

Special Report

Put to the Test: Making Sense of Educational Assessment

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Put to the Test: Making Sense of Educational Assessment

When it comes to assessment, there are enough perspectives, stakeholders, tools and methodologies to make your head spin. To be sure, despite the admirable goal of improving student learning by assessment, the trend toward greater accountability is often viewed as something that is imposed upon higher education institutions; infringing on an institution's autonomy and stifling faculty members' academic freedom without providing truly meaningful data to justify the additional workload it generates.

Meanwhile, others accept the fact that assessment is here to stay and strategies that, with careful planning, it's entirely possible to design exactly the type of assessment systems you need to get precisely the type of information required for an accurate picture of learning outcomes.

This *Academic Leader* special report delivers valuable insight and strategies to help you make sense of the sometimes complex means to achieve assessment's simple, but very worthwhile objectives. Topics include:

- Creating a sustainable, faculty-driven assessment initiative;
- Assessing class participation;
- Matching assessment methods to institutional goals;
- The role of student affairs in assessment;
- Assessing the millennial generation;
- Gaining faculty buy in; and
- Alternative approaches to assessment.

Whether you're a new faculty member looking to incorporate assessment into your classes, or an experienced member of a departmental or institutional assessment team, this special report will provide you with valuable tools and thought-provoking ideas from educators who have successfully implemented assessment programs at their institutions.

Rob Kelly
Editor
Academic Leader

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Creating a Sustainable, Faculty-Driven Assessment Initiative

By Rob Kelly

Meaningful program assessment requires faculty participation. The challenge of getting faculty involved and staying involved lies in convincing them that the benefits of assessment are worth any additional work it generates.

One way to start the discussion about assessment is to initially work with department chairs, preferably when they are not too busy. To get departments on board, Oberlin College conducts assessment workshops between terms. In its first assessment workshop in January 2005, department chairs met with assessment experts, who had them identify their goals and start to think about how they could best measure progress toward those goals in ways that would be directly observable.

The goal of that first workshop was for each chair to develop a single indirect measure of learning outcomes—something that asks students about their impressions of the learning experience. “You’re not asking for evidence; you’re asking someone to provide a subjective report on what they think they’ve learned,” says Patty deWinstanley, associate dean of Oberlin’s College of Arts and Sciences. These indirect, subjective measures often ask questions related to writing, public speaking, quantitative skills, and critical thinking, and can include student surveys conducted at various times throughout the program. Oberlin currently has in place a freshman survey, and deWinstanley expects all departments to have a senior survey in place soon.

In the next workshop during the summer, the department chairs worked on developing direct measures of learning outcomes. DeWinstanley has made an effort to make the departments feel validated in what they are already doing, not try to get them to go after something completely new and different. They can use grades, but they can’t simply use grades in and of themselves because grades do not allow for a direct measure of student learning.

“We work with them to determine a rubric for their department and to align those rubrics with their department-level goals so that they then have a piece of paper that can help someone, for example, take a look at an exam and see which questions are trying to tap into the department’s goals and then also to see what the faculty members had in mind as they went through and graded that question,” deWinstanley says. “In that way we could build on what the department is already doing. If they’re doing exams and they want to report back with their exams as an indicator of student learning, they can. If it’s a senior project or thesis, they could do that. If it’s a portfolio that students put together, they could do that. We’ve sat down with each department and said, ‘What do you already do? What are some of the products of your students’ learning that you’re already collecting?’ And then we formalized it.”

Formalization means keeping some of the papers, exams or other products of learning and using rubrics to

score them to show what the students learned. “The rubrics are a way that you can express the goal in a fashion that allows you to observe the actual behaviors. What are you actually looking for when you’re grading? Grades are OK, but they’re just not enough. You have to pair with those grades this kind of expression of what it means to have received an A, B, or C in a course,” deWinstanley says.

Faculty participation in assessment is needed because faculty have content expertise and need to choose assessment techniques to match content-specific learning objectives. “Each department has a different way of doing things. That’s the real strength of this. We allow this to be very much driven by the department. First of all they are very much the experts at looking at student learning in their fields. I wouldn’t even begin to know how to look at student learning in the history department because my training is in psychology,” deWinstanley says.

There is great variety in the direct measures of student learning at Oberlin, including standardized tests, alignment of certain sections of the GRE with department-level goals, student profiles, senior theses, and seminar papers.

In order for assessment to be useful, it must measure learning outcomes over time. This is why deWinstanley and her colleagues are working with departments to make these activities sustainable. “We want assessment to be a regular part of the department’s activities and reports that already exist, and we hopefully have gotten across that it’s not any one individual in the department that takes this on; rather, this is shared across the department,” deWinstanley says.

As departments discover the benefits of ongoing assessment, deWin-

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stanley invites faculty from those departments to speak to other departments about those advantages.

If that doesn't convince departments to get involved in assessment, deWinstanley reminds faculty that the assessment committee also conducts program reviews, which affects how resources get allocated. "A department that decides not to do any assessment at all will actually be in a very bad situation when program review time rolls around, because they

will not have the kind of information that other departments have to show why they need an addition to staff or why they need an increase in their budgets," deWinstanley says.

Ongoing workshops will give faculty the opportunity to talk about their progress and remind them that "we always have to be thinking about assessment at the department level," deWinstanley says.

"Busy faculty have to make decisions all the time about what they can and can't do, and unless they feel like assessment is valued by the

institution, I think that that's really a problem for sustainability. By providing feedback to the departments, we not only help them to further develop their instruments and learn more about the questions they may have, but we also show them that the institution values the work they've done," deWinstanley says. ●

Portfolio System Provides Integrated Assessment across the Institution

By Rob Kelly

In 2000, the college of education at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) introduced an electronic portfolio system for its students. The goal was to get students to understand their own learning by requiring them to create these portfolios that highlight their work. Building on that success, the university is in the process of implementing myMAPP, (Mapping Academic Performance through ePortfolios), an electronic portfolio system that integrates student, faculty, staff, department, college, and campus performance measures.

Although there are commercially available electronic portfolios, the university decided to design its own system. "We spent four months looking at commercially available products three years ago, but none of them met our needs. The products would have had to drive the process, and we were so adamantly against

that. We wanted the process to drive the product, so we developed our own," says Neal Topp, professor of education at UNO.

The myMAPP system is intended to serve as a self-reflection as well as a means of documenting and assessing performance. For faculty, this means that they will use these portfolios to collect academic/professional activities, practices and achievements related to teaching, research, and service to reflect on their performance as well as generate reports for promotion and tenure documentation and annual reviews.

Because the myMAPP system is database driven, information needs to be entered only once and can be used for different purposes. For example, a faculty member could include an example of student work (from the student's portfolio) to be used as a basis for the faculty member's personal reflection on his or her progress in an

aspect of teaching, as evidence of learning outcomes to support the faculty member's case for tenure, as evidence at the department level to indicate progress in teaching, and to illustrate progress toward college and/or university teaching goals.

