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Assessment and Values: A New Religion?

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Since the mid-1980s, outcomes assessment has been mandated for most institutions of higher education by governing boards, state legislatures, and accrediting bodies. As the movement has progressed, there has been a shift from summative assessment, primarily useful for purposes of accountability, to formative assessment that has a better potential to improve teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the issue of accountability focuses attention on the summative model, creating a danger that units responsible for curriculum and faculty development will not discover the value of assessment for their work. Perhaps the least known aspect of outcomes assessment is its importance as a vehicle for unveiling inherent institutional values and invigorating values inquiry. In both content and process, outcomes assessment is central to values in higher education.

As a member of the task force charged with developing a comprehensive outcomes assessment plan for West Virginia University, one of my responsibilities was to visit academic units to explain our project and consult with program representatives who were developing assessment plans in their disciplines. In one such meeting with members of my own department, a colleague commented, "I've known you a long time, and I don't understand what's going on with you. You act as if assessment is some kind of new religion or something."

That comment reflects some of the major pitfalls for assessment on any campus. First, it reveals the tension between faculty members

who feel they are being held accountable for student learning and administrators who are requiring that accountability. My colleague didn't understand how I, a fellow faculty member, could be enthusiastic about a demand for accountability that came as a top down imperative from administration.

Learning outcomes assessment cannot be done effectively without some conversation about what goes on in classrooms and some consensus about instructional goals. The banner of academic freedom is often waved in the face of such threats to faculty autonomy. A major review of the assessment movement cites administrators who proclaim, "The beauty of assessment is that it's the best prompt in years for faculty development" but who cautiously add that faculty development is "a term I can't use out loud here" (Hutchings & Marchese, 1990). Faculty who are not open to instructional development activities will certainly resist outcomes assessment.

Another problem reflected in my colleague's complaint is the conflict of values that many faculty members perceive in their institutions. Assessment came to WVU in the wake of a decade-long emphasis on research. My colleague is not actually concerned about suddenly shifting gears; the rewards for research productivity remain securely in place, and he knows that it's to his professional advantage to maintain his research agenda and marginalize teaching. However, when the institution sends one message to its faculty in promotion and tenure guidelines and other incentives that privilege research and then asks them to expend additional time and energy on teaching to develop models of outcomes assessment, it is not surprising that there's a strong element of cynicism. The new religion of assessment is assumed to be just one more higher education fad that will eventually disappear.

In fact, the conflict of values is a major problem because unless a campus climate for professional discussions of student instruction is already present, efforts to promote outcomes assessment are doomed to failure. My colleague sees assessment as something external to his role in the University, and that view is not only fatal to assessment efforts, it is reinforced when assessment is solely the province of administrative units. One of the important lessons learned from early

models is that assessment is most successful when integrated in the teaching and learning situation.

The movement toward more formative assessment models is a result of that lesson. With increasing emphasis on student portfolio analysis, classroom research studies, student interviews, and other qualitative approaches, outcomes assessment is moving out of the administrative domain and into the classroom.

Assessment and Institutional Values

In December 1992, the American Association of Higher Education's Assessment Forum published a document listing nine "Principles of Good Practice for Assessment of Student Learning" authored by national leaders in the theory and practice of outcomes assessment (Astin et. al., 1992). Most notable for purposes of this essay was the first principle:

The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.

Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve. Educational values should drive not only *what* we choose to assess but also *how* we do so. Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what's easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about. (Astin, et. al., 1992)

The ideals in this statement could make outcomes assessment seem even more formidable for fledgling educators trying to develop institutional or program-level plans. But what we discovered through trial and error at WVU is that when assessment is approached with integrity (i.e., not merely as an exercise in meeting external demands), highlighting values is an inherent part of the process. Our experience over the past four years indicates, I believe, some of the key elements in making assessment work for any institution.

