

**Assessing Student Learning: Using the Commission's
*Levels of Implementation***

Cecilia L. López, Ph.D.
Associate Director

Lopez@ncacihe.org
www.ncacihe.org

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I plan to organize my presentation around answers to the following questions:

- First: What is the *Levels of Implementation*?
- Second: What is the background for the *Levels*?
- Third: How can institutions use the *Levels of Implementation*?
- Fourth: How can evaluation teams use the *Levels of Implementation*?
- Fifth: Are there practical ways to use the *Levels* matrix?

I. What is the *Levels of Implementation*?

The *Levels* document is a 3 by 4 matrix consisting of three levels of implementation and four patterns of characteristics or descriptors that are associated with each level. The patterns associated with Level One, “Beginning Implementation of Assessment Programs,” include a number of characteristics consistent with assessment efforts that are in their infancy, or that are progressing at a slower than desired pace, or that have stalled. Patterns associated with Level Two, “Making Progress in Implementing Assessment Programs,” include characteristics consistent with the value the institution, its academic departments, and each of its academic programs place on measuring student learning and assessing the outcomes against clearly specified goals and measurable objectives and outcomes in the cognitive, behavioral, and affective domains. Patterns associated with Level Three, “Maturing Stages of Continuous Improvement,” include characteristics that have been culled from those assessment programs that are structured, systematic, on going, and sustainable. In institutions that manifest this level of attainment in their assessment programs, assessment has become a way of life.

When assessment has become deeply embedded in the culture of an institution that demonstrates characteristics associated with Level Three, decision-makers at all levels continuously study the information they obtain from successive iterations of assessment. They monitor learning in areas in which students have previously demonstrated lower than expected mastery of knowledge, skills, and values, to determine whether changes faculty have made in order to increase student achievement are having the desired effect. They probe into areas where students’ attainment is persistently high in order to deepen their understanding of the circumstances that are optimizing their students’ performance so that they can be replicated. Academic vice-presidents, deans, and department heads identify, encourage, and reward faculty who apply the results of research on learning theories and constructing knowledge. They follow the results of ongoing assessment to observe the impact of their efforts on the learning of particular student populations. They use findings from assessment to recommend changes in teaching, curriculum course content, instructional resources, and in academic support services in an effort to make a positive, measurable difference in their students’ learning. Once those proposed changes have been adopted, the academic leadership incorporates them into the regular departmental and institutional planning and budgeting processes, and ensures that they are kept high on the list of priorities for funding and implementation. They also are careful to incorporate assessment findings into reviews of all academic programs to document the growth in students’ knowledge over successive graduation years. In short, the institution’s academic decision-makers demonstrate by word and action that they are leaders in an institutional culture of evidence where continual improvement of students’

learning is an institutional value, an institutional commitment, and an institutional priority.

Because the Patterns of Characteristics for each Level are descriptive and not definitive, neither institutions nor Evaluation Teams should use them as a simple checklist. It is important for those charged with responsibility for the institution's assessment program to understand that few assessment programs will exhibit all of the characteristics associated with a particular level at any given time. They also need to bear in mind that not all assessment programs will progress sequentially through each level. Our research has shown that the Levels are both fluid and dynamic. We call the Levels "fluid" because Evaluation Teams have observed that within any one institution, different academic units and academic programs may exhibit characteristics associated with not one but two or all three Levels. We call them "dynamic" because the time will come when none of our institutions will display the characteristics associated with Level One, and Levels Two and Three may only partially resemble today's levels and descriptors. As institutions become more fully engaged in achieving continuous improvement in the learning of their enrolled students, their assessment programs will grow increasingly more distinctive. Their assessment programs will be more expressive of institutions' unique missions and educational goals, and accordingly, the characteristics Teams identify when they describe and evaluate programs will become more varied.

In sum, the Levels and their associated patterns of characteristics are neither prescriptive nor static. As institutions move toward a culture focused on the improvement of student learning, the Commission's research will produce findings that reflect the growing sophistication and effectiveness of the institutional assessment programs, and the characteristics and Levels reported several years from now will almost surely not be identical to those you are looking at today.

