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ABSTRACT

Uses of assessment in postsecondary education and policy issues are considered. In higher education, assessment is used to refer to at least six separate but overlapping activities: (1) multiple measures to track students' intellectual and personal growth over an extended period of time; (2) state-mandated requirements for evaluating students and/or academic programs; (3) a focus on the "value added," whereby students undergo pre- and post-testing and the gains in general education and skills are measured; (4) general standardized testing; (5) making decisions about funding by rewarding institutions for performance on established criteria; and (6) measuring changes in student attitudes and values. Attention is directed to three purposes of student testing: admission/placement testing, achievement testing, and testing for graduation. Policy issues include: specifying educational quality, achievement and student access, the cost of quality, legal issues surrounding the use of tests for promotion/graduation decisions, and the use of performance criteria in the budget process. It is proposed that concern with the outcomes of college and student achievement is likely to become an increasingly prominent policy issue. (SW)

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The Growing Interest in Measuring The Educational Achievement of College Students

by
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The Growing Interest in Measuring the Educational Achievement of College Students

The ground is shifting on American colleges and universities. After two decades of focusing on issues of equal opportunity and student access, the emphasis is increasingly on educational quality and the intellectual skills of students. Indeed, one recent report on higher education noted "the quality and meaning of undergraduate education has fallen to a point at which mere access has lost much of its value." 1/

There is no shortage of warning signals that quality is at risk:

- o A large number of college students need remediation. Research suggests that the average community college freshman is reading at an eighth grade level. 2/
- o Student performance on the verbal section of tests of general learned abilities (such as the Graduate Record Examination) has declined sharply in the last decade. 3/
- o Performance on professional licensing exams, such as the National Teachers Examination and state bar examinations, also point to declines in college student performance.
- o The focus of a liberal arts education is widely believed to have been diluted. Students are increasingly likely to major in professional and occupational fields. 4/
- o Sharp criticisms are beginning to appear in popular magazines, accusing higher education of everything from poor students to no quality control to price gouging. 5/

In the last two years, major reports from diverse groups have described these problems in detail and issued strong calls for improvements in academic programs. In Involvement in Learning, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, called for a systematic program to assess the knowledge, capacities, and skills developed in students by academic and co-curricular programs. 6/ William Bennett, then chairman of the

National Endowment for the Humanities, issued a statement, To Reclaim A Legacy, that called for renewed attention to the humanities and urged college and university presidents to take a leading role in curricular reform. 7/ The Association of American College's report, Integrity in the Classroom, referred to the absence of institutional accountability as "one of the most remarkable and scandalous aspects" of higher education and proposed that college faculties design and monitor appropriate techniques for measuring student progress. 8/

Most recently, the Southern Regional Education Board's Commission for Educational Quality called for the establishment of a "new covenant" involving the public, its political representatives, and higher education to find ways of improving quality while maintaining student access. Such a goal, the Commission concluded, will require new measures of student performance. 9/

There has already been some movement to address quality concerns. Many colleges have revised their curriculums and others are considering changes. A number of institutions have tightened their admissions requirements, hoping to ensure that students enter with a greater level of knowledge and preparation. Some institutions have begun to use commercially developed products to measure student progress and achievement while in college.

More promising, or ominous, depending upon your perspective, are the efforts of some state governments to increase educational quality at publicly supported institutions. The actions states have taken or are planning varies considerably, ranging from mandating admissions tests to revising funding formulas based on student

performance. By most accounts, the steps taken so far represent the tip of the iceberg.

If the calls for change have a common theme, it is a desire to assure greater levels of student performance. There is widespread agreement that we need to pay more attention to measuring educational achievement and proposals for better "assessment" of student learning are common. Assessment is a neutral enough word and it carries little of the negative baggage that other phrases (e.g., accountability testing) would bring along. But assessment has a number of different meanings, and is rapidly becoming an overused word that means different things to different people in different settings.