"At the end you've got a tool that allows you to answer key questions and provide key metrics that our administration and other constituencies hold us accountable for," says Stephen Shorb, dean of the University Library. "You could very rapidly get information such as how many juried papers were delivered, how many grants were applied for, and how many grants were awarded. I love it because the library is different from a lot of departments. All of the staff and faculty teach and provide service to the campus and the community, and this is a way for us to record

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those things and roll them into the total institutional effort.”

One of the strengths of myMAPP is the ability to incorporate artifacts—documents, multimedia, projects, etc.—things that do not necessarily come across on paper into the system as a way of cataloging one’s work. “The system has really caught on with the faculty since they realized it’s a good personal archive system. If they have a document associated with an achievement that they want to put in their own portfolio, then they don’t have to worry about finding it a few years from now, because it’s saved in the system,” Shorb says.

Creating and adding to myMAPP is relatively easy. A series of pull-down menus walks users through the process of entering new items into the system, which takes approximately 10 minutes.

Some users choose to update their portfolios regularly, while others do it as needed (in anticipation of an annual review, for example). Most users try to get all their information entered into the system because in the long run having all the information can save time and effort—once the information is in the system it can be manipulated to suit a variety of needs such as grant or award applications. “It’s very easy once you have the information in the system to reorder it in any way you would like. It eases requests for information that come in from so many different sources,” says Sheri Rogers, associate vice chancellor for academic and student affairs at UNO.

Each user can create a personal view of the portfolio that others cannot access. For example, a faculty member can create personal goals and ways of measuring progress toward those goals and choose not to show this information to the person he or she reports to.

For students, adapting to the myMAPP system is quite easy. Many

have used similar portfolios in their K-12 education, and the technology is not all that different from Facebook and MySpace, Shorb says.

The learning curve is a bit steeper for faculty and staff. Until recently, just the early adopters have used the system; however, faculty are now required to have their information in the system as a way of providing evidence for accreditation and other external constituencies. “We’re a metropolitan university, so our community is very important to us. Being able to aggregate some of that data and presenting it to some of constituents—business, nonprofits, government, and other community entities—is very important to us,” Topp says.

Creating myMAPP has been a collaborative effort among a variety of people at UNO. Here are some elements of that process that have helped make it a success:

- **Bottom-up/top-down.** “This isn’t just an administrative issue,” Topp says. “I think it’s important to have faculty, staff, and students involved as well. We included faculty and staff from many colleges from the very beginning.”
- **Regular communication.** “We have been trying to communicate very carefully, which is hard to do across a campus this size, but we are really diligent at finding ways to do that. We think it’s important,” Topp says.
- **Training.** “Training worked really well for us on three key points: it was conceptual in nature—those who didn’t have a background in portfolio-based assessment got a lot of conceptual information; training focused on the individual department, so each department had a chance to work out among themselves how this was going to work within their own frameworks; third, we did the technical part. I think a lot of

people tend to jump to the how to manipulate the software part. The conceptual and department tailoring, I think, was equally important,” Shorb says.

- **Kickoff meeting.** A kickoff meeting in the library provided time for people to ask questions. “We divided people into small groups to implement this. [We] selected those specifically for departments that had a lot of permutations in their reporting structures and tried to capture up front all the difficulties we would have in implementing and also made sure that the ‘quirky’ people we had were distributed evenly across groups because we wanted those outlying points of view,” Shorb says.
 - **Feedback loop.** “While we were trying to model continuous improvement, we were continuously improving in a timely manner. If all the faculty were experiencing the same problem, we fixed it right away so it illustrated that we were listening to them,” Rogers says.
- Topp reports that feedback from department chairs has been predominantly positive. They say myMAPP:
- provides a database of accomplishments,
 - makes reporting much easier,
 - forces chairs to use technology,
 - levels the playing field—all use the same system,
 - helps faculty understand the use of data,
 - has seemed to make reflection more thoughtful. ●

Assessment for the Millennial Generation

By Christopher Hill

Fresh assessment techniques are needed to gauge student learning in online classes, Julie Giuliani says. Giuliani is the executive dean of the Virtual College at Florida Community College-Jacksonville(FCCJ), which serves some 39,000 distance students. Giuliani has what she refers to as “a passion for assessment.” She has been working with assessment for years, since she was a graduate student researching classroom assessment techniques.

“There’s been volumes of research that says there’s no significant difference in terms of grades between students on land and online,” Giuliani says. “But there isn’t any formative kind of mechanism to gauge online student learning progress. We really can’t validate how well our students are learning online.”

She believes that the new wave of so-called Millennial students calls for what she refers to as “new millennium assessment approaches.” What she means by this is the employment of assessment techniques that are specifically designed for online media, that are part of the structure of the course, and where students perform self assessment as they participate in course activities.

One of the first things Giuliani did when she came into her position was to familiarize herself with the quality of teaching and learning in the online courses. As she went through the process, it became evident to her that, while they were doing many things right, they still weren’t where they needed to be in terms of creating

a culture of systematic observation of student learning.

The students were already familiar with social networking sites like YouTube and MySpace, with podcasts and blogs, and with devices like cell phones and iPods. She came to believe that to engage these students in the process of assessment your best bet was to use the same kinds of media. FCCJ had been forward looking in the emphasis it gave to multimedia in its online program. The school had created a faculty resource center where any faculty member—full-time or adjunct—could produce their own multimedia tools.

Giuliani soon began to look for an opportunity to try out her ideas. The school’s interim associate dean happened to also be an online adjunct history professor. Giuliani proposed to her that they use her American history course as a laboratory to experiment with multimedia assessment tools.

Podcasts and self-assessment

The first thing that they tried was a podcast of a re-enactment of a moment in American history. They scripted a podcast in which a 14 year-old girl described her family’s journey West on the Oregon Trail in the 19th Century. They recruited a part-time actress from the resource center staff to read the script. They created a link to the podcast on the course’s website. The online students did the assigned reading about the Westward expansion, and then listened to the podcast’s first-person ac-

count of pioneer life. The instructor set up discussion board questions to assess how much the students had gotten from both the text reading and the podcast. But in addition, the instructor designed a discussion board rubric, so that not only were students discussing and giving their feedback regarding their learning experience, they were also encouraged to use the rubric to self-assess what they had learned as a result of the multimedia experience.

Using the discussion board for self-assessment

Giuliani and her partner found a way to use the discussion board for a more formative assessment purpose. The idea was that the students were to read the learning module, participate in the activities (such as the podcast) and then in the discussion board they were to do what is called a 3-2-1 evaluation. The student were directed to state three themes or concepts they learned during the unit, two questions that they still had, and one idea they wanted to share with others. This is beneficial on two levels, Giuliani explains. Not only do students interact with and get different perspectives and ideas from each other, it gives the instructor feedback on their pedagogical strategies. “They can say, ‘Wow, I need to change my approach for the next module ‘cause obviously they didn’t get it.’ Or ‘Wow, this really worked and I’m going to grow this idea when I design the next module.’”

