



Assessing and Externally Validating Graduation Proficiencies: A Study to Explore Lessons from the Field

Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education
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Executive Summary

This paper presents the results of an independent study commissioned by the Senior College Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) in the implementation of its proposed external validation requirement for accreditation. The study was commissioned to inform WASC on methods for undertaking validation and alternative approaches if external validation or benchmarking were not required, but made optional. Based on a review of relevant literature, as well as interviews with institutional stakeholders, subject experts, and WASC project leaders, the paper explores a range of definitions and approaches for externally validating the assessment of core and graduation proficiencies, with attention to case studies from the literature illustrating advantages and challenges involved in current proficiency assessment practices. In addition, this paper presents insights into current practices of WASC-accredited institutions, as well as recommendations regarding steps for WASC going forward.

As a background for the study, the paper reviewed national trends in proficiency-based education, citing current accreditation requirements among other regional accreditation agencies, as well as the recent emergence of nationwide guidelines for best practices in assessment and accountability. Furthermore, the study presents evidence from the literature that external validation and benchmarking of core proficiencies contribute to increased faculty engagement in assessment and enhanced student learning.

A total of 18 interviews were conducted between, November 30, 2011 and January 19, 2012. Three WASC project leaders were initially interviewed to identify key goals for the study and to provide context in terms of the internal and environmental factors driving the increasing focus on assessment and reporting of student success and learning. Interviews with nine institutional stakeholders were subsequently conducted to gather data about institutions' current learning assessment practices. Finally, ISKME conducted interviews with six subject matter experts, who were selected based on the interviewees' knowledge of and involvement in external validation at both national and international levels.

Major findings include insights into current practices of WASC-accredited institutions in regard to graduation proficiency assessment. In particular, the study revealed a range of approaches to assessment of the five graduation proficiencies on the part of participating WASC-accredited institutions. Stakeholder interviews revealed that, while most of the institutions draw on commercially available standardized tests, several complement these tests with departmental, faculty-driven tools and rubrics to assess some or all of the five graduation proficiencies. Others are reportedly in the process of instilling new practices to capture what they view as more robust picture of student learning at graduation—through, for example, cross departmental benchmarking and student eportfolio assessment, which were reported as supportive of both knowledge sharing and increased engagement around the assessment process among faculty and student stakeholders. Several interviewees noted challenges or needed supports for assessing the five graduation proficiencies, including a need for support in more clearly aligning institutional proficiencies to those identified in CFR 2.2 and concerns that proficiencies are too discipline-specific to assess outside of majors. I was also suggested that majors at any given institution might possibly “backward engineer” to meet requirements—thereby obviating the distinctiveness that a given program has to offer.

With regard to external validation, the study found that most of the institutions represented in the study had yet to begin, or were just beginning, to implement external validation approaches to assessing the five graduation

proficiencies. One example included an institution that has recently implemented a more rigorous approach to external validation involving external reviewers who are nominated from institutions with similar missions to serve on program review boards. Another example involved benchmarking a range of metrics related to, for example, diversity practices and faculty teaching time, which interviewees indicated could be leveraged for future benchmarking around student learning proficiencies.

Several interviewees expressed concerns that external validation approaches assume uniformity across institutions and may potentially obscure the uniqueness of institutional missions and goals. Furthermore, interviewees identified concerns around potentially losing the professional development component of proficiency assessment if it is placed in the context of external metrics—specifically highlighting the importance of department or program level assessments that are driven by faculty as a mechanism to support their professional development and engagement in the assessment process.

On the whole, the findings point to an inherent tension between institutions' efforts to improve their practices through assessment of the graduation proficiencies that they seek to develop among students and their desire to maintain their autonomy, distinctiveness, and control over pedagogical and programmatic decisions. Taking this tension into account, this study offers specific recommendations for WASC, specifically in supporting institutions in the assessment of the five graduation proficiencies. These include:

- Clearly articulate what is meant by graduation proficiency assessment, in terms of timing, or the level (freshman through senior-level) during which students should be assessed to comply with the requirement.
- Provide tools and support for institutions' to map their existing competencies to the five stipulated in CRF 2.2 and to capture unique, institution-specific proficiencies that lay outside of the five.
- Provide operational support and continued training to facilitate institutions' ability to align and evaluate their existing proficiency assessment approaches to WASC's requirement for assessment of graduation proficiencies.