This paper seeks to provide an overview of the current interest in postsecondary assessment: what it is, what it embodies, who is using it, the questions it raises, and its future. The intention is not to answer questions as much as to raise them, in hopes that the other papers in the series and the forthcoming National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education will shed more light on the host of issues that merit attention.

What Is Assessment and What Does it Mean for Higher Education?

The theory of assessment began to emerge in the late 1930s thanks to the research of Henry A. Murray and his colleagues at the Harvard Psychological Clinic. The first large-scale effort to put assessment into practice was made by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) during the Second World War to evaluate candidates for especially dangerous jobs. In the mid 1960s, Douglas Bray extended

the assessment method into corporate settings by starting a long-term study of a group of new managers at AT&T and following their development in a major longitudinal study. By the mid 1970s, assessment centers were relatively common in the corporate world; one scholar estimated that there may have been as many as 1,000 of them. 10/

In education, assessment is often used interchangeably with evaluation and/or measurement. It is different in important respects. Assessment is derived from a Latin word meaning "to sit beside" or "assist in the office of the judge." Thus, the word refers to the process of gathering data and assembling the evidence into an interpretable form. Judgements, or evaluations, can then be based on the assessment evidence.

Psychologist Donald W. MacKinnon, defines assessment in a similar fashion:

> . . . assessment is a method for the psychological evaluation of individuals that involves testing and observing individuals in a group setting, with a multiplicity of tests and procedures, by a number of staff members. Through a pooling of test scores and subjective impressions, the assessors formulate psychodynamic descriptions of the assessed subjects which, hopefully, will permit prediction of the assessees' behavior in certain kinds of roles and situations. 11/

The Encyclopedia of Education Evaluation emphasizes that assessment is a "multitrait-multimethod" approach, meaning that it involves a number of variables (rather than a single measurement), and uses a number of techniques to measure them. 12/

Meeting such rigorous criteria is difficult. The best known educational assessment, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), for example, meets some of them, but not all. It

tests school children in different age groups in several academic areas using different techniques (e.g., multiple choice, essay). The evidence allows educators and policy makers to make judgements about education quality. But individual score reports are not issued; the data are aggregated before analysis, interpretation, and reporting. A true assessmer would focus on the individual learner.

Within nigher education the situation is even more complicated: assessment is now used to refer to at least six separate but overlapping activities. The first, which comes closest to the historic meaning, uses multiple measures and observers to track students' intellectual and personal growth over an extended period of time. The best and perhaps only such comprehensive example of this is Alverno College, an institution that has become synonymous with assessment and ability-based learning. In 1973, the Alverno faculty restructured the curriculum around a core of eight "abilities that last a lifetime:" communication, analysis, problem solving, valuing in decision making, social interaction, taking responsibility for the environment, involvement in the contemporary world, and aesthetic response. Teaching these abilities is an underlying focus of all courses.

Alverno has an elaborate system to aid students in developing these abilities. Over the course of a four-year career, the typical student will undergo more than 100 performance assessments. The colleges use simulations that require the students to demonstrate one or more of the core abilities and levels of performance within them. Criteria for evaluating the abilities remain the same for all disciplines. Faculty, peers, community professionals, and others evaluate

performance. Research done at Alverno suggests that the approach has been very effective in achieving its goals. 13/

The second, and most common, meaning of assessment in higher education is state-mandated requirements for evaluating students and/or academic programs. Some states use the pass rates on professional licensing examinations as indicators of quality, especially in teaching and nursing fields. Other states use testing for counseling and placement. Still others employ tests as a promotional gate that students must pass through before receiving their degree or moving on toward further education.

Postsecondary student testing has risen in popularity partly because of the states' experience with minimum competency tests for elementary and secondary school students. A decade ago, few states had such testing programs in place, today virtually every state does. Legislators have begun applying the same logic to higher education: if we can define core abilities for high school students as a way of focusing attention on the central elements of an education, why can't we do the same thing for college students?

