RESOURCES TO REMEMBER

Books to Order:

People to Contact:

Tools, Measures, Etc., to Remember:

Websites and Articles:

NOTES FROM LASTing CONVERSATIONS

TOPIC:

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION:

PROJECTS OF OTHER INSTITUTIONS

PROJECT TOPIC	INSTITUTION & CONTACT	IDEAS TO STEAL

PROJECT TOPIC	INSTITUTION & CONTACT	IDEAS TO STEAL

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24 November 2007

Some Useful Websites

Compendia of Links

Internet Resources for Higher Education Outcomes Assessment.
http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm

Outcomes Assessment Resources on the Web (Texas A&M University)
http://www.tamu.edu/marshome/assess/HTMLfiles/oabooks.html

Individual Sites

Alicia C. Dowd, "Data Don't Drive: Building a Practitioner-Driven Culture of Inquiry to Assess Community College Performance." A Lumina Foundation Research Report.
www.lumina.org

Jon Mueller, "Authentic Assessment Toolbox."
http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/index.htm

Gloria Rogers, "Assessment Planning"
http://www.abet.org/assessment.shtml#Assessment%20of%20student%20learning%20outcomes

Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation. http://pareonline.net/

Associations and Organizations

American Association of Colleges and Universities, "Greater Expectations." http://www.greaterexpectations.org/

Council for Aid to Education, "Collegiate Learning Assessment Project."
http://www.cae.org/content/pro_collegiate.htm

The International Center for Student Success and Institutional Accountability
http://www.icssia.org

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
http://www.highereducation.org/catreports/college_level_learning.shtml

National Forum on College-Level Learning.
http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/centers/collegelevellearning/

United States Department of Education: Commission on the Future of Higher Education
http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/index.html

Institutional Sites

Alverno College, "Learning Outcomes Studies: Educational Research and Evaluation."
http://www.alverno.edu/for_educators/ere_research.html

Arizona State University Office of University Evaluation
http://www.asu.edu/oue/assessment.html

Colby College
http://www.colby.edu/administration_cs/ir/assessment/index.cfm

Johnson County Community College
http://www.jccc.net/home/depts/6111/site/assmnt

Maricopa Community College District.
http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/about/orp/assessment/

Miami University of Ohio
http://www.units.muohio.edu/led/assessment/

Oregon State University
http://oregonstate.edu/studentaffairs/assessment/index.html

State University of New York at Binghamton

http://assessment.binghamton.edu

Texas Christian University
www.assessment.tcu.edu

Truman State University
http://assessment.truman.edu

University of Wisconsin, UW-Madison Assessment Manual.
http://www.wisc.edu/provost/assess/manual.html

Western Washington University
http://www.colby.edu/administration_cs/ir/assessment/index.cfm
http://www.wwu.edu/depts/assess/oiasl.htm

28 January 2008

http://www.insidehighered.com/layout/set/print/views/2007/08/14/engelmann

Inside Higher Education
Aug. 14, 2007

Assessment From the Ground Up

By Donna Engelmann

Although the Spellings Commission report has generated a lot of controversy in higher education circles, its ideas are hardly new. In fact, it might be viewed as a kind of summary of decades of criticism by a variety of stakeholders — employers, government officials, accrediting bodies, even parents — that higher education is not delivering the goods in terms of students' learning and professional performance.

One dimension of the report that has received much attention is the notion that standardized testing can produce data on learning that would allow comparison across institutions. I share with other educators the concerns about the reliability, validity and relevance of these tests. But what's most striking to me is that the rationale for using these measures is seldom discussed in terms of improving results for those most directly affected, those whose voices are almost entirely absent from this discussion, the students themselves. How could we assess learning in a way that benefits individual students directly, that contributes to the improvement of their knowledge and skills, rather than merely testing across an institution, using measures that may or may not be valid, and hoping that in time improvements in learning will trickle down to the students?

Since 1989, I have been teaching philosophy at Alverno College, a women's college with an outcomes-based, developmental curriculum — a curriculum where assessment happens from the ground up, where faculty see assessment as integral to teaching. Every day my colleagues and I give our students feedback on their performance in relation to very specific, faculty-designed outcomes for our courses, our programs, and the institution as a whole. Each student must demonstrate competence in eight core abilities in order to graduate and she and her teachers carefully track her progress toward achieving these goals. The list of abilities adopted by the Alverno faculty several decades ago — communication, analysis, problem solving, social interaction, valuing in decision-making, effective citizenship, developing a global perspective, and aesthetic engagement — is very similar to the lists of core abilities adopted in institutions around the world, in response to the call for all students to be able to make effective use of what they have learned.

At Alverno, expectations for mastery of the abilities are integrated by faculty into course and program outcomes, so that, for example, when I teach philosophy and humanities I am also consciously teaching analytic skill and the ability to make ethical decisions based on an understanding of one's own and others' values. In practice, this means that when I teach Kant's ethics, it is to give students theoretical tools to make their own ethical decisions, and

for this purpose, I am more likely to have them explain Kant's texts to one another than to lecture about Kant. The goal is to have them actively involved in coming to understanding, and to take responsibility for sharing their understanding with others. When I am assessing their learning, I ask them to apply Kant's thinking to the resolution of an ethical issue, rather than merely checking what they have memorized with a multiple choice test.

As an Alverno faculty member, it is no longer possible to imagine teaching without assessing, because for us to teach is to assess, continuously, what our students are learning, and what they can do with what they know. We assess in order to improve the learning process, to give each student, and groups of students, guidance for their learning. At this point in the life of our curriculum and our academic culture, if our accrediting body were to say: "You no longer have to go to the trouble of assessing student learning," we would still do it anyway.

In the Alverno curriculum, the continuous assessment of student performance produces data at all levels that can be — and are — used to make changes in course sequences, programs, and across the entire curriculum. When, for example, several years ago, the instructors of our intermediate communication seminar shared with one another their concerns that students were struggling to meet writing expectations, we examined the development of students' writing in the three seminar courses. As a result, all the faculty involved in teaching the seminars — from departments across the college — decided to redesign the whole series. As someone who has accepted (as all my colleagues do) the responsibility for teaching communication in all my courses, what keeps me committed to "going to the trouble" of assessing student learning is that Alverno has a college-wide understanding of what constitutes effective communication – and of all the other abilities — and this shared understanding supports me in being a more effective teacher.

I want to emphasize this point: I benefit, as a teacher, from a college-wide system of assessment. When I give feedback to a student on her communication skills in an ethics course, I am reminding her that there are standards for effective communication, that she has come to understand what these are through her work in our curriculum, and that there are ways in which she can improve her performance in relation to the standards. Through revising her work in response to feedback, her ability to articulate what she understands about ethical theory and its application will improve – she will learn ethics more effectively. The feedback I give to individual students in relation to course and program outcomes encourages their growth, and the observations I make of the patterns of their performance give me the evidence I need to improve my teaching. The mid-term assessment, in which they make a reasoned judgment about an ethical issue I assign, gives them practice for the final assessment in which they publicly share their reasoning and judgment about an ethical issue of their own choosing. At the same time, the mid-semester assessment gives me data about how well students have grasped the ethical theories we are exploring together, so I can make teaching adjustments to help students improve.

Now, there is a sense in which this is how all good teachers improve their teaching — seeing whether and how students are learning and fine-tuning their teaching in response. The advantage of our curriculum is that the learning expectations are made explicit in every course at every level, so the process of fine-tuning is intentional, shared, and systematic, for students and faculty both. The students experience the curriculum as coherent, developmental, and designed to support their learning. The faculty experience a shared sense of mission and mutual support for their efforts as educators, and act as faculty developers for one another, sharing effective pedagogy and assessment practices.

Our commitment to the assessment-as-learning curriculum is thus reinforced by the benefits we receive from working together as faculty to maintain it. This working together requires a different way of communicating than is typical in most colleges and universities. We meet several times a year as a whole faculty, and we meet frequently in cross-disciplinary groups to discuss the meaning of the core abilities and how best to teach and assess them. The work that we do to maintain and develop the curriculum is a significant factor in our tenure and promotion, which also strengthens our commitment and makes our efforts visible to one another.

The use of technology in assessment has also proved a benefit for both our faculty and students. Our students' continuous learning progress is captured in an online Diagnostic Digital Portfolio. Each student has her own portfolio, to which she can upload work samples and self assessments of her performance in relation to learning outcomes, while her faculty members upload feedback. The DDP provides a longitudinal view of each student's progress, giving her the opportunity to look back to see how far she has come, and to look forward to set new goals. Over time her self assessments become more sophisticated, and through them we see her take increasing responsibility for her learning. It is important to note that this technology only works for us because it is imbedded in the teaching and assessment practices of the faculty, otherwise the digital portfolio would be just a repository for documents.

Even with the technology, isn't such a curriculum based on faculty-designed learning outcomes, assessments of student learning, and frequent, targeted feedback more work for faculty? Yes, clearly, in some ways it is, since the design and implementation of effective learning and assessment strategies takes time. But my colleagues and I would say that the work is more efficient. For the collaborative effort we put in, we receive much greater evidence of genuine and durable learning on the part of students. Rather than assessment being a process of gathering data for administrators who gather data for accrediting bodies, assessment is first and foremost for our students.

Is this approach to assessment compatible with providing data to our stakeholders about the effectiveness of the education we provide? We believe that it provides the best possible evidence: We explicitly state our learning goals, and we have the data to show our students are meeting them. We have made our philosophy and results of our work of the last several decades available to our higher education colleagues in Learning That Lasts: Integrating

Learning, Development and Performance in College and Beyond (Ohio State University Press, 2002). We have also shared our approach to student assessment-as-learning with universities, community and technical colleges, professional schools and K-12 schools both nationally and internationally. These consortial and consultative conversations have demonstrated that student assessment-as-learning can be taken up by institutions of diverse missions and classifications, as long as faculty are willing to engage in the effort of making their learning expectations explicit, and are committed to making sure that students meet these expectations.

Is our approach to assessment consistent with using standardized measures of student learning? Yes, if the focus of these measures continues to be on the improvement of learning for our students. For a number of years, we have administered the National Survey of Student Engagement to our students. We are proud of the high marks our students have given their Alverno education for the diverse, challenging and supportive learning environment the college provides. The NSSE instrument measures what is very important to us — students' experience of their learning and their engagement in it — and we have used the results to guide improvements in both advising processes and co-curricular life.

In an article in the Association of American Colleges and Universities' Peer Review, "Can Assessment for Accountability Complement Assessment for Improvement?" Trudy Banta observed that across the country "some faculty in virtually every institution" are trying out the assessment of learning outcomes for their potential for improving student learning. She recommends that we should look very carefully at the validity and reliability of standardized tests before we adopt them wholesale. If we must compare student performance across institutions, in those cases where institutions share learning goals, comparing student performance in relation to common rubrics would give much richer and more relevant evidence of what students are learning than standardized tests. Accountability for results is not inconsistent with assessing to promote student learning, but promoting student learning should always come first. Banta hopes, as I do, that calls for assessment for accountability — what I have called "trickle down assessment" — will not stifle this movement for assessing from the ground up.

Donna Engelmann is professor and chair of the philosophy department at Alverno College, and past president of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers.
The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
http://insidehighered.com/views/2007/08/14/engelmann.

http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/09/28/engelmann

Inside Higher Education

Sept. 28 2007

Encouraging Assessment From the Ground Up

By Donna Engelmann

In this space last month, I wrote about how assessment from the ground up means that accountability for colleges and universities ought to flow from the improvement of student learning and not the other way around. In the responses to that article, and in the work that my colleagues at Alverno College have done with other institutions over the last three decades, a compelling question arises: How can we encourage one another as faculty to engage in assessment that will work for our students and for us, and not just be a bureaucratic chore?

Under pressure from accreditors and others, just about every college and university has declared that it has some form of measuring learning. But we also know that assessment data are gathering dust in file cabinets around the country, and that learning outcomes have gone into syllabi and quietly died. But when this has not been the case, when faculty have embraced assessment as central to their teaching, what has made the difference? How and why have faculty tied learning activities and assessment to course outcomes so that students themselves see achieving the outcomes as essential to success in a course or program?

My Alverno colleagues have conducted workshops on the improvement of teaching and assessing at colleges and universities in every state in the union and around the globe. And we have hosted a summer teaching and assessment workshop at the college for over 30 years. Our goal has been to share how assessing students' performance has improved learning, and has provided us with evidence to document progress in individual student learning and the effectiveness of the curriculum as a whole.

In our experience, there are at least five things that have been helpful in engaging faculty in teaching for and assessing learning outcomes:

1. Draw on the expertise of professors who are already — even without a formal assessment protocol — doing effective work in teaching, and in understanding what helps students learn. Colleges should create permanent spaces and places for faculty to brag about teaching jobs well done, and offer rewards for individual faculty and programs where effective learning is taking place. Many attempts to institute assessment have unfortunately proceeded from a deficit model – "teaching needs to get better around here, and we are going to bring in consultants and faculty developers to show you the error of your ways." It may be true that faculty members who have learned to teach on the job – as is true of the vast majority of college and university teachers today – have developed some bad habits and ineffective approaches. But it is also true that there is great teaching going on in every institution. Share and reward what's working, and recognize faculty expertise as teachers as well as scholars of the disciplines. An important part of this discourse is developing and sharing assessment processes that get at the kind of learning that faculty expect of students and provide insights into how to improve teaching. Encourage that professor who tried something with her students last year that failed to explain to her peers how she learned from that experience and what she is doing now to get better results. This sort of sharing among faculty will do more to advance

assessment that improves student learning than providing canned rubrics and requiring end-of-term assessment paperwork.

2. Move toward reward structures that encourage and recognize this kind of faculty collaboration. Develop criteria for excellence in teaching and assessment of student learning, and make them central – not peripheral – to faculty hiring, tenure and promotion. Voices in higher education have been saying this since Ernest Boyer's work on the scholarship of teaching, but a real change in attitudes about the importance of teaching in faculty life has yet to occur. Take seriously the need to nurture good teaching throughout a faculty member's career, and institute supportive apprenticeships for new teachers, who still get little to no attention to their development as teachers in their graduate preparation. Legitimize the scholarship of teaching, by recognizing its value alongside disciplinary research, but also create an institutional culture that prizes scholarly teaching. I take the term "scholarly teaching" from my Alverno colleague Tim Riordan, who has written and spoken extensively about the systematic and deliberate and joyous pursuit of the improvement of student learning that should be a part of every faculty member's professional life.

3. Create communities of practice around teaching and learning issues that faculty themselves see as critical to their work. It can be difficult to reach across institutional divides to have interdisciplinary conversations about teaching and learning, but one way to overcome barriers is to capitalize on informal gatherings to provide sites for discussion of issues faculty are raising in the context of their teaching. Try teaching breakfasts, brown bag lunches for effective assessment, coffees about how to work with brand new or challenging students. At Alverno, our Teachers of New Students has been meeting every Friday over lunch for over 25 years to discuss work with freshman and new transfer students. Institutions can nurture these efforts by upping the catering budget, providing the publicity, and recognizing their worth in official pronouncements by institutional leaders. It is surprising but true that discussion of teaching and assessing student learning can be just as intellectually stimulating as discussing disciplinary research, does more to create a community of shared interest among the faculty, and validates good teaching efforts.

4. Emphasize that collaboration to improve the teaching and assessing of student learning need not violate academic freedom or faculty autonomy. Professors have a shared responsibility for student learning, and that responsibility depends in part on where we teach. We have a duty to take into account the make-up of the student body, the mission of the institution, and in the best cases, what's consistent with the shared pedagogical approach of the faculty. Faculty agreement to establish and assess student learning outcomes can provide a framework for curricular coherence, while avoiding a restrictive rigidity for either faculty or students. It is vital to preserve for professors the space to teach their disciplines in light of their own understandings and interpretations, but equally vital to uphold the promise of effective teaching and learning that is extended in the mission of every college. In our experience faculty can collectively coordinate assessment across the curriculum to make learning more accessible, meaningful and rigorous for students, without having to give up the ways of knowing and methods of inquiry appropriate to their disciplines.

5. In working with institutions everywhere, we have also learned that leadership on behalf of improving learning and assessment – both formal and informal – is critical. Administrators can sometimes get things started, but it is faculty members who keep assessment going and meaningful. Without the expertise in and advocacy for assessment of faculty members who have their colleagues' respect, there is little hope that assessment

practices will persist when the accreditors have gone away or the provost has left the room. Recognizing a faculty member's emerging expertise in assessment by making responsibility for assessment part of his or her load is commendable. Adding responsibility for assessment to the load of a talented but already overburdened faculty member means the job just will not get done. Be realistic about the time it will take for individuals, departments, and corporate faculties to work together in new ways to take responsibility for improving student learning, establish goals and timelines for the process, and celebrate milestones along the way.

Instituting assessment from the ground up takes resources in time, talent, attention, publicity, and developing faculty expertise. Cultural change will be required, as will long term leadership and support. But from the perspective of those who have been engaged in assessing from the ground up, its rewards in terms of student learning and, ultimately, faculty satisfaction at a mission achieved, are well worth it.

Donna Engelmann is professor and chair of the philosophy department at Alverno College, and past president of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers.

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
http://insidehighered.com/views/2007/09/28/engelmann.

Comments Made OnLine

Here's a few more. Don't let programs get away with calling 'failure,' 'success.' In every school, there are, for example, grad programs that swore by year 4 they'd be getting 100 new students in that are pulling in 20 every other year instead. For whatever reason, that program is not 'selling itself' well and if it is way too cost ineffective — then don't let the periodic review be a compliment-fest — cut the program. Let faculty see that that program evaluations and assessment are not just exercises in creative writing to show that we are teaching at Lake Wobegone! We can do the math; we know how much a program costs — even just the faculty salaries — and why sink money into programs that are not working? Shut down ineffective programs. Then maybe we'll take it seriously. But when the worst programs (worst in # of students, the easy 'A's and even then they can't pull in students, etc.) get rewarded — we see how the game is played. And it is about programmatic presentation of self and CYA, not real assessment. So we'll play along too then. Why not?

kate, Professor of Sociology, at 8:05 am EDT on September 28, 2007

great article. If faculty don't really buy into assessment , it doesn't matter. It then becomes an exersize that needs to be done rather than a learning process that improves the quality of teaching and learning. You offer sound, practiacl strategies and advice.Thanks

Patrick Sanaghan, at 8:05 am EDT on September 28, 2007

Donna Engelmann wrotes "when faculty have embraced assessment as central to their teaching, what has made the difference?"

I think that's the wrong question. The question in my mind, and the mind of my fellow faculty, is "when faculty have embraced assessment as central to their teaching, WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS IT MADE?" I already assess student learning in my classes with time-honored rubrics called "exams" and "papers" and "talking to my students." What's the evidence that embracing the brave new world of assessment actually provides more benefit than it costs?

Dave Stone, at 8:50 am EDT on September 28, 2007

Assessing Writing

Dr. Engelmann suggests creating "spaces and places for faculty to brag about teaching jobs well done." She writes of "the systematic and deliberate and joyous pursuit of the improvement of student learning." She proposes "teaching breakfasts, brown bag lunches for effective assessment, coffees" and "upping the catering budget," providing "publicity," and praise for assessment in "official pronouncements by institutional leaders." Schools will "celebrate milestones."

What is it about this exhortation that makes me weary?

Regular student attendance might improve learning. Should we require attendance? Daily reading and writing might improve learning. If we require it, will students do it? And then there is the problem of actually assessing student writing in a discipline where writing is the primary outcome by which understanding is known. Is there any valid, reliable means of measuring this other than a slow, careful, deliberate sentence-by-sentence reading of student text? Is there any quick and convenient shortcut? I know of none. A teacher has done this once. Shall it be done again? By whom? And if the second assessment is in conflict with the first, shall student writing be assessed a third time? Of course we could simply count pages, or paragraphs, or words, or errors, or component parts, but a clerk could do that.