Three-2-1 assessment can be applied to any content area. The first two stages of the process are objective, while the final item involves a more subjective response. That difference in the questions helps the instructor gauge how much the students have absorbed from the unit and make adjustments based on the student responses.

Giulani and her associates call such

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practices VOAT's — virtual online assessment techniques. Creative online instructors acquire a “toolbox” of different VOAT's. An instructor tries one out and sees how it works, tinkers with it a little, and tries again.

Part of the mission of introductory online courses, in Giuliani's view, is to teach students how to use technology effectively. Giuliani and her colleague developed a VOAT for that, too. The course had a section on the iron mining and smelting industry in the United States. In the first weeks of the class, the instructor asked the student, after reading this segment, to take their cell phones or digital camera and go out in the field an

take a picture of something that was made of iron—making sure the students themselves were in the shot. They would then send that picture via their cell phone to the course site. As an alternative, if you didn't know how to use your cell phone as a camera, or didn't have a digital camera, you could go online and find some pictures of iron products of that era, and then send them to the instructor.

A culture of multimedia assessment

“My hope is that through this model course that eventually we'll be able to do more training with our adjuncts using this as a model of best practices,” Giuliani says. Giuliani hopes that eventually full-time fac-

ulty, not just adjuncts, will become interested in the multimedia assessment practices that she is initiating and come to the faculty resource center to create their own tools.

“[The history course] was our pilot test,” Giuliani says. “One of the first goals given to me was to work with quality assurance. And so I saw assessment and using the tools of the new generation as two of the supporting drivers to achieve the goal of quality and integrity of courses.” ●

Rethinking Assessment

By Jerry Reed and Nancy Small Reed

In large, introductory courses, student learning is typically assessed with machine-scored multiple choice tests. This approach works well when the course is a new one or the instructor teaches part-time. Other busy faculty are persuaded to adopt the approach by the helpful test item bank that comes with the text. But students still see these tests as overly abstract, anxiety-provoking, and contrived. Based on our experience, we think that there are better ways to assess learning.

An approach that has worked well for both of us, in courses as diverse as introductory computer programming, organizational behavior, interpersonal skills and psychology, is that of using project-based exams. In this case, student learning is defined pri-

marily by improved performance on realistic tasks relevant to course content.

Programming students should be able to use course content such as algorithms, languages, and tools in further programming courses and actual work tasks. This means being able to understand the typical work demands for entry-level programmers as well as being better able to coordinate efforts with other programmers and project members. Business students need to function as leaders or effective team members on group tasks in class and at work. Although we cannot measure performance after the class directly, we can use project-based tests to assess student performance on model tasks in the classroom.

Typical work tasks faced by many professional services employees, including programmers, project managers, team leaders, and supervisors include addressing abstract problems under time pressure. The more guided practice students have dealing with these types of problems, the more likely they are to perform satisfactorily on the job. Considerable research has shown that merely attending class, or even memorizing the text and lecture materials, is not enough to guarantee improved performance. Project assignments make course content more realistic and less difficult for students to remember and apply.

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Multiple-choice questions may lack detail and context and appear to need a “magic insight” for solution. When that insight is not immediately forthcoming during the exam, anxiety sets in and further hinders the expression of learned material. This is just as destructive to performance in a business, management, or programming setting as “math anxiety” can be to solving algebra problems. Project-based approaches largely avoid this situation.

By midterm, all of our homework and class activities are project based, whether a full-blown programming project or several smaller business problem scenarios. Since instructor enthusiasm consistently shows a strong relationship to student satisfaction with a course, we pick projects and scenarios of interest to us. To enhance realism, we present the content as customer requirements, staff reports, consultant advice, or company procedures. This takes the form of text, Web-based materials and examples from the workplace, in addition to required readings. Students are assigned content to share with the class, either via the class website or directly in class. Working in teams, the class produces a program or solves workplace problems that are more complex than all but the very ablest students could do on their own. We help students accomplish the project successfully by ensuring that particularly promising students are seeded into each group.

The goal is to make students comfortable using course content to produce products prior to the final examination. Then we derive final exam questions structured around these class-produced projects. These questions can often be objectively scored and are viewed as quite fair by students. After all, they helped develop the projects. There can be multiple correct answers for some questions, as in life.

Here are some sample test items using class projects as vehicles for evaluating, and perhaps enhancing, student learning:

Recognizing concepts: 1)

“Which line(s) show a Boolean operator being used?” 2) “What management error does this statement reflect? ‘Josh Smith didn't work hard enough to accurately complete his report on employee absenteeism, while I couldn't finish my report on diversity training due to inadequate information from the overseas division.’”

What If questions: 1) “What line numbers in the program will be executed if X equals 5 at line 300?”

Why questions: 1) “Why was the program loop from lines 413 to 418 introduced into our program?” 2) “Why was intrinsic commitment important to the management team in the Amalgamated scenario?”

Next action/best action questions: 1) “Based on the information provided above concerning Maria's problem with her team, what is the best action Maria could take next?” (Responses generated using class discussions and other course material). 2) “How could the function on lines 352 to 376 be rewritten to use real-valued variables?”

For those wanting to assess a student's choice of action in more depth, or to assess the quality of the student's reasoning more fully, multiple-choice questions can be followed up with an “Explain your response” short answer or longer essay response. These are particularly useful with items that have more than one acceptable course of action, as do many project-based questions. The student's explanation can elevate a marginally correct response to a “best” response and should be scored accordingly.

Finally, as the focus is on applied

learning, it makes sense to have the exam be “open book,” “open notes,” “open Web,” or all three with few negative consequences. Yes, some students might happen upon an example in the text very similar to a traditional exam problem, or might even be able to cut and paste a snippet of relevant code from the Web. However, they will be able to find only the most general sorts of advantage from the text and Web when test questions focus on their unique project(s). As our real purpose is for them to improve future performance, learning late is better than not learning at all. ●

What Is the Role of Student Affairs in Assessment?

By Arthur Sandeen and Margaret J. Barr

Assessment is at center stage on our campuses, and may now be the dominant issue in American higher education. We believe that this is not a passing fad but a reality, and that it will continue to have a major impact on how colleges and universities are funded, how they teach, and what students learn. Good assessment data gives us a better understanding of students, which can result in better policies and programs.

We propose that you consider the following:

Provide strong leadership

Strong leadership from the top is critical. We need to be very knowledgeable about assessment and, equally important, to be persuasive advocates for the role of student affairs in campus-wide assessment efforts. If we are to become full, contributing participants in our institutions' assessment programs, we have to acquire the resources for assessment activities, establish assessment as a priority, and ensure that assessment activities are well-coordinated within the division.

Further, we must be able to "tell the story" in a convincing manner to a variety of constituencies – and assessment should be at the heart of the story.

Work cooperatively with faculty

We should broaden the focus of our interests by making it a priority to work cooperatively with faculty on core academic programs. We have substantive contributions to make to

such efforts and indeed can play a leading role in initiating discussions with faculty colleagues that may lead to improvements in student learning.

The undergraduate general education program is often a useful focus for such efforts. We should be contributing members of groups assigned to develop such programs. This requires us to become more knowledgeable about the content of undergraduate study and to expand our knowledge of student learning.

