

ACCELERATE: Reimagining Assessment Principles for Learning, Student Success, and Institutional Change

By Constance Tucker, Dan Kaczmarek, Divya Samuga_Gyaanam

Assessment in higher education has long been shaped by a productive tension: the need to demonstrate accountability to external audiences while remaining faithful to the core educational purpose of improving learning. Few documents have influenced how the field has navigated this tension more than the *Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning*, first published by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) in 1992 and reaffirmed in 1996⁽¹⁾. For more than three decades, these principles have served as a shared set of values guiding assessment practice across institutional types and functional areas.

To understand their enduring influence, it is helpful to revisit the context in which they were created. As Trudy Banta, one of the principal architects of the original principles, has reflected, the early 1990s were marked by increasing public scrutiny of higher education outcomes, the emergence of performance funding in several states, and heightened demands for evidence of value and effectiveness. Assessment, in many places, risked becoming a compliance exercise driven by external accountability pressures rather than a tool for improving teaching and learning. The AAHE Principles were a deliberate intervention in that moment. They asserted that assessment should be learner-centered, improvement-oriented, and embedded within institutional conditions that support reflection and change.

Importantly, the AAHE Principles were never intended to function as a procedural checklist. Influenced in part by earlier work such as the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education², they articulated shared assumptions and values rather than prescribing methods. Principle 8, added thereafter, emphasizing that assessment leads to improvement only when embedded in broader conditions that support change, captured a core insight that remains salient today: evidence alone does not produce improvement. Leadership, culture, resources, and structures matter. In later writings, Banta et al. (1992) extended this idea even further, underscoring that effective assessment requires administrative commitment, faculty and staff development, and organizational readiness. From the outset, then, assessment was framed not merely as a technical activity, but as deeply cultural and relational work.

Why Revisit the Principles Now?

When the assessment community began to revisit the AAHE Principles in 2024, the conclusion was not that they were broken or conceptually insufficient. On the contrary, their resilience was striking. What had changed was the context in which assessment is practiced. Over the past three decades, equity has moved from the margins to the center of institutional conversations. Assessment now routinely spans not just academic affairs, but also student affairs, co-curricular learning, and student success initiatives today. Technology, and increasingly, artificial intelligence, has transformed how evidence is collected, analyzed, and shared. Practitioners are being asked not only to produce data, but to demonstrate impact, relevance, and ethical use.

The original principles, intentionally abstract and philosophical, do not always speak clearly to these contemporary realities. Their language can feel dated, and their lack of action-oriented framing can make them difficult to operationalize, particularly for practitioners new to assessment or leaders seeking clarity about expectations. The motivation for updating the principles, therefore, was not replacement, but translation: re-expressing enduring values in ways that are accessible, equity-minded, and explicitly connected to action and use across growing contexts of assessment practice.

The Development of ACCELERATE

In response to this need, the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) and Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) launched a formal initiative in 2024 to revisit and renew the AAHE Principles. The AALHE Nine Principles Revision Committee led the effort, sponsored by then-AALHE President Dr. Constance Tucker. Committee members included Dr. Divya Bheda (Santa Clara University), Dr. Jeremy Penn (University of Iowa), Dr. Karen White-Goyzueta (Southern New Hampshire University), and Daniel Kaczmarek (University at Buffalo). The work unfolded in close collaboration with the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, the AALHE Board of Directors, and the broader assessment community, with intentional consultation from original contributors such as Trudy Banta.

The revision process was structured, iterative, and participatory. It began with a review of foundational scholarship and a needs assessment informed by literature and practitioner input. Listening sessions at the Assessment Institute and AALHE-affiliated gatherings surfaced recurring challenges: inequitable assessment practices, assessment fatigue, lack of influence on decision-making, and uncertainty about how evidence translates into action. Drafting emphasized plain language, explicit values, and stronger verbs, while remaining faithful to the spirit of the original principles. Feedback from diverse stakeholders prompted further refinement, particularly around equity, advocacy, transparency, and the integration of assessment across institutional boundaries.