These dilemmas have proven intractable at my institution, though we have duly completed and submitted the required forms. Evaluating and assessing writing demands an informed, engaged, careful reader who ideally is also familiar with a student's academic performance in the course over a period of weeks and months. There is only one person who might possess all of these qualifications. He or she has assessed the writing once. Shall we make this teacher do it all again?

Bob Schenck, at 9:35 am EDT on September 28, 2007

What difference has it made?

You might try reviewing the research on Feedback Intervention Theory that showed that Feedback Interventions improved performance by d =.41. Kluger, A. N., & DeNisi, A. (1996). The effects of feedback interventions on performance: A historical review, a meta-analysis, and a preliminary feedback intervention theory. *Psychological Bulletin, 119*(2), 254-284.

You might also consider the work of Robert Marzano on "what works" in classroom instruction, as he has also studied the impact of feedback and goal setting on student learning.

Studies on the impact of assessment at the program or institutional level are less common and still emerging — you might consider work by Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, or by Peterson & Vaughn, or others.

T-bone, at 10:10 am EDT on September 28, 2007

Accessing the time for Right assessment

Dr Engelmann's assessment is a good supplement to balancing of the time between teaching and (student) learning. Imcrease one, and the time for other gets starved.

There is possibly a need to inculcate responsibility for watching their learning. In that case, the scope/purpose of assessment can be limited to ensuring the variation and efficacy of rightful-retention in learning.

In our educational system in India, assessing the motivation and focus is a big challenge. So is the problem of attracting students in the class. Not exactly teaching Quality, but rather breaking off the abstractions.

Priyavrat Thareja

Prof Priyavrat Thareja, Pb Engg Col, Chandigarh, at 11:00 am EDT on September 28, 2007

Assessing Writing—programs

Bob Shenk is absolutely right about assessing writing—that a careful reading by an informed reader is all we've got, but we need to go a bit further. Who is that informed reader and in what and in what ways is she or he informed? These are tougher questions and support Engelmann's point about collaboration and community. Writing teachers who assess writing need a community in which to do that assessment; is it then possible to communicate the standards of that community to another audience and give examples of individual assessment? That's the question I'm grappling with in my program.

Jeffrey Klausman, English Professor at Whatcom Community College, at 1:00 pm EDT on September 28, 2007

What difference has it made?

T-Bone suggests looking at Kluger and DeNisi for evidence of the good assessment can do.

I think Kluger and DeNisi prove my point. They define feedback intervention as "actions taken by an external agent to provide information regarding some aspect of one's task performance." Any decent teacher will regard this as self-evidently necessary and an integral part of what teaching is about. The question remains: when we bureaucratize what good teachers already do, and have done for centuries, while stirring in a generous helping of eduspeak, what is the value added?

Dave Stone, at 1:35 pm EDT on September 28, 2007

Going deeper

Donna Engelmann is right about assessment being successful if it is driven by faculty "from the ground up." However, I would propose that the process begin deeper down.

For assessment to be most meaningful, it must play an important role in how a faculty member identifies herself/himself as a professional in the field. Whether we work at teaching or research institutions, we define ourselves according to the standards of our professional societies. When student learning and the assessment of student learning become an integral part of what it means to be a professor in a particular field, faculty members will come to embrace it.

Of course, the process goes faster when a department needs to be accredited by its own professional association. Otherwise, assessment will always be imposed by people from the "outside." In a recent discussion about student learning outcomes and the importance of undergraduate research, I learned about the American Chemical Society's guidelines for departments desiring certification. It became no surprise that chemistry faculty have done more than many others in terms of assessment and undergraduate research, since it is part of what it means to be a chemistry professor.

Until the major academic professional societies (at least the ones I am familiar with) make learning assessment an important part of their mission, along with consideration of what it means to be a practicing member, assessment will remain peripheral to a faculty member's work in the field. And when professional societies make the assessment of student learning an integral part of their mission, they need to be in touch with the best teachers in the discipline, not necessarily the teachers at the best universities or those who typically drive their research mission. Faculty at teaching institutions can feel marginalized at professional meetings, yet they contribute enormously to their field. Guidelines and suggestions for teaching and assessment practices should come from the faculty who make real gains in student learning.

As Englemann notes, the importance of good teaching and understanding how and why it is good has been around a while. She writes, "Voices in higher education have been saying this since Ernest Boyer's work on the scholarship of teaching, but a real change in attitudes about the importance of teaching in faculty life has yet to occur."

I submit that the change has not occurred because it has been pushed at the institutional level, imposed on faculty for, apparently, someone else's purpose. (That there is a common good involved should be obvious, but often isn't.) Ideally, as Engelmann writes, the push should come from the faculty.

Even more, if assessing student learning becomes a part of what faculty do as practitioners in their field, I think it is safe to say that it will be embraced more widely. Equally, if the professional societies take action on the initiative of faculty, they have the opportunity to provide direction about the best practices in their field, ensuring that when the outside agencies do come around, they must take into account what the professional society says are the appropriate standards.

Robert Cape, Austin College, at 1:35 pm EDT on September 28, 2007

Using Evidence from Your Students to Improve Learning

Very nice article and a good discussion. One topic that sometimes is overlooked is the potential importance of using evidence from students to figure out how to make course activities work better. WHY aren't students doing that writing? HOW can I get better participation in my online discussions? Is there anything you can find out from students that could help you improve that course?

All faculty learn from their students. But we're working on strategies to help busy, skeptical faculty learn some new tricks. I won't describe this program here. It's called "Asking the Right Questions" (ARQ) and it's described starting on this web page:http://www.tltgroup.org/Flashlight/ARQ/Index.htm

If you have suggestions or questions about this brand new initiative, please get in touch.

Steve Ehrmann, Dir. Flashlight Program at The Teaching, Learning, and Technology Group (TLT Group), at 1:35 pm EDT on September 28, 2007

Community Standards—Jeffrey Klausman

One way might be to collect and maintain an online log or portfolio of student writing acceptable to a majority of the local discourse community. This portfolio might contain a variety of first-person narrative essays with formatted dialogue; a variety of exposition and argument both with and without citation and documentation; fiction; poetry; business and technical genres; and also a selection of blended forms. Both students and faculty could access the collection to learn what is expected and what is acceptable and to compare new student writing to it. Perhaps critiques of pieces in the collection could also be included, critics explaining why they do or do not concur with the selections. Another section could contain pieces of student writing which were nominated but did not receive consensus approval, their advocates explaining the reasons for the nominations, their critics explaining their objections.

Bob Schenck, at 2:00 pm EDT on September 28, 2007

Assessing Encouragement From the Ground Up

Over here at the College of Mother Theresa we have pretty much decided that an unusual obsession with assessment has a very detrimental impact on our students' learning and self-esteem, so we have decided that every moment previously devoted to assessment will, in the future, be a moment devoted to encouragement. I was asked to write a paper about the subject, but, thanks to Professor Engelmann, her "Encouragement of Assessment From the Ground Up" can be converted into my paper, "Assessment of Encouragement From the Ground Up." Just scroll through her

paper and change every use of “assess” to “encourage” and every use of “assessment” to encouragement” ... and, lo and behold, there is absolutely no loss of intellectual content.

I am a mathematician, and, back in the day, I used to spend a lot of time presenting the subject matter of my classes and interacting with my students in a manner that was likely to (1) enable them to love mathematics and (2) once they fell in love with the queen of the sciences, allow me to jump out of their way while some pretty damned exciting learning took place. What I’m telling you is that my primary objective – and I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a LEARNING objective – was inspiring love. If you love that stuff, you will just devour it in large quantities ... and continue to do so, albeit less intensively than as a college student, for the rest of your life.

Then I went through a phase – like the one that apparently defines the culture for learning that IS Alverno College – in which I presented students with my learning objectives, employed one or more of the in-vogue teaching-learning strategies, and paused every few minutes to assess my students’ learning. I really got off on assessment. But, since I could not accurately measure the extent to which my students loved mathematics I decided it simply couldn’t be all that important and I removed “you will love mathematics” from my learning objectives.” Seriously, can you just imagine me standing in front of my class, shaking my fist raised on high, and shouting “You’re going to love this stuff if it takes me all semester!” You see, most of my important learning objectives were not about things ... they were about attitudes ... about principles ... about how my students feel and think about the world in which they found themselves. Their answers to problems of differentiation and integration were much less interesting to me.

More than anything else, however, my students and I found teaching strategies built around assessment were just too boring. So, we’ve moved on to encouragement, thinking it would serve us well until the next educational or management flavor-of-the-month captures the attention of our local business school or college of education.

But thanks Professor Engelmann, for letting us know what we’re missing. We’ll keep you apprised of our successes with and assessment of encouragement.

Frizbane Manley, at 9:30 pm EDT on September 28, 2007

Frizbane Manley

Hooray, F. Manley! Though I teach language and literature, you have expressed my sentiments exactly! Thank you.

Bob Schenck, at 10:05 pm EDT on September 28, 2007

just okay

This well written and well intentioned article won’t matter. As long as faculty continue to value parking over learning and laziness over hard work, they will never be able to articulate what their students learn (because at the classroom and program there is very little evidence that any of them are).

My advice? Be patient and wait for the feds and/or state governments to make faculty use it to improve learning and tie their salaries and benefits to it. It is only a matter of time now.

PS, at 5:20 am EDT on September 29, 2007

Naivete, Inexperience, Ignorance

PS believes the federal and state governments can and will demand assessments that can and will pressure faculty to teach in ways that can and will make students learn. PS need write nothing else. This belief alone is evidence of PS’s utter and complete naivete, inexperience, and ignorance on the reality of learning.

Government mandates will work in education exactly as well as did Joseph Stalin's five-year plans for Soviet agriculture and industry and Bill Kristol's five-year plan for the liberation and democratization the Nation of Islam. Official documents and reports will show that results far exceed even extraordinarily ambitious objectives and goals.

Successful teachers and their government overseers will receive public honors, medals, and rewards at televised civic celebrations. Critics of the plan, those skeptical of official reports, and "unsuccessful," "noncompliant," "lazy" teachers and schools will be vilified and suffer political reprisals. Perhaps if we threaten to starve or to shoot the teacher, PS will wonder, maybe then he'll produce!

Alone, behind the scenes of such theatre, the solitary teacher's tasl will remain unchanged: How to get a student to read and to think.

Bob Schenck, at 12:30 pm EDT on September 29, 2007

No Kudos To Those Who Oppose ...

PS is a person after my own heart.

Seeing that there are some teachers who are not inclined to genuflect in the presence of Engelmann/Alverno-style assessment, PS gets right to the root cause of the problem, recognizing that those who oppose suffer from misplaced values and laziness.

I am pleased to learn that, because I was operating under the misconception that there were intellectually and pedagogically sound instructional strategies (styles) that were every bit or more "effective" than the now famous Faculty Assessment & Review Technology.

Frankly, I can hardly wait to get Form 633, Section A from the Feds to administer to my Advanced Structural Equation Models class. And, PS, will that be sent to me by the Department of "Education" or will there be another cabinet-level department created to help us assess our citizens from the ground up? And just as a matter of curiosity, does "from the ground up" suggest that we will have prenatal assessment?

Frizbane Manley, at 12:30 pm EDT on September 29, 2007

Oops!

In my last post I meant to write "awards," not "rewards," although there might be rewards, too, and I meant to write "task," obviously, not "tasl," whatever that is. Sorry, the mind goes.

Bob Schenck, at 7:10 pm EDT on September 29, 2007

Encouraging assessment from the ground up includes getting students to buy into the importance of assessment. At my undergraduate institution (Truman State), administrators made sure to stress assessment to students on a regular basis and how it helped better the quality of their education. As a result, students would actually be involved in the assessment process from filling out surveys to helping with the reaccreditation process.

Robert, PhD Student, at 8:25 am EDT on October 1, 2007

http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/10/08/schwyzer

Inside Higher Ed
October 8, 2007

The Educrats' Attack on Teaching
By Hugo Schwyzer

On a warm Tuesday at the very end of summer, my college held its twice-yearly faculty "in-service education" day. The theme: "improving student learning outcomes" as part of the transition from a "teaching institution" to a "learning community."

For the last decade, the administration has been eager to impress upon the faculty that we are not merely teachers but "learning facilitators." Learning, we are told, is a collaborative process, more rich and democratic than the top-down method of traditional teaching. Few of us unblessed by graduate degrees from Schools of Education have any real idea what that means, and so the powers-that-be decree that we have these regular indoctrination sessions. The untenured faculty among us are advised to attend and feign earnestness, while the tenured folk hang around to see what sort of a free lunch will be put on. Rarely are either the workshops or the meals memorable.

As Inside Higher Ed has reported, the Department of Education last week gave a $2.4 million dollar grant to three different college associations to help them figure out how colleges could measure "student outcomes." The goal is seemingly noble; all of us in higher ed are, one presumes confidently, concerned with student learning. The problem, of course, is that for a very long time the vast majority of us have been doing an outstanding job of assessing student outcomes: We call it testing and grading, and for most of us, it's worked splendidly. But of course, we who teach students haven't always had the benefit of an education in Education. (Those who can't do, teach; those who can't teach get education degrees and become administrators — it's an old and not unfair maxim.) And in order to demonstrate "reform" and "improvement", the educrats must first convince the faculty that our time-tested methods of evaluating our own instruction and our students' work have been entirely inadequate.

As part of teaching the teachers that they don't really know how to teach, last Tuesday at our "faculty education day" I was handed a little yellow binder stuffed with handouts of articles from various education journals. I got a free pencil (alas, already sharpened) which had "PCC Flex Day 2007: The Passion for Learning" emblazoned upon it. In my folder was a little self-survey, so that I could discover my own unique learning style, and then share it with my colleagues during the stimulating "breakout sessions" that were sure to follow. After all, the educrats opine, we can't really be effective "learning facilitators" until we become aware of our own learning styles — and how our own "ways of learning" may be obstacles to understanding the needs of students (sorry, "fellow learners") who have different styles.

On the agenda for the day, the following:

—Lunch (12:00-1:00)
—Turn in your program assessment form at your food station to get your meal!

The Ed.D.'s were on to us! They knew we came for free food, and so a crackdown had been implemented: no ticky, no lunchie. No self-assessment, no stir-fry over rice. Luckily enough, I had packed some trail mix, a nectarine, and a vegan protein bar, so the blackmail didn't work on me.

Seriously, of course, the real reason for all of this wallowing in self-congratulatory edu-speak is that the community colleges, like most public institutions, are worried about accountability. Accountability is the buzzword of the decade; the taxpayers (and their duly elected representatives) want to know that they're getting something in return for their billions. That's not unreasonable. But as anyone who has taught the humanities with passion for any length of time will attest, the most enduring outcome of our work as teachers emerges over the course of a student's entire life. The educrats have decided that the best way to prove accountability is to create measurable, testable, "student learning outcomes" (SLOs). The problem is, they expect that outcome to be manifest by the end of the semester in which the student was enrolled and evident in the form of a test that can be given at many colleges to allow for comparison. Evidence of authentic learning almost invariably takes much longer to emerge and its value for the student is independent of whether the student down the road or across the country had a good learning outcome.

The longer I teach, the more convinced I become that worrying too much about assessing learning is one of the chief enemies of inspiring our students to want to learn. Look, I want all my students to pass their final exams, get good grades, and remember what it is that they've learned. But I'm teaching history, not providing a certificate in refrigerator maintenance. My final exams assess the ability to construct coherent arguments as well as what, on one given day, a student has managed to memorize. But that doesn't mean that even the most carefully crafted exam can assess learning because the real learning happens long after the student has left the class.

Especially in my humanities and gender studies courses, I know full well that it will take many of my students years and years to connect what they've learned in class to their own lives. Often, the epiphanies and break-throughs that matter will happen long after students have left this campus, long after they've moved out of reach of the educrats and their assessment tools. I always compare the job of a good teacher (I'm not a learning facilitator) to a gardener or a farmer. I know it sounds patriarchal, deeply Western, and unfashionably hierarchical, but there it is: I sow seeds in the soil of students' hearts and minds. (Some of the time, my seed falls on rock, other times it ends up in the thistles, but some of it ends up in nice, loamy earth.) And here's the thing: I don't often get to see what blossoms and what doesn't, because whatever flowers do bloom will generally do so months or years after the student has left my class.

All teachers love it when their students report an "a-ha!" moment. We make a great mistake, though, in assuming that if these epiphanies are going to happen to our students at all, they will happen during the term we happen to be teaching them! Some of the most vital lessons I learned from my professors as an undergraduate only became clear to me a long time after I had left their classrooms, after the seeds they planted had had time to undergo a very lengthy germination.

So if the politicians and the educrats want to assess my skills as a teacher, they need to do more than look at my students' test results. We all know that students can cram in information for a December final — and most of the facts they memorized will have vanished from their heads by Super Bowl Sunday. But a new way of seeing the world, of seeing, say, gender roles and relationships in a new light — that may well endure even though there are no reliable ways of assessing that sort of internal transformation. The most important things my students learn in my classes can't possibly be

measured by any government-provided instrument. I've been teaching long enough to have students come back years and years after taking a class; some just mouth platitudes such as "I really liked your class" but a few say wonderful, heartening, reassuring things; they tell me in detail how something I taught them helped change the direction of their lives. Most of the time, they'll say something like "I didn't realize it at the time, but when you said X, it started a whole new way of thinking about the world."

There's no SLO that can measure that.

Look, I know who pays my salary. If the state legislature and their Ed.D. flacks want me to tweak my syllabi to emphasize the vocabulary of accountability, I'm happy to do it. But I'm still going to teach — primarily through lecture in an ancient, top-down, one-sided way. I'm going to pour out my enthusiasm and my passion, laboring in a field filled with rocky soil and pockets of rich earth. And for the most part, I won't be around to see the harvest. That's what it means to teach.

Hugo Schwyzer teaches history and gender studies at Pasadena City College. He teaches and blogs about such issues as the interplay of faith and sexuality, American history, and masculinity.
The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
http://insidehighered.com/views/2007/10/08/schwyzer.

Comments Made OnLine

We have ourselves to blame
Thanks for the morning chuckle, Hugo. I think many of us are familiar with the kind of non-events you describe, although I have to confess that unlike you, I'm easily persuaded to turn in my Survey of The Moment in exchange for a free lunch.

While many of your observations are bang-on, we do well to admit that the from-an-acorn-grows-a-mighty-oak analogy (yours was a seed, I believe) is basically just our self-validating hope that what we do will matter as much to our students as it does to us. It's a point of faith, not fact, and for that reason, it's about as useful as a security blanket.

In an era when the cost of college is outstripping inflation year after year after year, we have no one but ourselves to blame for the present scrutiny of learning outcomes. You're right. The picture is not as simple as some people apparently believe, but the assessment madness sweeping higher ed is a logical consequence of our collective failure to mind the pennies (and the random nutballs in our midst) along the way. We can't blame that on the educrats, no matter how hard we try.
KWT, at 6:10 am EDT on October 8, 2007

And, the choir said with great enthusiasm, "AMEN!" I think you must have been a colleague of mine once upon an assessment time ago. Been there, been through that, hear whisperings of the "a" word again, but this time not cringing; the ed-heads are not in charge!
lived through it, too, at 7:55 am EDT on October 8, 2007

KWT doesn't tell us who — or what group — is doing a better job than faculty of minding the "pennies and the "random nutballs."
Bob Schenck, at 8:35 am EDT on October 8, 2007

Yet more evidence for the need to privatize HE
" .. Look, I know who pays my salary. If the state legislature and their Ed.D. flacks want me to .."

Ah, the voice of tenured unionism in the public sector. Stepping up to the plate, with miles of smiles and loads of intrinsic motivation.

IMHO, this brings new meaning to the phrase, "no significant difference." As in, most students find their own way in life. Any reasonably competent teacher could have created the same effect.

In private colleges, there is more discipline. There's no mandated tax-millage to pay the overhead. Expectations are much higher and faster, as are graduation rates.

As long as there are tax mandates, "edu-crats" will be there. Count on it.
L.L., at 9:00 am EDT on October 8, 2007

Amen Brother, Amen!!!
Sad to say, KWT is correct ... we have only ourselves to blame.