Specific recommendations to inform the Commission in its decision regarding the proposed external validation requirement include:

- Create an explicit statement on the importance of external validation grounded in the existing culture of inquiry that already exists within institutions.
- Require that a set number of proficiencies must be externally validated with allowances for competencies unique to each institution.
- Provide at least minimal requirements for what "external" entails and offer recommendations on external validation approaches angled toward institutions' varied concerns and needs.
- Provide technical and operational support on roll out and implementation including ways for institutions to incentivize and engage faculty and to build community around the assessment work.

The study concludes that the range of existing approaches for assessing and demonstrating student proficiency, while adhering to the uniqueness of institutions' missions and goals, are in some cases insufficient to meet twenty-first century calls for accountability and transparency in the higher education system and concerns about workforce-ready students. The study has recommended strategies for WASC that take into account its role as both a gatekeeper to federal funds and partner on institutional assessment and reporting of student proficiencies. In doing so, the study has sought to inform WASC on incentives, options for flexibility, and supports needed for institutions to take part in the external validation requirement as they adapt to the many potential challenges of implementation.



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Introduction

As one of six regional accrediting commissions recognized by the US Department of Education, the Senior College Commission of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) is responsible to serve as “a reliable authority to assure institutional quality and integrity.” WASC entered a redesign process in 2010 to take significant steps to enhance its role as an agent of quality assurance and public accountability. In doing so, WASC will give greater attention to student success and student learning in the accreditation process.

Building on the considerable work that has already begun within the region toward defining and assessing learning outcomes, WASC intends to move the accreditation dialogue with institutions from a focus on assessment processes, toward understanding the significance of assessment results. Towards this end, the Commission in November 2011 adopted several proposals from the redesign Task Forces and Steering Committee stating that institutions place more emphasis on defining the meaning and quality of degrees, in terms of assuring that there are clear learning goals and outcomes for graduation and that institutions demonstrate that graduates achieve or surpass a stated level of proficiency, both within the major and at least the following five core areas drawn from Criteria for Review (CFR) 2.2: written communication, oral communication, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and information literacy.

The Commission deferred action until February 2012 on the proposal that at least two of these five core proficiencies be “externally validated” through a variety of means, including benchmarking. The Commission invited further comment on this proposal from institutions in the region. In addition, recognizing that the terms “external validation” and “benchmarking” had not been defined well in the discussions with the region or the Commission, WASC contracted with the Institute for Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) to conduct an independent study of the meaning of these terms and to explore options for consideration when the issue comes before the Commission in February 2012. Based on interviews with institutional stakeholders, subject experts, and WASC project leaders, as well as a review of relevant literature, the aim of the study was also to understand the experiences and perspectives of institutions related to graduation proficiency assessment, as well as external validation and benchmarking of graduation proficiencies, specifically in light of this proposal.

This paper presents the results of ISKME’s study and illustrates the diversity of definitions and approaches surrounding the assessment and external validation of graduation proficiencies with attention to case studies from the literature illustrating advantages and challenges involved in current proficiency assessment practices. In addition, this paper presents insights into current practices of WASC-accredited institutions, as well as recommendations regarding steps for WASC going forward. As such, the objective is to provide a platform for a broad discussion of graduation proficiency assessment and validation through an examination of the various forms it may take with examples of institutions that have either implemented or that express concern around implementing graduation proficiency assessment programs and practices.

Background

National trend toward proficiency-based education

Low graduation rates, high student debt, rapid growth of online and for-profit education, and increasing concerns about the quality of student learning and the rigor of degrees have prompted nationwide calls for greater transparency and accountability for both higher education and accreditation (Paris, 2011; USDE, 2006; Wright, 2011). Accreditation agencies have responded to increased pressures by helping institutions of higher education to effectively demonstrate the value and significance of their degrees awarded, through accountability to rigorous standards that set ambitious goals for institutional transparency and accountability (MSCHE, 2009; NEASC, 2011; NLASL, 2012; WASC, 2011).