Background

Assessment arrived at WVU, as at many institutions, through external mandates. In 1990, the University was faced with preparing for its decennial accreditation review by the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools with a campus visit scheduled for the spring of 1994, a review that included the need for a comprehensive outcomes assessment plan for the institution. In addition, the state had formed a Higher Education Council on Assessment, and our Board of Trustees was planning to incorporate requirements for outcomes assessment in the program review process. In response to these pressures, the Provost asked his Assistant Vice President for Curriculum and Instruction to form a task force to develop a comprehensive plan for the University.

The Process

Who Does Assessment?

In naming the Assistant Vice President for Curriculum and Instruction at WVU to lead the task force, the Provost had implicitly opened the process to the development of a formative model. That is, by delegating the task to the administrative officer directly concerned with curriculum and instruction, the Provost had assumed that outcomes assessment would go beyond the realm of the collection of summative data that would be the natural province of the institutional research office.

While the director of that office was a member of the task force (for indeed, summative information is a necessary part of any comprehensive plan), the majority of the members were faculty actively involved in student instruction through directing special programs or as members of key faculty senate committees. Thus, as the group assembled to begin the task of developing a comprehensive assessment plan for the institution, the choice of personnel insured that the focus would be on the primary site of student instruction—the classroom.

How is assessment understood?

In forming the task force, a charge was developed that included underlying philosophic principles that provide a conceptual framework for outcomes assessment at WVU. Among the key points were four especially relevant to the shape of the plan for WVU:

- Faculty must be involved at all levels in the design, implementation, and evaluation of a student learning outcomes assessment plan;
- Assessment should be used to promote positive changes in institutional effectiveness, not just to find problems and weaknesses in programs;
- WVU should strive continually to improve the quality of instruction and institutional effectiveness;
- Assessment should focus on the broad area of student achievement and attitudes as these relate to content knowledge in majors, general education, and student development.

It is important to note that WVU's mission statement prioritizes the institution's commitment to providing "high quality programs of instruction at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels"; thus, the assessment initiative is not only rooted in the mission but can be seen as the quality control measure for our instructional efforts. In developing the conceptual framework for assessment, the University implicitly affirmed the value of student instruction. The institution that asks how outcomes assessment will be conducted on its campus and what the parameters of that process should be will necessarily identify what it values in that inquiry.

Interestingly, during the self-study conducted as preparation for our accreditation review two years after our assessment initiative was begun, we held a series of focus group interviews that affirmed the priority of instruction for faculty, confirming the value that had been unveiled in the assessment process. In his recent *What Matters in College?* (1993), Alexander Astin has shown that the orientation of institutions of higher education is not solely a matter of size or mission. An institution may have a strong research orientation, but faculty attitude is a more significant environmental factor for students. In our self-study process, we discovered that while our administration had

been developing a strong research orientation in recent years for WVU, there was an underlying student orientation among faculty that was more indicative of institutional identity than had been assumed.

The faculty interest in student instruction as a primary value was confirmed when the task force assembled; one of the earliest requests of the group was assurance that central administration was serious about using this process to positively affect student learning. While none of us had the knowledge at the time to specify the assessment model we wanted to follow, I realize, in retrospect, that we were saying we were not interested in following a purely summative process, but we were more interested in formative assessment because of its potential to improve teaching and learning.

The congruence of our belief in the importance of formative assessment, coupled with the conceptual framework that affirmed this belief, enabled us to proceed without model confusion. If the principal players do not share this understanding of the goals and purposes of outcomes assessment at the institution, conflict may arise from a confusion about what assessment is or what it should accomplish on that particular campus.

How does it operate?

As noted, our plan evolved without any conscious awareness of different models but with a shared understanding of purposes and principles. Eventually, we discovered in the literature the model we had been following implicitly. It's important to note that while faculty assessment leaders may feel unsure of themselves because they are credentialed in specific disciplines unrelated to assessment, research indicates that most campus assessment leaders have neither training nor prior significant experience in assessment or measurement but have been educated principally in conferences and workshops (Johnson, Prus, Andersen & El-Khawas, 1991). Outcomes assessment is so integral to the teaching and learning process that most good teachers have an intuitive grasp of the process from their instructional experience and are well prepared to implement outcomes assessment in a more formal manner.