Although I knew about this phenomenon back in my graduate school days, my first real experience with it was in 1980, my first year on the faculty of North Carolina's public liberal arts university. There the scholar/teachers were outnumbered by at least five to one by the self-serving educrats who were intent upon politicizing the academic waters. A few of my colleagues promised me I was viewing the wave of the future in higher education ... and of course they were right.

I walked away five years later hoping I would never ever have to think about postmodernism, poststructuralism, or the AAUP again. Fat chance!

I'm thinking about moving to either Australia or New Zealand.
Frizbane Manley, at 9:15 am EDT on October 8, 2007

Well, I have to say I was a little put off by the tone here. The essay comes off as an attack on Ed.D's and teacher training more than it does educrats who like to impose systems that don't work. Personally, I don't think anyone should be teaching in postsecondary education without having SOME background in teaching. We have all experienced the prof. who was a genius in his/her field but couldn't communicate that to the class one iota.

This is crucial, however: "So if the politicians and the educrats want to assess my skills as a teacher, they need to do more than look at my students' test results." VERY true! Much of what we see in college is project-based learning, an assessment rarely considered important now days in K-12. Is it any wonder, in this day of NCLB that Feds want to see standardized testing in postsecondary education when our kids are saturated with it in K-12? They want it all to match...testing from the crib on up. Some people don't want to acknowledge there ARE more ways to assess learning other than through standardized tests. Sure, standardized tests should have their place. But not in the "make or break a school" column.

As to educators that become administrators because they can't teach, I will say I have had some excellent Chair people who WERE teachers. I'm sorry if you have not had this experience.

Too, I certainly have had the reverse: the presidents of career schools who insisted the teachers weren't teachers. They were "techies" or something else. I am still not sure. These folks needed a big boot.

Mr. Schwyzer, you sound like a dedicated, effective teacher. You also sound frustrated as hell. Please, just don't take that out on people who sincerely are trying to learn to teach better and train others to do the same. It does nothing but promote the perception that higher ed doesn't really care about teaching or student learning.
kgotthardt, at 10:00 am EDT on October 8, 2007

Straw man
Terrifically fun to read as a polemic, but like all terrifically-fun-to-read polemics, it attacks a caricature, rather than addressing the underlying issue.

There are many who approach the issue of assessing SLOs ham-handedly. But I doubt whether the best counter to such attempts is elitism and snarkiness.

I think most reasonable people in the academy would agree that you can't assess what is most important about a liberal arts education directly with a standardized test. Fine. But the more serious argument is whether you can develop reasonable assessments of the ENVIRONMENTS in which such ineffable transmissions — the seeds of later epiphanies — are likely to occur.

They are not likely to occur, for example, when students sitting in our classes are hung over. They are not likely to occur in environments where students busting their butts earn an "A" and look over their shoulders to see their peers coasting and earning a "failing" grade of B+. Not likely to occur in environments where faculty do not model the behaviors they want students to emulate (taking stands on issues of importance to the college rather than feigning powerlessness and pointing fingers at "unfair" administrations and trustees; using their tenured positions to take responsibility for defending and articulating the values of the liberal arts against commodification rather than using it as an excuse to NOT engage and provide an answer to broader societal pressures toward accountability; valuing the life of the mind over the life of the granite-topped kitchen). They are not likely to occur in environments where students do not ENGAGE with the material in class.

Engagement — essentially "time on task" — CAN be assessed, and pretty easily. Do we really want to be making the argument that engagement is unrelated to the "ineffable" truths we teach? Do we really believe that the likelihood of an "a-ha" moment occurring in later life is unaffected by the amount of sweat produced in the classroom long ago? Enlightenment itself is ineffable — but it's more likely to happen in the presence of specific behaviors and in specific communities than CAN be measured.

In sum, at least in the domains the author describes — the ineffable humanities — I am in agreement that ham-handed attempts to assess SLOs may well do more harm than good. But if the only rejoinder is sarcasm, elitism, and ridicule of the accountability crusade's often ham-handed

practitioners, rather than an honest and open effort to engage with the very real and pressing ISSUE of accountability, who will be most responsible for that harm?

A more helpful debate would focus not on WHETHER to be accountable, but on HOW to be accountable. Faculty fail to engage with sincerity in this debate at their peril. Or more precisely, at the peril of the liberal arts they profess to defend so vigorously. And even more precisely, at the peril of the NEXT generation of faculty, who will have to deal with this generation's lack of real leadership on this issue.
Mark Freeman, at 10:05 am EDT on October 8, 2007

Assessment
Hugo makes some good points. But the main provocation for his essay, the new multi-association assessment program, is not (so far as I can see) about "government-provided assessment tools." It's about colleges themselves, working together, to provide the kind of accountability for public funding that Hugo agrees is important.

Hugo also asserts that current assessment by faculty is "outstanding." That may well be true in the humanities. But in science, there's reason to take a second look, as was done in this famous video, "A Private Universe," which begins as graduating Harvard seniors are asked the question "Why is it warmer in the summer than in the winter?" The question is of some interest to anyone concerned with the possibility of global warming. But few seniors had a clue. One source of the problem, as this short video illustrates, has to do with the ways teachers learn (or fail to learn) what their students are thinking. http://www.learner.org/resources/series28.htmlThe video was produced by the Harvard Smithsonian Center

If you like that video, you might also want to take a look at their "Minds of Our Own." It's illustrated with more Harvard (and MIT) graduation day footage, and explores both the problems and some strategies in far more depth.http://www.learner.org/resources/series26.html
Steve Ehrmann, Dir. The Flashlight Program at The TLT Group, at 10:10 am EDT on October 8, 2007

It sounds like your assessment gurus are singularly unimaginative in failing to suggest meaningful avenues for you to pursue in assessment. Further, they apparently want you to violate the #1 maxim of best practices in assessment, "don't ask if you don't want to know." If tests don't enable you to ask questions about your students' learning about which you have genuine curiosity, choose another method. In my college, faculty members ask assessment questions that truly interest them and assess students in ways that match their broader learning goals. For humanities degrees that take years to ripen, assessment can include written alumni interviews and alumni focus group discussions (alums can talk to current students too about the value of their degrees while they are back on campus — which sells liberal arts goals to the current generation!). In our gender studies senior seminar, students create portfolios that enable them to share with faculty in their own way and in their own words the transformative learning they have experienced (and rubrics enable faculty to reflect systematically on links between their students' observations and gender studies program goals). In religious studies, faculty members will assess student learning when students write newspaper articles that will enable students to draw on their learning to explain and analyze current political hot spots in which religious conflicts feature. A key goal of that major is for students to be able to "take their degrees on the road" in order to explain religious beliefs and practices of the world religions to the public. At the graduate level, a rubric for a comprehensive

exam, created by faculty, is removing the mystery of why one professor gives a student a high pass and another does not. Faculty members actually appreciate the opportunity to discuss their criteria for graduate student success with each other and thereby promote greater rigor and fairness in the program. That assessment is no longer the province of educrats but of faculty is evident too in recent publications on assessment. Increasingly, assessment resources are written by faculty in the disciplines, e.g., Barbara Walvoord, Professor of English at Notre Dame. Their insights come from the trenches we know well; not surprisingly, their advice and suggestions are increasingly relevant to all of us.
Martie Reineke, University of Northern Iowa, at 10:10 am EDT on October 8, 2007

assessment
The assessment craze seems to have two elements.

1. When we assess our classes, we know what we want students to learn and do; the Assessment preachers ask that we articulate these elements to our students and outline how we will grade them. This process makes sense to me since it just asks us to articulate what we already do/know. It clarifies the courses for ourselves as well.

2. The second part, however, asks that we assess the value of what happened in the class and at the university and asks for concrete, countable measures. Since what we do in the liberal arts is already socially devalued (see the NAAL, ACT and National Endowment for the Arts literacy reports) it is hard for me to visualize any measure that does not include that devaluation. Moreover, quantifying outcomes assumes that education is simply a collection process..and not the "ah ha" moment the article mentions. The very request to justify education itself assumes that education is/must be tied to a measureable outcome like higher salary, gpa and the like.

I would much rather look at the inflated demand for 4-year degrees, why so many students seem unhappy and uncaring in their classes..and SO surprised when we suggest they take their own questions and concerns into their classrooms. For a large number of students at my 4-year, urban, public university, courses are disconnected boxes to be collected and added up to equal a diploma...a certification they need to get on with their lives.

The final point: like the act of reading, education takes an engaged student AND a challenging course to work; it does not always rest with the instructor to "learn them."
theron, at 10:35 am EDT on October 8, 2007

Whether we know it consciously or not, our public schools, from the "enlightenment" of Thomas Jefferson forward, are in place to provide workers for commercial interests. The idea of a liberal arts education that has an impact beyond the job training aspect of public education is a romantic notion, a rationalization, we teachers (trainers) use to give us restful nights' sleep. On the other hand, private colleges educate the elite, the wise leaders, the intelligentsia, who have the finely tuned reasoning skills and deeply imbued moral sense to use these publicly educated workers in the most humane, efficient and profitable manner. Since these public school learners need to be trained to follow obligingly the ever-changing rules of the workplace, rigid and ever-changing assessment techniques must become part of their lives from the earliest point. Remember, our education system is mostly socialization: stand in line, follow schedules, and listen to those more enlightened than you.
jstack, at 11:00 am EDT on October 8, 2007

assessing the factory
I have to agree with quite a bit that was written, except maybe the maxim that is old and tired. As a teacher of writing I can and do write, I just can't make a living at it. :-) Teaching is something I fell into as a way to both eat and write, but that's another story.

I whole heartedly agree that much of what we do, particularly in the humanities, is not at all measurable. One of my common jokes is that "I took this diversity course, and while I was racist/sexist at the beginning, I no longer am" or "I know I am now at least 20 percent racist/sexist than I was at the start of the class." How in the heck do we measure this sort of thing? Truth is, I doubt we can in any meaningful way.

I think a lot of assessment movements are an attempt to stave off federal intervention in higher education of the sort Sec. Spellings thinks a good thing. If we do it to ourselves, then we won't have the federal government doing it to us. Hardly the best reason for doing something of dubious value. So, yes, much of what is learned only becomes an "aha" moment, if it ever does, somewhere down the road, and to expect such things to happen only within the confines of the classroom is silly at best, dangerous at worst.

The long and short of it (like the cliche?) is that colleges and universities are being held to the factory model, that we can measure outputs right away, that students are widgets to be measured as outputs or outcomes, rather than complex human beings, who sometimes are loam, sometimes sandy soil, sometimes rocky soil wholly inhospitable and maybe even resistant to the seeds that are planted. **bradley bleck**, instructor at Spokane Falls CC, at 11:00 am EDT on October 8, 2007

assessment
Almost every point made in this essay is amendable by experience except one: that higher education is a long term enterprise. The empahsis on semesterly outcomes is, therefore, a misplaced but inevitable expenditure of resources and stems from the application of a business model to an entirely diffeent engagement. Over the years I have been interested to note how analogs are used in describing what we do and in justifying systems to manage what we do. The most common, after busines, are the criminal justice analogy, in which all students and, ironically, all faculty, are potential malfeasors and the systems are designed to contain or compensate for the offending activities, and the medical model, in which students exhibit a pathology or two or three which we cure or at least treat if not the causes then the worst symptoms. Each of these lend themsleves, to one degree or another, to the same misapprehensions about the measuarability of outcomes as does the business model.

I actually like the agricultural model, the "constant gardner" approach, if only because it reminds me of something I heard one of my instructors say way back in the day of my youthful military service: After a smoke break, the sergeant in charge of map reading turned to his assistant, a coprporal in charge of maintaining discipline among us troops, and said, 'Well, time to go back and shovel a bit more shit on the roses."
Indeed. **jon-christian suggs**, at 12:05 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

Oy Vey
Y'all need to quit taking advice from the lowest third of the SAT scores so seriously, namely, ed school grads at any level. **JWS,** at 12:05 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

FLACK TO FLACK
Let EdD flacks confer on Hugo, PhD flack, a Hugo Science Fiction Achievement Award for the year's best reiteration of the delayed learning smoke screen ("Evidence of authentic learning almost invariably takes much longer to emerge..."). Let's hope that down the road the assessment mavens develop an advanced faculty-DNA learning tracking mechanism that will accurately credit Hugo for "whatever flowers [that] bloom...months or years after the student has left my class." Only then will Hugo be able to validate the myth whose current uncertainty drives him to avoidance behavior, tenured polemic, and vegan protein bars—and me to frivolous ad hominem postings.
Philoctetes, at 12:10 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

Who done it?
What a breath of fresh air to know we are not alone and unable to articulate the injustice done to faculty by the Educrats. The one mystery to me in all this is how those of us who have tenure and the protection it entails have allowed this cancer of education speak and education values slip into the Humanities. It is no doubt true that while we were so busy articulating the value of humanistic inquiry we got usurped by the bureaucrats and their minions. I just wonder if there is still time to fight back or do we simply bury ourselves further in the sand until retirement!
Patrick Quinn, Chair at Ole Miss, at 12:25 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

tirade
Every protected group becomes outraged when asked to justify its protection. The tone of offended honor bespeaks a person who is either too insecure to tolerate honest inquiry or too arrogant to tolerate honest inquiry. Which is it?
socrates, at 12:30 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

I do appreciate the comments immensely, folks.

I do take evaluation very seriously. Having a colleague sit in on a class every once in a while, having student evals run periodically — these are important ways of measuring what it is that I'm doing. I don't believe I have nothing left to learn, just that I believe I have very little to learn from those who claim to have made "learning" their area of primary expertise.

And if someone does want to develop a really good longitudinal way of measuring student success, I'm all ears, especially if a free lunch is involved.
Hugo Schwyzer, Pasadena City College, at 1:20 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

Former students vs. Educrats
Brilliant, Hugo!

So long as the emails from long-forgotten students keep coming in saying things like, "Just thought I'd drop you this note to tell you that what you said back in 1992 just sunk in," I know I'm doing just fine. **Diana Relke**, Professor at U. of Saskatchewan, at 3:40 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

re: assessment
The hog doesn't get bigger just because we weigh it more often. **cgb**, at 5:00 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

So. . . . ?
So if one can count all the emails, phone calls, or letters thanking the professor for the educational experience provided as proof of the quality of teaching. . . Must one also count all of the comments made between students before, during, or after (or long after) a class describing it as a "blow off class" or "a waste of time", or describing the professor as "arrogant" or "boring" as evidence of one's failings as a teacher?

Of course, this is a foolish question to pose. One probably never hears enough praise when something is done well, nor enough valuable critique if it is done poorly.

In the end, I am not sure that either one of these measures tells you very much.

Unfortunately, this column (and many of the responses) seem to say as least as much about the authors as it does about attempts to assess learning — both of which are probably valid points.
Aspiring Educrat, at 5:00 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

Not so, administrators know so much more...
Ahh, another defensive article written by a lousy professor who cannot, will not, and will never be able to article what his or her students are learning. Why? Because the simple fact is that they are not. I googled this professor and found no evidence anywhere students learn anything in this person's "college class."

Like a vast majority of college courses, students could learn just as much by checking out a few books and watching a few episodes of the history channel than they ever could in this instructor's "class." And, even better, at no expense to taxpayers and much less expense to the student.

It really doesn't matter, though, because in several years all college syllabi will have to conform to government standards and all instructors will have to utilize similar student learning evaluation techniques. (If the professors cannot do it, someone will else will have to). In fact, professors won't even be able to write their own syllabi or do their own tests — these materials will be provided for them. Don't like it? Then go find another job. That will be the choice the professor of the future will have to face.

As an aside, professors don't really know that much about learning (as the author freely admits). Administrators know much more and, if they did teach, our students would actually learn. Too bad. What a lost opportunity that our professors care so little about learning that they feel it is a more of an administrative perogative than an instructional one.

Patience is the strategy for professors like this who care so little about learning. So little, in fact, that they wear it as a badge of honor that administrators know more about it than they do!
PS, at 5:50 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

Public and Private schools
In private colleges, there is more discipline. There's no mandated tax-millage to pay the overhead. Expectations are much higher and faster, as are graduation rates.

As someone who just started teaching a private college, ll, and has had scores of meetings and orientations with various educrats, and who is staring at a year-long calandar of department

meetings about “assessment” with a representative of the deans office present, let’s just say I’m pretty far from convinced you know what you are talking about.

I think it has more the mission of the school. At the big public RI where I got my PhD, there are hordes of Educrats but they are generally kept an arms length from the faculty, lest they encourage them to spend too much time thinking about students and teaching rather than grants and publishing.
djw, at 5:50 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

Educrats Attack on Teaching
Hugo S.: Dude, wherever you are, whatever you do, I am so sorry your wrote this and not me. Hang on! The jargonistas lack self-confidence and really, really believe that change trumps over a thousand years of successful tradition. How wrong is that? Keep flinging it, brother. Thanks!
Jeremiah, Pompous Mandarin Old Jerk, at 9:20 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

another way to think about
This author appreciates when his students are open enough to grasp another perspective on gender. But he himself is not open minded enough to think there might be another way to think about teaching and learning. It is sad when teachers think they don’t have anything to learn.
RA, at 9:20 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

Full response with hyperlinks is at http://educationpolicyblog.blogsp...2007/10/poor-excuse-for-teacher.html and http://blogs.britannica.com/blog/main/author/dbutin.

Now don’t get me wrong. I’m not against lecturing per se. Research has shown it to be useful in specific situations (not many, but there are some). And I certainly know that college students sometimes come to class in, shall we say, not quite the perfect condition to learn. And I too have had my share of edu-jargon that can make insomniacs go to sleep. But Schwyzer’s tirade is demeaning and just plain arrogant. Let me put it as bluntly as possible at first: if your students aren’t learning, then you’re not teaching. You may be spouting, pontificating, lecturing, sowing, seeding, PowerPointing. But you’re not teaching. Now let’s go step by step: First, faculty such as Schwyzer assume that knowledge is just transferred from their mouth to the student’s brain. Sorry. Doesn’t work that way. Read the research. Second, few faculty understand how to align objectives to assessments. Put otherwise, they just spray knowledge out there shotgun style and hope that something sticks. If they in fact actually tried an informal assessment, such as the 1-minute exit survey, they’d realize that little actual stuck. But then they’d have to go back and re-teach something. Third, the “gardener” metaphor presumes that students are just passive entities such as “rocks” or “ loamy earth.” Please. If there is one thing that the field of social psychology has taught us, it is that context matters. Teaching is always a two-way dance that consists of literally thousands of minute actions and reactions in the course of a one-hour class. So if Schwyzer’s students don’t get it, don’t blame them or those pesky educrats. Blame him. I’d suggest he go visit one of his colleagues in the education department and actually learn something.
Dan W. Butin, at 9:20 pm EDT on October 8, 2007

I am the guilty one!
1. Of course, all people who hold the Ed.D. are of the same mind. I say that with exaggerated sarcasm.

2. Jargon? My brother is a biologist. He uses that crazy jargon all the time; words like chromosome, photosynthesis, and molecules. (Language games, anyone?) I'll stop using the words "constructivism" and "epistemology" in my classes if I must avoid jargon.

