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## Reimagining Accreditation: From Compliance to Learning-Centered Transformation

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**Abstract:** Accreditation in higher education was established as a mechanism to ensure quality and promote continuous improvement. However, in recent decades, its implementation has often veered toward procedural compliance and documentation rather than meaningful engagement with student learning. This article critiques the prevailing verification model and presents a comprehensive framework for reimagining accreditation as a learning-centered, inquiry-driven process. Drawing from scholarly literature and practitioner insights—including discussions from the 2025 AALHE Annual Conference—the article outlines the theoretical underpinnings of assessment as scholarly work and identifies the cultural, structural, and policy-level barriers that inhibit its authentic practice.

The article argues that meaningful reform requires institutions to center direct evidence of learning, align assessment with pedagogical intent, and invest in faculty leadership and development. It calls for accrediting bodies to shift their focus from format and frequency to substance and educational impact, while advocating for national policies that support innovation, transparency, and capacity-building over punishment and standardization. Practical strategies are offered to move institutions from volume-based to value-based assessment, embed assessment into curriculum design, and foster cultures of reflective improvement.

Ultimately, the article positions accreditation as a public good and moral imperative, one that must evolve to meet the changing demands of education and society. It challenges higher education to move beyond compliance and to embrace assessment as a transformative tool that honors faculty expertise, supports student success, and restores trust in institutional quality.

**Keywords:** *accreditation reform, student learning outcomes, assessment culture, faculty engagement, continuous improvement, higher education policy*

## Introduction

Higher education accreditation was designed as a quality assurance mechanism intended to ensure academic integrity, promote accountability, and foster continuous improvement. Yet, in recent decades, it has drifted into a bureaucratic exercise, one that often privileges documentation over transformation and compliance over learning. Institutions perform assessment not to deepen educational quality, but to satisfy externally imposed mandates. This disjunction between intent and

implementation has fueled mounting frustration across the academic landscape, as reflected in conversations at the 2025 Annual Conferences of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE). These professional dialogues point to a growing consensus: accreditation must be radically reimagined to prioritize authentic student learning, not merely procedural conformity.

This article draws upon scholarly literature, field insights, and conference discussions to propose a new paradigm that positions assessment as scholarly inquiry and accreditation as a partnership for pedagogical renewal. Grounded in theory and actionable strategies, it offers a comprehensive vision for shifting assessment standards away from compliance and toward meaningful, mission-aligned learning.

## Theoretical Framing: Assessment as Inquiry, Not Audit

The philosophical foundation for rethinking accreditation lies in reconceptualizing assessment itself. Peter Ewell (2009) critiques the prevailing model of assessment as verification, a system wherein institutions demonstrate that they "do assessment" by producing volumes of data to satisfy accreditors. This emphasis on external accountability stifles genuine inquiry and narrows institutional attention to that which is measurable rather than that which is meaningful. Similarly, Suskie (2018) warns that assessment, when driven by external surveillance, loses its capacity to inform practice and promote growth.

An alternative model emerges from the work of Banta and Palomba (2014), Jankowski and Marshall (2017), and Hutchings et al. (2015), who advocate for an assessment culture grounded in inquiry, reflection, and integration. In this "learning systems paradigm," assessment is embedded within teaching, curriculum design, and student engagement. It is not a parallel process but a generative one—where learning outcomes are continuously interpreted, revised, and acted upon by faculty and staff in contextually meaningful ways.

## The Compliance Trap and Its Discontents

Despite widespread recognition of the need for reform, accreditation in practice continues to operate within a structure that emphasizes documentation rather than development. Institutions frequently produce lengthy reports, filled with data intended to demonstrate that student learning is occurring. Much of this data comes from indirect measures such as retention rates, standardized test scores, student satisfaction surveys, and graduation statistics. While these indicators can provide a general sense of institutional health, they often fail to offer insight into the quality and depth of student learning.

