As the nearly 420 public colleges and universities that are part of AASCU know, higher education is under tremendous pressure from a variety of sources. For three consecutive years, enrollment numbers have dropped, according to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center released in May 2014. Students, parents and the media increasingly decry the escalating costs of obtaining a degree and there are calls for proof of a return on that investment. Perhaps most importantly, businesses hiring new graduates don’t just want employees with a degree—they want workers with the relevant 21st century skills.

Employers are looking for graduates skilled in critical thinking, quantitative literacy, effective communication, digital literacy, citizenship, creativity, team work and life skills. So how can universities respond to these demands? One only need look at one of the key tenets of AASCU’s mission—research.

Universities need to start aggressively collecting and analyzing quantitative data that benchmark their institution’s effectiveness as agents of success. They need to study comparative data to obtain a nationally representative view of where their institutions are succeeding and where improvements can be made.

Both in educational research and the marketplace, these are known as student learning outcomes (SLO), and they involve assessments to measure the important areas mentioned above. Besides providing feedback on the effectiveness of programs, they can also assist in evaluating teaching and learning, and provide comparative data to benchmark performance for an institution.

An effective SLO strategy should provide a flexible and efficient way for institutions to analyze trends in order to help them identify successful efforts, as well as areas needing improvement, and provide an improved educational offering.

However, a mere collection of student learning data is simply not enough. It needs to be accompanied by a conversation on how to best use that data to enhance student learning and increase institutional effectiveness.

Those conversations will hopefully lead to institutions investigating and adopting new and evolving education models and solutions. Like AASCU, we share your vision of being a “transformative influence in American public higher education through advocacy, leadership and service.”

For this reason, we are already working on how to best document and provide evidence of student learning outcomes at both the aggregate (cohort or institution) and individual (student/learner) level. Though the path toward entering and completing college has become increasingly challenging, it is clear that there are significant lifelong benefits and value in having a higher education credential.

By Walt MacDonald

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ETS is a nonprofit organization founded in 1947 to advance quality and equity in education for people worldwide. ETS serves numerous stakeholders by developing, administering and scoring over 50 million tests annually based on its extensive research, analysis and policy studies.