As you review the Levels document, you will need to remember that the patterns of positive characteristics for each of the three levels are assumed to be cumulative in nature. However, this may not be immediately apparent when you attempt to follow any single characteristic from one Level to the next. You will find it helpful to read the matrix vertically rather than horizontally. Because many characteristics associated with Level One are not positive descriptors, they are no longer present in better-developed or more fully implemented assessment programs. Hence, they do not appear in Level Two. Additionally, in order to have the space necessary to add the descriptors used only for assessment programs that are fairly advanced, not all of the characteristics associated with Level Two are restated in the column reserved for Level Three. This means that when you refer to the *Levels* document, you need to assume that all the positive characteristics of an assessment program at Level Two are expected to continue to be exhibited in that same program, or enhanced, as it evolves and progresses to Level Three.

II. What is the background for the *Levels of Implementation*?

The conceptual basis for the *Levels of Implementation* was derived from a staff study of 432 Team Reports written during AY 1997-98, AY 1998-99, and Fall 1999. That study demonstrates how far 432 of the 986 affiliated institutions (44%) have come toward

realizing the Commission's expectations first stated in its 1989 "Statement on Assessment of Student Academic Achievement" and re-emphasized in 1996:

The program to assess student learning should emerge from and be sustained by a faculty and administrative commitment to excellent teaching and effective learning; provide explicit and public statements regarding the institution's expectations for student learning; and use the information gained from the systematic collection and examination of assessment data both to document and improve student learning (*Handbook of Accreditation, 2nd ed.*, pp. 32-43).

Clearly, the Commission has been and remains committed first and foremost to the continuous improvement of student learning. From this commitment come all of its efforts to engage institutions in the assessment of student learning. It is also "committed to the tenet that assessment of student academic achievement is key to improving student learning..." and that assessment "is critical to ...the educational accomplishment of students now and in the future...."

The Commission expects its affiliated institutions to have a mission statement and "purposes that... speak clearly to the learning expected of students; support the commitment to educational breadth and depth typical of institutions of higher education; and commit the institution to the excellence in teaching expected of institutions of higher education" (*Handbook of Accreditation, 2nd ed.*, pp. 32). All are expected to demonstrate a strong readily identifiable relationship between overall institutional mission and purposes and the specific educational objectives of individual programs and departments/units. The primary purpose of the assessment program is to ascertain whether students are learning what the institution and faculty intend.

Analysis of the Team Reports shows that virtually all institutions accredited by NCA have had their plans for assessing student learning approved and are now actively working to implement and improve their assessment programs. That same study also documents that institutions have progressed at different rates and with varying degrees of success. Some institutions are still struggling to get their assessment programs started. Many others have elements of their assessment programs in place. These colleges and universities are continuing to educate and engage all levels of their leadership in assessment of student learning and to more fully involve each of their academic departments, especially those that have lagged behind in implementing their portion of the institution's assessment program.

Findings from the study of Team Reports suggests that the assessment programs of a representative sample of NCA institutions currently fall along a continuum. And progress of individual institutions have made toward fully realizing their assessment plans along that continuum is relative, being in all cases dependent upon their unique histories, cultures, missions, attitudes toward assessment, and the prevailing faculty perception of the feasibility of improving students' learning across academic programs.

In preparing the study on which the patterns of characteristics for the Levels matrix is based, staff studied the sections of the Team Reports where Consultant-Evaluators

critiqued the assessment programs. Staff analyzed all of their comments on assessment programs through the constant comparative method of qualitative research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Sections dealing with assessment of student learning were excerpted verbatim from the Team Reports written at the conclusion of all 432 campus visits conducted by NCA teams during each semester in the period Spring 1997 through Fall 1999. The verbatim quotations were then coded and compared by subject content until dominant characteristics emerged. Results of the study showed that the concentrations and distribution of assessment program characteristics across a broad continuum permitted any single program to reasonably be classified as being at one of three levels, each possessing distinguishable characteristics.