Kuh and colleagues (2015) emphasize that although these metrics can help institutions track patterns and outcomes, they should not be treated as stand-ins for actual learning evidence. A high retention rate may reflect improvements in student support services or campus climate, but it does not indicate whether students are developing critical thinking skills or mastering disciplinary content. Likewise, student satisfaction scores may highlight effective course design or instructor approachability, yet they offer little information about knowledge acquisition or skill development.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argue that to truly understand what students know and can do, institutions must prioritize direct evidence of learning. This includes evaluating student-produced work such as essays, presentations, research projects, lab reports, or creative artifacts. These products reveal students' ability to apply concepts, synthesize information, and communicate their ideas effectively. Direct evidence captures the complexity of learning in ways that statistical aggregates cannot, making it far more useful for informing instructional practice and curricular design.

The challenge, however, is not limited to methods of data collection. It also involves the broader institutional culture surrounding assessment. Faculty across disciplines often report feeling alienated by assessment processes that appear disconnected from their academic values and teaching goals. Many see assessment as an administrative requirement that has little to do with the intellectual work of teaching and learning. This perception is shaped by years of external mandates, generic reporting templates, and rigid timelines that emphasize procedural completion over meaningful reflection.

Jankowski and Marshall (2017) explain that when assessment is not grounded in disciplinary norms or academic inquiry, it loses its relevance and fails to motivate genuine engagement. For instance, asking a faculty member in the visual arts to demonstrate student learning through multiple-choice exams, or requiring a philosophy department to quantify ethical reasoning with simple numerical scales, undermines both the complexity of the discipline and the purpose of assessment itself. In these situations, faculty may comply with the letter of the mandate but disengage from the spirit of improvement.

This disconnect results in what some have called "assessment fatigue." Faculty and staff become weary of processes that require significant time and energy but yield little value for their own teaching or for student success. Institutions often spend months collecting data, analyzing trends, and populating dashboards, only to produce reports that are rarely read outside of compliance offices. The work may meet accreditation requirements, but it rarely influences decisions about pedagogy, curriculum, or resource allocation.

Ewell (2009) described this phenomenon as the "verification model," in which the goal shifts from understanding and improving student learning to proving that assessment is being done. Institutions become more concerned with demonstrating compliance than with asking critical questions about the quality and equity of the educational experience. As a result, assessment becomes a ritual of compliance rather than a tool for reflection and innovation.

To escape this compliance trap, institutions must reposition assessment as a scholarly and strategic activity that is led by educators, informed by evidence, and focused on improvement. This begins by aligning assessment tasks with faculty interests and instructional goals. Departments should be encouraged to ask meaningful questions about student learning within their own disciplinary frameworks. For example, a biology department might explore whether students are able to design and interpret experiments, while a literature department might investigate students' ability to analyze

texts and construct arguments. These inquiries should drive the selection of assessment methods, ensuring that the data collected is both relevant and useful.

Institutions must also create time and space for faculty to reflect on assessment results and apply them to their teaching. This could take the form of regular departmental discussions, cross-disciplinary learning communities, or professional development workshops focused on data interpretation and curricular revision. When faculty are invited into these conversations as professionals and not just data contributors, they are more likely to see assessment as a meaningful part of their academic work.

Accreditors have an important role to play in supporting this cultural shift. Reviewers should look beyond data volume and format and instead evaluate the authenticity and utility of assessment efforts. Institutions that are using assessment to ask difficult questions, test new approaches, and improve student learning should be recognized and supported. Templates and standards should allow for flexibility, narrative explanation, and contextual interpretation. By valuing depth over formality and reflection over repetition, accreditors can help institutions reframe assessment as a driver of educational quality.

In short, the discontents of compliance-driven assessment are not simply administrative headaches. They are indicators of a deeper misalignment between the goals of accreditation and the realities of teaching and learning. Addressing this misalignment requires institutions to reclaim assessment as a meaningful, faculty-centered process. It also requires accreditors to support innovation and improvement rather than enforce uniformity. Only by moving beyond the mechanics of compliance can higher education realize the true promise of assessment—to foster better learning, more responsive instruction, and greater educational equity.