3. Don't give education scholars all the credit. Psychologists have also participated in the destroying of education. Those cognitive psychologists are particularly guilty. And don't get me started on the educational sociologists!
David Ayers, Ed.D., Assistant Professor, at 5:10 am EDT on October 9, 2007

let's look at those assumptions, Hugo
Well, Hugo, you certainly touched a nerve. It's pretty clear there are a lot of BAD faculty development sessions going on out there (at least from the faculty's point of view) and frankly, the stir fried lunches are probably not much better. But I'd like to take a look at three of your assumptions. Assumption 1: "Grades measure learning." This one is pretty thoroughly discredited by now. Grades measure how students perform in relation to one another, not what they are learning, and as extrinsic rewards they actually take students attention — great big gobs of it — away from their learning and fasten it on the race for A's. Assumption 2: "I am in this by myself." All of your remarks assume that you are operating as a teacher entirely by yourself, and you and many other faculty members do continue to see things this way. You assume that your impact on students can be measured discreetly, individually, in isolation from the rest of the experiences in the curriculum. How much more power to help students learn (I am assuming you and most of the other respondents still seek this) would you have if you thought of yourself as working on a team, being part of a corporate faculty whose shared responsibility is student learning. This would require you to talk with your collegues often and productively about what you are doing in your classroom and whether or not it's working. I suspect you would not go for this... Assumption 3: "There are ineffable things (or at least long-term things) that happen in students as a result of what you do that can never be measured." Hey, I am a philosophy teacher — I kinda like this one myself. But I know from my practice with students that they can reflect on the impact their education is having on them in a way that gets at some of this ineffable stuff. For starters, we could try asking them if they see any connection between what they are learning in our courses and other courses they are taking and in life in general. And if we ask them to self assess their learning frequently and systematically — I mean like in every course they take — it turns out that they take more responsibilty for their own education — what a bonus!These may be assumptions you're not interested in changing, but you can't change an assumption until you know you are making it — hence the need for the nasty stir fry, I guess.
Donna Engelmann, Professor of Philosophy at Alverno College, at 10:20 am EDT on October 9, 2007

I'm noting where Hugo "teaches" so I make sure my daughter doesn't get him for a prof. So, if I'm reading this right, grades are all we need to make sure students are learning? Really? In a day and age where grade inflation is rampant, where a 75 on an exam could be an A, and where faculty are assessed by how well their students perform? Teachers, or facilitators, or professors, are all in the same line of work, helping students learn. Look out, it may require more work than just showing up and putting all of the responsiblity on the student. Heck, if that theory worked out, you just might make teachers obsolete.
Bartleby Asment, at 11:05 am EDT on October 10, 2007

Thanks Hugo!
I especially appreciate the phrase “I am teaching humanities, not giving a certificate in refrigerator maintenance.” In the culture at large, there seems to be no appreciation of the difference between wisdom and skill aquisition. But educators are forced to work within the conflation. Why is everyone so eager to blame teachers alone when an entire society fails to fund, value, and prioritize education from Kindergarten to college?
Anna Jensen, at 11:30 am EDT on October 10, 2007

Are you as good a teacher as you think? An article from NEA
Read Paul Price’s article in NEA’s journal from Fall 2006. He is a prof. at CSU Fresno.

http://insidehighered.com/views/2...nea.org/he/heta06/images/2006pg7.pdf

Being the solitary souls that we tend to be in our efforts to prepare for our courses, it becomes very easy, he states, to get caught up in our efforts rather than assessing how effective we are, in assessing our weakness as well as our strengths.

As humans, we tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt.

I recommend the read. It is not related to student learning outcomes per se, by the way.

How do we find our blind spots?
CMD, at 4:10 pm EDT on October 10, 2007

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Jan. 31

Calling Out Colleges on Student Learning

By Doug Lederman

Two major higher education associations released a statement Wednesday designed to make clear (to Margaret Spellings and whoever else might be listening) that college leaders are fully committed to meeting the call for collecting and making public more and better information about how and what students learn. And while the document departs in some key ways from the themes advanced by Spellings and other policy makers pressuring higher education of late, it drew praise from one prominent critic: the former chairman of the secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

The document, "New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability: A Statement of Principles, Commitments to Action," was produced by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which represents 1,100 public and private colleges and focuses on liberal education, and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, an association of colleges that coordinates accreditation nationally. It was drafted in consultation with and praised (but not formally endorsed) by several other leading higher education groups, whose leaders appeared at a session Wednesday at the accreditation council's annual meeting where the new statement was unveiled.

Colleges and universities have been under heavy pressure in the last two years from the Spellings-led Education Department and others to be more accountable for how successfully they educate students. Many faculty members and college leaders have complained that their efforts to do so have been unfairly ignored and that the critics have promoted oversimplified and potentially destructive approaches to measure and report learning outcomes, such as an overemphasis on standardized tests. But many higher education groups have also acknowledged, sometimes grudgingly, that the external pressure has propelled their efforts in useful ways.

AACU and CHEA began discussions last spring aimed at seeing "whether we could now commit ourselves to simple guiding principles around which we could make public the activities that are going on," Carol Geary Schneider, president of AACU, said in describing the new statement Wednesday.

The statement went through many drafts and reworkings, and an early version drew criticism from some scholarly groups who said they feared it would send colleges too far in the direction favored by the Bush administration and would open the door to government intervention.

The final version released Wednesday strives to strike a balance between responding to the public pressure for more accountability in measuring and reporting learning outcomes, yet firmly embracing the idea that individual institutions should decide for themselves what to measure and how to do so. Schneider said it was "no accident"

that the statement calls for "new leadership" on student learning issues, saying it is time for higher education leaders to step to the forefront and government officials to recede.

"The primary responsibility for achieving excellence falls on colleges and universities themselves," the statement says. While accrediting associations, scholarly groups and foundations and governments all have a role to play in exhorting and pressing colleges to assess learning outcomes, "we strongly endorse the principle that quality standards must be set and met by institutions themselves and not by external agencies."

Every college and each major school and program within them "should develop ambitious, specific, and clearly stated goals for student learning appropriate to its mission, resources, tradition, student body, and community setting," and while those goals may vary from institution to institution, "they should include the enrichment of both individual lives and our democratic society as a whole through the study of science, social science, the humanities, and the arts."

The institutions should "gather evidence about how well students in various programs are achieving learning goals across the curriculum and about the ability of its graduates to succeed in a challenging and rapidly changing world," and the information should be used, as it historically has been, to help the institutions figure out how best to improve their performance.

But it should also be shared with the public, through an "easily intelligible summary of conclusions drawn from evidence about student learning and a clear description of the process of continuous improvement on a campus. Such information and evidence will help the public learn more about the multiple aims of college study and about campus priorities for strengthening learning."

The clearest way in which the statement parts ways with the push made by the Spellings-led Education Department is in its purposeful shunning of the idea that higher education should be working toward developing readily comparable ways of measuring student learning. While department leaders have insisted repeatedly that they have never sought to impose on colleges a "one size fits all" approach to student outcomes, as some higher education officials have asserted, politicians have urged the development of tests and other measures that would make it easy for students and families to compare the academic outcomes of students at various colleges a student might like to attend — a kind of comparison that could only be made if many colleges used similar standardized measures. Two associations of public universities have adopted a Voluntary System of Accountability that, consistent with the department's thrust, would require participants to use and report their outcomes on one of three measures of student learning.

The new statement goes out of its way to avoid such an approach. "We welcome the progress various associations of colleges and universities have made in developing widely agreed upon templates that will provide college applicants, their parents, legislators, and the general public with important data about demographics, admission and completion information, costs and financial aid, student engagement, and other relevant information," the AACU/CHEA statement says. And "[w]e commend those organizations and their philanthropic supporters that have in recent years developed promising means of assessing important outcomes of higher education."

But "[u]nderstanding that standardized measures currently address only a small part of what matters in college, we will work with foundations and campus partners to substantially expand the array of educationally valid and useful means — qualitative as well as quantitative — of assessing the full range of learning outcomes envisioned in this document."

Schneider, the AACU president, said it was purposeful that the word "comparable" appeared nowhere in the groups' document. "We think it would be premature to rush to comparability when we are still inventing tools that we will use to measure outcomes.... We did aim to have some comparability in the categories of outcomes that we should be striving for."

In an interview, Charles Miller, the Texas businessman and Spellings confidante who led the secretary's federal commission that studied higher education, noted the document's avoidance of comparability and standardization

and said it raised the question, "Can you get information that the public and the institution can use if you don't have some comparability?" The fear of comparability is particularly noteworthy given that the academy is filled, he said, "with people who depend on standardized testing more than any other industry," at the admissions stage.

But that quibble aside, Miller applauded the AACU/CHEA statement as "high principled and a really strong, favorable effort.... I like the sound of most of these things, and it could be used as a roadmap for people to do the right thing."

Noting that item No. 1 on the groups' "action plan" is encouraging a "vigorous discussion with the goal of implementing" the statement's principles on campuses "as fully as possible in the near future," Miller added: "If this opens up the discussion, I think it's a very positive step."

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/01/31/aacu.

Inside Higher Ed, January 23, 2008

Mixed Grades for Grads and Assessment

In discussions of education policy, and especially of educational failings, it's common to hear references to "what the business community thinks" or "what employers want."

It turns out that employers aren't as frustrated with the skills of new graduates as some politicians and policy makers suggest. In a number of areas, employers appear to think graduates are coming out well positioned. And while employers would love to see better assessment tools used in college (as you may have heard from some critics of higher education), employers seem dubious of multiple choice exams and how colleges compare to one another and much more concerned with being able to get individual analyses of potential employees' skills.

Those conclusions come from a national survey of employers with at least 25 employees and significant hiring of recent college graduates, released Tuesday by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Over all, 65 percent of those surveyed believe that new graduates of four-year colleges have most or all of the skills to succeed in entry-level positions, but only 40 percent believe that they have the skills to advance.

In terms of specific skills, the employers didn't give many A's or fail many either. The employers were asked to rank new graduates on 12 key areas, and the grads did best in teamwork, ethical judgments and intercultural work, and worst in global knowledge, self-direction and writing.

Employers Ratings of College Graduates Preparedness on 1-10 Scale

Category	Mean Rating	% giving high (8-10) rating	% giving low (1-5) rating
Teamwork	7.0	39%	17%
Ethical judgment	6.9	38%	19%
Intercultural skills	6.9	38%	19%
Social responsibility	6.7	35%	21%
Quantitative reasoning	6.7	32%	23%
Oral communication	6.6	30%	23%
Self-knowledge	6.5	28%	26%
Adaptability	6.3	24%	30%
Critical thinking	6.3	22%	31%
Writing	6.1	26%	37%
Self-direction	5.9	23%	42%
Global knowledge	5.7	18%	46%

To the extent that employers give graduates mixed grades, that raises the question of how they determine who is really prepared. Many of the existing tools appear to be insufficient, the poll found.

Only 13 percent said transcripts were very useful with another 16 percent saying fairly useful, compared to 33 percent who said "not useful."

What the employers appear to want are intensive, personally evaluated projects, not more testing. Only 7 percent said it would be "very effective" to have the results of multiple choice tests of general knowledge, and there was little interest in tools that would compare on colleges' graduates to another on critical thinking tests.

In contrast, 46 percent said it would be very effective and 70 percent said it would be very or fairly effective to have students complete an advanced project as seniors, demonstrating knowledge in the major and in problem-solving, writing, and analytic skills. And 69 percent said it would be very effective and 83 percent said it would be very or fairly effective to see an evaluation of a supervised internship where students apply college learning in a "real-world setting."

The results appear to contradict statements from Education Secretary Margaret Spellings and many politicians that the business community is demanding tools that allow for comparisons of colleges on how they perform in certain areas.

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the AAC&U, said in a press briefing on the data that "there was truth and misunderstanding" in discussions over the last year of what business leaders want. "They do want more transparent forms of assessment," she said, "but there was an assumption that people want more of the kinds of assessments of the sort that the testing industry provides."

In fact, what business leaders appear to want is much more individual and less focused on comparing colleges, according to the new poll. Focusing on new multiple choice measures to assess, she said, "is not a good investment."

— Scott Jaschik

Comments

The basics - Excuse me — nearly 25% were given low scores on "quantitative reasoning." Given the current U.S. financial SNAFU — could the two be related? As noted in "The Wall Street Journal?" As for the 37% with low scores in writing — hardly a "mixed" assessment, IMHO. Low is low.
L.L., at 6:25 am EST on January 23, 2008

Politicians and the cabinet secretary want even more multiple choice questions—this after having ruined many elementary schools' programs with the No Child Left Behind strategy so the schools now are just teaching to the test, like the NY state HS regents. Apparently the politicians want to compare colleges. (Then they could give many dollars to colleges that do well, presumably, and withhold from the losers—imagine the scenario.) This report indicates that businesses prefer to compare individual job candidates, which makes sense, since they are hiring one at a time, not a groups of grads. I am happy that they found a voice to speak for themselves. They may have to shout louder, and many times, to be hear—because people in DC seem to think they know what everyone wants everywhere.
bystander, at 6:45 am EST on January 23, 2008

Projects vs. Testing - Surveys like this can't tell you much about how students are doing, or compare them to the past at all. Obviously, any employer can set a very high standard and deem graduates inadequate. It all depends on expectations. The important results of this study are the fact that employers aren't interested in standardized exit exams or similar simplistic assessment information being pushed now by ACTA. Instead, what employers would like is the work product of students on major products. So why don't colleges give it to them? I'd love to see colleges strongly encourage seniors to complete a major project as a capstone, and then post the project on the web to allow employers easier access to what students can do.
John K. Wilson, collegefreedom.org, at 8:45 am EST on January 23, 2008

What employers want - Graduates who can read, write and do math accurately. That is what employers want. Not self-serving polls by special interests with a stake in continued taxpayer funding. Polls conducted by pollsters known by their work for one of two major political parties. As in, "lies, damn lies, and statistics." The poll pointedly notes that employers have very little faith in college transcripts. In other words — real-world unhappiness with employer-verified skill levels of "college graduates" and the veracity of college grades. ENRON never had it so good? As an employer who deals with academics frequently, I'd like to speak to an applicant's professors. One, to verify the information. Two, because faculty are often more frank about students, if there is no "paper trail."
Also — how an applicant can supposedly have good grades, yet do so poorly in real-world applications (e.g., math, writing).
Buzz, at 9:40 am EST on January 23, 2008

Gee, I wonder if higher ed's insistence on relegating intro freshman comp courses to low paid, part time adjuncts and teaching assistants may be a reason writing skills are so poor? This demonstrates higher ed's real commitment to teaching writing.No excuse, no reason, can justify this behavior. It speaks for itself.
Laura, at 9:50 am EST on January 23, 2008

The sub-heading in my email annoucing this story begins, "Survey of employers finds they think new degree holders have basic skills." That's a darn rosy interpretation of the "writing" score here. The actual report says, "employers are less convinced of their preparedness in terms of global knowledge, self-direction, and writing." What skill is more important in many workplaces today than writing?
It is interesting, too, that outcomes broadcast so loudly as aims in higher education—critical thinking, global knowledge, and, again, writing—come out at the bottom.
Mark Bauerlein, at 11:30 am EST on January 23, 2008

There seems to be a real problem with each new class of students concerning writing and critical thinking skills. The have been trained to take multiple choice exams and tothink in a highly structured manner.
gloria schubert, Instructor, at 12:10 pm EST on January 23, 2008

What employers want - Buzz, did you even look at the survey? Employers did not say they wanted grads who can read, write and do math. What they wanted was those with "global knowledge," "critical thinking," etc. Finding Pakistan on the map is not "global knowledge." What they need to understand integrates many of these "skills" such as, what is there about the differences between Shiites and Sunnis that has fostered such division in many Arab countries, and what does this have to do with the political climate in Pakistan? How do you "test" this on a multiple choice test? You need to encourage faculty to focus on issues not "skills."

In my field, math, I can show you that randomly testing for drug usage can produce up to 30-50% "false positives," depending on the reliability of the testing and the actual percentage of the population that uses the drugs. (If anyone wants to know how to do the math, I would gladly explain. Just email me.) On the other hand, the more important question is what is the impact of such an analysis. Somehow people still have faith that this procedure would "get the bad guys."

As long as we "teach to a skills test" we will never succeed in preparing students for the type of thinking that they need to actually improve the quality of life on this planet. We, of course, cannot do stem cell research unless we know how the system works, and those researchers who investigate will most likely understand, but isn't the more important question for those of us with very limited

knowledge of the process still need to recognize the impact of research on our lives and to help make intelligent decisions regarding the pros and cons of such research?

My wife recently died of breast cancer. I support lots of research into finding a "cure" for this miserable disease, but I believe (call it a hunch) that the cure will come at the celluar level. Some brilliant scientist is going to find the "gene" that caused the disease, and he (or someone else equally brilliant) will find a way of sliping in a new gene from some stem cell that will resolve the problem. Does anything I said make sense? Probably not, but what I don't want is someone who, for some God forsaken reason blocks this research. What I want in classroom across this country is open/clear headed discussions of whether to support such reseach or not. I could care less if the discussants know the difference between miosis and mitosis—although I am not opposed to including such knowledge in the discussions. In other words, I am much more concerned with "how we teach" than "how we test."
Fred Flener, Retired, at 12:45 pm EST on January 23, 2008

Writing - What no one, in or out of higher ed, ever seems to question is why we expect college to be the place where students learn writing. I agree that college graduates should write well, but why shouldn't we expect good writing from high school grads? In order to meet the needs of struggling freshmen writers, universities have turned their general education curricula into, as one of my students put it, "12th grade." If a student knows that what they're learning in 12th grade (or 8th grade, for that matter) will be repeated in college, why would he or she be motivated to take away anything more than what is needed to pass the course and get into college? Before everyone starts blaming college writing instructors, they should examine how the K-12 system has been extented into colleges. That system's approach to assessment, I believe, has a tendency to reinforce an "is this going to be on the test" attitude in students, and discourages the necessary practice, process and follow-through needed for students to become good writers.
English prof, at 1:00 pm EST on January 23, 2008

What Employers Really Want - US employers neither recognize nor hire for writing skills. Neither do they hire for quantitative skills, business skills, global awareness, language skills or technical skills. Almost all US business commentary on American students' command of these skill sets is simply meant to denigrate US students regardless of actual individual performance.

US employers typically do not recognize grades as valid indicators of performance except as means of excluding candidates. Straight As will not exclude a candidate, but neither will high grades guarantee actual consideration. US employers usually do not recognize more than a small handful of colleges and universities (and disturbingly, only about half of the 20 or so most competitive ones). They typically don't know what standardized test scores mean, and frankly could care less.

Employers usually hire for meaningful experience or cost-effectiveness. Internships and small-business experience typically do not qualify. Increasingly over the past three decades mid-size to large US employers have shied away from training new employees, preferring instead to poach employees from brand-name competitors or outsourcing firms. Small businesses typically lack the resources to train new employees. In addition, what formerly constituted most "new hire" positions in corporate America are those most likely to be offshore-outsourced.

Students' best bet at this time is to pursue opportunities related to self-employment. Self-employment currently presents the best opportunities to retain learned skills and to benefit from prior investment in those skills. This being the case, there's really no need to consider what "the business community"

thinks of American students' skills except as barometers of the fortunes of the pro-globalization, pro-immigration, and anti-labor lobbies.
Scrawed, at 1:00 pm EST on January 23, 2008

What AACU trying to say? - First of, I like to thank Scott to bring this report forward. I suspected that this report is a response to Spellings' committee. In a way, it did — employers don't trust standardized test. But it does not respond to the accountability question. The report showed that employers do want to evaluate the graduates and this is what is important. In what form is really a secondary question. Of cause, employers can careless about school rankings if they can evaluate graduates. But the measuring of school is actually a call for accountability. This goal can be achieved regardless of the type of evaluation is used. As long as the result is published, students and parents will have the information to pick a school with desired quality(employability) with reasonable price. There are opportunities for vendors to work with employers to create good evaluation tools. But I do hope US employers aren't like those described by Scrawed.
Duncan, at 2:10 pm EST on January 23, 2008

As a person who is an organization planner and has written many job descriptions the problem is really quite different. College rewards linear thinking where a good student narrowly concentrates on a single subject to the satisfaction of the professor. Most jobs require multitasking where the employee balances several diverse items at the same time and needs to do a good job on all of them rather than a superb job on one. It's likely to be impossible to change since the process of becoming a professor requires superb linear thinking and naturally, the professors will be inclined to reward linear thinking. It's clear to me that the employer will always have to deal with the transition from the linear process to the multitasking one and they need to do it and stop complaining. Colleges will supply smart graduates with the needed skills industry will have to help them adapt to a different environment.
steve, at 2:10 pm EST on January 23, 2008

Employers & Students - We've done (NASPAA)several employer survey's and continually see interest that students be better able to communicate (both oral and written), work with others (teamwork) and take initiative (lead) on the job. These 'soft skills' are not yet as prevalent in the classroom. They are also not as easy to teach compared to math, history, science, quantitative, hard skills etc. Employers create allot of direct and residual demand for educated students so listening to them make good sense.
scott talan, nat. assoc. schools public affairs & administration, at 2:40 pm EST on January 23, 2008

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Dec. 5

‘Beyond Tests and Quizzes’

With federal and state officials, accreditors and others all talking about the importance of assessment, what’s going o in classrooms? Assessment, after all, takes place every time a professor gives a test. A new volume of essays, *Beyond Tests and Quizzes: Creative Assessments in the College Classroom* (Jossey-Bass) argues that assessments in the classroom could be more creative and more useful to the educational process. The editors of the volume are Richard Mezeske, chair of education at Hope College, and Barbara A. Mezeske, an associate professor of English at Hope. I e-mail interview, they discussed the themes of their new book.