A third use of "assessment" is as a shorthand way of focusing on the "value added" by postsecondary education. Under this approach students receive pre and post-tests and the gains in general education and skills are measured. For many years Northeast Missouri State University has used a "value added" assessment to measure student learning using a wide range of national tests. 14/

A fourth meaning of assessment in higher education refers to general standardized testing. There are several general testing instruments that are available to measure student knowledge. The

Undergraduate Assessment Program, developed by Educational Testing Service, is a subject matter test that can be used as a comprehensive senior exam. 15/ This is not, however, one of ETS's larger programs: only two tests are available and these have not been renormed since the late 1970s. Moreover, institutions must score the tests themselves. The College Outcome Measures Project of The American College Testing Program (ACT-COMP) is a more general test aimed at measuring the application of facts, concepts, and skills needed for effective functioning. The test focuses on three areas: functioning within social institutions, using science and technology, and using the arts. It is currently used at more than 250 schools.

Fifth, some observers (especially state policy makers) see assessment as a way of making decisions about funding by rewarding institutions for performance on established criteria. The leading example is undoubtedly Tennessee's Performance Funding Program. This effort emphasizes student learning in general education, student learning in the major field, and student satisfaction with the educational experience. At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, the Performance Funding Program has allowed some departments to relate student learning to curricular offerings and the University's budget process. 16/

Finally, another use of the world refers to measuring changes in student attitudes and values. Higher education is justified in part by the "good neighbor benefits" it cultivates: open-mindedness, tolerance, interest in the community, and self esteem. A number of survey instruments examine attitudinal development and growth, such as the ACE/CIRP and the College Board/NCHEMS Student Outcomes

Information Service; many institutions use their own instruments to measure change in this area. 17/

Even the federal government is involved in this last area. The Department of Education will soon launch another national longitudinal study that will include a postsecondary sample for the first time. Follow-up surveys will provide evidence on the effect of college performance and subsequent activities (e.g., labor force participation). Similarly, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has recently undertaken a survey to measure "adult literacy."

The purpose of reviewing these various discrete items that are often grouped under the assessment umbrella is not to show one as preferable to the others. Rather, it is to illustrate the range and diversity of activities taking place and to indicate the importance of some precision in use of the word. "True" assessment is a valuable and powerful tool. But it is expensive and rarely what we mean when we speak of assessment in higher education. While we might group these six meanings under the same heading, some specificity is warranted: do we mean performance based funding, achievement testing, student development, or something entirely different?

Assessment as Testing

The aspect of the assessment movement that has generated the most attention is student testing. There are three separate but related ways states (and some institutions) are dealing with underprepared students through testing. The first tightens admissions standards to ensure that students learn basic academic

competencies in high school. In addition to testing, this approach often includes efforts to raise academic course requirements for college admission. A second focus more or less gives up on high schools and tests students at some point during their college career to ensure specified levels of achievement have been reached. A final method imposes a graduation test as a way of guaranteeing that students meet at least minimum performance levels before receiving a college degree. Each of these approaches--testing to measure skills as part of the admissions process, to decide whether a student is sufficiently prepared to advance, or as a hurdle to graduation--merit some discussion.

Admission/Placement Testing. Standardized tests for students before they enroll in college have been an established part of the landscape for many years. Recently, however, some states have begun to test potential students more thoroughly to ensure that they have the intellectual knowledge and tools to do college level work. Florida now requires potential students to achieve a minimum score on a standardized examination before admission. The test, mandated by the state legislature in 1984, focuses on basic communication and computation skills. Because the standards for the test are higher than those required for high school graduation, a program offered through the state's community colleges helps students that fail the test. No college credit is given for the remedial work. 18/

