



## Degrees that Matter: Moving Higher Education to a Learning Systems Paradigm

Natasha A. Jankowski and David W. Marshall

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In *Degrees that Matter*, Natasha Jankowski and David Marshall frame their learning systems paradigm within a paradigm shift over the purpose of higher education. Jankowski and Marshall are the director and senior scholar, respectively, of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Their research is devoted to trying “to determine how we know whether university students are learning.” The authors bemoan debates about whether the purpose of higher education is economic ends, civic engagement, or personal fulfillment; in reality higher education provides for all three. Experiences of strangers claiming “I didn’t learn anything in college!” frustrate the authors, because alumni “fail to see how their college or university experience developed the abilities or skills that have enabled them to be successful with their work lives” (4-5). Rejecting an end-process framework like the debaters and deniers, the authors argue for paying more attention to higher education’s strength of process in the development of students as self-aware, life-long learners.

Jankowski and Marshall propose a “praxis-oriented exploration” around the question: “How is what students are learning in higher education *aligned* with these three needs motivating higher education?” (6). They delineate the evaluation cycle emerging from this question, including the further cascade of questions prompted by the “how,” necessary internal and external conversation partners, drafting of learning program outcomes, and alignment of these program outcomes with classroom assignments. For the newcomer to higher education assessment, Jankowski and Marshall’s explanations of the process are well-organized, include examples from multiple contexts, and are well-cited with references for further learning. The authors’ choice to reference the various steps of the Tuning and Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) studied by NILOA without an appendix diagramming them was one drawback. Fortunately, the DQP offers online help to further understand the paradigm, with more specialized attention to associate and masters level programs than the book offers ([www.degreeprofile.org](http://www.degreeprofile.org)).

For teachers, *Degrees that Matter* is a refreshing read because it aligns assessment with the task of professional teachers to train students in content, skills, and an appreciation for learning that transfers outside the institution. It prioritizes the formation of learners in contextually relevant and appropriate ways at an institutional level. It calls for transparency through processes that develop relationships, resources, and buy-in from potential employers, administration, faculty, support staff, and students as well. Jankowski and Marshall further demonstrate that transparent communication is of critical benefit to historically underserved student populations, who suffer when institutional assumptions are not articulated.

Jankowski and Marshall understand that administrators and faculty experience assessment and accreditation as burdens. The authors make a solid case for the viability of their paradigm process because it is aligned and integrated with the work of teaching. As an institutional assessment structure, the learning systems paradigm seeks the best in the institution, desires to resource it, and also joins in faculty passion for student-oriented learning. The paradigm is conversational and iterative, and can be tackled in many different ways according to the institution’s interest in safeguarding assessment time and effort. Through the learning systems paradigm process, the school communicates to students that they are co-learners, co-assessors, and co-sharers of goals and benefits. By including students in the exploration of the “how,” *Degrees that Matter* aims for students to affirm that their degree matters because they understand the alignment between higher education and life, and they can perform their learning in a multitude of environments.