The result of this work is **ACCELERATE: Assessment Principles for Best Practice**, a set of ten principles published in *Intersection* in October 2025³. The name itself signals movement, momentum, and intentionality. ACCELERATE is best understood as an ecosystem of interconnected conditions that support meaningful assessment practice, rather than as a strictly linear maturity rubric, although the principles may help practitioners and institutions reflect on their developmental progress over time.

The ACCELERATE Principles

Each letter in ACCELERATE represents a core principle:

- **Aligned Purposefully:** Assessment is mission- and values-aligned, grounded in theory and evidence, and oriented toward impact rather than compliance.
- **Continuously Cultivating:** Assessment reflects a growth mindset, emphasizing learning, iteration, and ongoing development of people and practices.
- **Collaborative and Co-Creative:** Assessment is shared work, reducing bias and increasing relevance by engaging multiple perspectives.
- **Equity- and Empowerment-Minded:** Assessment actively examines and disrupts inequities, creating conditions that amplify voice and agency.
- **Learning-Centered:** Assessment prioritizes student learning while also supporting learning among educators and practitioners.
- **Energized by Expertise:** Assessment capacity is built intentionally through professional development and shared understanding.
- **Responsiveness-Oriented:** Assessment adapts to learners, contexts, and emerging needs.
- **Action-Driven:** Evidence is collected with the explicit intention of timely use and follow-through.
- **Transparent and Trustworthy:** Processes, labor, and decisions are communicated clearly to build trust and accountability.
- **Enduring and Evolving:** Assessment practices are sustainable, scalable, and responsive to change over time.

These principles are deeply interconnected. Isolating one without attention to the others risks undermining the whole. For example, learning-centered assessment cannot be separated from responsiveness to student needs or equity-minded practice. At the same time, naming each principle individually allows practitioners to interrogate where their current practices are strong and where additional development, dialogue, or leadership attention may be needed.

From Principles to Practice

A central aim of ACCELERATE is to support practitioners who ask, “Where do I begin?” The framework invites multiple entry points. Individuals might start with one or two principles that resonate most strongly with their role or context, using them as guiding values for course-level assessment, program review, or divisional planning. Teams can adopt the principles as shared norms for collaboration and communication. Institutions can use them as an audit tool, examining how assessment processes align, or fail highlighting misalignments, with stated commitments to learning, equity, and improvement. The *Intersection* special issue accompanying this framework is intentionally designed to move from aspiration to operationalization. Contributors were invited to reflect on how ACCELERATE principles show up in real contexts, acknowledging positionality, constraints, and complexity. Rather than prescribing a single “right” way to enact quality assessment, the issue surfaces diverse interpretations, tensions, and lessons learned. In doing so, it reinforces ACCELERATE as a reflective, values-based guide rather than a rigid standard.

The articles contained in this special issue illustrate how ACCELERATE provides a framework for the future of assessment, a structure to catalyze change throughout an institution, a stepping stone for assessment practitioners to elevate scholarship and the future of the field, a tool to expand the impact of professional development and assessment education, a call for collaboration with students in the assessment endeavor, a lens through which we can examine and learn from the past, a common language we can use to navigate any assessment context, and a model for tools that enhance assessment practice in hopes of amplifying assessment impact. By seeing how colleagues view their assessment past, present, and future through the prism of the ACCELERATE principles, practitioners are encouraged to do the same to the benefit of all of those impacted by the work of data-informed change.

Looking Ahead

As higher education continues to evolve, several trends will shape the future of assessment: deeper integration with institutional decision-making, increased attention to equity as a non-negotiable foundation, expanded use of AI and analytics, and a growing recognition that assessment is fundamentally relational work. ACCELERATE was designed with this future in mind. Its emphasis on intentionality, action, transparency, and expertise allows it to remain relevant as tools and contexts change.

Most importantly, ACCELERATE is not a destination. It is a living framework, grounded in the collective wisdom of a community committed to learning, improvement, and ethical practice. As that community continues to question, refine, and apply these principles, ACCELERATE will continue to evolve—shaped by those who are willing not just to talk about assessment, but to do the work of making it meaningful.

References

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