Seeking to Weigh a Pig (the Second Time):
Beyond meta-assessment

In the 2018 SACSCOC *Principles of Accreditation*, standard 8.2 (student achievement) mandates “the institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results” (p. 20). An addition to that algorithm’s wording from that of its erstwhile CS 3.3.1.1 precursor is the word “seeking.” As noted below, Dr. Keston Fulcher has predicated a now talismanically memorable formulation of this algorithm, viz.: “weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig.” This column will briefly focus on the last element of that algorithm, viz.: “provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results,” or the loop-closing second weighing of the pig.

“Nothing is so difficult but that it may be found out by seeking,” asserts the Roman playwright Terence in his play *Heauton Timorumenos* (The Self-Tormentor, Act IV, scene 2, line 8). Axiomatically, this self-tormented essayist infers that the enigmatic seeking-improvement-versus-having-improvement posits a higgledy-piggledy, or enigmatic difference between the actual existence of improvements *in esse* versus the possibility of having improvements *in posse*. Perhaps as enigmatic as “seeking improvement” – at least to some assessment scholars, was the similar admonition to “use of results” as Fulcher observes: “for example, some people interpret use of results as (a) changes to assessment mechanics (such as better sampling), while others cite (b) changes made to a program (e.g., curricular or pedagogical modification).” One noted assessment scholar defines “use of results as (c) making a change to a program and then re-assessing to determine that the change positively influenced student learning” (Fulcher, 2017, p. 4). In their landmark 2011 “Closing the Loop” article, Banta and Blaich assert another important dynamic: “the use of assessment data to guide change is much more about collaborating with colleagues to decide what to improve than it is about measurement” (p. 23).

As noted in figure 1 below, the 2018 PoA’s “student achievement” designation crosswalks to the 2012 PoA’s “institutional effectiveness:” *student achievement, institutional effectiveness; tomato, tomahto.*

Figure 1: SECTION 8: Student Achievement: 2018 To 2012 Standards Crosswalk:
Within the compass of this standard, its student achievement mandate applies to these three areas:

a. Student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs. *(Student outcomes: educational programs)*

b. Student learning outcomes for collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs. *(Student outcomes: general education)*

c. Academic and student services that support student success. *(Student outcomes: academic and student services)*

Relatedly, the most notably of the former IE standard, core requirement 2.5, now appears as the 7.1 core requirement in **Section 7: Institution Planning and Effectiveness**. That section is complemented by two other standards: 7.2 Quality Enhancement Plan and 7.3 Administrative effectiveness. SACSCOC continues to define institutional effectiveness as “the systematic, explicit, and documented process of measuring performance against mission in all aspects of an institution” *2018 SACSCOC Resource Manual*, p. 170. Since it introduced the IE construct in 1984, SACSCOC has always required qualitative and quantitative evaluation of academic programs. In addition, the institution must demonstrate planning and evaluation in its administrative and educational support services units (*Criteria for Accreditation*, 1997, p 18). As had previously been the case with its cross-walked standards, the new **Section 8 Student Achievement** standard predicates compliance by means of the previously stated, familiar IE algorithm. Madeline Murphy advocates moving beyond the theatre of compliance, presumably beyond its meta-assessment, whose impedimenta, David Eubanks notes, can be Kafkaesque (*Eubanks, 2017, p. 5*).
As noted above, several years ago, Keston H. Fulcher of the James Madison University’s Center for Assessment and Research Studies, reductionistically distilled the SACSCOC algorithm into its most elemental formulation, viz.: “weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig.” Later in the same 2014 NILOA Occasional Paper, “A simple model for learning improvement: Weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig,” he phrased his model in less metaphorical parlance as “assess, effectively intervene, re-assess.” Inherent in his model, Fulcher postulated “assessing learning does not by itself result in increased student accomplishment, much like a pig never fattened up because it was weighed.” Continuing the analogy, his paper “clarified how assessment results are related to improved learning – and contrasted this process with mere changes in assessment methodology and changes to pedagogy and curriculum” (Fulcher, 2014, p. 3). Banta and Blaich’s losing the loop may be cognate with Fulcher’s second weighing of the pig, hence the title for this article. The pig is weighed the first time to set the benchmark, then it is improved (fattened by feeding) and weighed a second time in order to determine the efficacy of the improvement. Consequently, the pig’s second weighing closes the loop.