A strong foundation in core proficiency assessment is already an integral component of higher education accreditation across the United States. For instance, both the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) currently require that institutions assess undergraduate student achievement of core proficiency outcomes at the level of courses, programs, and the institution, and that they utilize the assessment results for curricular improvement (MSCHE, 2009; NEASC, 2011). Many WASC-accredited institutions have also begun to assess core proficiencies at graduation. In January 2012, WASC conducted a survey of participants attending the WASC Resource Fairs to assess their knowledge of and current approaches to assessment of graduation proficiencies (full survey results forthcoming; see <http://www.wascsenior.org/redesign/news/resource-fairs> for information about the Resource Fairs). Of a total of 165 participants who responded to the survey, most indicated that they are already assessing at least some of the graduation proficiencies proposed by WASC. The most frequently assessed proficiency was reportedly written communication (84 percent) and the least frequently assessed proficiency was information literacy (42 percent). Respondents also reported on their use of assessment tools and tests with rubrics being the most commonly used assessment tool (76 percent) and commercially available tests the least (26 percent). Reported examples of how institutions are using rubric-based assessment tools and tests included adapting VALUE rubrics and developing local rubrics for assessment of student assignments and capstone projects.

Building on a growing, nationwide foundation of core and graduate proficiency assessment within accredited institutions, the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability has recently published national guidelines to promote best practices in assessment and accountability in higher education. These best practice guidelines, endorsed by 27 higher education organizations, including the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (CRAC), emphasize the need for institutions to supplement internal assessment of proficiencies, through recourse to externally informed validation and benchmarking (NLASL, 2012).

In accord with existing practices and emerging trends toward increased accountability through assessment and validation of core and graduate proficiencies, the proposed revisions to WASC accreditation standards seek to supplement current practices with external validation and benchmarking, a range of definitions and approaches for which are defined in the following section.

External validation and benchmarking: A range of definitions and approaches

Broadly speaking, external assessment of graduation proficiencies in higher education involves a wide variety of definitions and approaches. The terms “external validation” and “benchmarking” are sometimes used interchangeably, as the practices often overlap, but each responds to a distinct set of questions. Whereas external validation responds to questions regarding the validity of institutional claims regarding a given set of requirements, based on examination of evidence, benchmarking responds to questions regarding how well an institution meets those requirements in comparison to its peers, expectations, or national standards (Alstete, 1995; Banta et al., 1993; Dowd & Tong, 2011; ESMU, 2010; Wright, 2011).

External validation of graduation proficiencies serves to evaluate and validate assessment practices and results. External validation is performed by agencies such as ACT, ETS, and the Council for Aid to Education, who administer and score standardized tests, and also by external reviewers, who may include faculty from peer institutions, employers, or accreditation team members (ENQA, 2005; Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005; Wright, 2011; Yancey, 2009). Direct evidence of graduation proficiencies examined by external reviewers may include assessment results ranging from scores from locally-developed and standardized tests to samples of senior capstone projects and other artifacts of student achievement (Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005; MSCHE, 2007; Walvoord, 2004). Indirect evidence may include graduation and retention rates and data from surveys of employers, alumni, or students (e.g. National Survey of Student Engagement) (MSCHE, 2007; Walvoord, 2004).

External validation methods can include benchmarking, which is the systematic process of comparing performance with regard to key measures (Alstete, 1995; Banta et al., 1993, Dowd, 2005). From the perspective of the institution, benchmarking may take several forms, and can be performed internally (i.e., across programs or across departments) or externally (i.e., among institutional data-sharing consortium members). While metric benchmarking focuses on the straightforward comparison of performance data, diagnostic and process benchmarking focus on identifying areas for improvement and learning best practices from partners that exceed performance expectations (Doerfel & Ruben, 2002; Dowd, 2005). According to Dowd & Tong (2007), public higher education accountability initiatives formerly relied primarily on metric benchmarking, but have recently begun to move toward more nuanced approaches involving combined forms of benchmarking (Dowd & Tong, 2007). Wright (2011), on the other hand, emphasizes the need for a move away from purely comparing and sharing best practices or processes that lead to achievements, toward establishing quality standards for achievements and benchmarking the results of proficiency assessments.