## A Call for Learning-Centered Accreditation

To reclaim its purpose, accreditation must be reframed through a learning-centered lens. This shift involves four foundational principles:

1. **Authenticity:** Assessment must reflect the complexity and context of real-world learning. Portfolios, simulations, clinical evaluations, and integrative capstones offer rich data that transcend simplistic benchmarks.
2. **Integration:** Effective assessment is embedded into curricular and co-curricular experiences, not appended at the end. It must be part of the instructional design process, not a post-hoc reporting obligation.
3. **Agency:** Faculty and students should co-own the assessment process, determining what to assess, how to interpret results, and what changes to implement.
4. **Dialogue:** Accreditors and institutions must engage in continuous, reciprocal conversations. Accreditation should facilitate—not stifle—innovation and reflection.

This model reconceptualizes accreditation from oversight to partnership, and assessment from accountability to improvement.

## Reclaiming Assessment as a Pedagogical Act

At the heart of reform is the imperative to treat assessment not as a compliance mechanism, but as an extension—and indeed a driver—of pedagogy. Rather than existing outside of the teaching and learning process, assessment should be embedded within it, informing the evolution of course design, instructional practice, and curricular coherence. Banta and Palomba (2014) emphasize that assessment achieves its greatest potential when used by faculty as a means of understanding and improving their teaching. Suskie (2018) likewise advocates for inquiry-driven assessment frameworks that position the classroom as a space of ongoing exploration, where evidence of student learning is continuously gathered, analyzed, and acted upon.

This pedagogical lens reframes assessment as a scholarly practice—one in which educators ask difficult questions about what students are learning, what barriers they are encountering, and how instructional strategies can better facilitate meaningful engagement. Rather than a final judgment, assessment becomes formative and recursive, shaping teaching decisions in real time and empowering faculty to identify patterns in learning that may not be evident through intuition alone.

Effective assessment practices are deeply contextualized and discipline specific. Tools such as course-embedded assessments, signature assignments, and ePortfolios offer rich, authentic artifacts that capture student thinking across cognitive, affective, and skill-based domains. When these tools are intentionally aligned with program-level outcomes and institutional goals, they serve dual purposes: providing students with integrative learning opportunities and offering faculty actionable feedback loops.

For example, a signature assignment in an environmental science course might ask students to develop a sustainability proposal for their local community, drawing upon research, data analysis, policy evaluation, and ethical reasoning. Evaluating such an assignment with a rubric tied to program outcomes, such as systems thinking, civic responsibility, and interdisciplinary communication, yields insights far more relevant than test scores or Likert-scale surveys. Faculty can then reflect on the areas where students struggled (e.g., integrating sources, using quantitative data, articulating impact) and redesign instruction or support services accordingly.

ePortfolios, in particular, provide a longitudinal view of student learning, capturing growth over time and enabling metacognitive reflection. When scaffolded throughout the curriculum, portfolios allow students to make connections between courses, disciplines, and co-curricular experiences. For faculty, ePortfolios offer a window into student progression and provide evidence not just of knowledge acquisition, but of identity development, critical inquiry, and self-authorship. This richness is essential in capturing the holistic outcomes that higher education aspires to cultivate.

Critically, when assessment is embedded within the learning process, it shifts from being a task imposed upon faculty to one that is co-owned by them. This fosters professional identity, disciplinary agency, and institutional trust. Faculty no longer feel like data collectors for external entities but instead act as scholars of learning—engaging in reflective dialogue with their peers about what works, what doesn't, and why.

To support this pedagogical turn, institutions must reorient their infrastructure and incentives. Faculty development initiatives should center on assessment literacy, offering workshops and mentoring on designing effective rubrics, interpreting student work, and linking assessment findings to curricular revision. Centers for teaching and learning can partner with assessment offices to co-facilitate these efforts, ensuring that pedagogical improvement remains at the forefront.

Moreover, institutions should institutionalize spaces where assessment findings are regularly discussed, not just reported. Departmental retreats, curriculum committees, and cross-disciplinary learning communities can serve as forums for surfacing insights, sharing strategies, and celebrating instructional innovations that emerge from assessment. When these conversations are collegial and formative, they demystify assessment and reposition it as a vital component of academic excellence.