Tests are also used to help make decisions about student placement and remediation. Perhaps the best known example is the New Jersey College Basic Skills Placement Test, initiated by the state in 1977. The exam, developed in cooperation with the College Board

and ETS, consists of an essay and four multiple choice sections: elementary algebra, computation, reading comprehension, and sentence sense. Results are used for counseling and course placement. The test is now administered at all the state's public colleges and at a number of private institutions that participate voluntarily. 19/

The California State University system uses a similar examination. Entering freshmen are given an English placement test that serves as a diagnostic tool to help students select appropriate courses. The four-part examination--reading, sentence construction, logic, and organization--has been in place since 1977. 20/

A variation on this approach comes from Ohio. Under the Early Testing Program, now supported by the Board of Regents, high school students take a version of the mathematics placement exam used by the state's public colleges and universities. Students are given information about their likely placement while they still have an additional year to take courses and address deficiencies. A similar test to measure writing skills is currently being developed. 21/

An even more popular development than devising new testing procedures is raising admissions standards to public universities. According to a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education, twenty-two states have raised admission requirements in the last two years. In some cases, such as Missouri, the new standards are significantly higher than the state requirements for high school graduation. Supporters believe that such standards will both help raise educational performance in high schools and boost the academic preparation of entering freshmen. Critics worry that such an approach pushes all the blame for the declining quality of education

on secondary schools and may prevent disadvantaged pupils from entering the door of higher learning. 22/

Achievement Testing. In some cases, testing is used as a promotional gate to determine a student's readiness to move from one level of education to the next. The leading example of such an examination is Florida's College Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST). In 1982, Florida required that all students in community colleges or state universities present passing scores on a state examination before receiving an associates degree or being admitted to upper division (i.e., the junior class) status. The test is sometimes referred to as a "rising junior" exam. The requirement has since been expanded to private college students who receive financial aid from state sources.

The test measures communication and computation skills including reading, writing, speaking, listening, algorithms, concepts, generalizations and problem solving. About seventy-five percent of students pass the exam on the first try. All students receive score reports and interpretive guides as well as information regarding performance on each of the tested areas.

Florida has supplemented the CLAST examination with curricular standards developed by the state legislature. The so-called "Gordon rule" named after its sponsor, State Senator Jack Gordon, requires all students to complete 12 semester hours of course work in English (including written work of at least 6,000 words), and six semester hours of mathematics. 23/

Some states and institutions require students to take examinations if they plan to enter certain areas of study. In recent years, a few states have begun to require students to pass a general

education skills test to qualify for admission into teacher education programs as a way of ensuring that only qualified students would become teachers. Mississippi, for example, requires minimum scores of the ACT Comp examination. Other states require prospective teachers to achieve a minimum score on the Scholastic Aptitude Test. A recent survey by the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education found that 64 percent of their membership now use some kind of test to screen candidates for admission to teacher education programs. 24/

Several individual institutions, or public college systems, have adopted their own version of a "rising junior" examination. The City University of New York uses the Freshman Skills Assessment Program to ensure reading, writing, and mathematics proficiencies. The University of Arizona requires all students to pass a writing proficiency examination near the mid-point of their undergraduate career. The University of Massachusetts at Boston requires undergraduates to pass a writing proficiency examination before they can take upper division courses. 25/

Testing for Graduation. There can be a thin line between promotional gate testing and graduation testing. Florida's CLAST exam, for example, is clearly a graduation test for community college students and a gate for those in four year institutions. But beyond this, there are few examples of true graduation tests where students who do not pass the examination do not receive a degree. Despite the inroads state governments are making on the academic independence of colleges, they appear reluctant, so far, to impose graduation tests.

