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ABSTRACT

The conference reported in this document was attended by representatives of seven states (Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington). Participants focused on three key questions: (1) what are the issues and objectives behind assessment in each state? (2) what can be done regarding the implementation of assessment? and (3) how should the results be communicated? Concern with assessment was seen as reflecting interest in educational quality, as encouraging more effective use of resources, and as a means for faculty self-improvement. Variations across states were noted in terms of external forces, internal forces, initial fears and ultimate advantages of assessment as policy, and current issues. Suggestions directed at both campus leadership and state leaders are made for the improvement of assessment implementation especially in the areas of resolving differences between the two groups and maintaining good communication. A concluding section notes that the power of the assessment movement lies in the cogency of the questions it asks and that the biggest shortcoming of many state assessment initiatives is their failure to communicate a compelling set of reasons for mandated assessment. The conference agenda, a list of participants, and names of members of the Assessment Advisory Committee are included. (DB)

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ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Proceedings Document
December 5-7, 1989
Santa Fe, NM

Education Commission of the States
707 Seventeenth Street, Suite 2700
Denver, Colorado 80202

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ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EL DORADO HOTEL
309 West San Francisco Street
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501
(505) 988-4455

AGENDA
December 5-7, 1989

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 5, 1989

7:00-8:30 pm RECEPTION FOR CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS
DeZargus Room

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 6, 1989

8:00-8:30 am REGISTRATION AND CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST
Anasazi North

8:30-9:00 am WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS
Anasazi North

9:00-11:45 am GENERAL SESSION:
"WHAT ARE THE REAL ISSUES BEHIND ASSESSMENT IN EACH STATE?"

The format for this session is a series of interviews between the moderator and the panelists. The questions will focus on a brief description of what is happening in each state, the "questions" that assessment provides the "answers" for at the state level, and how assessment fits into the larger state strategy for improvement in higher education.

PANELISTS:

William Proctor, Executive Director,
Florida Postsecondary Education Planning Commission

Ann Bragg, Associate Director,
Illinois Board of Higher Education

Arnold Gelfman, Director of Planning & Special Projects
Brookdale Community College, New Jersey

Kathleen Kies, Executive Director
New Mexico Commission on Higher Education

Lucius Ellsworth, Assoc. Exec. Director of Academic Affairs
Tennessee Higher Education Commission

ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

9:00-11:45 GENERAL SESSION (Continued)
Anasazi North

Panelists: (Cont.)

Terry Teal, Executive Director
Washington Council of Presidents

Christopher Bill, Academic Programs Coordinator,
Council of Higher Education for Virginia

MODERATOR:
Frank Newman, President
Education Commission of the States

11:45-12:00 pm SUMMARY OF MORNING SESSION
Anasazi North

SUMMARIZER:
Peter Ewell, Senior Associate, NCHEMS

12:00 Noon LUNCHEON:
DeZargus Room

KEYNOTE REMARKS:
Governor Garrey Carruthers, New Mexico

2:00-2:15 pm "NATIONAL ASSESSMENT SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS"
(Sponsored by the Education Commission of the States, the American Association for Higher Education, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers)
Anasazi North

SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESULTS: **Peter Ewell, NCHEMS**

2:15-4:45 pm "WHAT CAN BE DONE?"
Anasazi North

MODERATOR:
Peter Ewell, NCHEMS

This session is about implementation and the policy issues and dilemmas raised in the implementation process. It is also about exploring the nature of the change strategy employed in the states for stimulating reform. The format for this session is an actively facilitated discussion.

ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

SUMMARY OF AFTERNOON SESSION (Continued)
Anasazi North

4:45-5:00 pm — **SUMMARY OF AFTERNOON SESSION**
Anasazi North

SUMMARIZERS:

Joni Finney, Senior Policy Analyst
Education Commission of the States
Charlie Lenth, Director
SHEEO/NCES Communications Network

6:15 pm — **DINNER FOR CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS**
La Tertulia Restaurant, 416 Agua Fria
Santa Fe, New Mexico (505) 988-2769
(Transportation Provided)

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1989

8:30-9:00 am — **CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST**
Anasazi North

9:00-10:30 am — **"WHAT DO WE COMMUNICATE?"**
Anasazi North

If the primary purpose of assessment is for "accountability" and to communicate "effectiveness," then major questions arise about what to communicate and to whom. The format for this session is an actively facilitated group discussion.

