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Using Learning Outcomes Assessment in Honors as a Defense Against Proposed Standardized Testing

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Learning outcomes assessment (LOA) is the self-assessment of self-created learning goals for students at the class, department, college, and university level. In higher education, LOA is being imposed upon us by our accrediting bodies (Eaton, Fryshman, Hope, Scanlon, & Crow, 2005; Lingenfelter & Lenth, 2005; Nichols, 1991, 1995; Wergin, 2005). This is difficult for us because LOA is not a part of the university culture, and there are very few people on most campuses skilled in the implementation of LOA. There is also very little in the way of release time and other resources that are being provided to implement LOA on many college and university campuses nationwide.

With these factors in place, it is not surprising that most of my colleagues did not welcome the LOA introduced in 2003 at my university in preparation for our upcoming reaccreditation visit. Similar resistance is being experienced on many campuses nationwide. To add to the discontent with the current testing movement, recent reports have suggested that the Secretary of Education's Higher Education Commission may call for standardized testing in higher education (Field, 2006).

We are all familiar with the high-stakes standardized testing mandated in the early 1990s in our primary and secondary education systems, and then augmented by No Child Left Behind in 2002 (Cala, 2004; Mathison, 2004). The fundamental flaw in the primary and secondary assessment system is that *assessment drives learning*. That is, our primary and secondary schools must "teach the test" in order for students to do well on the assessment (Popham, 2002). High-stakes standardized tests tend to use multiple choice formats that are best suited to the learning of factual knowledge, and student failure on these tests results in harsh penalties for the school. Consequently, innovative teaching methods that result in more sophisticated levels of learning are frequently eliminated to allow instructional time to teach the factual information that will be assessed on high-stakes standardized tests (Hursh, 2005).

There is no doubt that we in higher education do not want a similar system to be implemented in our classrooms, and we must make a stand against the current movement towards standardized testing in higher education. We need a method of assessment that is controlled at the level of the institution and that allows for the academic

freedom to teach and assess complex skills and expanding knowledge (Lingenfelter & Lenth, 2005). LOA allows us to provide the information desired by our stakeholders without the need for standardized testing, and it gives us the academic freedom to teach the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed by adult learners.

THE PURPOSE OF AN EDUCATION

Before one can fully consider the implications of any type of assessment in higher education, one must first consider the perspective of each of the stakeholders (e.g., the federal and state governments, students and their families, faculty and administrators, and external donors) in higher education. According to the United States Department of Education, a major purpose of higher education is to create an educated populace to address the economic and workforce needs of the country. Eighty percent of the fastest growing jobs require highly skilled workers who have at least some higher education, but significantly less than half of our college-aged population will ever complete their college degree (“A National Dialog,” 2005; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002).

For the student, the primary purpose of obtaining a degree in higher education is to find high-paying employment (Montgomery & Côté, 2003). This goal is reasonable as it has been reported that each year of completed higher education has a positive impact on the occupational attainment of the individual, with a bonus added for completing the degree. This predictor outperforms all other predictors related to career success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 427).

One explanation for this effect is that college develops the cognitive, attitudinal, and social skills needed to succeed in the work world. Considerable evidence also suggests that an additional causal mechanism for this effect is that employers in the U.S. use the presence of a college degree as a certification or credentialing mechanism to help screen potential employees (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The employment of college graduates also tends to be at the higher paying and more stable managerial, technical, and professional levels (Hamilton, 1994). College graduates are also promoted at a faster rate than other employees (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

College faculty and administrators frequently put more emphasis on the non-employment-related benefits of higher education. This emphasis is also reasonable as it has been found that as a result of participating in higher education students develop their knowledge base, can better handle complexity, and think more abstractly and critically. They also change attitudes, experience an increase in positive self-concept, expand their intellectual interests, and increase in general maturity and well-being (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

An increasingly important stakeholder in higher education is external donors. External donors—including corporations, organizations, and private citizens—support higher education for a variety of reasons that include creating an educated workforce and educating citizens.

It should be noted that the faculty and administrators’ perspective on the reasons for completing higher education differs from that of the government, students, employers, and some donors. Faculty and administrators in higher education should

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maintain their emphasis on the intellectual and attitudinal impacts of a college education. We should also embrace our role as the educators of our future workforce and demand the respect that this role deserves.

We must also keep in mind that higher education in the United State is a fee-for-service enterprise, and it is the state and federal governments, students and their families, and external donors who are paying for higher education. It is reasonable in any fee-for-service enterprise for those paying for the service to request accountability information in order to verify that they are receiving the services for which they are paying. The federal government, as a major investor in our higher education system, is currently questioning the outcomes of their investment in higher education (“The Challenge,” 2005). LOA data can provide our stakeholders with information regarding the types of learning that can be expected by students attending the institution (Eaton et al., 2005).

STEPS TO TAKE

EMBRACE LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT

As mentioned earlier, it is reasonable for stakeholders to request accountability information from us. Therefore, faculty and administrators in higher education need to proactively embrace the LOA being imposed upon us by our accrediting bodies; this is a system of assessment that we can control and that will allow us to retain our institutional identity and innovative teaching methods (Lingenfelter & Length, 2005; Wergin, 2005). Specifically, we need to let *learning drive assessment* and develop assessment methods that can test the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that we teach and value in higher education. For example, critical thinking on an assignment can be assessed with the development of a holistic scoring rubric and a small amount of scorer training. Wilson and Perrine (2005) and Maki (2004) provide an overview of how to create a learning driven assessment plan.

HONORS PROGRAMS SHOULD TAKE THE LEAD

As honors educators, we have the responsibility of educating the best and the brightest of the young adults who are attending college. A degree in honors adds both excellence to the curriculum and an additional credential to the college diploma. Thus, a degree in honors increases both the quality of the college education and the employability of the graduate. Honors students are some of the best prepared students in the nation. As such, they are positioned to take places of prominence and influence in our workforce. As the educators of our most capable students, honors educators should lead the charge in developing LOA in higher education as an offensive strategy against proposed compulsory standardized testing. Our students have the most to lose if an ineffective assessment program causes the decline in the quality of higher education.

PROVIDE RESOURCES

With LOA, higher education can prove to our funding sources the quality of work being done in the university. We can then demand the respect and support that we deserve as the educators of our nation's current and future workforce. However, LOA cannot be created without the appropriate resources. University administrators, including honors program administrators, must provide their faculty with the time, training, and in some cases financial support if LOA is to be properly developed on any university campus.

CONCLUSION

My frustration with my university's LOA was apparent in a recent conversation with an honors colleague. In the course of our conversation she said, "This is really a paradigm shift. It is going to take some time for us to get used to it." She is exactly right; this is a paradigm shift, and it is a paradigm shift that is here to stay. By creating our own LOA, we can manage the direction of this paradigm shift and preserve the quality of the education that we in honors programs, and in higher education, provide to our students.

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