Perhaps the leading example of such an examination comes from Georgia. Beginning in 1973, the state required students to pass its "Regents Exam" in order to graduate. The two-hour test has a reading and essay section and is evaluated at state scoring centers. Although passage is required for graduation, students first take the exam as sophomores and retake it until they pass. In recent results, about 75 percent passed the reading section and 60 percent passed the writing part, suggesting that the exam is not an especially rigorous hurdle for college graduates. 26/

Part of the difficulty in designing a graduation test for bachelor's degree recipients (or potential recipients) is the diversity of American higher education. The absence of a standard curriculum or an agreed upon central core of knowledge makes it difficult to develop a general-knowledge measure that would be suitable for all students across all institutions. Tests of basic skills--reading, writing, mathematics, etc.--may well ensure an acceptable level of minimum competency for college students, but they will hardly suffice as the mark of an educated person.

In some European countries, college graduates must take and pass a set of examinations, with special emphasis on their major field of study. There is some interest in the United States in such a program and some instruments are available. ETS's Undergraduate Assessment Program, for example, could provide the foundation for a measurement of senior-level subject-matter knowledge among students.

Policy Considerations and Unsettled Issues

The extensive range of activities going forward under the assessment banner illustrates the widespread state and, to a lesser extent, institutional interest in ensuring student achievement in higher education. Part of the focus is clearly an effort to change the signals sent to high school and college students by emphasizing that students must develop stronger academic skills. The efforts so far appear to have been reasonably well designed. Still, there are reasons for concern. Much of what we refer to as assessment is really achievement testing by any other name, a much narrower, though important, activity. As well, the current activities raise a number of troublesome long-range questions that need to be addressed. Some of the issues that should be of greatest concern to educators and policy makers alike are outlined in this section. The solutions to these issues are often obscure or difficult. Nonetheless, how they are answered will have an important bearing on the evolution of the drive toward improved quality.

What Is Quality? Any effort to measure student outcomes quickly leads to questions about the goals of education; results cannot be assessed except in relation to the desired ends. And if the goal is quality, how do we define it? Some educators, such as former Ohio State University president, Harold Enarson, claim that many efforts to measure quality are little more than "bush-league economics. It is zeal for quantification carried to its inherent and logical absurdity." 27/ From this perspective, any attempt to specify and measure educational quality is likely to complicate the broader goals of

learning, leaving students with only a cheap (but empirically verifiable) imitation. Try telling that to a state legislator.

Agreeing with this point does not mean all efforts are futile. Some efforts at assessment, such as Alverno College's comprehensive program, are rich and valuable tools. But such approaches are expensive, time consuming and will require a degree of institutional and political agreement that will be difficult to achieve. And there is an enormous difference in scale. Alverno, with its 1,400 students, is a far more homogeneous place than Ohio State with an enrollment of 50,000 plus.

But such differences are too often an excuse for not taking action. At many large institutions undergraduate education ranks, in truth, as the third or fourth priority and nobody is really in charge of it. In this environment the incentives generally favor the status quo. The question is less the size and structure of an institution than it is recognizing the growing public demands and acting upon them. There is, for example, no reason that large universities could not establish a general framework and guidelines for ensuring student quality and giving individual schools, colleges, or departments the responsibility for implementing appropriate steps.

The central problem is that measuring educational achievement may well require more agreement about the ends and means of a higher education than we have at most institutions. It is possible to define a minimum level of information or skills that students should possess, sort of a least common denominator approach to college. But defining a general core of liberal learning and developing tools to ensure that students are both broadly educated and deeply versed in

a particular discipline is a far more complex task. State governments and coordinating agencies can do (and are doing) the former, but only institutions can do the latter. The most comfortable approach to defining quality may well be letting outside bodies do it, but this may cheapen public perceptions of higher education--it's a little hard to talk about higher learning when somebody is giving your students minimum competency tests--and erode institutional autonomy.

Achievement and Student Access. The growing interest in quality does not mean diminished support for expanding access to disadvantaged groups. Indeed, access as a policy objective is so widely accepted that no knowledgeable observer proposes anything but greater efforts in this direction. Nonetheless, there is concern that raising educational standards, at whatever level, will result in decreased participation by minority students. Indeed, the current emphasis on testing and measurement as a vehicle relies on standardized indicators that have always been troublesome for the disadvantaged.