Work cooperatively with academic affairs

On some campuses, where student affairs and academic affairs both report directly to the president, the relationship between the two divisions sometimes may be more competitive than collaborative. Such separate and competing arrangements may no longer be conducive to improving the overall educational programs of the campus.

If the provost's office controls most of the resources on the campus, and if student affairs is viewed as a separate entity unrelated to core academic programs, it can be very difficult to assume a significant role in campus-wide assessment programs.

Collaboration and cooperation are extremely important, so if organizational arrangements become barriers, other options need to be explored. Previous organizational assumptions about the role of student affairs on the campus may need to be reconsidered. The requirements of student learning may lead to the decision to combine student affairs and academic

affairs into one coordinated unit.

Encourage collaboration between professional associations

We should urge collaboration between student affairs professional associations and generalist higher education associations such as the American Council on Education, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, and the American Association for Higher Education.

Our journals should broaden their approach to assessment, encouraging and publishing studies that focus on core academic programs on the campus rather than on local assessment surveys of little interest to those outside student affairs.

Provide data for external bodies

Assessment in higher education has become such a highly visible and volatile issue that we cannot ignore it, even if we find it distasteful or driven by external bodies who do not share our commitment to student learning. The governance of public colleges and universities is increasingly driven by external forces, and we cannot opt out of the process, even when it is unattractive.

While it may be tempting to remain apart from the fickle and increasingly political world of institutional assessment, we will not be able to have a major impact on the improvement of student learning if we are not part of the main event.

The excellent assessment initiatives now being conducted by student affairs professionals are commendable. These efforts are contributing to the improvement of programs and services on many campuses, and they should be continued and enhanced. Our central task is to demonstrate effective campus leadership to ensure that we are full participants in processes that improve the quality of education for students. ●

Encouraging Faculty Involvement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

By Rob Kelly

Despite the admirable goal of improving student learning by assessment, many faculty members are uneasy about participating in assessment-related activities. They resent having assessment mandates imposed on them by administrators and fear that opening their courses to public scrutiny might negatively reflect on them personally. One way to overcome these negative feelings about assessment while promoting improved student learning is to encourage faculty to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

The scholarship of teaching and learning, as outlined by Mary Taylor Huber and Pat Hutchings in *The Advancement of Learning: Building the Teaching Commons* (2005), contains four core elements:

- Framing questions about student learning
- Gathering and exploring evidence related to those questions
- Trying out and refining new teaching and learning ideas and strategies in the classroom and assessing their effect on student learning
- Going public with what is learned in ways that others can critique and build on

The scholarship of teaching and learning and assessment are complementary processes, says Scott Simkins, director of the Academy for Teaching and Learning at North Car-

olina A&T State University and an experienced SoTL advocate. An important difference between the two is that SoTL seeks to build a scholarly base over time that others can learn from, whereas assessment often leaves out this public scholarship element. In addition, SoTL often considers teaching and learning at the individual faculty or course level, and assessment is often focused on learning outcomes at the program, college, or institution level.

Simkins notes, “The scholarship of teaching and learning generally starts with a faculty member or a group of faculty members who are curious about [the learning challenges] a particular student...[faces] in their classes and want to do something about it. It starts with a question—why is something happening or not happening in terms of student learning? Because it begins with the faculty member rather than a chair, dean, or provost, there’s a greater sense of ownership of the process and greater motivation for carrying out the activity.

“So how can administrators promote this kind of student-learning-focused reflective inquiry among their faculty members? I think there’s a close parallel to what the best teachers do in the classroom. They don’t just tell their students to do specific tasks, they provide a structured environment in which students are encouraged to investigate and make new discoveries for themselves. In

the same way, I think the best chairs and deans provide a safe, professional environment for their faculty members in which they are encouraged to openly inquire about student learning in their classes and are rewarded for investigating and assessing the learning outcomes associated with pedagogical innovations, and in sharing effective teaching and learning practices with their colleagues—that is, carrying out the scholarship of teaching and learning.”

Simkins prefers to use carrots rather than sticks to encourage faculty involvement in the scholarship of teaching and learning and related assessment activities. Incentives might include course release time, a monetary stipend, or a travel grant for participation in teaching/learning conferences. Perhaps most important is to include this type of scholarship in merit pay, tenure, and promotion decisions, an idea consistent with Ernest Boyer’s expanded view of scholarship first laid out in *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990).

Of course, what qualifies as scholarly research in teaching and learning will vary among institutions and disciplines. Some might restrict research scholarship in this area to publication of peer-reviewed journal articles or grants from federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation; others might include SoTL investigations presented as part of a Web-based teaching gallery or a disciplinary or teaching/learning conference. “What would count as the scholarship of teaching and learning in economics, my professional discipline, would most likely be different than what would count as research in another discipline, but that also occurs in traditional disciplinary research,” Simkins says.

In order to get faculty buy-in for the scholarship of teaching and learning, and for internal assessment ac-

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tivities, support cannot be confined to a single department. “There has to be an institutional commitment. It has to be supported and rewarded by the deans and provost,” Simkins says. “It also means that there has to be ongoing professional development for chairs. Oftentimes department chairs are put in place who may have been good faculty members and good researchers but may not currently have the management skills or breadth of knowledge that is essential to effectively manage, support, and lead an academic department. Good leadership is central to effective assessment. Without it, assessment becomes simply a series of isolated events rather than an ongoing process of continuous inquiry and improvement.

“When it comes to improving student learning outcomes, being curious about what our students are actually learning is critical for success,” he continues. “That’s a place where teaching and learning centers can play an important role, especially if the teaching and learning center is viewed as an integral part of the institution and has the respect of both faculty members and administrators. Teaching center directors can work together with department chairs and deans to promote an environment in which questions about student learning are continuously encouraged, supported, and rewarded.”

Additionally, he says, “Department chairs arguably play the most important and influential leadership role in colleges and universities. The department is where faculty live; this is their professional home and this is where tenure really gets determined. Chairs can have a dramatic impact on student learning outcomes, as well as retention and graduation rates, simply by focusing attention on the teaching and learning process and actively rewarding faculty members who make it part of their normal

process to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning.”

Chairs can also encourage faculty involvement in the assessment process by framing student learning outcomes in moral terms. “It’s what we should be doing as professionals, as scholarly teachers—trying to figure out ways to improve teaching and learning outcomes and not just taking for granted that some students will pass while others won’t,” Simkins says. At North Carolina A&T, a historically black university, helping students succeed academically takes on added social significance. “We lose too many African-American students from the university, and we need to be concerned about that. We need to seek ways to improve the learning outcomes of our students, many of whom have been underprepared for the academic challenges they will face at the university. We need to find out what teaching strategies help to promote effective, long-lasting, and transferable learning in these students so that they can succeed as global citizens, workers, and professionals. The scholarship of teaching and learning can assist in this process, providing guidance not only for faculty members at our university, but across the nation and the world.”