Ultimately, reclaiming assessment as a pedagogical act is not merely a technical adjustment—it is a cultural one. It demands that institutions trust their faculty as stewards of learning, provide them with the tools and time to engage deeply in assessment, and reward them for doing so. When assessment becomes part of the fabric of teaching, rather than an external appendage, it transforms from a burden into a bridge, linking intention with impact, and instruction with improvement.

## From Volume to Value: Rethinking Evidence

A central obstacle to meaningful assessment in higher education is the prevailing fixation on volume, on collecting as many data points as possible across the widest array of learning outcomes. While this approach may satisfy the appearance of thoroughness, it often results in diminishing returns. Institutions generate vast quantities of information, but without strategic focus or interpretive depth, these efforts yield little actionable insight. The result is a landscape littered with metrics: pie charts and spreadsheets that signify effort without clarity, and compliance without consequence.

This dynamic is not merely inefficient; it is antithetical to the very purpose of assessment. When institutions prioritize breadth over depth, they risk reducing learning to a series of discrete checkpoints rather than a developmental, integrative process. Faculty become overwhelmed by the demands of measuring everything, often at the expense of measuring what truly matters. Students, in turn, may experience assessment as fragmented or arbitrary, failing to see how their assignments contribute to long-term growth.

The solution lies in a strategic pivot from quantity to quality, from coverage to coherence. This shift requires institutions to refocus their assessment practices on authentic, performance-based evidence that captures the richness of student learning. Case studies, design challenges, research projects, simulations, and reflective narratives offer windows into students' ability to synthesize knowledge, think critically, and transfer skills across contexts. These artifacts not only provide more meaningful representations of learning but also serve as valuable tools for teaching, advising, and program improvement.

For instance, a single well-designed project in a capstone course scored with a robust, shared rubric can yield insights into multiple learning outcomes: written communication, problem-solving, ethical reasoning, teamwork, and application of disciplinary content. Such an approach reduces redundancy and increases the interpretive value of the data collected. It also signals to students that the work they are doing matters—that it is not merely a performance for a grade, but a demonstration of cumulative knowledge and capability.

To fully realize this shift, institutions must invest in the infrastructure necessary to collect, analyze, and utilize qualitative evidence at scale. This includes technology tools that can assist with coding student reflections, mapping rubric scores across learning outcomes, and visualizing patterns in student achievement over time. Artificial intelligence platforms can play a powerful role in identifying trends, clustering themes in open-ended responses, and even highlighting outliers for closer human review. Dashboards that integrate both direct and indirect evidence—such as performance on key assignments, course pass rates, and student feedback—can help faculty and administrators make sense of complex learning environments.

However, technology alone is not the answer. Institutions must also develop the human systems that make sense of the data. Faculty-led assessment committees, interdisciplinary scoring sessions, and regular feedback loops are essential for transforming data into knowledge and knowledge into action. This means creating time and space for interpretation, not just collection. It also means resisting the pressure to report everything and instead focusing on what is most relevant to student success and institutional mission.

Importantly, the move from volume to value aligns assessment with equity and student-centeredness. Excessive data collection often masks disparities by diluting attention. By contrast, a focus on fewer, more meaningful indicators, disaggregated by student populations and contextualized within curricular pathways, can reveal where and why learning gaps exist. Institutions can then target interventions, redesign assignments, or shift pedagogical approaches to better serve all students.

Moreover, valuing depth over breadth encourages a more authentic relationship with accreditors. Rather than treating site visits and reports as opportunities to demonstrate exhaustive coverage, institutions can highlight exemplary practices, share reflective analyses, and discuss ongoing questions. This approach promotes a culture of continuous improvement rather than performative compliance.

Ultimately, rethinking evidence is about reclaiming purpose. Assessment should illuminate learning, guide improvement, and affirm institutional integrity. By choosing to collect less, but understand more, institutions can elevate assessment from a bureaucratic task to a transformational practice: one that fosters deeper engagement, more equitable outcomes, and a clearer vision of what students can truly know and do.