Reconciling equality and excellence has always been a difficult assignment and it will be no easier now. In fact, the challenges to be faced on the campus will be greater than ever before: colleges must continue to expand access to disadvantaged students while making even greater efforts to improve the quality of education they receive. This will require redoubling efforts to provide effective remediation both before and during the college experience. Such efforts will, of course, have serious implications for both staffing and funding. State governments are likely to be favorably disposed to the need for resources in this area; no state legislature will willingly

accept a program designed to ensure quality that fails large numbers of minority students. But remediation must now be seen as strictly temporary--the goal must be to bring students into the academic mainstream as quickly and efficiently as possible. Too often in the past remedial courses have become a substitute for meaningful and rigorous work.

The Cost of Quality. Raising academic standards will not be free. Even at the most basic level of adding an examination program, money is required to design and pretest the instruments, administer them, score and evaluate the results, and distribute scores to students and institutions. More elaborate assessment programs will involve greater costs. Related activities, such as remediation programs, will push the bill even higher.

State governments have already indicated a willingness to invest money for educational quality and opinion polls repeatedly show the public will support higher spending (and taxes) for better education. But, as the recent efforts to improve elementary and secondary education illustrate, there is an explicit quid pro quo involved. Higher funding for higher standards is possible. Higher funding without quality improvements is increasingly unlikely.

Colleges and universities will face increased competition for funding in the future. The state efforts to improve precollegiate education will cost a great deal of money and, in some states, elementary school enrollments are increasing while postsecondary enrollments are stable or declining. Since funding is usually based on enrollments, colleges will be in competition with elementary schools, as well as with other social services. In this environment,

clear, convincing evidence of higher quality might well allow institutions to make a better case with public officials. Charles McClain, the president of Northeast Missouri State University, has repeatedly said that the positive results of his school's value added program have made it easier to maintain support in the state legislature.

Legal Issues. Any assessment program that ties promotion or graduation to performance on standardized tests raises legal questions. While lawsuits aimed at blocking statewide or institutional testing programs at the postsecondary level remain comparatively rare, some have been filed. In Texas, for example, Federal Judge William W. Justice recently issued an injunction that forbids the state from requiring teacher education students to pass a Pre-professional Skills Test. How this and similar cases will be resolved is unclear, but the extensive record of such suits at the elementary and secondary level indicates that caution, and careful design, will be essential. James Mingle suggests that, at a minimum, three considerations should be kept in mind: Has adequate notice of the program been given? Are the test materials racially or culturally biased? Does the test reflect the material taught? The last issue may be the most important; any measurement instruments must be sufficiently related to curricular offerings to withstand judicial scrutiny. 28/

Is Assessment Tied to Funding? Funding for public colleges and universities has historically been based on enrollments and the kinds of programs offered rather than how well students were educated. In recent years, enrollment based funding encouraged institutional

growth and an expansion of student access. At the same time, state governments were often hesitant to rely on performance criteria in the budget process because it raised difficult questions about definitions of quality and measurement of performance. Institutions were no more anxious to rely on performance standards than were state governments. Now, as educational quality becomes an important policy focus for state governments, there are suggestions that funding formulas should also be modified.

Several models may be used. One is performance based budgeting that rewards institutions for meeting specified goals. Tennessee has such a system; it lets institutions supplement their core budget by demonstrating progress toward agreed upon measures of improved quality. A second approach is to establish and announce performance goals and outcome measures that will serve as a benchmark for evaluating institutional efforts. This approach does not tie funding directly to results, but it does provide a target that is likely to be considered in making budgetary decisions. Florida and several other states have expressed interest in this approach. 29/

A third method is to establish a competitive grant program that lets institutions apply for funds to undertake improvement or quality enhancing projects, a state-level Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). A related possibility is the use of special categorical funding to provide resources for specific issues or areas of interests. These last two approaches are popular with institutions since they emphasize local needs and interests. From the state's perspective, both can pave the way for "joint-ownership" of the effort by requiring cost-sharing. The weakness of these

approaches is that support for separate funding is hard to maintain (or expand) and it may be difficult to make specific projects institution-wide priorities. 30/

The general direction seems reasonably clear: state insistence on greater educational quality is likely to result in changes that will relate institutional funding to student achievement. But putting such a system in place will prove a difficult task that will require a delicate balancing of institutional needs for flexibility and autonomy with the public's interest in accountability and improvement.