Once faculty members get involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning, they view what they do in the classroom differently, and just as the scholarship they do within their disciplines encourages them, the scholarship of teaching and learning leads to further inquiry. The challenge is to convince faculty that the scholarship of teaching and learning is an inquiry process, not an evaluative process.

“For most faculty members, I think that teaching seems qualitatively different from the research that they carry out,” Simkins says. “People think of teaching as a private matter and one that is tied up with their identity. As a result, they are con-

cerned about inquiring too deeply about their students’ learning, fearful that unpleasant results may cast doubts not only on their teaching ability, but on their identity as a teacher-scholar. The scholarship of teaching and learning aims to uncouple the process of inquiry about teaching and learning from the personal identity of the teacher, focusing on the questions being asked, the gathering of evidence about those questions, the process of using that evidence to promote improvement in learning, and the public sharing of results. In the end, both the teacher and the students gain from this cycle of inquiry and sharing. That’s the point that administrators need to emphasize with their faculty members.”

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Assessing Class Participation: One Useful Strategy

By Denise D. Knight

One of the changes we have seen in academia in the last 30 years or so is the shift from lecture-based classes to courses that encourage a student-centered approach. Few instructors would quibble with the notion that promoting active participation helps students to think critically and to argue more effectively. However, even the most savvy instructors are still confounded about how to best evaluate participation, particularly when it is graded along with more traditional assessment measures, such as essays, exams, and oral presentations. Type the words “class participation” and “assessment” into www.google.com/, and you will get close to 700,000 hits.

Providing students with a clear, fair, and useful assessment of their class participation is challenging for even the most seasoned educator. Even when I provide a rubric that distinguishes every category of participation from outstanding to poor, students are often still confused about precisely what it is that I expect from them. It is not unusual, for example, for students to believe that attendance and participation are synonymous. On the other hand, when we attempt to spell out too precisely what it is we expect in the way of contributions, we run the risk of closing down participation. In one online site that offers assessment guidelines, for example, the course instructor characterizes “unsatisfactory” participation as follows: “Contributions in class reflect inadequate preparation. Ideas offered are seldom substantive, provide few if

any insights and never a constructive direction for the class. Integrative comments and effective challenges are absent. If this person were not a member of the class, valuable airtime would be saved.” The language used in the description—“inadequate,” “seldom,” “few,” “never,” and “absent”—hardly encourages positive results. The final sentence is both dismissive and insensitive. Shy students are unlikely to risk airing an opinion in a classroom climate that is negatively charged. Certainly, the same point can be made by simply informing students, in writing, that infrequent contributions to class discussions will be deemed unsatisfactory and merit a “D” for the participation grade.

While there are a number of constructive guidelines online for generating and assessing participation, the dichotomy between the students’ perception of their contributions and the instructor’s assessment of participation is still often a problem. One tool that I have found particularly effective is to administer a brief questionnaire early in the semester (as soon as I have learned everyone’s name), which asks students to assess their own participation to date. Specifically, I ask that students do the following: “Please check the statement below that best corresponds to your honest assessment of your contribution to class discussion thus far:

_____ I contribute several times during every class discussion. (A)

_____ I contribute at least once during virtually every class discussion. (B)

_____ I often contribute to class discussion. (C)

_____ I occasionally contribute to class discussion. (D)

_____ I rarely contribute to class discussion. (E)”

I then provide a space on the form for the student to write a brief rationale for their grade, along with the option to write additional comments if they so choose. Finally, I include a section on the form for instructor response. I collect the forms, read them, offer a brief response, and return them at the next class meeting.

This informal self-assessment exercise does not take long, and it always provides intriguing results. More often than not, students will award themselves a higher participation grade than I would have. Their rationale often yields insight into why there is a disconnect between my perception and theirs. For example, a student may write, “I feel that I have earned a ‘B’ so far in class participation. I know that I’m quiet, but I haven’t missed a class and I always do my reading.” Using the “Instructor Response” space, I now have an opportunity to disabuse the student’s notion that preparation, attendance, and participation are one and the same. I also offer concrete measures that the student can take to improve his or her participation.

When this exercise is done early in the semester, it can enhance both the amount and quality of participation. It helps to build confidence and reminds students that they have to hold themselves accountable for every part of their grade, including participation. ●

Outcomes Assessment Is Here to Stay, Get Faculty Buy In

By Rob Kelly

The trend toward greater accountability is often viewed as something that is imposed upon higher education institutions, something that infringes on an institution's autonomy and faculty members' academic freedom and adds to their workload. When framed in this manner, is it any wonder that some faculty members are reluctant about or downright opposed to learning outcomes assessment?

Part of the problem is that senior administrators do not adequately explain the purpose of and motivation for doing learning outcomes assessment, says Daniel Weinstein, assistant provost for institutional planning and assessment at Millersville University of Pennsylvania. "A lot of my counterparts at institutions throughout the nation approach faculty members and say, 'You have to engage in assessment, and it's my job to ensure that you do.' That pretty much leaves the conversation there, and faculty are left to their own devices. I can understand that in an environment like that, assessment is not going to make much progress."

Weinstein says that effective learning outcomes assessment requires an approach that comes from the administration but that is embraced by the faculty members. Without this collaboration, progress will be limited.

Ideally, the institution will have a resident expert to

- identify measurable or ascertainable assessment criteria,
- identify appropriate assessment tools,

- close the loop on outcomes assessment by helping faculty identify changes to what they teach or how they teach based on the assessment.

Distinguishing between classroom evaluation and outcomes assessment

One of the reasons faculty are reluctant to engage in learning outcomes assessment is that they often have difficulty understanding what learning outcomes assessment is. When told, "To help you achieve the level of self-reflection you need to get the evidence on the table that indicates that you are delivering quality education to your students," faculty often reply, "We're already doing that. We lecture; we give students assignments; we give them tests. They're assessed. Why are we having this conversation?"

"I tell them, 'Good question. There is a difference between classroom evaluation and outcomes assessment. [Classroom evaluation] falls far short in giving the kind of information you really need to effect change in your program,'" Weinstein says.

One of the limitations of using grades as a means of assessing learning outcomes is that it is not always evident (particularly to those outside the discipline) what level of student performance constitutes an A, a B, a C, etc., particularly when some faculty members award extra points for attendance or doing extra work.

There is also the issue of grade inflation (or deflation). Grades reflect

more than just student learning outcomes, Weinstein says.

Workload

Assessing student learning outcomes does not necessarily mean a substantial increase in faculty members' workload. In many cases, graded assignments and exams can be modified to provide useful assessment data. For example, a research assignment can be changed to include an oral presentation component, an expanded bibliography, or group work to be used to assess students' learning outcomes in those areas.

"As much as you can, utilize what's already in place. Utilize the good work and good tools that faculty already have, but find ways to tweeze outcomes information out of it and document it accordingly," Weinstein says.

To prevent faculty from feeling overwhelmed by the assessment process, Weinstein recommends that rather than trying to assess each learning outcome throughout a course, program, or degree, faculty should look at three learning outcomes per year.