Since we were required to implement assessment at both the university-wide level (general education and student affective devel-

opment) and the program level, our assessment initiative has had two broad components. In program-level outcomes assessment, we emphasize the autonomy of individual degree programs, and the major effort of the central group has been to provide development opportunities to familiarize faculty with outcomes assessment's processes and techniques.

However, before we began at the program level, the task force developed a statement of goals for undergraduate education at WVU through a review of our institutional mission statement, the statement of purpose of our general education curriculum, and the mission statements of our various colleges. We listed five goals that we then circulated to all faculty for review and comment. Their response provided confirmation that we had represented well the values of the University community. Most of the responses we received were praise for having focused our educational efforts so clearly, and the few suggestions were more semantic than substantive.

What seemed to be simply a preliminary step in the assessment process occupied the task force for more than a semester, but we understand, in retrospect, that in formulating these goals we were unveiling institutional values inherent in statements of mission and purpose. Hence, when we conducted a campus-wide conference on program-level assessment, we already had shared values among participants, and our discussion focused on ways to assess student learning. Beginning with "Is this what we all believe?" rather than "This is what you must do" seems to be a positive way to introduce assessment to faculty and avoid immediate resistance.

Even in the "doing" phase, there are ways to encourage dialogue and values inquiry. Rather than stipulate specific methods for programs, we have emphasized autonomy to encourage degree programs to develop assessment plans that will be meaningful in the discipline and helpful in instructional development. Since our focus has been formative, even those programs that rely on summative measures understand the importance of linking results to improvement.

For example, one of our professional programs assesses student learning principally through licensure examination results and surveys of graduates and their supervisors, asking both groups to identify strengths and weaknesses of specific skills that are developed in the

curriculum. Although licensure results have been superb over the past ten years, and surveys indicated that all skills areas were considered adequate, one particular area was identified as less strong than others. As a result, the program initiated a review of the curriculum components related to that area.

Formative assessment does not simply mean using certain types of measures; it is an attitude that must permeate the entire process. It has informed the developing role of the task force, a group that in two years evolved into a more permanent assessment leadership group, the WVU Assessment Council. In keeping with our value of formation rather than information (my colleagues in engineering speak of being pro-active rather than re-active), the leadership group has focused on education of the University community about the assessment process, providing general workshops and meeting with individual schools, colleges, and departments to help them formulate their assessment plans. An informal assessment newsletter was begun to communicate information and maintain a positive attitude toward assessment throughout the University.

One lesson of our process has been that values are implicit in the choices made during the development of an assessment process in an institution, and a values orientation can help assessment leaders navigate unfamiliar terrain.

The Practice

Two projects at the university level are indicative of the ways assessment can (and should) invigorate values inquiry in higher education.

The first began very simply. The task force had spent a year deliberating assessment at WVU and needed to *do* something. With little knowledge and no prior experience, we initiated a longitudinal study of student experience based in the primary question, "What happens to students at WVU?" We had no agenda but felt that the general information we could acquire would be valuable as a preface to outcomes assessment. In addition to tracking students' academic progress (or lack of progress), we conduct annual interviews. In planning the interview protocol, we identify questions to which we'd

like students' response. At least one question is designed to explore the differences (if any) between their values and ours.

For example, a problem we experience is student absence from class, especially among freshman and sophomores. Several internal studies have shown a strong correlation between failing grades and poor attendance. By asking students why they think undergraduates often fail to attend class, we learned not only that students were well aware of the problem but that underclassmen generally believe that class attendance is unrelated to grades. If we want to retain students, we now realize that we need to intervene to help them understand the value of class attendance. This information has helped shape our student orientation programs and policies.

We also used the interviews in planning our assessment of general education. Suspecting that most students were unaware of any intentional curriculum and saw the components of our general education program as simply a series of requirements, we asked, "How do you feel about having to take courses outside your major?" The results were surprising. Although we confirmed our assumption that students had no conception of a program with goals and objectives for learning, we also discovered, to our surprise, that students were not opposed to general education. Admittedly, most students are vocationally oriented, but they also appreciate the need to be more broadly educated in a rapidly changing society. By understanding their values, we are better able to define our own as an instructional faculty and, most importantly, communicate those values to our students more effectively.