External benchmarking of graduation proficiencies has gained in popularity in higher education as a method for enabling students and policymakers to assess institutions and as a tool for discovering and adapting best practices (Alstete, 1995; Alstete, 2004; Banta et al., 1993; Dowd & Tong, 2011; ESMU, 2010). Institutions involved in external benchmarking usually select a comparison group comprised of comparable and exemplary or “reach” institutions, and in the case of proficiency assessment, use some form of comparable measure, such as a standardized test or a calibrated rubric, for assessing outcomes (Alstete, 1995; Alstete, 2004; Banta et al., 1993; Dowd & Tong, 2011; ESMU, 2010; Wright, 2011). Some examples of comparable measures include: the ETS Proficiency Profile (formerly known as the MAPP); the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), a product of the Council for Aid to Education; and the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), produced by ACT (Klein, Liu, & Sconing, 2009), and the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics, developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (Kuh & Ikenberry, 2009), among others.

The following section illustrates some approaches to external validation and benchmarking, highlighting advantages and challenges involved in these approaches through a discussion of case studies from relevant literature.

Advantages and challenges of external validation and benchmarking: Cases from the literature

The literature on institutional assessment of core and graduate proficiencies presents several case examples demonstrating the advantages and challenges involved in implementation of external validation approaches, including benchmarking. These case examples illustrate how implementation of these approaches supported, among other things, enhanced student learning and increased collaboration among institutions. The discussion also reveals challenges that arose for institutions including difficulties in determining common definitions for the proficiencies assessed.

Enhanced student learning. External validation of graduation proficiencies demonstrated through student eportfolios has been found to enhance student learning. For instance, in the Florida State University’s

Competency-Based Career Portfolio Program (CPP), which assesses student learning through the use of student-curated eportfolios that are reviewed by employers, student participants reportedly valued the structured articulation of learning outcomes, as well as the self-efficacy the CPP affords them to creatively personalize their overall learning experience (Reardon, Lumsen & Meyer, 2004; Yancey, 2009). Employers, as CPP review agents, frequently rated student reflection as more compelling than the artifacts themselves (Yancey, 2009). Student reflection across contexts may be key to the enhanced student learning provided by portfolio-based assessment; researchers at FSU and elsewhere suggest that this matrix model for assessment portfolios fosters multi-contextual learning, as students analyze, synthesize and reflect on the value of their coursework and experiences, extending the context of their learning in the process of seeing each artifact in multiple ways (Hamilton & Kahn, 2009; Lorenzo & Ittelson, 2005; Reardon, Lumsen & Meyer, 2004; Yancey, 2009).

Deepened culture of assessment. A longitudinal study on the Council of Independent Colleges' Collegiate Learning Assessment (CIC/CLA) consortium, which involved 47 CIC colleges and universities that administered the CLA to their students from 2008-2011 to assess core proficiencies at the freshman and senior levels, indicated that participation in the consortium contributed to strengthening institutional focus on developing communication and critical thinking skills and a deeper culture of assessment on campus for some colleges (Paris, 2011). Moreover, participating institutions found that talking about the CLA in the context of their mission helped them to build a broader community of understanding and greater credibility among institutional stakeholders including prospective students and parents, board members, and prospective donors (Paris, 2011).