Institutional Autonomy and State Authority - The drive toward higher standards in postsecondary education may jeopardize the American tradition of institution-based quality control. One educator has warned: "If American higher education is to forestall the imposition of a state system of examinations, it will have to improve its own forms of quality control. . . If the academy does not strengthen these controls of its own volition, it may find government moving to do so in ways that jeopardize the core of the enterprise." 31/

Efforts by individual institutions to measure student progress is consistent with the tradition of higher education--it allows diverse colleges to pursue their own visions of excellence. Colleges can effectively use activities tailored to their own goals and student situations. As well, they can develop elaborate ability-based assessments reflecting higher order learning goals, as Alverno College has done.

But if the states take the lead and impose a single program, they may well do so by imposing standardized measures on all institutions. Such an approach may undermine autonomy, increase

the homogenization of higher education, and stifle innovation. Should this occur, the diversity that we prize and that the rest of the world admires, will be seriously undermined. Most of the state-level programs enacted so far have been carefully designed, but future initiatives may turn to standardized measures that can be administered cheaply and interpreted easily, perhaps even offering a single number as the current level of quality in individual colleges. Americans hunger for such information. Witness, for example, the wide reliance on SAT scores as a benchmark of secondary school quality, despite widespread arguments by educators that the test is a poor instrument for such purposes. Imagine how college officials would react if the nation's GRE scores were mandated and released each year amid such wide media attention and public comment.

An additional danger in this regard harkens back to the previous policy issue--whether such scores are used to make policy decisions. If institutional funding is tied to results on state measurement instruments, faculty may feel pressured to teach to the test, especially if they in turn are evaluated on students' performance. There are some suggestions that "teaching to the test" now takes place in states where such programs exist. 32/ In the process, institutional flexibility and autonomy are diminished.

Summing Up: It's Here to Stay

Concerns about what, if anything, colleges and universities teach their students are not new. Harvard's legendary president, Charles Eliot, who virtually eliminated required courses for undergraduates was once asked why Harvard was such a great

storehouse of knowledge. "In all likelihood," he allegedly replied, "it is because the freshman bring us so much, and the seniors take away so little." Throughout the long history of American higher education, we have experienced regular periods of concern that graduates were taking away too little knowledge from their college experience. We are now in another such era, and the move to assess student achievement flows from it.

The drive to ensure quality raises a host of troubling issues, ones that go to the heart of the college experience and the relationship between higher education and the many publics it serves. Some in higher education hope that this is nothing more than a passing fancy. Colleges and universities are very conservative institutions, change comes slowly, if at all. Those who advocate large-scale assessment would appear to want colleges to plunge off into a brave new world with few road maps. Asking colleges to do something they don't want to, that is only loosely defined, and that threatens to upset existing arrangements has all the makings of a fad or a disaster. In either case, it should be avoided.

