

# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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## Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension

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# Peter Ewell

Dr. Ewell is the Vice President at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), a research and development center founded to improve the management effectiveness of colleges and universities. A member of the staff since 1981, Dr. Ewell's work focuses on assessing institutional effectiveness and the outcomes of college, and involves both research and direct consulting with institutions and state systems on collecting and using assessment information in planning, evaluation, and budgeting. He has directed many projects on this topic, including initiatives funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the National Institute for Education, the Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education, and The Pew Charitable Trusts. In addition, he has consulted with over 375 colleges and universities and more than thirty state or national governments internationally on topics including assessment, program review, enrollment management, and student retention. Dr. Ewell has authored seven books and numerous articles on the topic of improving undergraduate instruction through the assessment of student outcomes.

A graduate of Haverford College, he received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Yale University in 1976 and was on the faculty of the University of Chicago.



# Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Revisiting the Tension

- Initial Paper - *Assessment, Accountability, and Improvement: Managing the Contradiction, 1983*
- On Language
  - *Accountability* – “requires the entity held accountable to demonstrate, with evidence, conformity with an established standard of process or outcome. The associated incentive for that entity is to look as good as possible, regardless of the underlying performance.”
  - *Improvement* – “entails an opposite set of incentives. Deficiencies in performance must be faithfully detected and reported so they can be acted upon. Indeed, discovering deficiencies is one of the major objectives of assessment for improvement.”

# Two Paradigms for Assessment

	Assessment for Improvement Paradigm	Assessment for Accountability Paradigm
<b>Strategic Dimensions</b>		
<i>Intent</i>	Formative (Improvement)	Summative (Judgment)
<i>Stance</i>	Internal	External
<i>Predominant Ethos</i>	Engagement	Compliance
<b>Application Choices</b>		
<i>Instrumentation</i>	Multiple/Triangulation	Standardized
<i>Nature of Evidence</i>	Quantitative and Qualitative	Quantitative
<i>Reference Points</i>	Over Time, Comparative, Established Goal	Comparative or Fixed Standard
<i>Communication of Results</i>	Multiple Internal Channels and Media	Public Communication
<i>Uses of Results</i>	Multiple Feedback Loops	Reporting

# Managing the Tensions

4 four principles to guide institutional responses to external accountability while developing the capacity for evidence-based continuous improvement

## 1. Respond visibly to domains of legitimate concern

- Concerns for our “customers”
- Collective responsibility for Teaching and Learning
- Focus on Accountability to ourselves

## 2. Show action on the results of assessment

- Think about this from the beginning
- Focus on thoughtful collective reflection about evidence
- Learning Objectives must be inescapable

# Managing the Tensions

4 four principles to guide institutional responses to external accountability while developing the capacity for evidence-based continuous improvement

3. Emphasize assessment at the major transition points in a college career.
  - Transition out of Development Education
  - The completion of a program
4. Embed assessment in the regular curriculum
  - More authentic evidence

# Questions for Discussion

- Given the tension between accountability and improvement, how would you describe assessment efforts at your institution?
- Is there a necessary interplay between accountability and improvement?
  - Is it possible for there to be broad based improvement without accountability?
    - At the State / National level?
    - At the local level?