## Strategic Pathways for Reform

Translating vision into practice requires deliberate, coordinated steps across five domains:

1. **Elevate Direct Evidence:** Accrediting bodies must continue to prioritize student artifacts as primary evidence of learning. Institutions should structure their assessment systems around capstones, portfolios, clinical evaluations, and project-based work that mirror real-world applications.
2. **Integrate Assessment into Curriculum:** Through backward design, learning outcomes must be linked to signature assignments across general education and majors. Common rubrics and faculty norming sessions ensure consistency and support alignment.
3. **Empower Faculty Leadership:** Faculty must be at the center of assessment governance. Institutions should recognize and reward assessment leadership through tenure guidelines, stipends, or course releases. Faculty learning communities and assessment residencies can build sustained expertise and innovation.
4. **Support Experimentation and Iteration:** Accrediting agencies should create safe space for institutions to pilot new strategies and share lessons learned—whether successful or not. National repositories of promising practices can encourage cross-institutional learning.
5. **Reconstruct Accreditor Relationships:** Accreditation must shift from audit to collaboration. Institutions should involve accreditors early in the development of new approaches, framing site visits as opportunities for shared learning rather than judgment.

## Alignment with Standards: Challenges and Opportunities

While most accrediting bodies frame assessment in terms of improvement, their standards are often vague or inconsistently applied. For example, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Standard 8.2.b calls for general education assessment, yet institutions frequently default to multiple-choice tests. Western Association of Colleges and Schools Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)'s Standard 2.9 emphasizes outcomes consistency but lacks clear implementation guidance. Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)'s Standard V.3—requiring disaggregated data—offers promise for equity-focused analysis, while New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)'s Standard 2.7 invites innovation in alumni and employer feedback. Across the board, clearer rubrics, exemplars, and reviewer training would enhance consistency and legitimacy.

## Culture Change: The Human Side of Reform

Any shift toward a learning-centered accreditation model must be grounded not only in revised standards or technical processes, but in an intentional and sustained effort to reshape institutional culture. For decades, faculty have viewed assessment with skepticism, often perceiving it as a distraction from their core responsibilities of teaching, research, and service. This resistance is neither irrational nor unfounded—it stems from a long history of assessment being imposed from the top down, framed in the language of compliance rather than inquiry, and evaluated through rubrics that fail to reflect disciplinary nuance or pedagogical complexity.

The path forward requires a fundamental change in the narrative surrounding assessment. Rather than being framed as an administrative burden, assessment must be positioned as a form of intellectual and professional engagement. Institutions should affirm that assessment is scholarship: it involves posing questions, gathering evidence, interpreting results, and taking informed action. When conducted

thoughtfully, assessment can lead to pedagogical discovery, curricular improvement, and increased equity in learning outcomes.

To support this cultural transformation, institutions must invest in faculty development that centers on peer exchange and empowerment. Faculty learning communities (FLCs) can be powerful vehicles for this change. These small, interdisciplinary groups provide a safe space for faculty to explore assessment practices, share teaching experiences, and reflect on student learning in ways that are both personal and professionally meaningful. Through FLCs, faculty can develop a shared vocabulary around assessment and build trust in institutional efforts to improve quality rather than merely document it.

Another promising approach is the creation of assessment residencies—structured opportunities for faculty to devote dedicated time, such as a summer term or a sabbatical semester, to leading or redesigning assessment initiatives within their programs. These residencies provide time and recognition for deep engagement, while producing high-quality, context-sensitive strategies that can be scaled across the institution.

Celebrating faculty contributions to assessment is also critical to shifting culture. Institutions should create formal and informal mechanisms for recognizing assessment-related innovations through internal teaching awards, assessment showcases, or featured articles in campus newsletters and peer-reviewed journals. By elevating assessment work to the same status as research and teaching excellence, institutions send a powerful signal that understanding and improving student learning is an endeavor worth honoring.

Leadership also plays a key role in shaping institutional culture. Deans, department chairs, and provosts must model curiosity about student learning and frame assessment conversations in terms of shared inquiry, not accountability. When faculty see that leadership values reflection, experimentation, and the use of evidence to drive improvement, they are more likely to engage authentically and enthusiastically.