"You don't get in a faculty member's face and say, 'You're falling down on the job because you're not doing [learning outcomes assessment].' That's a quick way to alienate them and to get them to well up with self-defense. And I don't blame them. You come to them and say, 'You are the academic professional. You are the author of your own discipline on this campus. I have no business telling you what your intended student outcomes are. The best I can do is troll the Internet and come up with examples from other institutions about learning outcomes, but it's up to you to tell me what a degree in biology from [this institution] means,'" Weinstein says.

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Increasing pressure for assessment

Thus far, there are no clear national standards for learning outcomes assessment; however, accreditation bodies are becoming increasingly prescriptive in what they require of institutions. “Before long, these commissions on colleges are going to mandate certain learning outcomes in disciplines. That scares me because it flies in the face of academic freedom, which I uphold emphatically.

“Visiting team members of these regional commissions are getting focused training on what to look for in terms of outcomes assessment, so they’ll know if an institution just slapped together [its learning outcomes assessment] or it is something that has been ingrained into the system of the institution,” Weinstein says.

Weinstein reminds faculty that this increasing accountability has not yet encroached on their academic freedom. “I like to remind faculty that there is as much academic freedom tied to their outcomes assessment as there is tied to the curriculum and pedagogy. They like that, and they respond to it.”

The trend toward more prescriptive measures, however, could impact academic freedom. The commissions on colleges are becoming more prescriptive “because there are not enough institutions coming out with quality outcomes assessment,” Weinstein says.

Commend faculty for participating

Assessing learning outcomes is a big step for many faculty. In addition to the time it takes to develop measurable learning outcomes, selecting appropriate assessment tools, many faculty are concerned that the process

can point to their shortcomings as instructors. It is important, however, to ensure that student learning outcomes assessment is kept out of faculty job evaluations. “I tell faculty, you engage in outcomes assessment for you. If you don’t make all your targets but you specify what you’re going to do next time, that will result only in commendation from your administration.

“The fact that you’ve done it and documented it and got something from it, the administration is going to commend you for it. You were bold enough to collect data that shows that you are not accomplishing everything you intended to accomplish, but that is the point of outcomes assessment—that you have some mechanism that gives you feedback on how well you are doing in communicating with your students,” Weinstein says. ●

Assessment Methods Should Match Institutional Goals

By Rob Kelly

Learning outcomes assessment, once a “spontaneous, authentic intellectual activity” focused on understanding student learning and seeking ways to improve the learning experience, has in the past 20 years become an activity driven largely by accreditation requirements, with little regard for an institution’s unique missions, says Karl Schilling, associate director for the Center for Teaching and Learning at Miami University in Ohio.

“Early on, institutions were creating their own instruments, and as assess-

ment has progressed and the stakes have gotten a lot higher, I think there has been a tendency for institutions to turn to test makers rather than developing their own notions of how they want to do assessment. Most institutions think about assessment now as a means to appease the accreditors, not necessarily as a way to learn about their own institutions, because the stakes have become so high,” Schilling says.

Many institutions rely on standardized tests that provide easy-to-under-

stand statistics, thinking that that will satisfy accreditation requirements; however, accrediting agencies don’t really have a standardized notion of what assessment should be. “Most regional accrediting agencies are very open. They want the institution to reflect upon itself, and that’s really the key thing that’s supposed to happen in accreditation,” Schilling says.

One of the dangers of focusing on

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reviews by accrediting agencies is neglecting assessment and then trying to make up for lost time by engaging in assessment activities as the institution's 10-year review approaches, resulting in assessment that does not provide the institution with much useful information, Schilling says. A better approach would be to think of ways to gather evidence specific to the institution (or department or academic program) to determine how well it is meeting its intended goals and to suggest ways to improve the teaching and learning process.

At Miami University, Schilling and his colleagues paid a sample of first-year students to maintain portfolios of their work over four years. The students wore beepers and when contacted wrote down exactly what they were doing at that moment. "We began to understand how students use their time," Schilling says.

Some of that information was surprising. For example, the notion of recommending that students spend three hours working on a course for every hour spent in class was not supported by the results of this study.

The approach used by Schilling and his colleagues provided a more precise picture of how students use their time than would have been obtained from an end-of-class questionnaire. Such an instrument might ask students how much time they spent studying for a test, for example. But because of the fact that they have no vested interest in it, students may or may not answer the question honestly, or they may not recall well enough to answer accurately.

"By capturing those students' papers and stuff, I think we really got a strong insight into what the students were doing at that time [10 to 15 years ago]," Schilling says.

Schilling recommends that institutions identify a problem and ask ques-

tions such as, "What are we trying to achieve?" and "What evidence do we have that matches that?" This evidence can be gathered through interviews, assessing random examples of students' work, or other methods. The important thing is to match the assessment questions and instruments to the institution's mission, Schilling says.

At Miami University, assessment occurs among groups of people interested in specific issues, such as critical thinking. "Every institution has innovators. It's important to make sure somehow that those innovators come up with ideas for how we can better capture what we're doing and be able to display it to the public. Otherwise, we're going to get what George Bush is doing to the K-12 sector, which is just not a good way to teach young kids. It's not the politics of it; it's just the approach that the administration chose to use," Schilling says. ●

Parting Shot - 'Assessmania' and 'Bureaupathology' in Higher Education

By Thomas R. McDaniel, PhD

This is not a rant. As a college administrator, I am fully aware of the importance of assessment, and the bureaucratic efficiencies mandated in higher education in our country today. However, I do think it is important for academic leaders to be able to step back from the fray and the daily demands of administration and think about the philosophical and educational implications of the standards movement in higher education. Most college and university administrators

are keenly aware of the standards movement in K-12 public school education, a dominant theme of contemporary education reform that has now moved to the college campus.

This movement has created a significant amount of controversy, with strong proponents on both sides of the issue. Many argue that it is essential for colleges and universities to embrace the standards movement and to verify their educational value (which now comes at what may seem an extraordinary cost

to the public) by way of comprehensive and sophisticated assessment systems. In the public school sector, this is often announced to the public by so-called "report cards" for schools, required by the sweeping federal legislation known as No Child Left Behind.

In higher education, we are now finding similar reform movements accompanied by increasing demand for quantitative proof (or at least some evi-

dence) to justify the high cost of a college education. Some argue that this has now become the primary responsibility of accrediting agencies—not only regional accrediting bodies but also the myriad of specialty accreditations for an extensive array of professional and disciplinary curricula. This alphabet soup of accrediting agencies includes such formidable bodies as NASAD (art), NASM (music), NLNAC (nursing), NCATE (education), FIDER (interior design), and AACSB (business), to mention but a few.

These agencies have done much in recent years to base accreditation processes and decisions on “outcomes” rather than “inputs.” The major concept here is that a college and its programs should be measured not by the qualifications of its faculty, the claims made in catalogs or on syllabi, or the library and other resources in the institution, but rather by student performance in both qualitative and quantitative measures of achievement.