Increased institutional collaboration. Additional evidence indicates that, among institutions involved in the assessment of core proficiencies, the process of building aligned, standard methods has resulted in increased institutional collaboration and the development of professional communities of practice grounded in shared measures and common issues. For instance, the Collaborative Assessment for Liberal Learning (CALL) consortium of four liberal arts institutions (Carleton, Grinnell, Macalester and St. Olaf) has developed a number of initiatives related to assessment, which have involved intensive inter-institutional collaboration. In a recent initiative, the institutions identified a set of common proficiency objectives (Critical Thinking, Quantitative Reasoning, Effective Communication, and Global Understanding) and convened teams to formulate shared definitions for each outcome (Walczak, 2009). Over the course of three years, the institutions coordinated their assessment activities such that the consortium as a whole (though not necessarily each institution) used and collectively evaluated at least two assessment strategies (some standardized, some homegrown) for each of the four proficiencies. The team on Quantitative Reasoning, for instance, worked to develop a rubric to assess that proficiency at an institutional level with the aim of comparing Quantitative Reasoning activity between large groups such as humanities majors vs. social sciences majors (CART, 2009). However, challenges involved in collaboration include difficulties in arriving at common terms for assessment among collaborative partners. For instance, the CALL team on Effective Communication reported a standing dispute over the appropriateness of "effective" as a descriptor for writing (CEWT, 2006).

As an extension of the CALL assessment initiatives, some of the members also participated in the CIC/CLA consortium mentioned above. The study revealed that, on the whole, institutions participating in the CIC/CLA consortium found that it provided a professional community of practice grounded in shared measures and common issues, wherein institutional collaboration included knowledge-sharing and mutual support (Paris, 2011).

Catalyst for institutional change. Finally, participation in the CLA/CIC consortium, described above, has been found to provide a catalyst for institutional change. According to Paris (2011), most of the institutions involved in a CLA longitudinal study reported that engagement in the consortium prompted revisions to faculty professional development, programs, and courses, as well as overall revisions of assessment methods in general (Paris, 2011). One example of the way in which participation resulted in revisions to courses was reported by Charleston Southern University (CSU) of South Carolina, where student-centered pedagogy was found to emerge from faculty participation in a CLA Performance Task Academy, a professional development program designed to support faculty in introducing performance tasks into coursework across disciplines (Paris, 2011). Among the key

areas assessed by the CLA, the performance task assesses student ability to perform real-world tasks involving critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication (Klein, Steedle, & Kugelmas, 2009; Paris, 2011). For example, students might be asked to prepare a brief for a debate or compose a business memo using a set of provided materials (Klein, Steedle, & Kugelmas, 2009; Paris, 2011). Following their participation in the Performance Task Academy, several CSU faculty modified courses to include performance tasks and testing, reflecting a pedagogical shift toward a student-centered focus on problem solving and a greater understanding of the connection between pedagogy, coursework, and assessment (Paris, 2011).

Methodology

In building on the insights from the literature cited above, ISKME conducted interviews with WASC project leaders, subject experts, and institutional stakeholders to assess variations in definitions and approaches to external validation and capture the experiences of WASC-accredited institutional stakeholders who have implemented or have considered implementation of these approaches.

Between November 30, 2011 and January 19, 2012, ISKME's research team conducted a total of 18 interviews. Interviews with three WASC project leaders were initially conducted to provide context for the study in terms of the internal and environmental factors driving the increasing focus on assessment and reporting of student success and learning, as well as what WASC viewed as the goals and key research questions guiding the study.

Interviews with nine institutional stakeholders were subsequently conducted to gather data about institutions' current learning assessment practices. In particular, the interviews focused on types of data and rubrics utilized in both internal and external assessment, strategies for reporting findings, and understanding key stakeholders involved in the development, implementation, and use of assessment knowledge. These interviews also sought to draw forth recommendations for how institutions can align WASC's proposed external validation requirement with their existing assessment practices, as well as the challenges institutions may face in assessing the five core competencies at graduation including challenges with achieving buy-in from key stakeholders.

Institutional stakeholders interviewed included administrators in the areas of academic planning, development, and assessment, six of whom indicated they also served as WASC accreditation liaison officers. The interview sample included representatives from both private and public institutions and from institutions enrolling as many as 40,000 undergraduate and graduate students per year to as few as 3,500 students. While the majority of the interviewees (8 of 9) represented individual campuses, one interviewee was the representative of a state university system's chancellor's office. The diverse sample included institutions with a range of approaches to curriculum including institutions emphasizing standard curriculum approaches to those that emphasized less traditional curriculum including programs in religious studies and community studies.