In the “Return of the Pig: Standards for Learning Improvement” – in which he models SLO performative emphases and conclusions, Fulcher continues to shift “higher education’s focus away from empty assessment practice to something more edifying” (Fulcher, 2017, p. 10). In yet an earlier NILOA blog, Fulcher discussed the evaluation of assessment practice (aka meta-assessment, what he calls “assessment mechanics”), which can help institutions explain the quality of assessment at every level of a university from program to department to college to the university (Fulcher, 2013, n. p.). Peters expands on the definition of meta-assessment “as the deliberate examination of the elements, basic conditions, and needs of a thing (service, event, system, and so on) that transcend particular instantiations of that thing” (Peters, 2000, p. 334). Therefore, meta-assessment focuses upon the modalities, dare I say architectonics (i.e., structural design), of the assessment process as opposed to its results. Axiomatically, those results focus on direct measures, which – as Suskie notes – are: “direct evidence of student
learning is tangible, visible, self-explanatory evidence of exactly what students have and haven’t learned” (2009, p. 20). Her examples include: student ratings by their field experience supervisors; scores and pass rates on appropriate licensure/certification exams; capstone experiences; other written work or performances; portfolios; scores on locally-designed tests; employer ratings of graduates; student reflections on their values, attitudes and beliefs. Coincidentally, Banta observes, “among direct measures, provosts report that rubrics of classroom-based performance assessment are used most frequently” (2014, p. 93).

Bresciani asserts “higher education apparently has been fraught with ‘flavor of the day’ processes and reporting initiatives,” among which might be certain meta-assessment models predating common-core architectonics, or structural design elements. Yet, regardless of what measures or meta-assessment processes are used, data may remain as inscrutable as a Rorschach test (Eubanks, 2017, p. 7). “Seeking improvement” seems to hit a brick wall when assessment is asked to use data to drive improvement. Data comes easily, but its measurement is fraught with difficulties and statistical hazards (Terenzini, 1989, p. 37). Insightfully, Terenzini frames the problem another way: “Assessment requires reconsideration of the essential purposes and expected academic and nonacademic outcomes of a college education. It also requires a clarity of institutional and programmatic purpose, as well as a specificity of practice often absent on many campuses or hidden in the generalities of recruiting materials. What should students get out of attending college? What should they get out of attending this college?” (2010, p. 30). Volkwein and Yin also postulate their own chapter on “measurement issues in assessment,” whose “data analysis and measurement problems…can be show-stoppers [to a critical faculty audience] if they are not properly handled or defended:”

- The uses of grades in assessment
- Institutional review boards
- Research design as a compromise
- Standardized testing
- Self-reported measures
- Missing data
- Weighting data
- Conditional effects
- Hierarchical linear modeling versus ordinary least squares
- Causation and correlation

(Volkwein, 2010, pp. 141ff)

Based on Fulcher’s “weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig” analogy, which algorithmically predicates input, throughput and output, I invite my readers to consider what do you think is the pig farmer's expected outcome? And, since outcomes devolve from missions, readers should work backwards from that outcome to consider what would be the farmer's mission. Then, please consider why does the farmer weigh the pig the first time and why does he fed it and weigh the pig the second time? As a deceptively simplistic model, assessment modelers may conclude that the second weighing of the pig is just as important as the first weighing: the first weighing predicates an initial assessment baseline or benchmark upon which the second weighing of the
pig will conclusively impinge relative the weight gained, i. e., demonstrable assessment improvement. Modelers would also know that the elliptically stated formula presupposes the farmer to have had a finance-based presumptive mission for raising pigs in the first place. In fact, mission statements drive outcome formulation as well as actualizing their concomitant downstream meta-assessment processes. The ultimate aim of assessment is improvement of student learning: as Banta and Blaich conclude “the most important outcome of assessment is not gathering high-quality data, generating reports, or stimulating conversations among colleagues…[rather it is]… demonstrably improving student learning by assessing it” (p. 27). Meta-assessment processes and initiatives fail, Fulcher postulates, if program learning assessment, intervention, and re-assessment is not following. He ascribes the acronym PLAIR (Program Learning Assessment, Intervention, and Re-assessment) to this process for which his article also provides a detailed delineation based on his three pillars of assessment, pedagogy and curriculum.

Ultimately, any process, meta-assessment or otherwise, eventuate in a result. The result is paramount and the process is only a needful means to achieve that result. With the exception of the 8.2 algorithm those meta-assessment processes might be perceived as heuristic, i. e. they are not prescriptive, but allow us to find the answers for ourselves. Indeed, it is the discovered pig in the poke that matters and not the poke.

References