For institutions of higher learning, the consequence of this paradigm shift has been the creation of a wide range of assessment procedures—many of them emphasizing the quantitative side of the equation—to provide these agencies with the outcome evidence required to show that the accreditation standards have been met. Some argue that such measures are essential to convince a skeptical public that there is value in the educational commodity for which they are paying a premium. Others point out that the accrediting agencies are serving a purpose that they are uniquely qualified to provide and that may well stem the tide of heavy-handed governmental impositions of accountability.

Questions

These arguments may indeed be true. Nonetheless, it seems to me appropriate for educational leaders to reflect on a number of questions that follow from this now reigning concept of accounta-

bility and accreditation:

1. Are the premises of the accountability movement in higher education justified? This is to say that there may be reason to question the notion that outcomes should replace inputs, that quantitative score keeping is the best way to determine the value of educational services, that the public is truly skeptical of the utility of investment in a college education, and that government is ready to leap into the breach if accrediting agencies do not save the day. This is also to question the premise that standards established by external agencies—which are granted the authority to close or sanction programs or entire institutions—should guide (or even control) the mission, policy, and curriculum of higher education. Are these premises in fact true and compelling?

2. Are the requirements for assessment—and the vast bureaucratic mechanisms required to generate the data—worth the cost and effort? This question should be considered within the context of any individual institution of higher learning, but there is reason to contend that the scarce resources of an institution might better serve the mission of the institution in some other activity or enterprise. To answer this question it would be necessary to calculate the cost of personnel, hardware, software, committee structures, report generation, etc., and determine if the cost justifies the commitment and resources allocated. However, as long as accrediting agencies have the power to demand such outcome evidence, institutions may have no alternative. Are there any possible alternatives?

3. In the long run, does this kind of outcomes-based accountability lead to improvements in educational institutions? Accrediting agencies typically go beyond merely requiring the collection and reporting of data to insist that institutions aggregate, disaggregate, and

analyze data and from that process determine specific improvements that should be made to all aspects of the institution’s operation. Such processes must be continuous and a part of assessment reports. Are these requirements leading to the most important and desirable improvements in the institution? For example, would more subjective and qualitative measures result in harder-to-validate but better institutions?

Conclusion

As I mentioned, this is not a rant but rather a plea for institutions to take opportunities for reflection on the accreditation processes that presumably ensure institutional effectiveness. As ingrained as the standards movement has become, with its concomitant requirement for comprehensive assessment systems to measure outcomes, it would nonetheless be a mistake for academic leaders to merely assume that such processes and activities ensure a better institution. What is the most appropriate relationship between internal and external locus of control when it comes to higher education policy decisions? There are points at which assessment can become a mania and bureaucratic processes become pathological. We may simply go through the motions to produce results that bypass the best thought and evaluation required for truly effective education. Some academic leaders are rightly concerned that the demands of “outcomes accountability” may undermine rather than enhance the intellectual joy and creativity of the college classroom, establishing a “tail wagging the dog” approach to education that may not be in the best interest of students or faculty. Let us, then, take time to pause and reflect—and then determine platforms and positions that make the most sense for higher education. ●

Manias, Pathologies, and Alternative Approaches to Assessment: A Response to Doubting Assessors

By Jo Allen, PhD

The article, “‘Assessmania’ and ‘Bureaupathology’ in Higher Education” by Thomas R. McDaniel opens with “This is not a rant,” followed by a claim that he recognizes the importance of “assessment and ... bureaucratic efficiencies.” In the remainder of the article, however, he seems to challenge that importance as he clusters three sets of questions about the reality of the need for assessment, the resources required, and the usefulness of the outcomes. In this article, I’d like to offer a response that moves beyond the standard defense of assessment toward offering a couple of insights on those “bureaucratic efficiencies.”

McDaniel’s first challenge to the premise that accountability is justified in higher education is readily countered with evidence from current events, research, and best practices in assessment. (Yes, measuring outcomes does provide better evidence of learning than measuring inputs. No, quantitative work is just one, and not necessarily the best, means of assessing services. A quick read of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Inside Higher Ed* points to both public skepticism and legislative “interest” in the value of higher education; and, yes, as quality control agents, accrediting agencies should have a stake as peer reviewers in the disciplines.) Overall, in fact, the call for accountability in higher education is hardly

shocking given that our world is teeming with newly bred skepticism, thanks to Enron and WorldCom (which taught us to view corporate America—and audited account statements—from a more cynical perspective), to wiretapping/surveillance and claims of weapons of mass destruction (which taught us to question our government’s intelligence-gathering mechanisms), to widespread child abuse in the church (which taught us that even our truth-sayers may not be worthy of our trust). If the postmodern era was about living with ambiguity, this era is about accountability.

In the next cluster, McDaniel challenges whether the results of assessment are worth the cost and effort. The first consideration, of course, is what cost and effort would we value if the results meant we could better educate our students? In short, where would we draw the line in the sand? Is it worth \$3,000 but not worth \$3,001? Second, the reluctance to calculate the cost/benefits of the assessment enterprise is surprising, given that is exactly what we do (throwing in a few subjective measures such as contribution to mission and educational philosophy, donor/alumni loyalty, tradition, etc.) with every other educational initiative—from departments and programs to academic support services to athletics—in order to determine their value and contributions to the educational

enterprise. Assessment and other forms of rigorous analysis can actually help us calculate exactly those costs and benefits and make appropriate decisions.

In the last cluster, McDaniel more directly takes on accrediting agencies, saying that they “typically go beyond merely requiring the collection and reporting of data to insist that institutions aggregate, disaggregate, and analyze data and from that process determine specific improvements that should be made to all aspects of the institution’s operation.” Well, yes. As with all legitimate claims to “excellence,” accreditors ask that we support those claims with evidence. That hardly seems unreasonable. And that they require us to do all this with data harkens to simple best practices in research; after all, who would collect and report data without deciding whether to aggregate/disaggregate or analyze the data? Further, how are any decisions made about institutional goals and processes and progress, other than from data? Although there is nothing like a good instinct or even a good dose of passion for ideas, we surely look for some basis in reality (i.e., data) before launching, or squelching, those ideas.

Alternative perspectives

As points of reflection, I would like to offer three proactive ways to think about assessment and its concomitant “bureaucracies”:

1. You get what you design. Although there is every opportunity to go overboard with assessment—as many institutions may even have done—there is also the opportunity to design exactly the system you need to get exactly the information you can use. Most accreditors have offered generous leeway in designing mechanisms to generate useful information for particular programs and institutions.

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There are some guidelines to be sure, but the overarching messages have been rather consistent: (a) You don't have to assess everything—choose what you care about most as the emphasis in your assessment plan; and (b) You can assess on a cycle, determined by you and/or your stakeholders, in order to take snapshots of trends that can tell you something valuable about your program (or unit) and its impact.

Conversations with senior leaders, faculty, program directors, and others should point to what is actually useful to them—or to you—as a decision maker. Then, design the system to provide that information. One of the most valuable questions we can ask in assessment is, “What would you do with that information if you had it?” If the respondent cannot answer the question—or cannot answer it without going through a warren of offices, approvals, analysts, and, for that matter, costs—in order to use the information, then the information's usefulness may be pretty marginal.

