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Nine Ways Collaborative Assessment Can Drive Student Success

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

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Abstract: Assessment is not a bureaucratic necessity—it is a strategic engine for institutional transformation. In *Nine Ways Collaborative Assessment Can Drive Student Success*, we challenge the conventional view of institutional research and assessment (IR&A) as compliance-driven and reactive. Instead, we present nine actionable strategies that reposition IR&A as a collaborative, future-focused force for student-centered change. Drawing on national survey data, sector-leading practices, and examples from institutions, the article demonstrates how assessment professionals can shift from data reporters to institutional strategists. Themes include embedding assessment into strategic planning, tracking decision outcomes, adapting external models, integrating student and employer feedback, recognizing prior learning, and leveraging comparative benchmarks. The piece also captures key takeaways from the 2025 AALHE Annual Conference, where assessment leaders called for more transparent, story-driven, and equity-centered practices. Participants highlighted the critical role of trust, technology, and purpose in building effective assessment cultures. The article argues that collaborative assessment is not a bonus; it is the foundation for institutions seeking to serve today's diverse student populations and evolving workforce demands. With courage, institutional support, and cross-campus collaboration, IR&A can become the connective tissue that transforms insight into action and vision into measurable impact. This is not just a call to rethink how we assess; it is an invitation to reimagine how institutions learn, improve, and thrive together.

Keywords: *collaborative assessment, institutional research, student success, strategic improvement, data-informed decision-making*

Introduction

Institutional research and assessment (IR&A) is not just looking backward, crunching numbers or checking boxes to appease accrediting bodies. It is the radar guiding your institution towards future improvement. When it comes to increasing student success, IR&A isn't a siloed operation. It is the connective tissue linking data to decisions, insights to action, and performance to progress.

Too often, institutional research and assessment professionals do not play this collaborative role though. It is getting harder to play given the deluge of data. A routine theme at Embry Riddle's Annual Continuous Improvement Summit is the difficulty in building a true institution-wide emphasis on continuous improvement. Likewise, an AIR study found that only about four in ten institutional research professionals felt that "data collected by different offices are integrated to present a

comprehensive picture of institutional performance” (Association for Institutional Research, 2022). To unlock the full potential of assessment to drive student success, you must play a strategic role, get constant feedback to create a culture of continuous improvement, and create compelling insights that lead to action.

Playing a Strategic Role

Institutional research and assessment professionals must move beyond simply reporting numbers and instead become key players in shaping institutional strategy. To do this, they must bridge the gap between data collection and decision-making, ensuring that insights lead to real, actionable change. This requires a shift from passive reporting to active collaboration with faculty, administrators, and student success teams. By embedding assessment into institutional strategy, engaging stakeholders, and leveraging data to drive meaningful improvement, assessment professionals can become catalysts for change, rather than mere compliance officers (Hutson & Hogan, 2024). To play a strategic role in driving student success, tie details to the big picture, track results, and avoid reinventing the wheel.

Connect the Details to the Big Picture

Every bold institutional vision is only as strong as the data that brings it to life. Florida State University’s strategic plan aims for it to be “among the nation’s most entrepreneurial and innovative universities.” How does that big picture vision connect to detailed assessments? Florida State University’s Office of Institutional Research dashboards include metrics on how many students take entrepreneurship classes – if you are curious, 1298 students did in 2022. This is one great example of how metrics can be tied to institutional priorities.

To help institutions connect day-to-day metrics to strategic goals, start by embedding assessment professionals into strategic planning teams. Require that every goal or Key Performance Indicator (KPI) in the strategic plan is linked to a measurable, regularly updated data point. Facilitate cross-functional workshops where teams practice translating strategic priorities into relevant indicators and create campus-wide dashboards that explicitly connect individual data points to institutional objectives. Encourage leadership to reference these connections in public communications and budget decisions.