Because our interviews indicated a need to raise student and faculty consciousness of learning goals, we implemented a classroom research project that aims to help both faculty and students understand the goals of general education and document learning with reference to those goals. At WVU, our general education program (known as the Liberal Studies Program or LSP) is composed of a group of distribution-based requirements taught in various degree programs. Our aim is to establish a descriptive profile of learning in the LSP while measuring student learning outcomes. In the process, we plan to improve delivery of the LSP. Since student learning in general education is less determined by content and curriculum design than

by delivery (Astin, 1993), our faculty development/outcomes assessment project should lead directly to improvement.

Each semester, faculty participants in this project identify one or two LSP goals that they believe are met in their courses. They plan modest research projects to assess learning in relation to those goals. One of the most important exercises in values inquiry that developed from this project was the need to state specific learning goals for the LSP. From our experience with the statement of goals for undergraduate education, we realized that one of the problems in assessing the LSP was that the program had been instituted with a description of its ideals rather than concrete goals for learning. In translating that description into goals and asking faculty to review them in relation to their teaching, we indirectly engage faculty in examining the value of those objectives for learning.

The conversation among faculty participants and between individual faculty members and the project coordinator has been an exercise in values inquiry. In order to develop a classroom research project, participants had to ask themselves why they were designing their courses in specific ways and what they hoped to accomplish. In addition, one component of the project is surveying students about which goals were met in participating faculty members' classes. We tabulate those surveys for a profile of the class from the student perspective and invite faculty members to review and discuss the correlation between their perceptions of the learning goals accomplished and the perceptions of their students. Thus, we are presenting the program goals to students as values for learning and enhancing their understanding of the LSP as a total program.

This year, we added another component to the process of assessing learning in the LSP with a limited student portfolio pilot project. Twenty-five honors freshmen volunteered to participate in this project that involves an annual reflective essay on the LSP experience combined with course materials that support the essay and individual interviews.

One aspect of formative assessment that we've discovered in the past two years is that it's a more recursive than linear process. As we develop a knowledge base about student learning outcomes at WVU, we see other aspects of student learning that deserve investigation.

This process differs from our original assumptions about outcomes assessment.

The original charge to the Assessment Task Force implied that a complete assessment plan for the University would be established prior to implementation. We anticipated our charge would last two years, and then the work of the task force would be completed. When two years passed and we discovered that we had several projects ongoing and others developing from information learned in earlier projects, we wondered what we were doing wrong. We discovered that while the summative model is linear, formative evaluation is recursive. Answered questions lead to other questions.

The Future

The danger that assessment will indeed be some “new religion” in higher education that will lack currency once external pressures are lessened and administrative enthusiasm wanes is eliminated when the value of the process is experienced at the program and classroom level. If organizational developers use assessment to ask the questions that are appropriate for their institution, the value of outcomes assessment for program and faculty development will be evident and outcomes assessment will be institutionalized in existing structures and procedures.

Let me offer an example. Several years ago, the WVU Faculty Senate initiated a modest writing-across-the-curriculum venture. A discipline-specific writing requirement was instituted, and programs responded with course development. No means of evaluating the effect of this requirement was stipulated, but within several years anecdotal reports indicated trouble. Members of the Faculty Senate were demanding some review, and no one was sure what to do. Fortunately, the calls for review of these courses occurred three years after we’d begun working on assessment, and we immediately offered to assess the student outcomes and report to the Senate. Our assessment confirmed some of the problems that had been reported, pointed out some virtues that had not been noticed, but, most importantly, suggested specific action that could improve the situation.

Once faculty appreciate assessment as a process that supports and strengthens their efforts rather than view it as some intrusive arm of external agencies, outcomes assessment not only finds a home, it fulfills its potential to improve the academy.

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