Finally, ISKME conducted interviews with six subject matter experts, which were selected through a collaborative process of recommendation by WASC project leaders and ISKME based on the interviewees' knowledge of and involvement in external validation and benchmarking at both national and international levels. Subject experts interviewed included university administrators and professors working on assessment issues, a representative from the office of a state commissioner for higher education, and a member of a national panel on productivity in higher education. Interviews with subject experts sought to draw forth a broader perspective on the field of external validation, where it is headed, and options for how it might best be implemented at the institutional level.

The findings discussed below will focus on analysis of the interviews with institutional stakeholders; subject expert and interviews with WASC staff were utilized to frame and contextualize the study and to inform the analysis of institutional stakeholder data. It is important to note that this study does not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the experiences and implications of current proficiency assessment approaches across

institutions; instead it aims to explore some of the ways in which interview participants currently implement, evaluate, share, and align assessment strategies, and how WASC might consider its proposed external validation requirement in alignment with current institutional practices.

Findings: Institutional Stakeholder Interviews

Assessment of graduation proficiencies

The majority of interviewees (7) reported that their programs ensure the development of all or nearly all of the five proficiencies identified in CFR 2.2 (written communication, oral communication, quantitative skills, critical thinking, and information literacy). Two of these interviewees reported that critical thinking was less well defined or not addressed as a core proficiency at their institutions, and one reported that oral communication had not been addressed.

Looking across the institutions represented in the study, the analysis further revealed a range of approaches to assessment of the five graduation proficiencies. While most of the institutions reportedly draw on commercial tests such as the ETS or the CLA, several complement these tests with departmental, faculty-driven tests and rubrics that address some or all of the five graduation proficiencies. Others are reportedly in the process of initiating new practices to capture what they view as a more robust picture of student learning at graduation, which are said to support knowledge sharing and increased engagement around the assessment process among faculty and student stakeholders.

- One interviewee discussed cross-departmental benchmarking as a mechanism to share knowledge and improve practice. Specifically, the interviewee reported that faculty use an adapted version of a tool developed by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA). With this tool, each department at the institution is required to visually document, in a hexagon-shaped diagram, its assessment plan and curriculum map, its student learning outcomes, evidence of student learning, and the use of the evidence in changing practice, as well as how the department's mission links to the institution's overall goals. In an online environment, when readers click on a section of the hexagon, they move into a portal file with supporting documentation. The interviewee further indicated that once fully implemented, the hexagon tool would be used by each department at the institution to assess graduating seniors in the five proficiencies. The aim of the approach, the interviewee noted, is to capture the robust stories of what students are learning within and across disciplines, to make those stories public, and to learn from one another. Furthermore, the interviewee noted: "I believe this transparency will help faculty and students become more engaged in assessment."
- Two interviewees discussed the use of student eportfolios as assessment tools that support institutional and student learning. At one institution, the interviewee reported that a system has been set up, wherein eportfolios could be tagged to capture evidence of student learning across levels within the university, program, department, and institution. Another interviewee discussed eportfolios as a mechanism to more fully engage students in their own learning—resulting from the self reflective process of mapping their work to rubrics or matrices.

Several interviewees additionally discussed challenges or needed supports for assessing the five graduation proficiencies:

- Two interviewees indicated that in order to assess the proficiencies at graduation, they need support in more clearly aligning their own proficiencies to those identified in CFR 2.2, as they have no mechanisms for doing so.

- Three interviewees noted that proficiencies are too discipline specific to assess outside of majors. For example, one interviewee emphasized that writing in psychology differs from writing in chemistry—and that learning outcomes are defined and assessed differently in these two disciplines. Similarly, another interviewee reported: “When we say we’re graduating a student in a particular field, it’s important they have competency in their major. So these proficiencies vary significantly field to field and we feel it’s more appropriate to have the assessment done within the discipline.” A third interviewee indicated that a central concern of assessing core proficiencies at graduation is that majors at the institution will “backward engineer” to meet the requirement—thereby obviating the distinctiveness that a given program has to offer.
- One interviewee questioned assessment of the five graduation proficiencies, specifically in light of continuously changing external demands that may make other proficiencies more relevant in the future. The interviewee specifically expressed concern that WASC or federal agencies may adopt new assessment recommendations within the coming years that, for example, align to the framework of the Degree Qualifications Profile developed by the Lumina Foundation (see http://www.luminafoundation.org/publications/The_Degree_Qualifications_Profile.pdf).