Q: What do you see as the major failings of the tests used in most classrooms?

A: It is not that tests have failings, but that tests are limited. Conventional paper and pencil tests should not be the sol means for assessing student learning because tests are by their very nature single snapshots in time of student learnir often limited to “what do they remember” under pressure. Tests, alongside other assessment tools, can inform teaching by providing multiple lenses for considering what it is that students know and can do. If, at a given point in semester the teacher discovers (through timely assessment) that students are not getting it, and either do not know th material, or cannot do anything with what they know (i.e., they can’t apply their knowledge), then instruction can be shifted on the spot to rectify the situation. Multiple assessment tools are always preferable to the single test.

Q: How different are different disciplines in the way they use tests?

A: They vary extensively. It seems to us that some disciplines lend themselves more readily to applications or to problem-based demonstrations of learning than others. We think immediately of the social sciences, and also of any discipline which assesses students based on their writing. In the arts, skill is best demonstrated in applied fashion. Science courses with robust laboratory components afford many opportunities for creative, non-test assessment of learning.

Some disciplines rely on one, two, or three tests each semester as their sole means of assessment, and these tests are often focused on rote recall of facts. Content knowledge, to be sure, is essential, but tests (and ongoing assessments) need to give students opportunities to demonstrate not just recall, but also application. Test experiences can challenge students to a deeper level of mastery by requiring them to use facts in new and creative ways to demonstrate understanding, and to tap into their personal schemas. Too often tests are designed to measure what students do not know: Since we all know far less than there is to know and understand at a deep level about a given topic, concept, or discipline, constructing a test to prove that is a simple matter. However, if students a know concepts X, Y, and Z at the end of a course, then designing assessments, and yes, tests, to confirm that is a tougher process. That’s because rote recall cannot be the sole indicator of knowledge and understanding. The tests or assessments have to be multifaceted and must assess multiple layers of student knowledge about X, Y, or Z.

It’s just common sense to encourage learning beyond the rote level. For years, the business community has complai about employees (i.e., graduates of our schools) who cannot solve problems, who cannot work independently or

collaboratively, or who need constant direction. Creating tests that measure the knowledge and skills at the levels wh application can occur will not solve these problems in and of themselves, but a concerted global effort to move beyo rote learning can be a major component in developing a thoughtful, creative, and adaptable citizenry who can demonstrate knowledge and skills in new and creative ways to solve problems we cannot yet even imagine. We nee collectively move students away from the mindset that asks, "Is this on the test?" to "This is interesting. How migh use it in the future?"

Q: Could you share your definition of "creative assessment" and some of your favorite examples?

A: Creative assessment is *flexible*, *timely,* and *interesting* to both the instructor and to the student. When teachers shift instruction based on student feedback, then they are being flexible and creative. We do not mean that teachers should design ever more imaginative and bizarre assessment tools, or that they should ignore mandated curricular content. Rather, creative assessment, as we use the term, implies focused attention to student learning, reading the signs, engaging students, and listening to their feedback. Creative assessment often gives students opportunities to apply ar deepen their superficial knowledge in their discipline.

For example, in the chapter in our book about teaching grammar, Rhoda Janzen describes an assessment that require students to devise and play grammar games: They cannot do that without a deep mastery of the principles they are learning. In another chapter, Tom Smith describes how he grades individuals' tests during private office appointmen He affirms correct responses, asks students to explain incomplete or erroneous answers, and both gives and gets immediate, personal feedback on a student's ability to recall and apply concepts. In a third chapter, David Schock wr about taking media-production skills into the community, allowing students to demonstrate their knowledge and skil by creating public service announcements and other media products for an audience outside the classroom.

Q: How is technology (the Web, etc.) changing the potential of testing and assessment?

A: Technology is expanding the possibilities for assessment while at the same time complicating assessment. For example, checking understanding of a group and individuals during instruction is now relatively simple with electror tools which allow students to press a button and report what they believe about concept X. The results are instantaneously displayed for an entire class to see and the instructor can adjust instruction based on that feedback. However, technology can complicate, too. How is a teacher able to guarantee student X working at a remote comput station on an assessment is actually student X, and not student Y covering for student X? Does the technology mere make the assessment tool slick without adding substance to the assessment? In other words, merely using technolog does not automatically make the assessment clever, substantive, correct, or even interesting, but *can* do all of those things.

Q: In the national debates about assessment, many policy makers place an emphasis on comparability. Hov important do you think it is that tests be comparable?

A: In our experience, the best measures of learning take into account the immediate circumstances of classroom and teacher, as well as the individual learner. Good assessment tells you what people know and can do, and since people different from one another, one learner might best demonstrate his knowledge by taking a standard pen and paper tes while another might best demonstrate his knowledge by designing a multi-media presentation. One purpose of good assessment is always to shape subsequent instruction.

Q: What are the lessons from this book for people engaged in the national debate over assessment?

A: With the pressures to move to more mandated standardized testing to determine what it is that students know, we may be limiting both teaching and learning. We have not taken a stand against standardized tests — they're the law, we do them. However, such tests should not be the sole means for determining what makes for a well-equipped and knowledgeable citizen of the 21st century. If teachers are focused on a mandated lesson and rote recall of facts in that lesson, they may shortchange students who need one more opportunity to consider the concepts in ways which migl be personally meaningful and are connected to personal schema or prior knowledge. But if checking in with students periodically about what they know and understand allows for subtle shifts in teaching to reinforce concepts, even wh state and national mandates are met, then we are all better off.

— Scott Jaschik

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Nov. 30

Assessment From the Faculty Point of View

When you're at a higher education meeting these days and the topic is assessment, it's a safe bet that the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education factors prominently in the discussion.

But at a session Thursday of the American Anthropological Association, there was nary a mention of the federal pan that framed the debate on learning outcomes and value added during its run last year. Instead, there was plenty of gri about the university power structure, much skepticism about the assessment process and a consensus that faculty mu take ownership when evaluation takes place.

Panelists noted that many college faculty members — themselves often included — view assessment as a threat. Th threat comes not from federal agencies, they said, but from accrediting groups and administrators. College leaders pressure professors to measure the quality of their courses using quantifiable methods. Curricular committees form, report is produced and everyone goes on their merry way. It's a top-down process with little faculty buy-in and no meaningful outcome, the time-tested complaint goes.

While articulating the above concerns, the anthropology professors who gathered for the session said it's time for a change. Peter N. Peregrine, a professor of anthropology at Lawrence University, said assessment works best when faculty members are involved and it's not a top-down mandate. They need to be the ones asking questions of themselves, each other and their own students. It could be about the utility of an assignment, he noted, or broader questions about a program. Either way, the assessment questions thought up by professors are almost always differe from the ones asked by administrators.

"They tend to be more specific, personal and much less generalizable than administrative ones," Peregrine said. And the fact that administrators are the ones who most often end up setting the agenda explains why assessment tends to follow a "rather halting pattern," he added.

Peregrine cites a recent example that he said demonstrates why the top-down mandate is ineffective. Three years ago Lawrence established the Office of Research on Academic Cultures and Learning Environments (ORACLE) as a w to get faculty more involved in the assessment process and to provide undergraduates with research opportunities. T university's accreditation review was coming, Peregrine said, so why not be prepared?

As coordinator of the office, Peregrine invited two students to research whatever topic they wanted related to assessment. They looked at how individualized instruction offered at Lawrence played into students' admissions decisions, and why current students pursued independent study. Both undergraduates produced a senior thesis from their research, and Peregrine said he was pleased with their work. For the second year, he asked two new students to respond to a question: What impact does individualized instruction have on students' academic performance? Peregrine said that while the research revealed noteworthy trends, neither student researcher pursued the topic as a senior thesis, "nor was their work done with the same eagerness and professionalism."

Why? Peregrine said it's simple: Because he decided the topic, there was little student buy-in.

"I'm a skeptic of mandated programs for assessment," said Frank Salamone, a professor of sociology at Iona Colle "Once you let administrators determine what specifics a class should teach, you've lost control."

Salamone, one of the panelists, said he's concerned that assessment often means more institutional bureaucracy, and that administrators often favor the easiest methods of evaluation — multiple choice or point scales that don't account nuance. "I know when I do a good job and I know when I do a bad job," he said. "Why do we have to quantify everything?"

And even when faculty have some control over what questions are asked during assessment exercises, there's no assurance of student buy-in. Instructors at the University of Minnesota's Duluth campus helped implement an online system in which students assess themselves in categories such as "knowing yourself" and "communication to a general audience," as a way to determine what they are learning from courses. Students never took to the system, sa Jennifer E. Jones, an assistant professor in the sociology/anthropology department at Duluth, and the process suffere

Amid the skeptical voices, Susan Sutton, associate dean of international programs at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, said she learned a great deal about her department through its assessment exercises. Anothe panelist, Darlene Smucny, academic director of social sciences in the School of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Maryland University College, said she's found it valuable to give out common exams in large courses that are often taught by adjunct instructors. It's a way to measure whether faculty members are looking at similar learning outcomes, she said.

Peregrine and others at the session said they would like to see the anthropology association publish suggested learni outcomes, as well as having professors list their objectives in course literature. That happens at Central Arizona College, where instructors use the same template and publish on their course Web pages what students are expected learn. It's a helpful exercise, said Maren Wilson, a professor of anthropology, when it comes time for accreditation review.

Smucny said she and others at Maryland have yet to find a common test to give for anthropology 101 courses. Pane said that's common in a field that prides itself on curricular diversity.

"I'm not sure we'll ever have an across-the-board system that all anthropologists buy into," Salamone said.

— Elia Powers

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/11/30/assessment.

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June 26

Assessment for 'Us' and Assessment for 'Them'

By Jeremy Penn

In the movie "Ghostbusters," Dan Aykroyd commiserates with Bill Murray after the two lose their jobs as university researchers. "Personally, I like the university. They gave us money and facilities, and we didn't have to produce anything. You've never been out of college. You don't know what it's like out there. I've worked in the private sector. They expect results." I can find some amusement in this observation, in a self-deprecating sort of way, recognizing that this perception of higher education is shared by many beyond the characters in this 1980s movie.

Members of Secretary Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education were very clear about their expectations for higher education when they wrote, "Students increasingly care little about the distinctions that sometimes preoccupy the academic establishment, from whether a college has for-profit or nonprofit status to whether its classes are offered online or in brick-and-mortar buildings. Instead, they care — as we do — about results."

This expectation for assessment as accountability has forced many faculty members and administrators to seek out ways to balance assessment for "us", or assessment for "improvement," with assessment for "them," or assessment for "accountability." We do assessment for "us" in our classrooms, to provide feedback to students on their progress, in our programs to provide direction for improvement efforts, for each other when we provide reviews of articles and of ourselves when we evaluate our own performance.

Conversely, assessment for "them" is done in response to an external demand to prove "how much students learn in colleges and whether they learn more at one college than another," as the Spellings Commission put it in its final report.

When we perform assessment for "us" we are not afraid to discover bad news. In fact, when we assess for "us," it is more stimulating to discover bad news about our students' performance because it provides clear direction for our improvement efforts. In contrast, when we perform assessment for "them," we try our best to hide bad news and often put a positive face on the bad news that we can't hide.

When we perform assessment for "us" we do our best to create valid and reliable assessments but don't let the technical details, particularly when they are not up to exacting research standards, derail our efforts. When we perform assessment for "them," if there is any deviation from strict standards for validity, reliability, norming group selection, sampling approach, testing procedures or scoring techniques, we are quick to dismiss the results, particularly when they are unfavorable.

We know the "us" — faculty members, students, department chairs, deans — and we know how to talk about what goes on at our institution with each other. Even amid the great diversity of institutions we often find a common core of experience and discover that we speak each other's language.

But the "them" is largely a mystery. We may have some guesses about the groups that make up "them" — parents, boards of regents, taxpayers, legislatures — but we cannot be sure because accountability is usually described generically, not specifying any particular group, and because our interaction with any of these groups is limited or nonexistent.

When we perform assessment for "us," we operate under a known set of possible consequences. Some of these consequences could be severe, such as a budget reduction or a reprimand from our superior, but in general the possible consequences are a known and acceptable risk.

When we perform assessment for "them," the consequences are much more terrifying because we do not control who uses these data or the purposes of their use. One of the uses of assessment for "them" is for accreditation, which can bring particularly negative consequences. We wake up in the middle of the night with visions of newspaper headlines publicly disclosing our poor performance.

At its best this would bring years of embarrassment and shame that would hang over our heads like the cloud of dust that followed Charles Schulz's Pig-Pen. At its worst we face losing accreditation and the labeling of our school as a "diploma mill," causing our students to be ineligible for federal student aid and leading to a mass exodus of students from our institution. Assessment for "them" brings high levels of risk and low levels of reward.

Finding the balance between assessment for "us" and assessment for "them" is a significant challenge that is also full of uncertainty as the Department of Education pursues negotiated rule making and as the Higher Education Act comes up for renewal in Congress. It can feel a bit like the Eliminator challenge in the television game show "American Gladiators" that had contestants navigating a balance beam while Gladiators attempted to knock them off the beam with swinging medicine balls. There have, however, been a number of efforts by university systems and by individual institutions to find ways to balance assessment for "us" with assessment for "them."

The State University of New York (SUNY) Assessment Initiative seeks to strike a balance between assessment for "us," or assessment for "improvement," with assessment for "them," or assessment for "accountability". The SUNY Assessment Initiative can be divided into two parts: assessment of general education and assessment within academic majors.

For assessment of general education, SUNY first developed a set of learning outcomes for general education programs at undergraduate degree-granting institutions. All SUNY institutions are required to use "externally referenced measures" to determine whether or not their students are achieving in the areas of Critical Thinking, Basic Communication and Mathematics. However, to keep this approach in balance, the Assessment Initiative does not require all institutions to use the *same* measure. Rather, institutions can select from nationally-normed exams or rubrics developed by a panel that best represent their mission in the state. This holds institutions accountable for demonstrating student achievement in foundational areas but will not be used to "punish, publicly compare, or embarrass students, faculty, courses, programs, departments or institutions either individually or collectively," according to a description of the program.

Institutions are also required to perform local assessment of their general education programs. Institutions are held accountable for attending to the *process* of assessment — examining student learning on specific objectives through assessment and making decisions about ways to improve based on those data — by an external group called the General Education Assessment Review group (GEAR). GEAR, composed of primarily faculty members from SUNY institutions, reviews and approves campus assessment plans but not the actual assessment outcomes. In this way, SUNY documents say, "emphasis is placed on assessment best practice without introducing an element of possible defensiveness campuses might feel if their assessment program does not yield evidence to

support optimal student learning."

At the institutional level, Colorado State University and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln partnered together to implement within their institutions the Plan for Researching Improvement and Supporting Mission (PRISM) and Program Excellence through Assessment, Research and Learning (PEARL), respectively. PRISM and PEARL engage faculty members in assessment of the academic major — assessment for "us." Faculty members select learning outcomes that are important for students in that major, perform assessment of student learning on those outcomes and then make improvements to their program based on those data. A panel of faculty members from each institution holds the academic majors accountable by reviewing assessment plans and encouraging the use of higher quality assessment practices.

To balance assessment for "us" with assessment for "them," PRISM and PEARL utilize an online software system that allows for the classification of the academic major assessment activity for aggregation at higher levels. In this way the institutions can describe the kind of learning that is going on within the institution, the assessment instruments that are being used to examine that learning and the improvement activities that were performed in response to the assessment data.

The SUNY Assessment Initiative and the PRISM and PEARL approaches balance assessment for "us" and assessment for "them" by demonstrating a commitment to student learning, not by achieving benchmark scores on a specific assessment or by earning a particular ranking. In both of these examples participants are held accountable for engaging in the *process* of assessing student learning, a process that is reviewed for best practices by an external panel.

Dan Aykroyd and Members of Secretary Spellings' Commission on the Future of Higher Education are correct in expecting "results." If discussions for demonstrating these "results" continue to emphasize narrow and prescriptive assessment for "them" institutions will face large amounts of work, risk and agony for little benefit. However, if assessment for "them" can be about demonstrating a commitment to student learning and being accountable for a *process*, then institutions will be able to place their time an energy where it belongs: with the students.

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The original story and user comments can be viewed online at http://insidehighered.com/views/2007/06/26/penn.

Caring or Uncaring Assessment

By Larry Braskamp and Steven Schomberg

Assessment will make higher education accountable. That's the claim of many federal and state education policy makers, as illustrated by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education. Improved assessment has become for many the lever to control rising tuition and to inform the public about how much students might learn (and whether they learn at all). But many in higher education worry that assessment can become a simplistic tool — producing data and more work for colleges, but potentially little else.

Has the politicization of assessment deepened the divide between higher education and the public? How can assessment play the role wished for by policy makers to gauge accountability and affordability and also be a powerful tool for faculty members and college presidents and provosts to use to improve quality and measure competitiveness? Successful policies will include practices that lead to confidence, trust and satisfaction — confidence by faculty members in the multiple roles of assessment, trust by the public that assessment will bring accountability, and satisfaction by the leaders such as the presidents that assessment will restore the public's confidence in higher education. A tall order to be sure, but we believe assessment – done correctly — can play a pivotal role in the resolution to the current debate on cost and quality.

For confidence, trust and satisfaction to occur, higher education and public officials must each take two steps. Higher education must first recognize that public accountability is a fact and an appropriate expectation. This means muting the calls by public higher education for more autonomy from state and federal government based simply on the declining percent of the annual higher education budget provided by public sources. This argument may help gain the attention of policy makers regarding the financial conundrums in higher education but it is not a suitable argument against accountability. Between federal and state sources, billions of dollars have been invested in higher education over the nearly 150 years of public higher education. The public deserves to know that its investments of the past are being used well today — efficiently and effectively.

In response, federal and state policy makers need to publicly embrace the notion advocated as early as 1997 that quality is based on "high standards not standardization." Higher education's differentiation is a great gift to America. The cornerstone of American higher education — institutions with a diversity of missions — is meeting the educational needs of different kinds of students with different levels of preparation and ability to pay. It is important to recognize that assessment must match and reinforce the pluralism of American higher education. America is graced with many different kinds of colleges — private, public, religious, secular, research, etc. It is important to have an assessment system that encourages colleges and universities to pursue unique missions.

A second step is for higher education to make transparent the evidence of quality that the public needs in order to trust higher education. "Just trust us," is no longer sufficient as higher education has flexed its independence in setting ever increasing tuition rates in spite of the

public's belief that it has been excessive. Trust is built on transparency of evidence not mere declarations of quality. Practically a few indicators of quality that cut across higher education are going to be required. For example, surrogate and indirect measures of learning and development captured by student surveys, amount of need-based financial assistance, dollars per student invested in advising services, and dollars per faculty member dedicated to instructional and curricular development are some possibilities. Public opinion is heavily on the side of legislators and members of Congress on this issue.

