

Student Learning Outcomes and Law School Assessment

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*A Practical Guide to Measuring
Institutional Effectiveness*

**Lori E. Shaw
Victoria L. VanZandt**



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From Victoria L. VanZandt

To my honorable, ornery, and wise father, Joe T. Fergus, memories of you make me smile every day. I love you and will always miss you.

From Lori E. Shaw

To my loving parents, William and Wilma Shaw, for their unfailing love and support.

From both authors

To Dean Lisa Kloppenberg for starting us on the assessment journey and providing support and guidance along the way.

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Preface

Excellence is the gradual result of always striving to do better.

Pat Riley

As you begin your exploration of this Guide, you may be wondering what prompted us to write about the use of student learning outcomes to measure institutional effectiveness. The answer is simple. We believe that legal education is good, but with some effort on all our parts, it can be so much better.

Surprisingly, our lawyer-dominated academic discipline has rarely relied on evidence in making critical decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, etc. Institutional outcomes assessment allows us (*i.e.*, law schools and law faculty) to use the collective performance of our students as evidence of our own performance as educators. The empirical data it provides allows us to advance from mere guesswork to prudent decision making.

We owe it to our students to analyze our own efforts with the same critical eye we apply to theirs. We owe it to our students to identify exactly what we want them to learn and to weigh the evidence of what works and what doesn't work in achieving those desired learning outcomes. And we owe it to them (and to their future clients) to take thoughtful action to address any failure to achieve those outcomes.

The American Bar Association and other accrediting bodies agree that we owe our students more. As a result, they now mandate that every law school engage in institutional student learning outcomes assessment. This Guide is intended to help you understand and satisfy the new accreditation requirements. It will walk you through the process step by step.

Because this is a "how-to" guide, we have adopted an informal tone. We want to keep it simple and focus more on the practical than the theoretical aspects of assessment. We realize that our approach is basic. We are only skimming the surface here. There are many excellent texts that delve into the theory and provide in-depth treatment of our various topics. We encourage you to explore those texts, many of which have been cited throughout the Guide.

We embarked on this project knowing that we were on an uncharted course in legal education. We have attempted to set out the best practices for what should be done. No system is perfect. And, we admit that

we are learning from our own mistakes. On more than one occasion as we worked on the Guide, one of us looked at the other and exclaimed, “Wow. I wish we’d done it that way!” Because we are all still learning, we encourage you to share your experiences, good and bad, with the academy, as we have shared ours.

Most of all, we encourage you to always keep sight of why you are undertaking this new and sometimes overwhelming task—it’s all about helping your students learn. And isn’t that what we’re all here to do?

Measurement is the first step that leads to control and eventually to improvement. If you can't measure something, you can't understand it. If you can't understand it, you can't control it. If you can't control it, you can't improve it.

H. James Harrington