Track the results of your decisions

While making decisions can be tough, tracking them to analyze results and knowing what is working is even tougher. A Gartner analysis of data-driven decision making found that about 50% more leaders also found “tracking and analyzing the results of decisions” challenging than “selecting the right decision.” It also revealed that leaders find it about three times more challenging to analyze results as it is to identify problems and opportunities and put them in context (Gartner, 2020).

Institutions can improve their follow-through by developing simple mechanisms for post-decision review. Create a “decision log” for major policy or programmatic changes and assign responsibility for tracking outcomes. Establish a set cadence (quarterly or annually) to revisit these decisions in leadership meetings. Consider using project management tools that pair decision-making milestones with key outcome metrics, and regularly communicate which decisions have yielded positive impacts, and which haven’t, to promote transparency and learning.

Do not start from scratch, adapt and collaborate

Picasso said, “Good artists copy, great artists steal.” Do not simply copy assessments from other institutions or trade organizations. Get inspired and adapt them to your institution’s needs. For example, if you want to gauge entering student readiness to inform student support, you can adapt Old Dominion University’s Transition to College Inventory, the ACT Readiness Benchmarks, RNL’s College Student Inventory Survey, or Cengage’s College Success Factors Index. You can take it one step further and use these adaptations to spark collaborations with other institutions.

Encourage a culture of smart borrowing by formally scanning peer institutions for promising practices. Build a shared internal repository where faculty and staff can submit useful external tools, templates, or instruments that have been successfully adapted. Consider forming regional partnerships with institutions of similar mission or student demographics to co-develop assessment models. Institutional leaders should champion collaboration over reinvention by incentivizing adaptations and publicly recognizing teams that creatively localize proven tools.

Gathering Meaningful Input from Students and Industry

Student and employer feedback is not just a box to check. It is the compass that ensures programs remain relevant, impactful, and aligned with real-world needs. Institutions that actively integrate feedback from students and employers do not just measure learning; they shape experiences that drive student success and career readiness. By listening to what students value, understanding industry expectations, and recognizing prior learning, institutions can refine their academic offerings and provide more personalized, effective support. Student and industry feedback loops can transform programs, enhance student growth, and build stronger connections between education and the workforce.

Uncover what students care about

To focus attention and resources, you need to know what students value. Recent research identified growth as the biggest driver of student satisfaction and something that varied significantly by group (Buro Happold, 2023a). Being challenged, gaining confidence, building skills and knowledge, collaborating on teams, solving complex problems, and exploring career pathways are all essential aspects of student development that contribute to long-term success. A national study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2021) found that while employers highly value these competencies, fewer than half are “very satisfied” with graduates’ ability to apply college learning to real-world, complex problems.

This points to a broader concern: while institutions may be fostering growth in these areas, students themselves do not always feel adequately prepared or confident in their development. Although specific satisfaction rates vary, related research indicates that adult learners, women, and students attending private institutions often report higher levels of satisfaction with their educational experiences, especially in terms of personal and professional growth (Buro Happold, 2023a). These patterns suggest that both institutional structures and demographic experiences shape students’ perceived outcomes and satisfaction, highlighting the need for more intentional, inclusive approaches to student development and assessment.

Create ongoing structures to capture authentic student feedback—beyond end-of-course surveys. Host listening sessions, conduct thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses, and run design-thinking workshops to understand what students value. Build reporting frameworks that disaggregate results by key identity markers to identify gaps in experience. Ensure this data feeds back to academic departments and student services in actionable ways, perhaps through annual student experience briefs or campus-wide town halls that center student voice.

Get industry feedback on programs

Employer feedback on your academic programs is essential, especially as their needs change. The Afeka College of Engineering provides a prime example of industry feedback. Their president Ami Moyal combined his experience as a faculty member as a CEO in industry to focus the college on workforce readiness. Surveys and curricular reviews identified opportunities like developing “soft skills” that complement technical expertise. Now about half their graduates go into Research & Development and enrollment is up 50% (Moyal, 2020).