2. Talk with your accreditors.

Since it is not likely in this day of skepticism and accountability to waive the assessment mandate, your accreditors are likely to work with you on a plan that is doable, meaningful, and even cost-effective. As an example, my own institution, Widener University, went through a dynamic two-year strategic planning process that led directly to statements of goals, objectives, action steps, measures of success, accountability, timelines, and resources required. Clearly, it would have been pointless to go through the process all over again to accommodate our regional accreditation agency, Middle States. Following a conversation with our Middle States liaison Robert Schneider, we were granted permission to participate in a pilot project

that allowed us to build on what we had already done with the strategic plan as the foundation for our re-accreditation and assessment documentation. As a result, the last two years have been spent moving forward (and documenting that progress) on implementing the strategic plan, rather than (re)creating an alternative means of documenting our stability and institutional growth. Our arrangement is truly a win/win situation: Accreditors want us to document our academic and financial stability, quality, and capacity to continue to offer a high quality education; we, on the other hand, want to demonstrate our use of planning and resulting data as the means for supporting quality processes that drive sound decision making.

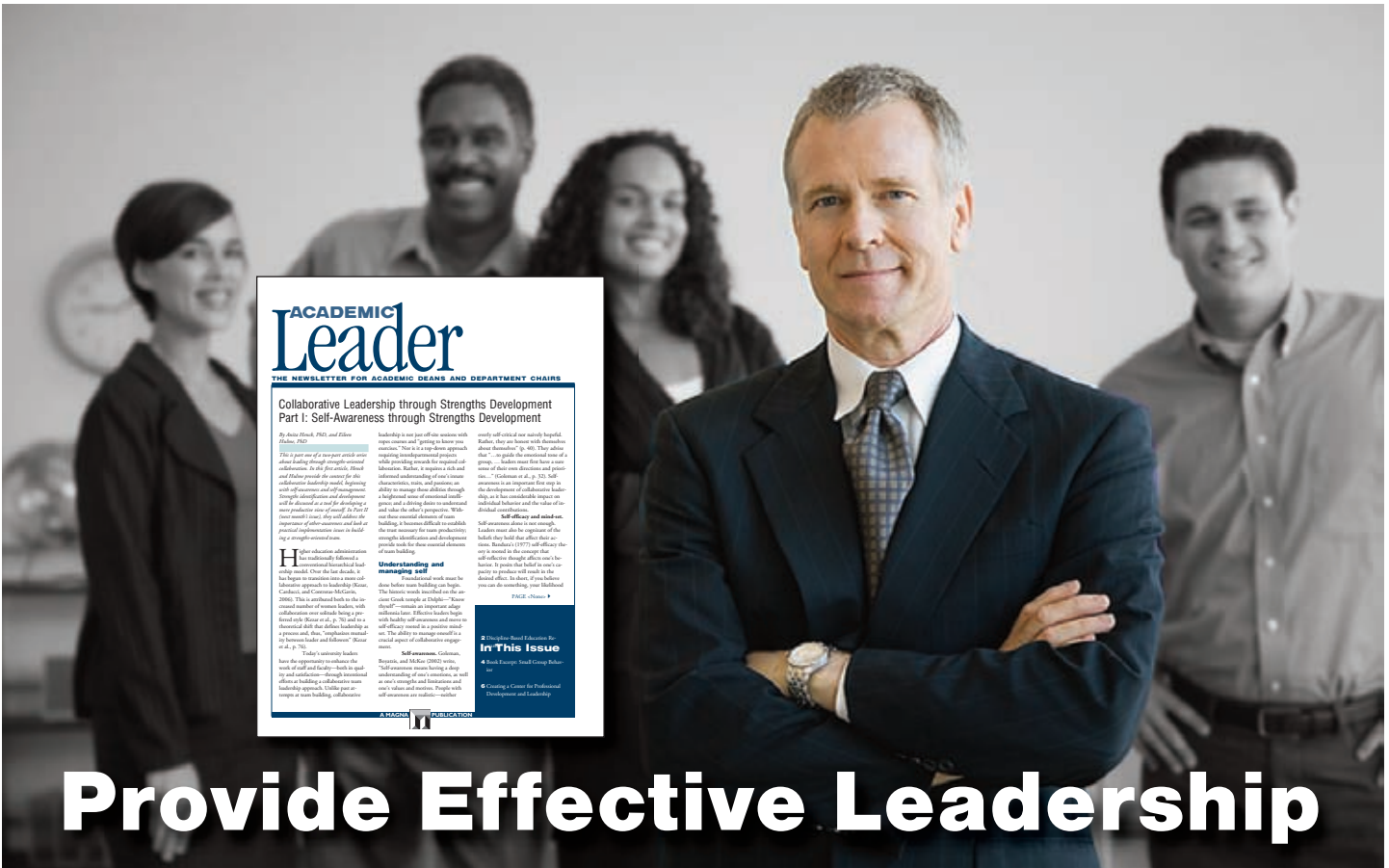
3. Look for alternative uses of assessment data.

If the resulting data's usefulness for improving programs is not considered of high enough value to merit its activity and costs, then consider its potential contributions to identifying your institution's niche and points of excellence. In particular, you might look at its potential to help identify programs that need highlighting, shoring up, merging, or eliminating, thus resulting in more careful use of your resources. In addition, its potential to influence your donors and alumni, two groups that are keenly interested in being affiliated with excellence (and evidence of such), is powerful. From alumni newsletters and magazines to carefully crafted letters of solicitation, information based on assessment results can be “worth its weight in gold” to readers who want to feel their loyalty and contributions are merited. Increasingly valuable is using assessment results in recruiting initiatives (students, faculty, and staff)—again, people like to be associated with excellence. And, finally, assessment results offer tremendous potential to speak proactively to legislators and the general public about ex-

cellence, value, and the results of self-imposed accountability in higher education.

Ultimately, what any or all of these steps require is movement beyond discontent and suspicion about the value of assessment and real leadership towards making it truly valuable. As a long-time proponent of meaningful assessment and as an occasional site reviewer for Middle States, I can report my own views and experiences in this pursuit of documented quality: If an institution can provide evidence of its stability and quality (separate from its reputation, number of tenured faculty, and number of volumes in the library), I care very little whether it spent \$1 or \$100,000 to do so, whether it had a part-time clerical position or a team of assessment experts committed to the work, or whether it had a substantive list of meaningful and evidence-based accomplishments or volumes of such.

What I do care about are our students—that we can effectively demonstrate to them, as well as to others, that their education (not their degrees or diplomas) matters. As an educator and, I hope, a role model, I want to provide the same thoughtful, precise, and documented evidence that I demand from students regarding their own claims in the research papers they write. To do any less would be hypocritical, requiring students to provide evidence of their claims to me, but then letting me off the hook in a critical message to them about the value of higher education and, more specifically, of an education at my university. In that sense, if in no other, I think the work is well worth it. ●



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