MODERATOR: Kathy Kies

10:30-10:45 am — **SUMMARY OF MORNING SESSION**
Anasazi North

SUMMARIZERS:
Joni Finney and Charlie Lenth

10:45-11:30 am — **OVERALL SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE THEMES**
Anasazi North

Summary of Conference Themes: **Ted Marchese,** Vice-President
The American Association for Higher Education

ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 7, 1989 (Continued)
Anasazi North

11:30-12:00 pm **"WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?"**
Anasazi North

MODERATORS:
Joni Finney and Peter Ewell

12:00 Noon ADJOURN

* * *

** *This Conference was funded, in part, with a grant from the Fund For The Improvement Of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). It was sponsored in cooperation with the National Governors' Association.*

INTRODUCTION

On December 5-7, 1989, representatives of seven states (Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New Mexico, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington) participated in a conference on assessment and accountability in higher education organized by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). These states have been involved with the issue of assessment for some time. In addition, all of them except New Mexico had participated in ECS case studies during 1989 of assessment implementation and the use of assessment data.

A grant from the Fund for Improvement in Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) allowed ECS to invite a team from each of these states to discuss assessment as a means for improvement and accountability in higher education. Participants (listed in Appendix A) focused on three key issues at the conference: (1) What are the issues and objectives behind assessment in each state? (2) What can be done regarding the implementation of assessment? and (3) How do we communicate the results? All of these questions, we believe, reach the heart of assessment and accountability issues for higher education.

This document summarizes the conference proceedings. Also available from ECS is a background paper prepared for conference participants by Peter Ewell, Assessment and the "New Accountability": A Challenge for Higher Education's Leadership. (Copies of this paper can be ordered from the ECS Publication Department, 303-299-3692.)

THEMES AND FINDINGS FROM THE CONFERENCE

It was clear in the conference that interest in assessment is, in fact, an interest in the quality of the education. This interest comes at a time when attention is shifting from simply providing access to students to making sure they have ample opportunities for success. Assessment can link higher education to these broader public interests as well as to other sectors of education.

Several other points were added during the conference. Participants expressed concern about the effectiveness of the overall higher education system in meeting the needs of states, specifically industry's needs for a skilled work force. From this concern it follows that assessment has tended to focus less on what is taught than on how it is taught and the skills that are imparted.

Assessment is, further, a way to justify new and continuing investments in higher education as well as a way to ensure that funds are used efficiently. That is, assessment is a tool for using resources more effectively. At the institutional level this suggests using assessment to improve teaching and learning and using assessment-based knowledge for funding decisions. At the state level it implies using assessment to measure progress toward state goals, then relating state funding for base programs or marginal increases to assessment results.

As conference participants noted, assessment is also a means for faculty self-improvement and for the improvement of student learning. That is, assessment helps define the knowledge base, in ways that make this definition a serious, respectable intellectual issue.

The discussion of conference participants also indicates that assessment is part of a new management strategy for higher education and for states, a useful new set of quality-control mechanisms. Budget allocations and program reviews have proved to be too limited to accomplish many of the types of changes that the state coordinating boards and the legislature are expecting. A consequence of these new expectations are opportunities for state boards to augment their coordinating roles with new leadership roles.

The absence of information about what institutions are doing or how that information addresses states needs is being questioned, not the provision of data per se. Accountability in this context is more a process than a specific outcome. Accountability no longer means only financial accountability, limiting program duplication, or providing student access. It does mean demonstrating results in these areas. Accountability has become a question of the quality of higher education's process and product.

Assessment Can Help Address These Concerns

Assessment is already underscoring the real problems in student preparation. It is also drawing attention to the importance of student expectations and standards for graduation. The fact of the matter is that there are real discrepancies and discontinuities across student bodies and across institutions which make the discussion of assessment critically important.

