

## The next stage of assessment

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For all of us as educators, the Lumina Foundation draft report on “The Degree Qualifications Profile” needs to be must reading. The Foundation in the first paragraph of the report states that the Profile is “a tool that can help transform U.S. higher education.” Specifically, it “proposes specific learning outcomes that benchmark the associate, bachelor’s and master’s degrees...regardless of a student’s field of specialization.” And for those of you who are not yet familiar with what the Foundation is proposing, the Degree Qualification Profile will validate “ five basic areas of learning: Broad, Integrative Knowledge; Specialized Knowledge; Intellectual Skills; Applied Learning; and Civic Learning.”

Clearly we are looking at outcomes assessment but not the outcomes assessment that we have been concentrating on in recent years. Our outcomes assessment looks at our learning goals and sees how successful we have been in meeting those goals, and also, as we make changes, whether we become more successful. The Lumina Foundation clearly takes issue with our present focus on outcomes by stating: Even as colleges and universities have defined their own expected student learning outcomes — typically to meet accreditation requirements — their discussions have been largely invisible to policy leaders, the public and many students.

The Foundation continues by saying: Similarly, while higher education institutions have been under increasing pressure to be accountable for the quality of their degrees, institutions have frequently responded by testing samples of students in ways that say too little about learning and even less about what all students should attain as they progress through college. Without disagreeing with the need for a “Profile,” I’m not sure that the Foundation’s criticism of outcomes assessment and accountability is valid. As many outcomes or quality measures as we have had for many years, a formalized structure for outcomes assessment has not been easy for higher education to implement. It really requires assessment to be in place from the micro (individual courses) to the macro (the overall curriculum) plus a mechanism to take that assessment and translate it into cycles,

once again at all levels, of continuous improvement. This is a process of continuous improvement that will take time to put fully in place. And rarely is this process as “invisible” as the Lumina Foundation states — we deal with 20 accrediting agencies plus our internal shared governance structure. We may not prepare press releases every time we assess an outcome or demonstrate accountability but higher education has made huge progress in recent years in validating and strengthening what we do.

But for Lumina this isn’t sufficient and perhaps they are right. For them, outcomes assessment should be in the context of standardized, by level of degree, outcomes that they feel every educated individual should attain regardless of his/her major; not just credits earned and grades achieved by macro competencies demonstrated and clear for all to see, and they have spelled out those macro competencies. As noted in the report, the “Profile” provides “reference points for accountability that are far stronger than test scores or tallies of graduates, research dollars, student satisfaction ratings, job placements or patents.” The report continues by stating that “more to the point, because the Degree Profile defines competencies in ways that emphasize both the cumulative *integration* of learning from many sources and the *application* of learning in a variety of settings, it can offer benchmarks for improving the quality of learning.”

Lumina is clear that they are not looking for standardized degrees. However, the inevitable conclusion of implementing required competencies and outcomes will be more standardization. It will also require a vastly more robust and sophisticated assessment procedure. Regional accrediting agencies are already gravitating toward the Lumina Profile. As educators, we need to participate in this unfolding debate. We need to help shape the competencies so that they demonstrate desired results without overly constraining or standardizing our higher education structure. Not an easy goal to accomplish. Meanwhile, for those individuals looking to see what accrediting agencies will be looking for in the next decade, just read the Lumina report. The handwriting is on the wall.