Assessment is not likely to be a fad. Several factors suggest that careful attention to the results of undergraduate education will be with us for some time. The first is simply that the great accomplishments in expanding student access have created another set of problems. Many people who would not have attended higher education two decades ago are there today. Some measure of quality assurance is essential. As the Southern Regional Education Board noted: "Access should be a highly significant social and economic force, but it will not be unless it is access to quality education." 33/

A second factor is the widespread public concern (most evident in state legislatures) that many colleges place too little value on teaching undergraduates. Leon Botstein, president of Bard College and hardly an unsympathetic observer, has written:

> Since World War II, talk about teaching and curriculum in the American university has lost whatever marginal prestige it once possessed. Teaching strategies and lesson plans are now considered the contemptible stuff of the unsophisticated--classroom teacher below the college level. Rigor in specialization, quality of scholarship and familiarity with current research--the cutting edge of a field--have become the essential and sufficient criteria for achieving status and recognition in institutions of higher education. 34/

The decline in interest in teaching, coupled with the changing student population and its greater needs for careful, thorough instruction, lead many observers to question just what, if anything, students are learning. It is not a question that will be easily dismissed.

Still another reason that the standards issue will not go away is easily overlooked by educators. State governments, once the whipping posts of American politics, are more competent and professional than ever before. Constitutional modernization and administrative reform have transformed state capitals. State governments now ask more and better questions, have more information and assistance available to them, and are much more visible and active actors than they were twenty years ago. Legislatures and governors are increasingly asking what the state is getting for its money. The capacity to ask tough questions and the willingness to act means that colleges and universities can soon expect (and in some cases are already getting) the same sort of scrutiny that has been given the public schools. 35/

Most of the attention so far has been on public institutions and they will bear the brunt of the future scrutiny. More specifically, the focus will be on state colleges and community colleges. Too often we use the nation's leading research universities or selective colleges as the reference point for talking about higher education. In truth, these institutions probably enroll less than 15 percent of the nation's students. But the mission of these schools has changed little in the last two decades and the competition for admission by students offers some assurance of quality. But community colleges and state colleges serve all comers and the mission of both types of institutions have grown more complicated (and obscure) in recent years. Many state legislatures regard these schools as directionless and mediocre.

This does not mean that private colleges occupy a completely safe harbor. Some states provide direct subsidies to their private institutions, and many others provide indirect assistance. Most states regulate at least some aspect of private higher education within their borders. If public funds support it, public regulations can follow, as Florida's expansion of the CLAST program to private college students receiving financial aid illustrates. Moreover, some private colleges are already desperate for students and willing to take anyone as a way of filling classrooms. State governments know that in such an environment, quality is too often a secondary consideration.

In short, concern with the outcomes of higher education and student achievement is likely to become an increasingly prominent part of the policy landscape. Higher education has two choices in this regard. It can wait, watch and see how developments evolve. In the meantime, more states are likely to take action. Alternatively,

colleges can take a leadership role and implement assessments that meet the public interest while preserving institutional autonomy.

This latter course will require enormous leadership at the campus level. Individual institutions that have developed impressive programs for measuring student achievement owe much to the vision of one or two campus-wide leaders. Charles McClain at Northeast Missouri State, and Joel Read and Austin Doherty at Alverno, took a special interest in these issues and provided the leadership needed to overcome the inevitable difficulties that arose. Unfortunately, the incentives often work against academic leadership by college presidents. One recent study of college presidents found that only two percent of the seven hundred surveyed described themselves as playing a major role in academic affairs. This does not mean that college presidents can do it alone. Only by involving the entirety of the college administration and staff is there a reasonable chance of success. In Education Secretary Bennett's words:

> Revitalizing an educational institution is not easy. Usually it requires uncommon courage and discernment on the part of a few and a shared vision of what can and ought to be on the part of many. 36/

Most state legislatures would prefer to see colleges and universities take the lead in this area. Legislators recognize the complexity of the issues involved and the political rewards involved are not great. Self regulation is a popular public policy tool these days if it serves the public interest in a clear and appropriate fashion. Strong steps toward institutional renewal will be well received in state capitols. But legislators will not be satisfied with bland assurances of quality or meaningless indicators.

Whether higher education institutions can marshall the leadership, energy, and creativity to meet the quality challenge by themselves remains to be seen. But one thing is clear: the issue will not quickly fade away.

Endnotes

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