VARIATIONS ACROSS STATES

Because each state faced different problems, assessment initiatives began quite differently, according to participants. Important commonalities emerged, however, in the need to establish credibility for quality in undergraduate education and to induce changes in instruction. Moreover, there has been considerable cross-fertilization as people in one state have learned more about approaches in other states and as "assessment" has become a more salient policy issue. As a result, initiatives that began differently (Tennessee's "performance funding" approach and Virginia's "campus-centered" approach, for example) have often addressed similar concerns and encountered similar challenges.

Participants agreed that assessment became an issue in part because of external pressures and in part because of concerns about curriculum and instruction that arose within institutions of higher education. Though many of the concerns have nothing to do with assessment per se, participants also agreed on a number of reasons why assessment has been an effective policy response.

External Forces

Discontent with undergraduate performance has been one of the outside forces driving assessment, fueled in part by the public's broader discontent with elementary and secondary education. Higher education in particular has been charged with not expecting enough of entering students and not thinking systemically about its role in a continuous educational process. In Florida and New Mexico, for instance, a major issue was "paying twice," once for K-12 instruction and once again for remedial courses in college. Service issues have also arisen, such as whether undergraduate programs are consistent with the economic, political and cultural needs of the state -- or with the needs of student "consumers." Trust has been a major issue for the public and public officials, who increasingly need evidence of a return on investment in higher education.

Given these concerns, some state boards became interested in assessment as a way to get out in front of a developing issue. Elsewhere, as in Tennessee and Washington assessment was seen as a quid pro quo for enhanced funding and a way to build trust.

Internal Forces

In Tennessee and Illinois, for example, campus concerns induced state higher education officials to consider ways to get their own houses in order. Strategic planning has brought more review of the purposes of institutions and greater attention to the quality of teaching. Faculty share the public's concern for distinguishing remedial and college-level work. In the interests of improving their institutions and their own teaching, faculty want to know how well they are doing. They are also concerned about grading, about the lack of continuity in the undergraduate curriculum and about the overall direction of higher education.

Assessment as Policy: Initial Fears, Ultimate Advantages

Assessment does arouse some fears within institutions, participants agreed. Administrators and faculty are often uncomfortable with results that are made public before they have had time to solve the problems assessment can uncover. They fear the misuse or even abuse of data. They worry that invidious comparisons of institutions may affect enrollments and finance.

Nonetheless, faculty and administrators also recognize that assessment can be advantageous in the long run. Within colleges and universities, assessment has helped shift scarce faculty and administrative attention to undergraduate teaching, in a manner that faculty find intellectually respectable. As a result, despite their initial resistance, most faculties respond positively to assessment. Thereafter, the local benefits of assessment have been considerable. Cited repeatedly was assessment's potential to revitalize the individual grading process.

Furthermore, the information assessment supplies to the world outside can serve as the quid pro quo for continued investment in higher education. Some assessment approaches hold particular promise for identifying and addressing statewide needs. Assessment seems capable of promoting systemic thinking about educational quality; it can make problems of articulation among undergraduate institutions explicit, and it often clarifies the need to link higher education more effectively with elementary/ secondary education.

Current Issues

Assessment policies have forced two major issues into the open, the need to establish more explicit criteria for performance and accomplishment, and the need to lessen fragmentation and discontinuities in education as a whole.

Making explicit criteria that were previously vague or non-existent is important to establishing a correspondence between what colleges teach and society's needs and therefore to building public trust in higher education. Within institutions, establishing clear criteria was seen as essential to setting benchmarks for student performance.

The discontinuities to which assessment draws attention occur between elementary/ secondary education and higher education, between institutions of higher education, and within those institutions. That is, assessment has revealed the need for articulation, cross-institutional standards, and more curricular coherence.

