

Assessment: Higher Education's Accountability Tool

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Abstract

This paper is the first of seven that will evaluate and explore the topic of assessment in higher education. In today's higher educational environment, more than in past times, assessment information, quantitative and qualitative drive the day-to-day operations of most institutions. This paper provides a brief overview of what assessment is, how the results of assessments are utilized, and debate the usefulness of such a corporate based tool within the sphere of higher education.

Keywords: assessment, assessment results, and the usefulness of assessment in relation to higher education

Assessment: Higher Education's Accountability Tool

Much like many corporate entities, the current organizational behavior of many educational institutions is being driven largely by various assessment tools. Although institutions of higher learning have long sought ways to measure student learning acquisition, (exams were one of the earliest methods for this process), today's academic environment is *assessment obsessed* to the point that often programs and/or classes are developed with a heavy dose of assessment as part of the planning process. In addition, if a program cannot find a way to generate an assessment to test its impact and effectiveness, often, that program is shelved due to the lack of ability to run an assessment. However, not all programs can be effectively or immediately assessed for outcomes.

This paper will give a foundational explanation of what assessment is, as well as what it can and cannot accomplish. The paper offers a brief overview of how the concepts of assessment and the job of higher education intersect with one another, and the conflicts that sometimes arises from this intersection.

Assessment in a Nutshell

Simply stated, assessment is a tool utilized to determine the value (extrinsic or intrinsic) of a given action. Generally, in education, the most common form of assessment has been exams, quizzes, or research papers, with the focus being on student learning outcomes. Mary J. Allen (2003) defines assessment as "a framework for focusing attention on student learning and for provoking meaningful discussion of program objectives, curricular organizational, pedagogy, and student development (p. 4). Allen (2003) also argues that as the diversity of students' skill levels has increased, faculty are continually "challenged to find ways to engage all students in effective learning environments" (p. 2). In this sense, assessment is a critical tool because it

allows a given institution to measure its effectiveness in terms of reaching all populations on campus. Additionally, it shows areas where certain student populations maybe faltering in the learning process.

Alternatively, Patrick T. Terenzini (2010) asks, “What does one get out of a college education (p. 30). Terenzini (2010) further states that, “Assessment requires reconsideration of the essential purposes and expected academic and nonacademic outcomes of a college education” (p. 30). His model (Figure 1), Terenzini effectively showcases the multilayered nuances of assessment. As shown in his illustration, there are three main levels of inquiry for academic assessment: who is being assessed, what is the purpose of the assessment, and what is the object of the assessment.