To systematize industry engagement, establish advisory boards for key programs with rotating membership to ensure diverse employer perspectives. Conduct regular labor market scans using tools like Lightcast or GrayDI, and map employer-identified skills to curricular content. Build short employer surveys into existing program review cycles and facilitate crosswalks between job requirements and learning outcomes. Celebrate departments that demonstrate improved alignment with industry needs through annual reports or faculty development showcases.

Assess and credit prior learning

Increasingly students arrive with a patchwork of academic and employment experience. You need to understand students' past performance, activities, and behaviors to grant credits, better predict their future, and support them along their path. This is something the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) is advocating. The University of Akron's prior-learning initiative is an exemplar; it offers students the chance to earn academic credit for their existing knowledge and skills (AACRAO, 2023).

Institutions can expand recognition of prior learning by building a centralized Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) office or function. Train faculty assessors to evaluate portfolios and align experience with course outcomes. Develop clear equivalency tables and credit pathways for military experience, industry certifications, and standardized assessments. Make these processes transparent, efficient, and accessible—especially to adult learners and community college transfers—and promote PLA as a student success and equity strategy in institutional marketing.

Moving from Analysis to Impact

Data analysis is not just about numbers—it is about telling a compelling story that drives action. The most impactful analyses do not just present findings; they provide insight, context, and direction for institutional decision-making. By segmenting students based on risk, making meaningful comparisons, and establishing baselines, assessment professionals can transform raw data into strategic guidance. The key is to ensure that analysis leads to change, not just reporting. To use data to shape smarter

interventions, improve student support, and optimize resources for maximum impact, segment your student body, establish intentional baselines, and make meaningful comparisons.

Segment your study body by retention risk

University of South Florida uses a case management approach inspired by healthcare to segment their student body and target support where and when it is needed. They created their SMART (Student Monitoring and Risk Tracking) tool to identify which 15 to 25% of students need the priority outreach and support. Over about a decade, their first-year retention rates increased from 86% to 92%, four-year graduation rates increased from 43% to 64% and six-year graduation rates increased from 66% to 75% (University of South Florida, 2022).

To implement segmentation, begin with data you already have—credit accumulation, GPA, attendance patterns—and use predictive modeling tools to flag risk early. Collaborate with student support offices to design intervention protocols based on risk tiers. Ensure data analysts and front-line practitioners meet regularly to refine criteria, share qualitative feedback, and calibrate approaches. Most importantly, create closed feedback loops so that support staff can see whether their efforts changed the trajectory of at-risk students.

Establish baselines for comparisons

The assessments you conduct about student services, staffing, and spaces can do more than uncover and prioritize needs. They provide a baseline to measure progress against. The University of Michigan created a new workplace that brought together academic and administrative centers, and in the process resulted in an average of 4.26 hours per week per person productivity gain. Who does not want to get 10% of their week back or in effect hire 10% more people for free? Likewise, the University of Minnesota created a flexible work program that reduced response times by 69%.

Before launching new initiatives or making significant investments, gather pre-intervention data on key metrics. This means documenting usage rates, satisfaction levels, or academic outcomes for existing services or spaces. Use control groups when possible or compare them against historical trends. Make baseline setting a requirement in new project proposals or funding requests. Encourage units across the institution to maintain “before and after” snapshots to clearly demonstrate the impact of their work (Maki, 2010).

Make comparisons for context

Do not evaluate your data on its own, put it in context with trends and comparisons to other institutions. For example, this space utilization whitepaper looks at how much, how often, and when spaces are used across 38 universities and found that satellite libraries are used 40% less than main location and those with student success functions are used 25% more. How does your library compare? Use this to inform decisions about library consolidations and where to locate centers for writing, tutoring, communication, and more.