A final feature of the discussion was the relative absence of references to "accountability" in the abstract. Participants did not, for the most part, see assessment as a means to greater accountability. Rather, accountability was seen as the logical outcome of improvement in higher education. That is, assessment policies have arisen out of concerns to raise quality -- to change the system -- not simply to communicate the status quo to the public. This close association of assessment with quality, participants

concluded, has been responsible for assessment's unexpected staying power as a national issue.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The relationship between state assessment policy and institutional change is dynamic. In discussing the complexities of implementation, participants talked about the opportunities for leadership on campus and at the state level and about the dilemmas that, good leadership notwithstanding, nonetheless remain. Good communication is seen as essential to the implementation of assessment policies.

Leadership on Campus

For institutions to see the need to change and then manage change requires the leadership of college and university presidents. Presidents and other top administrators can create a climate on campus that encourages faculty to innovate and supports the use of assessment information. If assessment is to be woven into an institution's fabric, not isolated or bureaucratized, campus leaders need to build a convincing case for it to faculty. In the case of assessment as in so many others, campus leaders must also mediate internal and external pressures.

State Leaders

Participants had a number of suggestions to offer state leaders.

- Help articulate what the public and higher education's outside constituents want.
- Determine key goals through a process that builds in two-way communication.
- Expect institutions to evidence movement toward these goals: establish timelines for progress, require progress reports.
- Help with the selection of a few simple indicators.
- Host attention-getting and sustaining activities: convene groups to build joint ownership of assessment plans, for example, and host conferences at which data and information can be shared.
- Provide financial and technical resources: couple pressure to raise quality with funding for assessment programs, direct funds toward improved performance rather than penalizing lack of performance.
- Interpret the changes that take place on campus to the public, being sure to use data appropriately.
- Monitor progress. Ask, for example, whether institutions have reallocated funds to general education, whether campus leaders are using assessment information to make decisions, whether people who have helped increase student achievement have been rewarded.
- Be patient, but keep pressing for results.

Dilemmas

The effects of assessment on the quality of teaching are slow to develop, which means that the long-term consequences of assessment are still largely uncertain. The dilemma, as participants pointed out, is that institutions of higher education and state policy makers often operate within different time frames. State demands tend to be immediate where institutional change tends to be slow. The problem is that assessment is on diverging tracks at the state and institutional levels; the solution lies in making the tracks converge.

Making tracks converge relates to the dilemma of matching external demands to internal developments. State demands for information can derail campus activities that might otherwise lead to lasting change, according to some participants who were concerned that state requirements might pre-empt campus discussions about improvement rather than legitimizing such discussions. Some states expect institutions to respond to so many issues simultaneously (to issues of minority achievement and admissions standards, for example, as well as to issues of assessment), that institutions are hard pressed to manage all the agendas.

Furthermore, external pressures are particularly difficult for institutions to manage when assessment is viewed as a way to accomplish very complex and comprehensive change in higher education. Resolving this dilemma might lie in focusing assessment on: (a) the improvement of undergraduate teaching and learning; (b) articulation between two-year and four-year institutions; (c) the redefinition of expectations for students at various levels; (d) the meeting of workforce needs; and (e) assessment of student satisfaction. If the assessment of institutional effectiveness is not divided into workable components, it is difficult for institutional leaders to demonstrate progress, and to thereby communicate that progress to the public.

Participants stressed the importance of setting goals for assessment that are easily communicated and that provide overall direction for institutions and the state. The idea of having such goals does not present a dilemma. Which goals are appropriate, though, and how progress toward them is best indicated are both problematic. The idea of using only a few straightforward indicators has a lot of support, but there is, for example, some conflict between the idea of using common statewide indicators and institutions' own assessment initiatives, based on their unique mission.

Communication

Participants agreed the success of assessment has much to do with communication. Good communication is essential to the development of goals, to recognizing progress, to spreading the news of progress beyond higher education, to managing the frustration that inevitably accompanies complex change, and to maintaining a consensus for change.

Both external and internal communications about assessment are a challenge. The internal use of information for improvement is less well-developed at present, but both areas need attention.

The complexities of assessment need, whenever possible, to be presented briefly, cogently, accurately, and in simple English. This principle holds whether the information is targeted to the general public or to education professionals.