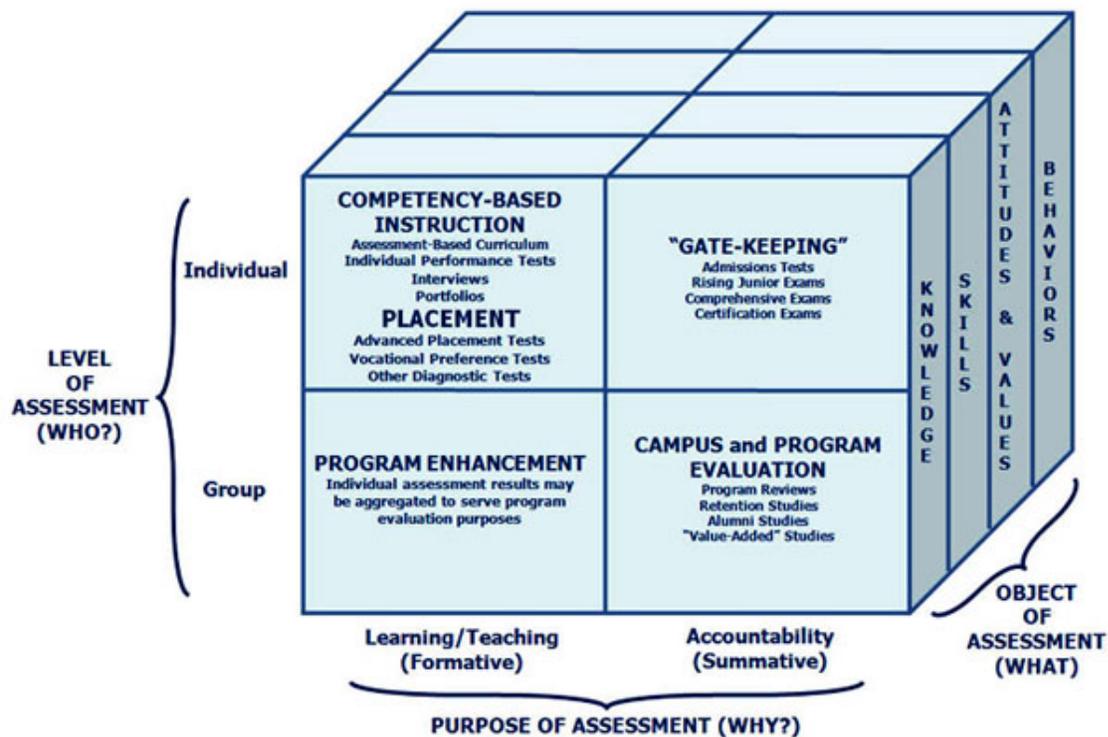


Figure 1: Terenzini's Assessment Taxonomy

Source: "Assessment with Open Eyes: Pitfalls in Studying Student Outcomes. Patrick T. Terenzini (2010), p. 32.

The final point about assessment is that it is only as valuable to an institution as its outcomes. In other words, an institution needs to create an assessment process that is reasonable and successful in producing outcomes that are usable to a given group. Mary E. Huba and Jann E. Freed (2000) list outcomes that define a successful assessment:

Successful Assessment
1. Flows from the institution's mission.
2. Has a conceptual framework.
3. Has faculty ownership/responsibility.
4. Has institution-wide support.
5. Uses multiple measures.
6. Provides feedback to students and the institution.
7. Is cost-effective.
8. Does not restrict or inhibit goals of access, equity, and diversity established by the institution.
9. Leads to improvement.
10. Includes a process for evaluating the assessment program.

Figure 2: Successful Assessment

Source: Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning. Mary E. Huba & Janne E. Freed (2000), p. 67.

The key thing about assessment is, however it is built, conducted, and evaluated, it must be audience specific. It is important to identify how the assessment will promote change within the institution (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 72). This leads to the next step in the discussion of assessment, involving the value of assessment for various institutions.

Assessment Information vs. Funding

The essential code word for the rationale of assessment models in higher education is *accountability*. Again, like many major corporate entities, higher education is being driven to account for its usage of funds, learning outcomes, and contributions to society such as gainful employment. Higher education has long defended its right to exist by touting its benefit to preparing individuals for the workforce, by showing benefit to society at large through its

research efforts, and by claims that it strives to offer equal access to everyone to form a more inclusive and educated society; thus, moving human kind forward in its social evolutionary process. However, for most institutions, a large piece of the financial sustainability question hinges on the results of accountability outcomes.

Goldie Blumenstyk (2015) calls today's assessment crusade "the accountability movement" and defines it as a "measurable way that colleges demonstrate to political leaders, taxpayers, and outside advocates that they are making good use of tuition dollars and public funds" (p. 109). In other words, higher education, more than in past times, is being held accountable by all concerned parties to prove that it is being responsible with its funding and provides a tangible value to society at large.

William Zumeta (2004) claims the following about the need for accountability in higher education, specifically as it relates to fiscal matters,

If taxpayers and their elected agents, students, and parents, and donors are willing to provide substantial additional resources to higher education, it is quite clear that such largess will be accompanied by similar demands for accountability to demonstrable results are being visited upon other sectors of society. (p. 82).