For public policy makers, it is imperative to accept the notion that to assess is to share the evidence and then to care. Caring requires action and support not just criticism. Public policy makers must educate themselves about the complexity of higher education teaching, research and public engagement. This means accepting that the indicators of quality of the work of the academy are complex, as they should be. Whatever indicators are chosen, the benchmarks will vary by type of college or university. Take graduation rates as an example. Inevitably, highly selective colleges and universities are much more likely to have higher graduation rates than those with access as a goal. The students being admitted to the highly selective colleges and universities already have demonstrated their ability to achieve and have the study skills and background to be successful in college. Open access colleges and universities, on the other hand, have a greater percentage of students who are at risk, need to develop study skills in college, and are in general less prepared for the riggers of college study when compared to those with high achievement records out of high school. But these characteristics — which frequently also result in lower graduation rates — do not make these colleges and universities inadequate or not worthy of public support. Many great thinkers have said that a nation can be judged by how it treats its poor; this same argument works for education. The goal for everyone is to do better, starting where the students are — not where we would like them to be when admitted.

With both sides changing their approaches, the public and higher education can productively focus on how together they can use assessment as an effective tool to determine quality and foster improvement. In doing so, we offer eight recommendations that if followed can offer the faculty the confidence they demand that assessment is a valid tool for communicating the evidence of student learning and development, the presidents the satisfaction that when all is said and done, it will have been worth the effort, and the public the trust that higher education is responsive to its concerns.

1. Recognize that assessment can serve both those within the academy and those outside of it, but different approaches to assessment are required. Faculty members and students can use assessment to provide the feedback that creates patterns and provides insight for their own discussion and decision making. To them assessment is not to be some distant mechanical process far removed from teaching and learning. On the other hand, parents, prospective students, collaborators, and policy makers also can benefit from the results of assessment but the evidence is very different. Through institutional assessment, they can know that specific colleges and universities are more or less effective as places to educate students, which types of students they best serve, and the best fit for jointly tackling society's problems.

2. Focus on creating a culture of evidence as opposed to a culture of outcomes. Language and terms are important in this endeavor. The latter implies a rigidity of ends, whereas the former

reflects the dynamic nature of learning, student development and solution making. A "teaching for the test" mentality cannot be the goal for most academic programs. We know from experience that assessment strategies that have relied heaviest on external standardized measures of achievement have been inadequate to detect with any precision any of the complex learning and developmental goals of higher education, e.g. critical thinking, commitment, values.

3. Accept that measurement of basic academic and vocationally oriented skills and competences may be appropriate for segments of the student population. For example, every time we get on an airplane we think of the minimum (and hopefully) high standards of the training of the pilots and the rigorous assessment procedures that "guarantee" quality assurance.

4. Avoid generic comparisons between colleges and universities as much as possible. A norm-referenced approach to testing guarantees that one half of the colleges and universities will be below average. The goal is not to be above average on some arbitrary criterion, but to achieve the unique mission and purpose of the specific college and university. A better strategy is to build off one's strengths — at both the individual and institutional level. Doing so reinforces an asset rather than a deficit view of both individual and institutional behavior leading to positive change and pride in institutional purpose. In order to benchmark progress, identify similar institutions. Such practices will encourage more differentiation in higher education and work to stem the tide of institutions clamoring to catch up with or be like what is perceived as a more prestigious college or university. "Be what you are, do it exceptionally well, and we will do what we can to fund you" would be a good state education policy.

5. Focus on tools that assess a range of student talent, not just one type or set of skills or knowledge. Multiple perspectives are critical to portraying the complexity of students' achievements and the most effective learning and development environments for the enrolled students. All components of the learning environment, including student experiences outside the classroom and in the community must be assessed. We must measure what is meaningful, not give meaning to what we measure or test. Sometimes simple quantitative data such as graduation rates and records of employments are sufficient and essential for accountability purposes. But to give a full portrayal of student learning and development and environmental assessment, many types of evidence in addition to achievement tests are needed. Sometimes portfolio assessment will be appropriate, and at other times standardized exams will be sufficient.

6. Connect assessment with development and change. Assessment has been most useful when driven by commitment to learn, create and develop, not when it has been mandated for purposes of administration and policy making. Assessment is the means, not the end. It is an important tool to be sure, but it always needs to point to some action by the participating stakeholders and parties.

7. Create campus conversations about establishing effective environments for the desirable ends of a college education. Assessment can contribute to this discussion. In its best from, assessment focuses discussion, not make decisions. People do that, and people need to be engaged in conversations and dialogue in ways that they focus not on the evidence but the solutions. As we stated earlier, to assess is to share and care. When groups of faculty get together to discuss the evaluations of their students they initially focus, somewhat defensively, on the

assessment evidence (and the biases inherent in such endeavors), but as they get to know and trust each other they focus on how to help each other to improve.

8. Emphasize assessment's role in "value added" strategies. Assessment should be informing the various publics about how the educational experiences of students or of the institutional engagement in the larger society is bringing value to the students and society. All parties need to get used to the idea that education can be conceptualized and interpreted in terms of a return on investment. But this can only be accomplished if we know what we are aiming for. This will be different for each college and university and that is why the dialogue with policy makers is so crucial. For some, the primary goal of college will focus on guiding students in their self discovery and contributing to society; for others it will be more on making a living; for yet others on understanding the world in which we live.

When both the public and higher education accept and endorse the principle that assessment is less about compliance or standardization and more about sharing, caring and transparency, then confidence, trust and satisfaction will be more likely. We believe that higher education must take the lead by focusing on student learning and development and engage with the public in collaborative decision making. If not, policy makers may conclude that they have only the clubs of compliance and standardization to get higher education's attention.

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http://insidehighered.com/views/2006/07/26/braskamp.

Faster, Better, Cheaper: The Iron Triangle of Assessment[1]

Marc Chun, PhD, The RAND Corporation's Council for Aid to Education[2]

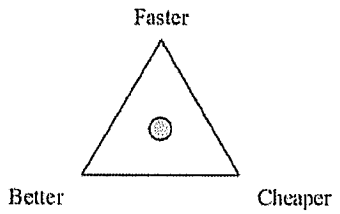
Although we may seek to accomplish everything we do faster, better and cheaper, we all find that we can never have all three at once. We must trade off these triple-constraints against one another. Ask a chef to whip up a meal quickly and cheaply, and it won't taste very good; ask an architect to design an noteworthy building but on an extremely short time frame, and the plans won't come cheap; or ask NASA to create a new space probe that is better but to do so with limited funds, and it will necessarily take more time.

When it comes to faster, better and cheaper, we live in a "choose two" culture.

When a project is underway, we will have to decrease one dimension in order to improve the other two (or often to even keep the other two steady). We can complete a project under budget and before the deadline by cutting corners, but this comes at the expense of quality. If we commit to improve the quality of the product and do so with fewer funds, it will take longer.

In the same vein, if one dimension is unbounded, we have tremendous flexibility. If we have an unlimited budget, we could do whatever we want as fast as possible; it will just cost a bundle.

One way to illustrate this dynamic is the "iron triangle" below, with each dimension at one of the triangle's vertices. Think of the default mode as the gray circle in the center -- the project will be completed at moderate speed, of moderate quality and at moderate cost.



Any movement away from the center means sacrificing at least one of the dimensions. As noted in the example below, the red circle indicates that by "choosing two" to complete the task *faster* and *cheaper*, one must be willing to accept that the process might not necessarily be *better*.

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[1] The author gratefully acknowledges the helpful comments of Elizabeth McEneaney, Mary Rauner and Richard Hersh on an earlier draft of this essay.

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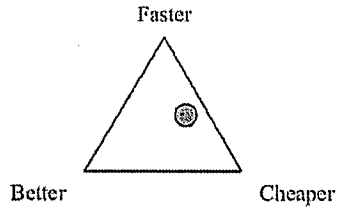


In many ways, the same can be said of higher education assessment, and more specifically, assessment of undergraduate student learning (e.g., that of student writing and critical thinking). Before proceeding, it is important to define terms as relevant to this case:

What's **faster**? Requiring less time to collect data and to complete analyses.
What's **cheaper**? Necessitating fewer resources (money, staff, technology, and other materials) to conduct the assessment.
What's **better?** Admittedly, this is the least straightforward of these terms; in the most general sense, this means having overall higher quality.

However, to probe further on "better," we must take into account the purpose of the assessment. Given that teaching and learning are two halves of a whole, assessment should reveal how students are learning as well as how professors are teaching. Assessment can be *diagnostic* or *baseline* (measuring, at the outset[3], students' individual or collective strengths, weaknesses, knowledge and skills); *formative* (monitoring students' progress throughout the process, as a means to provide students feedback about their learning as well as to provide professors information about their instruction in a timely manner such that corrections can be made); or *summative* (typically conducted at the conclusion of the process, evaluating and judging the cumulative learning experience and determining the overall level of understanding and ability that has been achieved). Thus, "better" assessment must be considered in light of what one intends to do or seeks to accomplish.

When considering the descriptions (i.e., that are included in this book) of ways to assess writing and thinking, one should ask if the approach is faster, if it is cheaper, and if it is better, and recognize the trade-offs inherent in the choice.

Assessment at the Individual Course Level

The individual faculty member goes through a version of the calculus of trading off faster, better and cheaper when deciding how to assess student learning in the classroom, be that for diagnostic, formative or summative purposes. A professor teaching a literature class may engage the students in discussion on the first day of class to determine their extant understanding of the material for the course. An instructor teaching a cultural studies seminar may have students complete a "minute papers" at the end of each class session in which they note what they learned that day and what remains unclear; this information can help gauge student comprehension to date. In general, it is reasonable to assume that most faculty members would agree that a better

[3] In the most general sense, this could be the outset of the entire collegiate experience, the outset of a course, or the outset of a module.

way to assess student learning is going to be more holistic and comprehensive. A way to understand the degree to which a chemistry student has mastered the material might be to see if she can identify an unknown substance by meticulously doing titrations and observing interactions with reagents; a engineering student might build a model of a proposed bridge; a philosophy student might do an ongoing series of oral presentations that span the academic term. Faculty might To assess general education skills such as critical thinking and written communication, students could be engaged one-on-one in a dialogue with the faculty member, could write theses, or could do some other performance-based project that requires the demonstration of such competencies. Arguably, such forms of assessment of student learning and mastery of material are indeed better, but they take more time and greater expense of resources.

In a small course, however, this may be a fair trade-off. In an upper division seminar with half a dozen students, it is reasonable for a faculty member to make the investment of time and cost to do such assessment. It not only takes more class time and resources for the students to demonstrate their competencies, but also more time and resources for the faculty member to complete the evaluation and provide feedback. However, the quality of the feedback is invariably going to be better. A faculty member can provide a more nuanced and specific set of critiques that may promote more learning on the part of the students.

Yet, once we scale this up to an auditorium lecture hall with 500 students, this no longer seems feasible. Thus, the chemistry laboratory activity becomes a multiple-choice test; the individual model bridge project becomes a group project; the series of presentations becomes a five-minute briefing. In order for the faculty member to maintain some reasonable semblance of faster and cheaper, it becomes inevitable that better must be compromised. And whereas a regular one-on-one discussion between the faculty and student may permit a faculty member to note specific areas of strength and development, the results of a multiple choice exam offer limited opportunities for such luxuries.

The high-quality assessments could be maintained if one of the other two constraints is unbounded. If the faculty member had the luxury of a large assemblage of willing and capable teaching assistants, such assessment again becomes possible; if the faculty member had no other commitments and could devote all time to the course, this also begins to seem viable. Thus, a faculty member can really have only two of the three.

Finally, it should be noted that in the nexus of faster, better and cheaper, there may be a temptation to focus primarily on summative assessment. Faculty are held accountable for end-of-term grades, prompting the minimal necessity for such assessment. Since courses typically hinge on mastery of material at some absolute level rather than value added at a relative level (comparing where individual students began and where they end), there is a disincentive to conduct diagnostic assessment: to do so would be neither faster nor cheaper. Moreover, in situations where, for example, a syllabus is so completely structured that there is little room to make mid-course adjustments, formative evaluation may seem superfluous, again taking more time and greater investment of resources. It is only at institutions and in programs that focus on tailoring teaching and learning with respect to students' starting points and experiences during

the course will diagnostic and formative assessment be considered "better," justifying the fact that such efforts will not be faster or cheaper.

Assessment at the Institution Level

When we shift from the classroom-level to the institution-level of assessment presents a similar challenge as moving from a small to a large course. Although we may have great success with a smaller-scale assessment effort, bringing it to scale creates similar challenges. Here, we again see this same three-way tug-of-war. At the institution-wide level, ask a campus administrator to assess student learning in areas such as writing and thinking, and again although the desire may be to have all three, it's really only fair to expect her to choose two, and she must often settle for just one. Put another way, a campus administer can only really control two dimensions, and can only really guarantee those two.

As a heuristic, the traditional approaches this administrator has at her disposal can be organized into four basic families or groupings: (1) actuarial data; (2) ratings of institutional quality; (3) student surveys; and (4) direct measures of student learning. Each will be considered along the dimensions of the degree to which they are faster, better and/or cheaper.

Method 1: Actuarial Data

What are often seen as the most "objective" measures of higher education are the analyses based on "actuarial" data. These data include graduation rates, levels of endowment, student/faculty ratios, highest degrees earned by faculty members, selectivity ratios, admissions test scores of entering students, and levels of external research funding. Although not intrinsic to the data themselves, the way in which the analyses are conducted typically rely upon two central assumptions: that *a "higher quality" institution has more resources* (funding, faculty [which is defined as a higher percentage of any given cadre holding Ph.D.s], and students [those with high entrance examination scores]), and that *students learn more at such "higher quality" institutions.* As one might suspect, these assumptions are not universally accepted.

Researchers argue that the primary advantages of using actuarial data are that these data are relatively straightforward to collect, and the resulting statistics can be easily compared across institutions and over time. Indeed, actuarial data are arguably *faster* and *cheaper* to collect; given the highly systematized and standardized procedures, such projects capitalize on tremendous efficiencies of scale. However, although actuarial data have prima facie validity in objectively assessing higher education quality, it is not clear if such approaches are *better*, in that the tools often cannot tacitly measure student learning.

Method 2: Ratings of Institutional Quality

A second approach of higher education assessment is based on analyses of ratings and rankings of institutions. This has typically taken the form of surveying either or both college faculty and administrators and asking these "experts" to rate the quality of different institutions and their programs on a series of dimensions, again with the assumption that students learn more at such "higher quality" institutions. Further, the implicit logic here is that informed "experts" can best assess institutional quality. Some rankings are based in part on actuarial data (such as selectivity, faculty resources, and financial resources), but are also based on surveys of faculty

and administrators that ask for their perceptions and opinions about academic quality and reputation.

Again, although such rankings are relatively *faster* and *cheaper*, concerns about ranking methodologies have raised doubts that this information is indeed *better*. Rating systems are susceptible to methodological concerns. For the rating systems published in popular periodicals, the weighting approaches are often editorial in nature and hard to defend on theoretical bases (e.g., they may weight student-faculty ratio as 20% of the total score and research productivity as 10%, without providing any empirical justification that student learning is affected by each variable in such proportions), and ratings can be highly sensitive to even minor weighting changes. Additionally, some variables may lack face validity: alumni giving is claimed to serve as a proxy for student satisfaction, when it can arguably be instead a function of effectiveness of the development office or the relative wealth of the students. Further, reputations change slowly, advantaging those that are slowly declining, and disadvantaging those that are rapidly improving.

Method 3: Student Surveys

A third approach used to assess institutions is based on self-reported student information. In contrast to the proxy data used in the actuarial approach and ranking data based on surveying faculty and administrators, these data are collected by asking students directly about their collegiate experiences, satisfaction, academic abilities, and educational and employment plans. Typically, individual institutions collect such data to gather feedback about their institution while national researchers collect data from a number of institutions in order to generate research on the effects of higher education in general.

In contrast to actuarial data and ratings systems, the use of student surveys demonstrates some of the trade-offs involved. Although such data aren't cheaper and faster than the first two methods discussed (it takes more resources and time to collect surveys from individual students), if one is seeking to understand student learning, these data are somewhat *better* in that such rough proxies are not employed. Further because many of the outcomes of interest cannot be empirically measured (e.g., attitudes and values), the use of student self-reports is commonplace in higher education research because they are seen as better. However, a key issue in student surveys, as in all surveys, is that of the reliability of the self-reported data (particularly given the "desirability bias").

Still, although you may have better data, this does not necessarily lead to better analyses. It may be problematic to determine the actual impact of any process variables. Moreover, the traditional positivistic approach often employed in such analyses assumes that individual aspects of the college experience can be studied atomistically; it can be seen as denying the holistic nature of student learning.

Method 4: Direct Assessments of Student Learning

A fourth approach to assess institutional quality is to measure student learning directly. Direct assessments of student learning are perhaps the least systematically used of the four methods discussed here, but have the greatest face validity (to assess what students have learned, assess, well, what students have learned). Direct assessment may involve analyzing course grades; administering standardized tests, performance tasks, or open-ended questions to assess general

academic skills or subject matter knowledge; and obtaining data from evaluations of student projects or portfolios of student work.

Referring back to the earlier discussion of individual classroom level assessment, such forms of assessment reflect the ideal that many faculty embrace. To assess students' abilities in ballet, for example, one could count the number of toe shoes they've gone through, one could ask an external expert how strong the program is, and one could have the students complete a survey to capture what they think about their skills and how much they've grown; or, alternatively, one could have them actually *dance.*

Researchers tend to agree that this approach is a valid measure of students' abilities, but the use of one performance indicator may not be reliable. For example, a student may write an excellent term paper on one topic, but not on another, due to varying levels of motivation or interest in the topic. The key here is to ensure that enough information is collected, with an intentionality to the range of settings and contexts. While such approaches arguably provide *better* data, they are generally neither faster nor cheaper.

The Four Approaches Compared

When it comes to understanding what students have actually learned in college the literature suggests that we are faced with a conundrum. There is general agreement that student learning is important and valued, but there is little (if any) agreement on how to assess said learning. Collection of actuarial data is commonly used because of the ease of data collection and the patina of scientific objectivity, but this approach equates quality with discrete, available (and perhaps most significantly, easily measurable) indicators of quality. Institutional rankings rely on a formula using actuarial data and ratings by informed experts, but these rankings are limited (and questionable) because they provide only an indirect measure of quality and because they tend to conflate quality and reputation. Student surveys use student perceptions of their learning, but research has shown that such measures may be problematic because they depend upon student self-evaluation; still, this research has been an important step in connecting student learning with educational quality. Finally, direct measures of student learning arguably have the greatest face validity with regard to assessing undergraduate education, but the literature indicates that there are numerous issues that complicate their implementation.

Another Methodological Note

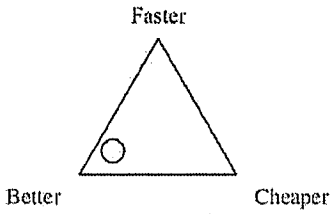
An important note is that the temporal design of any study will also shape the faster/better/cheaper analysis. A cross-sectional snapshot using any of these data sources has the advantage of being faster, but may limit the ability to make claims about changes over time in student learning in any value-added way. To study college impact using a pre- and post-test model will arguably produce better analyses (in that having two time points has clear advantages over a solely retrospective survey design), but this will neither be cheaper nor faster. Tracking specific members of a particular cohort of students can be even more expensive, but can provide richer data about student growth.

So Which to Choose?

To return to our campus administrator, she most likely faces a particular version of this tug-of-war. She can meet two of the demands, but it's impossible to accomplish all three. Typically, she won't have unlimited time and she won't have unrestricted resources; to prepare for the looming accreditation visit or faculty committee meeting, she may have to sacrifice a better assessment in order to stay on schedule and under budget; this is perfectly understandable, and might make sense given the very real exigencies she faces. Further complicating the matter is, as noted before, there isn't universal consensus about what "better" means when it comes to assessing writing and thinking. Given this, the range of assessment approaches may be considered of equivalent quality, and thus essentially interchangeable; thus, the ones that are fastest and cheapest will win out.

The point to keep in mind, however, is that it's important for all on campus to recognize these trade-offs. A campus that focuses exclusively on cost and schedule must be prepared for the fact that some compromises in quality will be made, in just the same way that a campus that focuses on having a high quality assessment in short order must be willing to put its money where its mouth is. The key is to identify what is most important to the campus: doing work faster, better or cheaper.