Participants shared advice about how institutions can communicate effectively with the outside world. Institutions should initiate communication and offer good data and key conclusions to the public without being requested to supply them. In the interests of credibility, institutions should include the bad news with the good, and help the public understand the significance of the data rather than presenting simply statistics. Institutions need to explain results in terms of problems addressed, and give a picture of the institution as a whole. Institutions must also be sure to frame the questions and supply the data that interest the legislature and the public, like graduation rates, employment patterns, the education of teachers, and success in employment. Illinois, for example, has developed a system for reporting to high schools about students' success in college, a communication process that cuts across sectors and includes the public at large.

Three principles should govern communications to faculty in institutions:

1. Assessment results can be used to improve teaching and learning.
2. The more faculty see assessment as integral to teaching and learning, the easier it will be to engage institutions in the assessment process.
3. Students, too, must be actively engaged.

In the best of circumstances, participants felt, assessment could serve the common interests of students, faculty, and administration. Institutional representatives believed, however, that it was too early to provide a complete report on how assessment information is feeding back into institutional improvement. "The conversation is taking place," they said, but it is not being recorded or reported.

In meeting the communication challenge, as in meeting many of the other challenges of assessment, a commitment to long-term goals is essential, participants concluded. That commitment must be strong enough to withstand changes of political climate and personnel if assessment is be effective.

CONCLUSION

For the past five years, the AAHE Assessment Forum has tracked the unfolding of an "assessment movement," initially by helping institutions respond to a wave of mandates, more recently by looking hard at their on-campus effects. With that history, it has been interesting to listen these past two days to the ways this is all now discussed by state-level officials. You've asked for reaction, and I offer these points.

"Keep At It; Strive To Do It Better"

For all the reasons articulated here these past two days, assessment is powerful medicine. In my 26 years of professional life in higher education, I've seen many issues, and the nostrums for them, come and go; few of these resulted in "movements," and fewer still had the potential for deeper change that we see in assessment.

As a movement, assessment consists essentially of a set of questions; its power derives from the cogency of these questions and the processes of response they typically evoke. Stated from an on-campus point of view, the questions include:

- What is our contribution to student knowledge? How and what do we know of that contribution?
- Do our graduates know and can they do what our degrees imply? How do we assure that?
- What does all the course-taking and related experiences we stipulate for students add up to for them?
- What knowledge and abilities do we intend our graduates to possess? At what level of demonstrated performance? What would it take to get them to a next level of performance?

These I hope you'll agree, are fresh, powerful questions, ones that take you back to fundamental purposes and ways of operating. They can be posed, with slight change of language, at the state level or at a departmental level; they are intellectually interesting questions, that faculty members do care about; they put a spotlight squarely on the undergraduate function, where it now must be, especially in comprehensive institutions; more particularly, they refocus attention on students and issues of teaching and learning; and they are questions about quality -- the very ones we need now for a sustained, next stage of undergraduate renewal.

In this view of the movement, as you'll see, assessment has less to do with measurement and data than with a systematic asking of questions about student learning, done in a spirit that prompts organizational processes and new evidence useful to the improvement of learning.

I've described these questions and their aim as fundamental and their origins as recent; they are also damnably hard to answer. The student experience of college is varied, complex, and subtle; there is no ready, easy way to "measure" some single "thing" out

there. Over the past five years, colleges have scrambled to find intelligent ways of responding to your mandates (often with precious little support); higher education finds itself in a period of intense experimentation and methodological invention, with some reportable progress.

But all this takes time. I remind you that Alverno College, justifiably admired for what it has accomplished with assessment, began its work on the subject in the early 1970s; Northeast Missouri has been at this for nearly sixteen years, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville for a dozen, Kings and Miami-Dade for ten . . . even Kean College of New Jersey, which had millions to fund the effort, is only now, in its fourth year, at the start of showing results.

Why say all this? Two points. My first is one of worry about state action on behalf of assessment. In my observation, legislatures and state boards love the cooking up of "initiatives"; they come and go with dizzying speed. But what is their relative priority? Staying power? How much is really behind them? On many campuses, I can tell you, these questions are in doubt; institutions see this as one more flurry, to be waited out. Even those that have made a commitment to undertake longer-term engagement with assessment questions wonder whether, two years from now, anyone in the capital will care about the answers.