Therefore, if an institution cannot justify its existence by showing that it is meeting the goals and standards it sets for itself, then it will not be able to attract the multiple sources of funding needed for its operation. If higher education is going to sustain its value to society at large, it is imperative that it prove its institutional effectiveness.

Assessment Information vs. Institutional Effectiveness

A key usage of assessment is for marketing purposes. Institutions pay out tens of thousands of dollars on recruitment, retention, and marketing their various brands annually. By utilizing assessment results, an institution can market its uniqueness, as well as its successes, to potential consumers. Also, when appealing to private donors, it is imperative that institutions can prove that they are a good investment.

Performance based funding is another usage of assessment results. According to Blumenstyk (2012), such funding “is tied to state appropriations to public colleges to accomplishment of certain goals such as an increased graduation rates, lower student debt, or more students majoring in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics” (p. 110). Again, this ties into the concept of colleges utilizing their resources to benefit the needs of a modern workforce.

In terms of learning assessments, the results not only give faculty and students alike a roadmap for the projected learning process/outcomes, they also offer a matrix by which the effectiveness of such a plan can be measured. However, there are some challenges with assessment measurements.

For example, in states where a state-wide university system exists, students might to transfer between institutions, a fact that can greatly impact a given institution’s retention rates assessment. If a student cannot obtain entrance into a higher-ranking institution, often they attend a lower ranking institution until they improve their grades enough to move to their desired university. At this point, it might be fair to say that the initial institution did not do its job well because the student was not retained. Or something might be built into the institutions’ assessment that shows that indicates that is it was a part of the student’s success. Or an an

institution might be penalized for losing the student. This example clearly illustrates that while assessments are a valuable tool, they might have their limitations.

Terenzini (1989) points out another limitation of assessing student outcomes stems from the fact that “evidence indicates that whereas participate in a prematriculation orientation program has no direct influence on freshman persistence into the sophomore years” (p. 42). Terenzini (1989) goes on to state “that college effects many not manifest themselves right away. For example, it is probably unreasonable to expect significant student progress over a one or two-year period” (p. 42). The point is, that often the success of a student in a given course may not truly be evident until the student has time to work with the information over a period of time to prove knowledge acquisition and integration into their skill set. The same can be said of extra-curricular programs and on-campus clubs.

Assessment outcomes value can differ depending on the audience. While faculty may have one point of view about the outcome of a given assessment, students may hold an entirely different view. Per Ann Zilberberg, Robin Anderson, Sara Finney, and Kimberly Marsh (2013), students have a dislike of assessments such as exams because many perceive them as “unfair, not resulting in feedback, externally mandated, purposeless, and conducted as single-shot evaluations” (p. 214). In addition, Erika Offerdahl and Debra Tomanek (2011) share that “Teachers’ and students’ perceptions and reactions are influenced heavily by the instructional environment, teacher-student relations, and interactions, as well as cultural norms associated with gender or ethnicity which can impact the effectiveness of assessment” (p. 782). With the current debates concerning fairness of testing based on race and level of educational opportunities in grades K-12, Tomanek’s comments are a reasonable conclusion.

According to Derek Bok (2013), another issue about assessment is that many times “they seldom measure other qualities and competencies that are increasingly recognized as important such as a capacity to collaborate effectively with others, and exercise imagination and ingenuity in carrying out complex tasks” (p. 199). For example, in business colleges, many employers expect graduates to be able to work well in multiple types of teams. While the work of the team can be measured, it is difficult to measure the effort of the individual team members; particularly since teamwork is normally divided up based on the specialized skill of each team member.

Concluding Thoughts and Further Research

Clearly, assessment is a valuable tool that has multiple implications for higher education. However, may not be a full-proof plan and may have limitations. This may largely occur since acquisition of knowledge is an individualistic process that with certain skills, can prove difficult to measure.

While future research should involve an in-depth view at the specific types of specific types of assessments most commonly utilized in higher education, for now this work may expand the understanding of assessments in terms of the types of tools used to measure institutional effectiveness and accountability.

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