I argue here that in the best interest of our students and improving academic programs, however, campuses should place a high priority on better. Quality should never be negotiable. If one completes analyses cheaper and faster, but there are no meaningful conclusions that can be drawn, the entire exercise is rather worthless. Having better data, conducting better analyses, and coming to better conclusions should be the key. Although it may cost more and take more time, an unspoken fourth dimension I would add here is the return on investment; this will assuredly be higher with better assessment. Better assessments have the potential to ensure that better programmatic choices will be made in the long run, that our understanding of student learning will be deeper and more accurate over the long haul, and that our ability to conduct more sophisticated and nuanced analyses will occur over the long range. Until the day comes when we can choose three, perhaps we should instead start by choosing one:



Looking Where the Light Is Better: A Review of the Literature on Assessing Higher Education Quality[1]

By Marc Chun, fellow, RAND Corporations's Council for Aid to Education

An old joke recounts how a woman notices a man on his hands and knees while he frantically searches for something under a streetlamp. "Excuse me?" she asks. "Do you need some help?"

"Oh, yes, I'm looking for my car keys," he replies, and gestures towards his idle car in the darkness half a block away.

As she kneels down to assist, she inquires, "Where exactly did you lose the keys?"

As he carefully scans the pavement around him, he points off down the block and replies, "Over there by the car."

She pauses and shoots him a quizzical look. "Then why are you looking over here?" she queries.

"The light's better."

Given the most recent push for assessing higher education quality (framed in the public policy discourse as an issue of accountability), it is instructive to review the research literature, which demonstrates that there has been tremendous ongoing assessment effort in the United States over the past forty years. This assessment has occurred simultaneously at multiple levels. At the state level, recent research found that, by 1997, more than three-quarters of the states had some form of higher education assessment policy; however, the researchers note that "little systemic knowledge has been available to measure the extent and scope of publicly mandated outcomes assessments" (Nettles, Cole and Sharp 1997). At the institutional level, all institutions engaged in some form of assessment (often linked to self-studies for accreditation purposes); however, of the 1,393 public and private institutions recently surveyed, 82 percent listed "Excellence in Undergraduate Education" as part of their mission statement, but 38 percent did not conduct studies to link student experiences to student outcomes (Peterson, Augustine, Einarson and Vaughan 1999a, 1999b, 1999c).

Indeed, the literature shows that much has been (and can be) learned from both the state-level and institution-level assessment efforts. But if we take as our starting point that one of the central purposes of higher education is student learning, the obvious question arises: Are we indeed measuring what we *should* be measuring? Or, to what extent do we measure what is easier to measure? Are we looking merely where the light is better?

Four Approaches to Data Collection

The methodological approaches traditionally used to

[1] *This article uses material from a preliminary literature review completed by RAND Associate Researcher Catherine Augustine.*

assess higher education quality can be organized into four basic families or groupings: (1) actuarial data; (2) ratings of institutional quality; (3) student surveys; and (4) direct measures of student learning. Each will be discussed separately.

Actuarial Data

What are often seen as the most "objective" measures of higher education quality are the analyses based on "actuarial" data. These data include graduation rates, racial/ethnic composition of the student body, level of endowment, student/faculty ratio, highest degree earned by faculty members, breadth and depth of academic course offerings, selectivity ratio, admissions test scores of entering students, and levels of external research funding. Researchers argue that the primary advantages are that these data are relatively straightforward to collect, and the resulting statistics can be easily compared across institutions and over time. Although not intrinsic to the data themselves, the way in which the analyses are conducted typically relies upon a central assumption: A better quality educational institution (or a better quality educational experience) is necessarily associated with more and better resources—in this case, better funding, better faculty (which is defined as a higher percentage of any given cadre holding Ph.D.s), and better students (which is operationalized as resulting from higher admissions selectivity) (Astin 1968, 1977, 1991, 1993).

Actuarial data have been used by some states to measure institutional effectiveness (NCHEMS 1994). For example, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board gathers data in order to track students. As part of the ongoing review of two-year colleges, the coordinating board has developed the Academic Performance Indicator System (Gates et al. 2001). This information system contains longitudinal data on courses and students (demographic information, Social Security numbers, course enrollment, and graduation and Texas employment status), which allows students to be tracked across colleges and into the workforce by linking Social Security numbers to Texas workforce commission data.

Other examples of actuarial approaches include the National Center for Education Statistics and the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, which include data on student enrollment, faculty ranks, and institutional expenditures. These national databases are huge in scope, and some of the data come from secondary sources—such as census counts and transcripts (NCHEMS 1994). However, recent reviews of national data systems concluded that current databases yield little information about an institution's educational effectiveness in terms of the student outcomes it produces (Dey et al. 1997; NPEC 2000). In addition, a 1999 study found that only 10 percent of the approximately 1,300 institutions responding to a national survey reported having an institutional database that linked student information with faculty, curricular, and

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financial databases (Peterson et al. 1999).

The literature indicates, then, that in all of these cases, although actuarial data have prima facie validity in objectively assessing higher education quality, it is not clear if the analyses can even tacitly measure student learning.

Ratings of Institutional Quality

A second approach is based on analyses of ratings and rankings of institutional quality. This has typically taken the form of surveying either or both college faculty and administrators and asking these "experts" to rate the quality of different institutions and their programs on a series of dimensions. The implicit logic here is that informed "experts" can best assess institutional quality.

Perhaps the best-known (and most notorious) use of such analyses is the annual college rankings published by *U.S. News & World Report*, which have become the best-selling college guide in the United States. The rankings are based in part on actuarial data (such as selectivity, faculty resources, and financial resources), but are also based on surveys of faculty and administrators on their perceptions and opinions about academic quality and reputation. Although the general approach of using of multiple indicators and measures is consistent with the assessment literature (e.g., see Riggs and Worthley 1992; Astin 1991; Ewell 1984, 1988b; Gentemann et al. 1994; Halpern 1987; Jacobi et al. 1987; Ratcliff, Jones et al. 1997; Terenzini 1989; Vandament 1987), the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings have come under fire for a number of reasons.

Of primary concern have been the methods used to calculate the rankings. A 1977 report by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC)—commissioned by *U.S. News & World Report*—presented a systematic review of the methods used in the rankings. The NORC report notes that "the principal weaknesses of the current approach is that the weights used to combine the various measures into an overall rating lack any defensible empirical or theoretical basis. Recent studies of the measure by McGuire (1995) and Machung (1995) indicate that the ratings are sensitive to relatively small changes in the weighting scheme." The *U.S. News* weighting scheme is difficult to defend, and the NORC study concludes that, "since the method of combining the measures is critical to the eventual ratings, the weights are the most vulnerable part of the methodology." NORC also notes that a simple correlation matrix of the variables is not presented, which would indicate whether or not the measures are collinear and are, in essence, measuring the same thing. They also note that some variables may lack face validity. Alumni giving is claimed to serve as a proxy for satisfaction, when it can arguably be instead a function of effectiveness of the development office.

The NORC study also notes that reputational ratings play a huge role in rankings (college presidents are asked to rank other institutions), but it is questionable whether or not the respondents are able to make judgments about such a wide range of insti-

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tutions. As noted in the study, "The large number of institutions within each classification means that each rater is asked to rate about 2000 institutions."

Moreover, the underlying assumptions about reputation may also be of concern. The NORC study notes, "The principle [sic] limitations are its inherently subjective nature and the fact that academic excellence, at least as traditionally defined, is not the goal of all, or perhaps even the majority, of colleges or students. In addition, it is generally assumed that reputations change more slowly than real change in institutions, thus overvaluing institutions that, in fact, may be declining and undervaluing institutions that are improving."

In addition, the *U.S. News* approach does not measure what many claim to be the most important measure of programmatic and institutional effectiveness: directly measured student abilities (Winter, McClelland and Stewart 1981; Graham and Thompson 2001). The NORC study concludes that, in addition to a need to measure student experiences, "the other area that is absent from the current set of measures relates to the academic demands of the curriculum…. There is not a good taxonomy of curricula, and the literature in this area is not particularly helpful." It should be noted that, in 1996, *U.S. News* added a measure of "value added," which they defined as the difference between actual and expected graduation rates. Such an operationalization is highly problematic. A high or low graduation rate may have drastically different meanings in different contexts, and the measure has no direct link to what students have actually learned at the institution.

In an article in the *Washington Monthly*, editor Nicolas Thomson writes, "A single magazine's idiosyncratic ranking system may seem peripheral to the larger issues of higher education, but this particular one matters a lot ... the rankings do have a kind of Heisenberg effect, changing the very things they measure and, in certain ways, changing the entire shape of higher education. The problem isn't that the rankings put schools in the wrong order ... a better ranking system ... would push [a school] to become an even better school…. Unfortunately, the *U.S. News* rankings instead push schools to improve in tangential ways and fuel the increasingly prominent view that colleges are merely places in which to earn credentials." Why do the rankings have such widespread acceptance? Thompson writes, "The rankings are opaque enough that no one outside the magazine can figure out exactly how they work, yet clear enough to imply legitimacy."

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

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Indeed, it is questionable whether or not the rankings have changed educational practices at the institutional level. In a survey of nearly 1,400 colleges and universities, Peterson and Augustine (2000) attempted to determine if assessment was used as an end itself or if it was used to improve education. They concluded that "student assessment has only a marginal influence on academic decision making" and that faculty members involved in governance were supportive of assessment at only a quarter of these institutions. The greatest impact, then, seems to be how the rankings shift student application patterns. A study by Monk and Ehrenberg (1999) for the National Bureau of Economic Research found that moving up one place in an institution's ranking results in an increase in admittance rate of 0.4 percent.

As a result, many have rejected the meaningfulness of the rankings and their usefulness in shaping educational and curricular policy to improve student learning. According to Donald Kennedy, president of then-first-ranked Stanford, "It's a beauty contest, not a serious analysis of quality." In 1998, *The New York Times* reported that law schools mailed pamphlets titled "Law School Rankings May Be Hazardous to Your Health" to 93,000 law school applicants.

It is undeniable that institutional rankings have a widespread impact on the college-going behavior of student applicants, on institutional programmatic changes (in an attempt to move up in the rankings), and in reinforcing cultural assumptions about what constitutes a quality undergraduate experience. Again, however, the literature demonstrates that there is no clear link between such rankings and actual student learning.

Student Surveys

A third approach used to measure institutional quality is based on self-reported student information. In contrast to the proxy data used in the actuarial approach and ranking data based on surveying faculty and administrators, these data are collected by asking students directly about their collegiate experiences, satisfaction with their coursework and school, self-assessments of improvement in their academic abilities, and educational and employment plans.

The two most common methods for gathering such data are through surveys (Astin 1991; Ewell 1987c; Gill 1993; Johnson et al. 1993; Lenning 1988; Muffo and Bunda 1993) and interviews of individuals or groups (Johnson et al. 1993; Lenning 1988; Smith et al. 1993), which in some cases may supplement student interviews with those of faculty and other stakeholders. Ostensibly, the methodological advantage of these surveys is that data can economically be collected on a large-scale basis. Individual institutions collect such data to gather feedback about their institution (NCHEMS 1994), and national researchers collect data from a number of institutions in order to generate research on the effects of higher education in general and on the between-college impacts. Such self-reported information has also been used in an

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attempt to assess institutional effectiveness (Astin 1993; Pace 1990; Terenzini and Wright 1987).

For example, the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, which is based on the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, gathers information about education and work experiences after student completion of the bachelor's degree. The study, which surveys a nationally representative sample of institutions, students, and parents, includes cross-sectional data gathered one year after bachelor's degree completion. Also included are longitudinal data regarding entry into and progress through graduate level education and the workforce. The goal is to follow each cohort over a twelve-year period.

The National Survey of Student Engagement is an annual student survey designed to aid colleges and universities in improving student learning (Kuh 2001). The survey assesses the extent to which students from approximately 470 four-year colleges and universities participate in activities associated with learning and development. Kuh notes that a goal of the project is to change the way people think and talk about higher education quality.

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey, administered by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, is touted as the most comprehensive, longest, and largest higher education student survey. Annual data collection began in 1966, and the fall 2000 administration of the Freshman Survey included 717 participating institutions nationwide and over 404,000 students (which is almost a quarter of the nearly 1.64 million first-time, full-time first year students). The Follow-Up Survey is typically given to a sub-sample of students eight years after entering college. The surveys utilize self-reports on activities and goals as well as self-ratings. The assumption underlying self-reported data is that respondents can describe their feelings (such as satisfaction), their behaviors (such as time-on-task), and their opinions. In addition, it is assumed that students can describe their current abilities as well as their learning gains or improvements over time. Faculty members and administrators have also been surveyed about their feelings, behaviors, and opinions (Peterson 1987; Gamson and Poulsen 1989). Astin and his colleagues (1991) developed a survey of faculty (UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute Faculty Survey) that includes items on teaching techniques and assessment methods. These self-reports have been used

> Although it may seem to be the most obvious way to assess the quality of undergraduate education, the use of direct measures of student learning is uncommon.

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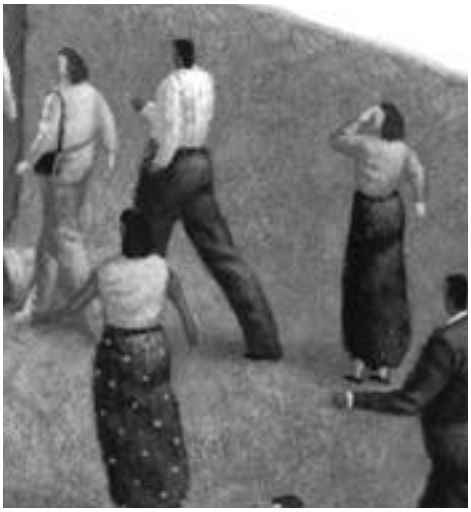
in student assessment efforts (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991).

A key issue in student surveys, as in all surveys, is that of the reliability of the self-reported data. Because many of the outcomes of interest cannot be empirically measured (e.g., attitudes and values), the use of student self-reports is commonplace in higher education research. Researchers have studied the credibility of these self-reports (Berdie 1971; Pohlman and Beggs 1974; Baird 1976; Turner and Martin 1984; Pace 1985; Pike 1995; and Ouiment, et al. 2001) and, as noted by Kuh (2001), there are two problems that impact the accuracy of self-reports. First, some respondents are *unable* to supply accurate information; and second, some respondents are *unwilling* to supply accurate information (Wentland and Smith, 1993; Aaker, Kumar and Day 1998). Either condition clearly affects the efficacy of the data and the subsequent analyses. However, Pike (1999) also studied the "halo effect," in which student respondents may inflate reporting of their behavior, performance, or what they perceive they have gained from their college experience towards the more socially acceptable. He argues that, because the effect is consistent across students and institutions, comparisons are not compromised. (This, however, is still a concern when it comes to having an "accurate" picture of student growth.)



Again, one challenge in student surveys is ascertaining whether or not what students report corresponds to what they actually experienced. Ouiment et al. (2001) considered student responses to the College Student Report. They used focus groups and survey instruments together and concluded that, although there was some variation in respondents' interpretation of some items on the survey, there was a general consensus for a "vast majority of items." They also concluded that "the meaning of the response categories were item specific; that is, the meaning of 'very often' to one question did not necessarily represent the same frequency as another item."

However, other research suggests that student surveys may nonetheless be a viable approach. Some researchers found that self-reports are highly correlated with quantifiable measures of student progress (Anaya 1992; Anaya 1999; Dumont and Troelstrup 1980; Ewell and Jones 1993). Furthermore, Astin's (1993) studies on the relationship between self-reported data and student achievement indicate that the patterns of self-reported data vary by major and student experiences in ways that mirror the patterns found by directly assessing cognitive outcomes.

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Kuh (2001) concludes, based on his review of the research (Bradburn and Sudman 1988; Brandt 1958; Converse and Presser 1989; DeNisi and Shaw 1977; Hansford and Hattie 1982; Laing, Swayer and Noble 1989; Lowman and Williams 1987; Pace 1985; Pike 1995), that self-reports are valid under five conditions: "(1) when the information requested is known to the respondents; (2) the questions are phrased clearly and unambiguously; (3) the questions refer to recent activities; (4) the respondents think the questions merit a serious and thoughtful response; and (5) answering the questions does not threaten, embarrass, or violate the privacy of the respondents or encourage the respondent to respond in socially desirable ways."

Setting aside the difficulties in data collection, another concern has been raised about analysis of student survey data. Often, as in analyses of the CIRP data, researchers rely on a central conceptual paradigm that one can assess the impact of college using essentially the pre- and post-test model. Although having two time points clearly has advantages over a solely retrospective survey design, it is nonetheless problematic to determine the actual impact of any process variables. Moreover, the traditional positivistic approach often employed in such analyses assumes that individual aspects of the college experience can be studied atomistically; it can be seen as denying the holistic nature of the college experience.

Thus, although student surveys can and have been used in an attempt to link educational quality with student learning, their use is problematic specifically in assessing student learning because of the indirect measure of learning given the reliance on student self-assessment.

Direct Assessments of Student Learning

A fourth approach to assess institutional quality is to measure student learning directly. Direct assessments of student learning are perhaps the least systematically used of the four approaches discussed here. This may involve analyzing course grades; administering standardized tests, performance tasks, and special multiple-choice or open-ended tests to assess general academic skills or subject matter knowledge; and obtaining data from other measures, such as evaluations of student projects, portfolios of student work, etc.

Some researchers have used direct measures of student learning as a means of collecting data on programmatic and institutional effectiveness (Winter, McClelland and Stewart 1981). However, most of these efforts are conducted by an institution's faculty and staff on their own students. As a result, comparisons between institutions are less common (exceptions include Bohr et al. 1994; Pascarella et al. 1994). Still, some institutions have collaborated in directly measuring student learning outcomes in order to compare results among themselves (Obler et al. 1993). In addition, some states have required that all institutions use the same standardized measures in directly assessing students' knowledge, skills, and

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abilities (Cole et al. 1997; NCHEMS 1996; Steele and Lutz 1995). These methods have been used to collect data on individual students and on groups of students at both the program and institutional levels (Ratcliff, Jones, Guthrie and Oehler 1991).

In addition to the more standard and commonly used paper and pencil examinations, direct assessments of students can also be done through evaluating on-demand student performances, such as presentations, debates, dances, and musical recitals (Palomba and Banta 1999). These performances can be evaluated at the end of a student's career in order to assess programmatic effectiveness. Researchers tend to agree on the validity of this approach in terms of measuring students' abilities, but the use of one performance may not be reliable. For example, a student may write an excellent term paper on one topic, but not on another, due to varying levels of motivation or interest in the topic. Such a lack of consistency may not be important, however, if the goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of the program rather than of the student (Johnson et al. 1993; Lenning 1988). The evaluation process tends to be low-cost to the institution, although students may expend a great deal of resources in completing the long-term projects. While students may enter their projects in state or national competitions, there is little evidence that these projects are compared in order to make judgments about program effectiveness across institutions. Such comparisons could be difficult due to variations in curriculums between institutions.

While the importance and value of student learning are generally accepted, few agree on how best to assess it.

In order to overcome the problem of reliability with some of these direct measures, scholars have advocated the use of portfolios (Banta et al. 1996; Black 1993; Forrest 1990; Hutchings 1989; Suen and Parkes 1996). Portfolios require students to assemble cumulative samples of their work products and often include a self-evaluative component (Black 1993; Fong 1988; Johnson et al. 1993; Waluconis 1993). While evaluating multiple student products overcomes problems of reliability, validity concerns remain. It is difficult to ensure that the work presented in a portfolio represents only the work of the student. If results of group work are allowed in the portfolio, it is again difficult to ascribe the work to the student. Moreover, Koretz et al. (1994) argue that portfolio assessments are unreliable.

Still, some have argued that direct assessment can be used as a means of academic accountability and as a tool for curriculum reform and institutional evaluation (Mingle 1986). For example, the Texas

National Center for Postsecondary Improvement.

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Academic Skills Program is administered to all first-time freshmen and to all rising juniors as a means to ensure that all students attending public institutions of higher education have the basic skills for college-level work.