External Validation and Benchmarking

Analysis of the interview data revealed that beyond participation in nationally-normed tests and external validation approaches that fall within specialized accreditation agencies for assessing proficiencies in fields like nursing and engineering, a few institutions were beginning to implement external assessment approaches or were considering future implementation:

- One interviewee reported the implementation of a new, more intentionally rigorous process of enlisting two external reviewers who are nominated from institutions with similar missions to serve on program review boards. In successfully securing faculty buy-in into the external review process, the institution emphasized the possibility of faculty drawing on the reviewers’ expertise during their visit and using the time to, for example, create learning opportunities by setting up conversations between graduate students and the external reviewers to discuss the reviewers’ areas of research. Feedback from deans within the institution who participated in the process revealed benefits by way of new knowledge and learning.
- Two interviewees reported on benchmarking practices in place at their institutions to compare and discuss a range of metrics related to, for example, diversity practices and faculty teaching time. In both of the benchmarking examples, comparative schools were carefully chosen that best aligned to the metric or issue in question, and in both cases, the institutions had established processes for ensuring cross-institution dialogue that they indicated could be leveraged for future benchmarking around student learning proficiencies.
- In discussing future, potential participation in consortium-based approaches, two interviewees emphasized the importance of dialogue to create shared assumptions, goals, and strategies, both within the consortium and with WASC. In particular, one highlighted the need for commonality in terms of the assessment levels and the purpose of benchmarking, asking: “Would it be appropriate for us to use freshman critical thinking scores if [another consortium member] were using senior scores from capstone projects? And what is the value, are we trying to compete or are we trying to say yes our educational systems are working?”

A few interviewees discussed concerns or challenges with external validation and benchmarking including:

- Three interviewees discussed that because external validation approaches assume uniformity across institutions, they have the potential to obscure the uniqueness of institutional missions and goals. For example, one interviewee discussed how the unique programs at the institution cannot be externally

validated because external metrics do not exist that could be applied to those programs. The interviewee indicated: “We sacrifice our uniqueness and what our university has to offer if we conform to the five proficiencies and establish benchmarks for our programs, some of which are so unique that they cannot be compared.” Another interviewee reported that competencies including global citizenship, creative thinking, and scientific inquiry are more central to their mission and goals and specifically noted: “Redirecting our assessment machine to externally validating five lower priority themes, with the exception of critical thinking, forces us to redirect attention from assessing things we value the most that are more progressive and forward thinking.”

- Finally, two interviewees pointed to concerns around potentially losing the professional development component of proficiency assessment if it is placed in the context of external metrics. In short, these interviewees highlighted the importance of department or program level assessments that are driven by faculty as a mechanism to support their professional development and engagement in the assessment process. As one interviewee noted: [Assessment] empowers them to act— they have bought into the process and see where they can improve. They have ownership and therefore empowerment to see what can be done and where changes can be made. [...] Assessment is really a faculty development process.”

Discussion and Recommendations

On the whole, the findings from the analysis of the institutional stakeholder interviews point to the inherent tension between institutions’ efforts to improve their practices through assessment of the proficiencies that they seek to develop among students and their desire to maintain their autonomy, distinctiveness, and control over pedagogical and programmatic decisions. While some of the institutions represented in this study have begun to implement practices that potentially meet WASC’s proposals, others argue for a more flexible, individualized approach to learning assessment. And while several institutions call for tools and support to further facilitate implementation specifically of the proposed external validation requirement, several others call for the freedom to make assessment choices linked to their institutional and programmatic missions. Those institutions that call for additional support or tools were often those very institutions that reportedly see benefits from external validation. Much in line with evidence within the extant literature, these benefits were said to include, for example, enhanced student learning and a deepened culture of assessment within their institutions.