Institutions should prioritize benchmarking not only against national norms but also peer and aspirational institutions. Building internal capacity for comparative analysis through membership in

consortia or using platforms offering benchmarking tools allows campuses to contextualize internal data within broader sector trends. Regularly situating internal reports with external benchmarks strengthens transparency, accountability, and strategic planning. Training campus leaders in the responsible interpretation of comparisons helps prevent misaligned or superficial conclusions. When performance gaps emerge, departments should be guided through goal-setting processes that are informed both by internal priorities and external expectations, ensuring data-driven but context-sensitive improvement strategies. Benchmarking against similar or aspirational institutions offers critical insight into where the institution performs relatively well or where performance falls short; it also helps leaders identify new practices worth emulating or adapting (Community College Daily, 2024).

Putting It All Together

Collaborative assessment is not an optional enhancement, it is a foundational strategy for institutional effectiveness and student success. When assessment professionals are empowered to go beyond compliance, they can help rewire institutions to think systemically, act strategically, and improve intentionally. This work cannot be done in isolation. It requires strong partnerships across academic affairs, student services, institutional research, and external stakeholders like employers and alumni. It also demands that institutions cultivate a culture where evidence is not just gathered but acted upon, where feedback is not feared but sought out, and where decisions are not just documented but evaluated for real-world impact.

The nine strategies outlined in this piece provide a roadmap to shift from a fragmented, reactive approach to one that is cohesive, forward-looking, and deeply student-centered. Institutions that tie their big-picture ambitions to measurable outcomes, adapt proven models instead of duplicating effort, gather student and industry input meaningfully, and move from raw analysis to transformative action will find themselves better equipped to serve today's students and tomorrow's challenges. But none of this will happen without courage. It takes courage to move away from entrenched compliance routines. It takes courage to interrogate your own practices and admit what is not working. It takes courage to build new structures of collaboration, transparency, and accountability. That courage must be met with support from leadership, from peers, and from a broader community of practice committed to reshaping what assessment means in higher education.

The 2025 AALHE Annual Conference provided powerful validation and fresh insight into the themes explored throughout this article. A recurring conversation point emphasized that assessment is no longer the domain of a single office or a designated few, but a connective tissue that binds together institutional priorities, cultural values, and educational equity. In dialogue with peers from institutions of various sizes and missions, several common threads emerged. First, there is growing recognition that assessment can no longer live solely in static documents. Rather, it must evolve into a continuous, living process that integrates student voices, reflects community impact, and remains nimble to institutional change. Presenters shared successful models of integrating student affairs professionals as co-assessors, illustrating that some of the most powerful learning experiences happen beyond the classroom: and these, too, deserve to be measured, evaluated, and elevated.

A second insight centered on the importance of transparency and storytelling. One institution described its pivot from publishing dense assessment reports to developing annual “student learning impact stories” co-authored by faculty, staff, and students. These narratives made data actionable and accessible to stakeholders from trustees to parents and helped reclaim assessment as a tool for advocacy rather than audit.

Third, the conference highlighted the role of technology in enabling collaborative assessment practices. Yet, attendees repeatedly cautioned against the assumption that more tools automatically mean better outcomes. Technology must support—not supplant—human relationships and shared purpose. Several presenters stressed that even the most advanced platforms will fail to generate meaningful insights if campuses have not first built trust, clarified goals, and developed shared definitions of student success.

Finally, a key message from both formal presentations and informal hallway conversations was this: assessment professionals are hungry for meaning. Many described burnout from years of compliance-driven cycles that felt disconnected from student experience. The sessions at AALHE called attendees to reclaim assessment as a moral act, a way to honor students’ journeys, uplift equity, and challenge institutional complacency.

In sum, the AALHE conference affirmed that collaborative assessment is not just a strategy; it is a movement. One that calls us to build bridges between silos, to elevate underrepresented voices, and to use evidence as a catalyst for better learning, deeper engagement, and greater institutional integrity. As we return to our campuses, we do so with renewed clarity: collaboration is not a detour from our assessment work. It is the only road forward. This is the moment to reimagine institutional research and assessment not as a set of reports, but as a shared practice of inquiry, improvement, and purpose. When done collaboratively and strategically, assessment does not just measure progress. It propels it.

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