Although it may seem to be the most obvious way to assess the quality of undergraduate education, the use of direct measures of student learning is uncommon. The literature suggests several reasons for this. These approaches can be cost-prohibitive to implement, for example. And there are huge obstacles to making institutional comparisons. The most insurmountable of these is the need for institutions to agree on what should be measured.

Is There Madness to the Methods?

When it comes to understanding what student have actually learned in college (and linking learning to assessments of institutional quality), the literature suggests that we are faced with a conundrum. While the importance and value of student learning are generally accepted, few agree on how best to assess it. The literature further suggests that this can be better understood by considering the available methods.

Actuarial data is commonly used because of the ease of collection and the patina of scientific objectivity. But this approach equates quality with discrete, available, and, perhaps most significantly, easily *measurable* indicators of quality, such as counts of people and resources. Institutional rankings rely on a formula that combines actuarial data and ratings by informed experts. These rankings are limited (and questionable) because they provide only an indirect measure of quality and conflate quality and reputation. Student surveys have attempted to measure quality using student perceptions of their learning. Research has shown, however, that such measures may be problematic because they depend upon student self-evaluation. Still, this research has been an important step in connecting student learning with educational quality. And finally, while direct measures of student learning may arguably have the greatest face validity with regard to assessing undergraduate education, the literature indicates that there are numerous implementation issues.

This last point is perhaps the most significant in a profoundly important yet subtle way. Whereas the discussions in the literature about the first three methods have debated whether or not these approaches *can* measure student learning (and question whether or not the proxies used are valid or appropriate), discussions about the direct measures of student learning debate *how* student learning should best be done. Granted, these debates are perhaps just as fierce: At what point should students be assessed? What should be included in the assessment? What is the best means to collect the information? And how can it be ensured that these data are reliable? The central point, however, is that few would deny that direct measures of learning are an appropriate means to assess the quality of undergraduate education. In other words, if we are interested in understanding what students have learned, we should measure what students have learned. The key is to focus on developing better methods to directly assess student learning. Thus, to return to the anecdote that opened this discussion, we know where we should be looking. We will find the keys by building a better streetlight.

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In the near future, a few colleges will have become significantly better -- by present expectations, astonishingly better. Their faculty will collectively set academic and professional standards for students that are maintained across-the-curriculum. Their academic programs will know precisely the extent to which their students are demonstrating expected learning outcomes. Student advisors will precisely compare a student's actual achievements to-date to the expected achievements of that student's chosen program. Colleges will have a continuous picture of each student's readiness for the next learning opportunity. Institutional researchers will have a new wealth of data for investigating student learning. Students will receive a new college record showing what he or she has demonstrated they know and can do. As students realize that this record reflects their achievements to prospective employers, they begin to care about what it shows. In short, these colleges will distinguish themselves by the demonstrated quality of their academic outcomes and by the ability, as an organization, to attend to the personal, professional, and intellectual development of their students.

It may be difficult to believe that this many new organizational capabilities can appear, given the fact that higher education has changed so little in the last century. However this can and will happen, for the following reasons.

1. **There can be an unexpectedly strong positive ratio of effort to results.** A college can evidence all of these accomplishments by doing well one single sustained activity -- standards-based evaluation of student achievement. This is a straightforward academic process: faculty work together to define expected student achievements and related standards of evaluation; subsequently individual instructors evaluate and document individual student work using these definitions and standards. (Likewise, those in student affairs work together to define non-academic achievements and related standards of evaluation; subsequently, in the course of their oversight of co-curricular activities, they evaluate and document individual student achievement using these definitions and standards.) More simply: within college-determined authorizations, everyone who chooses to participate evaluates and documents the student achievements that he or she has personally observed. Applying this approach in any chosen part of the college yields focused information on actual student achievement for that part. As this approach comes to be applied more widely throughout the college, the other results identified above grow out of each other in approximately the order in which they are described.

2. This academic approach to outcomes is being re-invigorated by direct technological support. Up to now, colleges have been prevented from developing these powerful capabilities because they have lacked the deeper, more fundamental capability from which all of these other capabilities derive, namely, the organizational capability of documenting student achievement per student and per achievement. This is a complex set of data, and organizational procedures put into place before digital information systems could not deal with it well. Therefore, to the present, standards-based evaluation has been applied piecemeal. Each department has been left to do this for itself, or even worse, each professor/instructor has been left to do this for him- or herself. It has been manual, laborious, and has yielded none of the results identified above. Given these

constraints, the broad use of standards-based evaluation throughout a college has been almost inconceivable and certainly impractical.

All of this has now changed with the introduction of new software that directly underwrites the process of standards-based evaluation, easily captures data per student and per achievement, generates new information on student achievement and appropriately distributes it to those who should know. For those teaching credit courses, the revised process of scoring students looks like improved grading. For those who are responsible for noncredit instruction, service learning, work-study, and the full array of extra-curricular activities, there is now an equally robust way to attend to student achievements in those settings as well. The software captures data linking a specific student to a specific achievement to a specific setting at a specific date and time. Out of this granular data, a college can define on-request reports that aggregate data by student, by achievement area, by setting, by date, or by any combination of these -- a wealth of information on actual student achievement that has never been so rich or so available. It is the careful re-introduction of this information back into the educational process itself that yields the new capabilities.

3. **The introduction of this approach is feasible, because a college can start small and grow incrementally, on whatever timetable is comfortable.** Faculty or staff who are most interested can begin. The emphasis can be on activities that are already occurring: work that students are already completing in courses (and other college settings), critical judgments that faculty are already making (presently, in order to calculate a course grade), and decisions about educational goals for students that faculty committees are already making. Begin with one or more "core competencies" within programs, if you wish, or begin with a single college-wide expected student achievement. Begin with assignments or begin with a program's overall exit goals and work backward, if necessary. Begin with accreditation expectations or mission-driven goals that are distinctive to the college. Begin with knowledge or with skills or with perspectives.

Wherever a college begins, as faculty come to see how easily this is done, they will choose to do it more fully. As other faculty come to see that their own teaching is made easier by new information about the readiness of students who are coming into their courses, they will choose to join, at least if they contrast this with other more labor-intensive and less rewarding assessment activities. There is a network effect here; the more information (and the better information) on student achievement that is fed back into the educational process, academic term by term, the greater is the value for everyone, both faculty and students.

4. **This approach will be easier, faster, and deliver far more results than other existing approaches to outcomes assessment.** Indeed, this is an academic alternative to "assessment" if, by that term, is meant all of the extra work that colleges have added to have data on student learning. It does ask faculty and staff of a college to decide what to attend to -- what should we expect of our students? by what standards should they be evaluated? -- and allows college committtees to apply those expectations and standards wherever in the curriculum it is most appropriate. The system-supported process then

makes actual student achievement in those chosen areas visible, upon request. By doing this, this approach assists a faculty in making decisions, applying them, reflecting on the judgments made in that application, and revisiting decisions. Once reflected on, it will become apparent that this will make academic settings better. For organizations whose purpose is the intentional learning of its students, this is a fundamental capability. Once we begin using it, we will wonder how we ever functioned without it.

Of course, there are also reasons why, in any given college, this will not happen. Most colleges will be too busy or pre-occupied to notice the arrival of this opportunity. Many will perceive this narrowly as yet another software system for organizing their current assessment data and thus entirely misunderstand the opportunity. If a college does recognize the opportunity, it may still fail to do this well because it believes that if anyone does this, everyone must do it, carrying over a spirit of compliance that was needed in previous assessment initiatives in which faculty had no good reasons of their own to participate. It may also fail because faculty assume that all expectations and standards must be perfectly defined before beginning to apply any of them. On the other hand, it may fail because faculty simply choose not to work together to define consistent and coherent expectations and standards. (Certainly a century or more of academic practice without the ability of colleges, *as organizations*, of attending to student achievement has created a culture in which collaboration among faculty, and between academic and student affairs, is often missing.) Given all of these reasons, perhaps 9 out of 10 colleges will not choose this opportunity...

...but some will, and that, after all, is what I stated in my thesis: in the near future, a few colleges will have become significantly better. They will choose this because they will have reasons of their own to distinguish themselves from other colleges. These few will presently have the right combination of characteristics: a stable administration, no organizational crises to distract their attention or to consume their collective energy, the ability as an organization to take the long view, and above all, a small group of faculty with a willingness to learn by doing, starting small and growing the areas of the college curriculum and co-curriculum that use standards-based evaluation of student achievement. These colleges will become astonishingly better.

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Moving From Paperwork to Pedagogy

Channeling Intellectual Curiosity into a Commitment to Assessment

By Peggy Maki

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Viewed as externally mandated, assessment of student learning typically ebbs and flows within an institution in relation to the timing of accreditation visits. Originating from an external force, namely accreditation, assessment is characterized as "burdensome," "a chore," or "an add-on" to faculty responsibilities, arousing resistance to compliance and resulting, oftentimes, in a short-lived commitment.

What if the origin of the commitment to assessing student learning were to come from within the institution? What if the origin of that commitment were to come from faculty members themselves, based on their intellectual curiosity about how students learn in disciplines, how students integrate their liberal learning into their majors, or how web-based technology, for example, develops or transforms thinking?

Consider why faculty members are attracted to their disciplines: A fascination with the kinds of problems or issues within their fields. An attraction to pursue new avenues of exploration. An interest in contributing new knowledge and perspective or in testing assumptions, claims, and hypotheses. A drive to discover or uncover new information that may well challenge theories or practice.

Consider why faculty members are drawn to teaching: A desire to develop critical thinkers and effective problem-solvers who ask questions, examine evidence, identify fallacies in underlying assumptions, integrate multiple perspectives, seek additional information, and challenge, or at least question existing practice or the status quo.

Finally, consider characteristic faculty member behavior during meetings: We look at issues from multiple perspectives, question colleagues' underlying assumptions, seek clarity, or open up new lines of reasoning. Recall the number of times this behavior has manifested itself moments before a scheduled faculty meeting vote, as a faculty member asserts: "I think it would be perfunctory for us to vote on the proposal until we have had additional time to consider it in depth." In departmental, faculty, and taskforce meetings, raising questions, seeking additional information, and challenging assumptions typify faculty behavior.

Making the Connection

The thread that connects faculty members' commitment to their work inside and outside of the classroom is intellectual curiosity — the characteristic ability to question, challenge, look at an issue from multiple perspectives, seek more information before rushing to judgment, raise questions, deliberate, and craft well-reasoned arguments. What faculty members exhibit themselves they also desire to instill in their students: They want to help create individuals who will question, challenge, view an issue from multiple perspectives, and, yes, wonder.

Channeling faculty intellectual curiosity into exploring relationships between pedagogy and student learning extends curiosity into the focus of their teaching — into the ways in which

students integrate, draw upon, and use the knowledge, abilities, habits of mind, and ways of knowing and problem solving that characterize those who work in a discipline. Rather than disconnected from content and teaching, assessment becomes the means of ascertaining what and how well students achieve what faculty members intend them to achieve.

Assessment as Scholarship

Extending intellectual curiosity into inquiry about student learning requires that institutions value and recognize this endeavor as a part of the scholarship of teaching and learning that contributes research on practice to higher education. In *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice* (National Academy Press, 1999, available free online at www.nap.edu/catalog/9457.html), the authors call for extending "the frontier of learning research by expanding the study of classroom practice."

2002 AAHE Assessment Conference Next Month

Interested in more on assessment? AAHE's 2002 Assessment Conference will be held in Boston June 20–23, with preconference workshops June 19–20. "Assessment: A Shared Commitment" is the conference theme.

The conference will include plenary sessions by Robert Coles, professor of psychiatry and medical humanities and the James Agee professor of social ethics at Harvard University, Peter T. Ewell, vice president at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, a panel of administrators and faculty from North Carolina State University, including James Anderson, vice provost for undergraduate affairs, and Peggy Maki, AAHE's director of assessment. The conference will also feature more than 200 interactive presentation, poster and roundtable sessions, 49 preconference workshops and other associated meetings and events.

Register by May 24 and save $25. Register by June 3 to avoid late fees. For more information, to download the conference preview, or to register online, see www.aahe.org/assessment/2002.

And in *Knowing What Students Know: The Science and Design of Educational Assessment* (National Academy Press, 2001, available free online at www.nap.edu/catalog/10019.html), the National Research Council challenges education to rethink current approaches to assessment: "Advances in the study of thinking and learning (cognitive science) and in the field of measurement have stimulated people to think in new ways about how students learn and what they know, what is therefore worth assessing, and how to obtain useful information about student competencies."

From Curiosity to Inquiry

Here are some questions that might extend faculty intellectual curiosity into inquiry about student learning:

- What kinds of understanding, abilities, dispositions, habits of mind, and ways of thinking, knowing, and problem solving do faculty members believe students should achieve by the time they graduate? How do faculty members contribute to these expectations within courses and programs? How do faculty members build on one another's work to ensure that students have ample opportunity to develop institutional and programmatic learning outcomes?

- What evidence would document students' progress towards those expectations, and how could that evidence be captured so that faculty members could learn about patterns of student achievement to inform pedagogy and curriculum? Similarly, what evidence would document students' level of achievement at the end of their studies?

- How do educational experiences outside the classroom complement and contribute to expected learning outcomes? How do students make connections between what they learn in the classroom and what they learn or experience outside of the classroom? What do the curricula and other educational experiences "add up to"?

- Given the diversity of students in higher education, including their experiences and learning histories, which students benefit from which teaching strategies, educational experiences, or educational processes believed to be responsible for contributing to

expected student learning and development? What pedagogies or educational experiences develop the knowledge, understanding, abilities, habits of mind, and ways of knowing and problem solving that define a biologist, an accountant, or a sociologist, for example? When does a student studying to become a biologist begin to think and act like a biologist? How are curricula and pedagogy intentionally designed to develop knowledge, abilities, habits of mind, and ways of knowing? What evidence is there that these designs result in desired student learning and development?

- What assumptions about teaching and learning underlie how faculty members teach in a discipline? What assumptions about assessment methods underlie when and how faculty members assess their students' learning? How are methods of assessment aligned with content, pedagogy, and instructional design to deepen students' learning and to foster transference of knowledge and abilities to new situations?

Developing Institutional Commitment

Institutional leaders need to frame a commitment to assessment as a professionally responsible endeavor, integral to teaching, that contributes to higher education's learning about student learning. As Judith K. Litterst and Paula Tompkins conclude in the article "Assessment as a Scholarship of Teaching" (*Journal of the Association for Communication Administration*, January 2001), "Far from being 'mere' service, assessment — a creative and systematic study of situated teaching practices, which utilizes particular forms of research and knowledge — belongs in the scholarship of teaching."

Creating an institutional environment that fosters inquiry into student learning means redesigning or creating new structures and processes to allow significant time for faculty and other educational professionals to conduct research on student learning, interpret results of assessment, and reflect on these interpretations to advance innovations in teaching and curricular design.

Institutions that claim assessment as their own will likely transform themselves to sustain a focus on student learning. The faculty will be supported by institutional structures, processes, and communication channels that symbolize the integration of assessment of student learning into the rhythms of institutional life. Time and space for discourse that focuses on the results of assessment — that builds in periods of self-reflection about students' achievement of programmatic and institutional outcomes, as well as about innovations in pedagogy and curriculum — will mark institutional commitment to student learning.

These institutions will also create neutral zones to receive good news as well as not-so-good news about student learning to foster open inquiry about assessment results, institutional and programmatic self-reflection about those results, and development of innovations in teaching, curricular, and instructional design. These institutions will articulate the value of engaging in assessment as an avenue of research that advances pedagogy and broadens and deepens and challenges what we know about what and how students learn. These institutions will turn to faculty as the generators of significant questions and lines of inquiry about student learning, about the design of methods to assess learning over time, and about interpreting and using assessment results to inform pedagogy and curricular design.

Developing an institutional commitment to assessing student learning from the inside out requires that our colleges and universities establish principles of inquiry that emerge from and are sustained by faculty intellectual curiosity.

Changing Institutional Priorities Workshop Series

The continuing workshop series "Changing Institutional Priorities: Developing a Shared Understanding of the Value of Assessing Student Learning" provides support and assistance to institutions committed to strengthening their assessment efforts through promoting a culture that embraces change and the applied scholarship of teaching and learning. AAHE and the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges (HLC) sponsor the series.

Teams develop individual plans, processes, and strategies to transition their institutions' cultures from having a sporadic institutional commitment to student outcomes assessment to having a shared understanding of the value of assessing student learning.

Applications are being accepted for the November 6–8 workshop in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and planning is underway for several more regional workshops in 2003 at the invitation of other accrediting agencies across the United States. For more information on these assessment workshops, see www.aahe.org/hlc or contact Kathleen Weil (202/293-6440 x770) assessment program manager, kweil@aahe.org, or Peggy Maki (202/293-6440 x794) director of assessment, pmaki@aahe.org.

9 Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning

by

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1. **The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.** Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve. Educational values should drive not only *what* we choose to assess but also *how* we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what's easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about.

2. **Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.** Learning is a complex process. It entails not only what students know but what they can do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes, and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. Assessment should reflect these understandings by employing a diverse array of methods, including those that call for actual performance, using them over time so as to reveal change, growth, and increasing degrees of integration. Such an approach aims for a more complete and accurate picture of learning, and therefore firmer bases for improving our students' educational experience.

3. **Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.** Assessment is a goal-oriented process. It entails comparing educational performance with educational purposes and expectations -- those derived from the institution's mission, from faculty intentions in program and course design, and from knowledge of students' own goals. Where program purposes lack specificity or agreement, assessment as a process pushes a campus toward clarity about where to aim and what standards to apply; assessment also prompts attention to where and how program goals will be taught and learned. Clear, shared, implementable goals are the cornerstone for assessment that is focused and useful.

4. **Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.** Information about outcomes is of high importance; where students "end up" matters greatly. But to improve outcomes, we need to know about student experience along the way -- about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment

can help us understand which students learn best under what conditions; with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve the whole of their learning.

5. **Assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic.** Assessment is a process whose power is cumulative. Though isolated, "one-shot" assessment can be better than none, improvement is best fostered when assessment entails a linked series of activities undertaken over time. This may mean tracking the process of individual students, or of cohorts of students; it may mean collecting the same examples of student performance or using the same instrument semester after semester. The point is to monitor progress toward intended goals in a spirit of continuous improvement. Along the way, the assessment process itself should be evaluated and refined in light of emerging insights.

6. **Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.** Student learning is a campus-wide responsibility, and assessment is a way of enacting that responsibility. Thus, while assessment efforts may start small, the aim over time is to involve people from across the educational community. Faculty play an especially important role, but assessment's questions can't be fully addressed without participation by student-affairs educators, librarians, administrators, and students. Assessment may also involve individuals from beyond the campus (alumni/ae, trustees, employers) whose experience can enrich the sense of appropriate aims and standards for learning. Thus understood, assessment is not a task for small groups of experts but a collaborative activity; its aim is wider, better-informed attention to student learning by all parties with a stake in its improvement.

7. **Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.** Assessment recognizes the value of information in the process of improvement. But to be useful, information must be connected to issues or questions that people really care about. This implies assessment approaches that produce evidence that relevant parties will find credible, suggestive, and applicable to decisions that need to be made. It means thinking in advance about how the information will be used, and by whom. The point of assessment is not to gather data and return "results"; it is a process that starts with the questions of decision-makers, that involves them in the gathering and interpreting of data, and that informs and helps guide continuous improvement.

8. **Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.** Assessment alone changes little. Its greatest contribution comes on campuses where the quality of teaching and learning is visibly valued and worked at. On such campuses, the push to improve educational performance is a visible and primary goal of leadership; improving the quality of undergraduate education is central to the institution's planning, budgeting, and personnel decisions. On such campuses, information about learning outcomes is seen as an integral part of decision making, and avidly sought.

9. **Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.** There is a compelling public stake in education. As educators, we have a responsibility to the publics that support or depend on us to provide information about the ways in which our students meet goals and expectations. But that responsibility goes beyond the reporting of such information; our deeper obligation -- to ourselves, our students, and society -- is to improve. Those to whom educators are accountable have a corresponding obligation to support such attempts at improvement.

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