The matrix of patterns of characteristics that has been developed and presented within the Levels document can be accepted as reflecting the state of the assessment programs of a representative sample of affiliated institutions. Staff analyzed the comments of Consultant-Evaluators in Team Reports written after 403 comprehensive and 29 focused visits made to 44% (432 of 986) of all NCA/CIHE's member institutions. This sample of 432 institutions included 41% (144 of 350) of all 2-year colleges; 44% (79 of 179) of the institutions offering only the baccalaureate; 35% (96 of 271) of those that offer master and specialists degrees; and 45% (84 of 186) of all doctoral degree-granting universities. Within the 432 institutions that comprise the sample in this study, were 44% (202 of 461) of all NCA private, not for profit institutions; 36% (182 of 500) of the publicly controlled institutions; and 76% (19 of 25) of the for profit institutions.

The concept and identification of three Levels were first publicly introduced at the 1999 Assessment Conference of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (López, 1999, February) and presented again at last year's NCA/CIHE Annual Meeting (López, 1999, April). The concept and document, *Levels of Implementation*, have now become the basis for a joint project of the AAHE and NCA/CIHE that is being funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

III. How can Institutions Use the Levels of Implementation?

The Commission expects that the document, *Levels of Implementation*, will be a tool that our affiliated institutions can use to understand and strengthen their assessment programs. The Commission believes that there are at least six ways that our institutional constituents may find the *Levels of Implementation* informative and of practical value. Colleges and universities can draw upon the *Levels* document:

1. to measure their progress toward their goals for a successful assessment program at the institutional level by comparing its current characteristics and Level, to those recorded one year or several years earlier, or to those that emerged immediately after their assessment program was established, and then to the characteristics of the next higher Level in the matrix;
2. to identify the structural, procedural, and policy changes their institution needs in order for the institutional assessment program to become fully realized, by comparing the present characteristics of the program to those

- associated with the next higher level and deciding how best to close the gap;
3. to carry out the agreed upon changes that will serve to maintain existent positive attributes of the assessment program and to improve components that need to be strengthened, by creating and following an action plan, timetable, and budget;
 4. to determine how far they have come toward carrying on effective assessment programs at the academic program level by identifying the characteristics of the assessment programs that exist within each academic unit and comparing them with the clusters of descriptors associated with Levels One, Two, and Three;
 5. to confirm or challenge the impression held by the institution's constituents about the quality of their assessment program at the programmatic level (general education, the major, and graduate and professional degree programs), by comparing the actual characteristics of each with the Levels and the descriptors associated with them;
 6. to include in their Self-Study Reports, a self-evaluation of both the assessment program for the institution as a whole and the assessment programs of the academic units, using as standards for all of them, the patterns of characteristics described in the Levels, and any additional patterns of characteristics they have identified as important to their own unique missions and purposes.

IV. How can evaluation teams use the *Levels of Implementation*?

The Commission anticipates that evaluation teams are likely to find the *Levels of Implementation* a useful resource because the document suggests the types and range of questions that they could productively ask an institution about its assessment program in order to evaluate progress it is making in assessing and improving student learning at the institutional and programmatic levels.

To this end, we have asked that as Consultant-Evaluators on Evaluation Teams review an institution's progress in assessment, they accept the following statements as expression of their basic obligations:

- ◆ No matter what the level of an institution's implementation of its assessment program, the team needs to give the institution the best consulting advice possible on how to improve it;
- ◆ No matter what the level of the institution's implementation of its assessment program, the team needs to recognize, orally and in its Team Report, any accomplishments of the institution toward instituting and operating an effective assessment program;

- ◆ When determining what to recommend to the Commission as appropriate follow-up, an Evaluation Team is well advised to be guided by the following advice:
 1. call for a **focused visit** when the predominant pattern of characteristics locates the institution at Level One, and the team finds little evidence that progress is being made toward Level Two;
 2. call for a **monitoring report** within 3 years when the predominant pattern of characteristics locates the institution at Level One, and the team finds good evidence that progress is being made toward Level Two;
 3. call for a **progress report** when an institution at Level Two appears to lack the capacity to use data, or for some other reason is not using data from the assessment program both to identify areas where students are not achieving the programs' educational goals, and to attempt to increase student learning by making improvements in curricula, modes of instruction, learning resources, academic and student services, and by any other means.