In continuing to support its institutions in more effectively demonstrating the value of their degrees, while at the same time paying heed to its role as a collaborative partner in the accreditation process, the question thus becomes, where should WASC be flexible, and where might it be most advantageous to be more rigid? Additionally, how can WASC support institutions in the implementation of the proposed external validation requirement—even those that express concern around the requirement? The recommendations below suggest ways that WASC might address these questions.

Specific recommendations for WASC in supporting institutions in the implementation of the assessment of the five graduation proficiencies include:

- *Clearly articulate what is meant by graduation proficiency assessment* in terms of timing. That is, to address the potential conflation of assessment of core competencies at lower division levels and assessment of proficiencies at graduation, WASC would serve its institutions by clearly defining what constitutes graduation proficiency assessment in terms of the timing options or the level(s) (freshman through senior-level) during which students should be assessed to comply with the requirement.
- *Provide tools and support for institutions* to map their existing competencies to the five stipulated in CFR 2.2 and to allow institutions to capture unique, institution-specific proficiencies that lie outside of the five.

- *Provide operational support and continued training to facilitate institutions' ability to align and evaluate their existing assessment approaches to WASC's requirement for assessment of graduation proficiencies. In doing so, WASC can support institutions in leveraging practices already in place toward its graduation proficiency requirement.*

Specific recommendations to inform the Commission in its decision regarding the proposed external validation requirement include:

- *Create an explicit statement on the importance of external validation that is grounded in the existing culture of inquiry that already exists within institutions. The emphasis by institutional stakeholders on the importance of maintaining distinctiveness and added value in their program offerings, and concerns that external validation may result in compliance to the detriment of quality, underscores the need for an explicit statement from WASC on its rationale for external validation. In creating such a statement, WASC could potentially benefit from leveraging the culture of inquiry that exists on campuses, and asserting its voice in establishing the legitimacy of the question that asks institutions to answer how they know that their students are doing a good job.*
- *Require that a specific number of proficiencies must be externally validated with allowances for competencies unique to each institution. To address the institutional concerns related to competing competencies, while at the same time adhering to its emphasis on public accountability around meeting a basic level of proficiency, WASC should require that a specific number of proficiencies must be externally validated, but that one or more of these could be competencies that are unique to the institution.*
- *Provide minimal requirements for what "external" validation entails and offer recommendations angled toward institutions' unique needs. For example, WASC could work with institutions to develop external validation approaches that move beyond purely campus or department-based comparisons or validation of learning and beyond sharing of internal assessment results with the public to include approaches that use external scorers, employer reviewed eportfolios, or benchmarking/consortium-based approaches. In establishing the requirements for external validation, WASC would serve its institutions by offering recommendations based on institutional needs and concerns. For example, external reviewers could be suggested as an assessment approach for those institutions that deem their programs as too unique for assessment through externally comparative metrics.*
- *Provide technical and operational support on roll out and implementation. Finally, in light of several institutions who expressed a need for direction and support for implementation of the proposed external validation requirement, WASC could provide tools to, for example, help institutions evaluate the extent to which WASC's guidelines for externally validating proficiencies are already embedded in institutions' existing review processes. Furthermore, WASC should, as part of its existing work to train faculty and institutional staff, create workshop curriculum targeted toward implementation of the requirement with innovative approaches to creating new solutions for external validation and for building community, incentives, and buy in within and across institutions around external validation.*

Conclusion

This study has revealed a range of approaches across participating institutions that assess and demonstrate student proficiency while adhering to the uniqueness of institutions' missions and goals. In many cases, however, these measures are not enough to meet twenty-first century calls for accountability and transparency in the higher education system and concerns about workforce-ready students. Furthermore, alongside the preference for internal and local assessment approaches by several institutions included in this study, there exists strong evidence from the literature that external validation and benchmarking leads to benefits such as increased faculty engagement in assessment and enhanced student learning. In considering the implementation of its proposed external validation

requirement, this study has recommended strategies for WASC that take into account its role as both a gatekeeper of federal funds and partner on institutional assessment and reporting of student proficiencies. In doing so, the study has sought to inform considerations for WASC around the incentives, options for flexibility, and supports needed for institutions to take part in the requirement as they adapt to the many potential challenges of implementation.

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