Ultimately, cultural change cannot be mandated; it must be cultivated. Institutions must be patient but persistent, creating environments where assessment is no longer seen as a demand, but as an opportunity to reflect, refine, and reaffirm the transformative power of education.

## Policy Implications and National Momentum

Achieving this cultural and practical transformation at scale will require parallel shifts at the policy and regulatory levels. Accreditors, state agencies, and national organizations must evolve in ways that support innovation, reward meaningful learning assessment, and reduce the emphasis on procedural uniformity. This does not mean eliminating expectations or lowering standards. Rather, it calls for a smarter, more flexible approach—one that evaluates institutions not on how much data they collect or how neatly they format their reports, but on the depth, authenticity, and usefulness of the assessment work they undertake.

Accrediting bodies should update their standards and evaluation criteria to reflect a deeper understanding of learning-centered assessment. This may include recognizing faculty-led initiatives, valuing qualitative as well as quantitative evidence, and rewarding institutions that demonstrate thoughtful, iterative improvement, even if outcomes are not always perfect. Reviewers must be trained to identify promising practices that diverge from tradition yet align with institutional mission and educational purpose.

National organizations, such as AALHE and the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), can play a vital role by serving as conveners, facilitators, and amplifiers of effective practice. By funding pilot projects, curating repositories of exemplary assessment work, and offering professional development for faculty and administrators, these organizations help normalize a more humanized and scholarly vision of assessment.

Public policy must also shift its orientation. Too often, state and federal regulations conflate assessment with accountability, leading to systems that emphasize punishment over improvement. Policymakers should prioritize initiatives that create capacity: investments in faculty development, support for institutional research offices, and incentives for equity-focused learning interventions. Additionally, policies that require data transparency must be balanced with a commitment to interpretive context. Dashboards and outcome reports are useful only when they foster understanding, not when they are used to rank or shame institutions.

Internally, institutions must reflect these external priorities through sustainable infrastructure and fair practices. This means ensuring that faculty have the time, tools, and recognition to participate meaningfully in assessment. Workload policies should account for the labor of learning evaluation, and reward systems, especially for tenure and promotion, should explicitly include contributions to assessment and continuous improvement. Without this internal alignment, external mandates risk reinforcing cynicism rather than supporting change.

## Reclaiming Accreditation as a Public Good

If accreditation is to fulfill its promise as a guarantor of educational quality and institutional integrity, it must be reclaimed as a public good: one that exists not to protect bureaucratic routines, but to promote student learning and social advancement. This will require a courageous departure from status quo thinking and a recommitment to the values that undergird higher education: equity, inquiry, growth, and transformation.

This shift begins by abandoning the performance of compliance. Too often, accreditation has devolved into a ritualistic exercise producing reports, populating dashboards, and aligning checklists that fulfill requirements but do not serve students. Institutions must instead embrace assessment as an organic part of pedagogy. Faculty must be given the time and agency to investigate how and why students learn, and to act on those insights in ways that improve instruction and foster inclusion. Accreditors, for their part, must recognize that authentic assessment cannot be templated—it must be interpreted in light of institutional mission, student demographics, and pedagogical goals.

Policymakers must support this transformation by aligning incentives with the behaviors and values that truly matter. Improvement, not perfection, must be the goal. Transparency, not standardization, must be the measure of accountability. Investment, not surveillance, must be the strategy. This vision is not a utopian ideal. It is a practical necessity. In a rapidly changing world marked by technological disruption, political division, and growing demands for relevance and return on investment, higher education must evolve to remain credible and impactful. Accreditation, as one of the most powerful levers of change in this system, must evolve with it.

Reimagining accreditation is not just a procedural shift—it is a moral imperative. It affirms that education is not a commodity but a commitment. It insists that students are not data points but human beings. And it demands that institutions rise to meet the challenge of not only teaching content, but cultivating character, curiosity, and capacity.

Our students deserve a system that values what they learn, how they grow, and who they become. Reclaiming accreditation as a public good is the first step toward building that system—and toward ensuring that the work we do in higher education is worthy of the trust society places in us.

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