V. Are there some practical ways to Use the *Levels* matrix?

There are a number of practical ways that those of you who are responsible for, or advocates of, the assessment program of your institution or academic unit can immediately begin to use the *Levels* matrix. Each of you will probably think of many others, but here are a few suggestions.

One way, is to use the characteristics and Levels as the basis for a series of questions. Raising questions engendered by discussions of the characteristics within each Level may stimulate faculty and administration to decide on a plan of action that would raise the effectiveness of their present assessment activities enough for them to demonstrate the capacity to attain patterns of characteristics consistent with the next higher Level. Let us try to envision how this might work.

For purposes of discussion, let us consider how an institution might use the matrix to think about students' understanding of the value the institution places on assessment of their learning and especially about the value-added when students participate in assessment activities. Here are some questions that could arise from a consideration of the patterns of characteristics in the matrix that refer to students' roles in an effective assessment program, and that might lead to productive discussion.

1. Can a prospective parent or student find the words "student" and "learning" together in the same sentence anywhere in the viewbook, catalog, or other materials sent to potential students?
2. Do undergraduate students receive printed materials that contain explicit statements of institutional goals for student learning? For expected outcomes for their complete undergraduate (or graduate) education? For the general

education program? The major? Each course in which they are registered? Do post-baccalaureate students receive comparable materials appropriate to the graduate degree program in which they are enrolled?

3. Do any of the documents provided to enrolled students describe the value the college places on student learning across the entirety of their undergraduate (or graduate) education and each academic program and major? Do any explain the ways in which assessment is an integral part of the teaching-learning process?
4. What required course or experience gives first year undergraduate students an understanding of the intended outcomes for their learning over the course of their entire undergraduate education, their learning in the core curriculum and their major, and an understanding of how learning obtained from the core curriculum is integrated with learning in the major?
5. What is being done to ensure that *transfer* students are expected to meet the institution's stated goals for their learning (i.e., its anticipated learner outcomes) for students' undergraduate education as a whole, and for their learning in the core curriculum and in the major?
6. In what ways are successive classes of students being educated about the need for them to be active partners with the faculty and academic administration in the assessment program at both the institutional and department/unit levels?
7. By what means are students helped to reach an understanding of: the importance of the institution's goals for their learning and the college's assessment program; how it is being carried out; the role of students in its success; and the usefulness of certain assessment activities and outcomes to them now as individual learners, and to future cohorts of students?
8. How are students being actively engaged in the assessment program at both the institutional and departmental levels so that they participate in every phase from initial planning to offering suggestions for changes such as those the institution could make in learning resources, co-curricular activity, support services, at the institutional level and in the curriculum or modes and styles of instruction at the departmental/unit level that they think could help students learn more?
9. Who is asking students directly what it would take for them to want to be involved in assessment efforts? Who is responsible for using their answers to create ways to interest and involve them in assessment activities?
10. What is being done and by whom to arouse student excitement about the potential benefits of assessment to future cohorts of students and to get them to take their own participation in the assessment program seriously?
11. What innovative ways are the Assessment Committee, academic officers, and department and program chairs using to involve students as well as faculty on

teams to evaluate projects that can enhance students' learning and increase their first-hand knowledge and understanding of assessment efforts across campus?

