Learning gain – A U.S. perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the U.S., regional accrediting commission standards allow for a range of approaches for determining learning gain in higher education institutions. Standards may vary across accrediting bodies, but follow a common set of good practice principles. Although improvement should be the goal of learning gains assessment, accreditation compliance is the main driver followed by a desire to improve student learning. Several national initiatives are having a positive impact on learning gain efforts. These include the identification of essential learning outcomes, the implementation of high impact practices, and the use of VALUE rubrics across institutions. The latter were created by faculty members as part of a multi-institutional national project. In sum, the learning gain landscape in the U.S. is characterized by a fairly decentralized approach together with collaborative, voluntary national initiatives; however, buy-in has been gradual and improvement is needed in terms of making meaningful learning improvements based on assessment data.

In the U.S., how learning gain is defined, determined, and assessed is largely at the discretion of individual higher education institutions and the programs within them. Regional accrediting commission standards allow for a range of approaches for determining gain, which are appropriate to an institution’s mission and students. Each of the seven regional higher education accrediting commissions in the U.S. has standards outlining accountability expectations for student learning at course, program, and institutional levels. The achievement of these standards is regularly evaluated through a peer-review process.

Standards may vary across accrediting bodies, but all follow a common set of good practice principles, which guide what commissions should reasonably expect: student learning is central to the institution’s mission, learning gains and related processes are clearly documented (learning goals, goal attainment, collective evaluation of learning, program improvement), multiple sources of evidence are used, key stakeholders are involved in assessment processes, and reflection on results is used to improve learning and build capacity (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2003).

Although improvement should be the goal of learning gains assessment, Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) report that accreditation compliance is the main driver followed by a desire to improve student learning and an emphasis on equity (e.g. by

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disaggregating learning gains for specific student populations) (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018); 82% of CAOs report that their institutions have student learning outcomes, and 50% report having program learning outcomes aligned to institutional learning outcomes. Course-embedded assignments and capstone experiences are the most common form of assessment with rubrics in second place and standardized tests in third place. Changes as the result of assessment are most commonly made at course and program levels.

Several notable national initiatives are having a positive impact on learning gain efforts. Essential learning outcomes (ELOs), which reflect the knowledge, skills, and abilities valued by employers and aimed at preparing graduates for twenty-first century challenges (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2008) have been largely adopted in some form across institutions and provide a common understanding of expectations for higher education graduates. The ELOs include intellectual and practical skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, and communication, and other skills to be developed across the curriculum rather than being discipline-specific.

High impact practices (HIPs) are designed to develop the ELOs. They include first-year experiences, intensive writing, collaborative assignments, undergraduate research, community service learning, diversity/global experiences, capstone courses, internships, learning communities, common intellectual experiences, and ePortfolios (Kuh, O’Donnell, & Schneider, 2017). At the foundation of these practices are eight elements of teaching and learning: high expectations, sustained effort, meaningful faculty and peer interaction, working with diverse others, timely and constructive feedback, real world application, public demonstration of competence, and reflection on and integration of learning (Kuh & O’Donnell, 2013).

Although evidence for the impact of HIPs is based on student self-reported gains as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, O’Donnell, & Schneider 2017), each of these HIPs has a considerable body of research associated with it indicating strong learning gains. Community service learning, for example, is associated with personal, social, learning, and career development benefits (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001).

The Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics were created by faculty members to measure the ELOs. They are being benchmarked as part of a multi-state initiative, which entails the collection and evaluation student work across disciplines, to establish shared standards of learning (AAC&U, 2017). Tuning and the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) are also faculty-driven national projects. Tuning involves identifying core areas of knowledge within disciplines to provide consistency in content taught across institutions while the DQP demonstrates progressive levels of development pertaining to ELO-type learning outcomes at various degree levels – associate, bachelor’s, master’s (Lumina Foundation, 2018).

In sum, the learning gain landscape in the U.S. is characterized by a fairly decentralized approach together with collaborative, voluntary national initiatives aimed at assisting stakeholders (particularly faculty members) in building capacity to improve teaching and learning and establish commonalities in learning expectations across institutions. Despite these efforts, however, buy-in and participation has been gradual and challenges with closing the loop in terms of making meaningful
learning improvements based on assessment data are ever present. On a national level, gaps exist between employer views of recent college graduates’ achievement of essential skills such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork, and are significantly lower than graduates’ views (Hart Research Associates, 2015), indicating that much remains to be done.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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