12. What provisions are being made in the assessment program, and by whom, for students to become familiar with the faculty's goals, objectives, and expected outcomes for each academic program in which they are enrolled and for each course?
13. What is being done, and by whom, to make the findings from assessment activities useful to students interested in improving their learning as individuals?
14. What reporting mechanisms exist to provide students with timely feedback about the results of tests and surveys they have participated in? Where are these published so that students and faculty are aware of them?
15. What requirements provide students the opportunity to reflect upon the work they have produced over the course of their academic program, to put their thoughts into writing, and to include judgments about how their work does or does not demonstrate attainment of the faculty's expected outcomes?
16. What is being done and by whom to compare students' self-assessment of what they have learned with objective indicators of their performance and then to use the results of that comparison as the basis for introducing improvements?

The questions I have just posed are hardly exhaustive even for this one participating constituency in a successful assessment program. But they are suggestive of the value of using the *Levels of Implementation* document to determine what patterns of characteristics already exist in the institution's assessment programs, which could exist if there were an adequate infrastructure, and which need to be cultivated if the continual improvement of student learning is accepted as an institutional priority.

A second way to use the *Levels of Implementation* document is to make it a kind of template to construct a similar matrix for your own institution. For example, the Assessment Committee could ask each department or academic program to evaluate itself against one or more of the descriptors associated with Levels Two and Three, without regard to which level any given characteristic belongs. The Assessment Committee would ask the academic unit to first come to an agreement on where they are as a faculty group in regard to this particular characteristic and to brainstorm until they concur on where, if there were no barriers, they would like to be in regard to it. The academic unit would then be asked to compare their present and desired characteristics with those published in the *Levels* document and decide which Level their assessment program currently corresponds with most closely and which they would be in if they were to attain their desired state. The usefulness of this type of exercise is that a group of constituents arrive at descriptors of their current assessment programs, articulate what they would like to see in place, and then create the means to make their vision a reality. In this scenario, you would have used the matrix to help academic departments speak candidly about the actual state of their assessment program and then stretch their imagination until they can

envision what it would look like if they were to develop an assessment program to meet their own concepts.

A third way you might use the *Levels of Implementation* document when you return to your campus would be to create a two-part survey of your assessment program, using each of the patterns of characteristics for Level Two and Level Three in turn. As the first part of the survey, you would ask constituents engaged in the institution-wide assessment program, and those carrying on assessment at the academic program level to evaluate each of the characteristics of their particular assessment program by using first Level One's descriptors and then Level Two's as standards. For each characteristic, they would assign a rating within a given pattern on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning non-existence of the characteristic and 5 meaning that it is an institutional priority. You would then ask each respondent to assign a 1 to 5 rating of the relative importance of each of the characteristics addressed in part one. Comparison of the results of these two survey questions would surely lead to lively and useful debate and might well be the catalyst the group needs to galvanize and function as a team capable of agreeing upon a viable action plan that could move the assessment effort forward at both the institutional and academic program levels.

In summary, the Commission intends the *Levels of Implementation* to be a useful tool for institutions working to strengthen their assessment programs so that they can continually improve student learning. The Commission also expects the *Levels* document to assist Evaluation Team members as they conduct their evaluations of the institution's assessment programs, consult with institutional leaders, and formulate their recommendations for follow-up monitoring by the Commission. Like the actual assessment programs that NCA Teams evaluated in the Team Reports staff analyzed to prepare this matrix, the *Levels* are dynamic. The number and descriptors of *Levels of Implementation* of the assessment programs of NCA/CIHE institutions will change as the Commission, its core of Consultant-Evaluators, and its affiliated institutions work together to improve the assessment programs that enable us to document what our students know and can do and seek ways to improve both. Why is this so important? Because it is the right thing to do, ethically and professionally. And because improving student learning *really* matters. Indeed, it is the reason for our continued existence.

Assessment of Student Learning: Resources

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Web Resources on Assessment

Outcomes Assessment Resources on the Web:

<http://www.tamu.edu/marshome/assess/oabooks.html>

Resources for Methods in Evaluation and Social Research:

<http://members.localnet.com/~shackman/evalwebs.html>