Point two is that some state boards have gotten into assessment with a lick and a promise, thoughtlessly; several seemed to stick a half-baked mandate out there, maybe stage a conference, then nothing followed. Others, perhaps in some eagerness to push and prod institutions into a faster "doing" of assessment, too quickly forced the debate around one method (like standardized testing) or approach (value-added), so that the larger set of questions behind assessment, and the reasons for their asking, got lost.

What I'm calling for, then, is a sustained, thoughtful push by state leadership on behalf of assessment's questions and processes, for educational leadership on behalf of undergraduate improvement, not mere enactment plus oversight; all this for the long haul, communicated clearly and unambiguously, to institutions and public alike because assessment <u>is</u> the right issue for you now, and needs you to stay there and deepen it.

<u>"A Clearer 'Why' and Context for Assessment"</u>

The biggest shortcoming of so many state assessment initiatives is their failure to communicate a compelling set of reasons for the mandate and doing of the thing. We hear that it's "an age of accountability," or that a board initiative is "better than letting the legislature do it," about "quid pro quos" and "quality" and being more "competitive," that assessment is "in the air" and will be "good for you," but what exactly is intended here? Beyond mushy cliches, why are institutions being asked to do this? What real problem prompts it? Just what is supposed to happen as a result?

Allow me to report: real and harmful confusion about these matters is rampant on campuses we visit. When a chancellor stands before a faculty and says (lamely), "We have to do this thing because the state has ordered us to," it is apparent to all that

ownership lies elsewhere. Good faculty put it down as a task for administrators, a compliance mentality rules, and the game is lost.

I don't have for you this morning a grand rationale for state-level action on behalf of assessment; it would necessarily differ by state in any case. (Two to admire are those developed by a statewide task force in Minnesota and by the provost's office at SUNY.) Whatever the individual case, I think the elements of a problem definition and resulting rationale were apparent in the discussions here yesterday, set up by Peter Ewell's paper for this conference. That is, we're simply not getting the institutional and student performance from the undergraduate function that we need and believe can be achieved; we've got to do something major to rebuild its quality and effectiveness; assessment raises the kind of questions that can help get the function to a next level of performance.

I think the behaviors we see on campuses are a natural outcome of public policy and societal forces of the past three decades, which, inter alia, have tended to push our institutions to operate within markets. So our institutions do compete (in ways unthinkable in Europe, for example) for funding, donations, grants and contracts, students, faculty, and for the large enablers of prestige and public appropriation. Over these decades, too, we've set up quality-control mechanisms around many university functions, for example, competitive grants, peer review, around the award of research dollars. But the effect of much of this has been to leave undergraduate education as a function somewhat behind in the dust. There is a thin (at best) connection between a reality of undergraduate quality and success in student markets; one finds no effective system of peer review applicable to the function, and few monetary incentives or rewards exist for its demonstrated effectiveness. State policy has been complicit in all this.

What this leads me to, then, is a call for concerted state attention to the ways its own behaviors enhance or detract from the undergraduate function--in the incentives and rewards that inhere in funding formulas, in the consistency of messages about what's important, even in matters like who gets appointed to presidencies. Chances are such a review would result in five or eight changes or initiatives, one of which would indeed entail assessment of undergraduate student learning, but the whole of which would provide a context within which the conduct of assessment would be understood as natural and necessary. The "why" question, too, would be at rest.

To put this another way, if so many state-to-campus signals run away from attention to undergraduate education, and assessment is floated out there as a new requirement justified by secondary or defensive reasons, it's already dead in the water. The answer to the "why" question entails holding the cliches, and attention to consistent context.

"What Should We Expect of Assessment? Not Much, Directly"

Years ago as a faculty member I taught statistics and research methods to undergraduates. Believe me when I say, the two have real limits and can do just so much. But what strikes me is how much people with little knowledge of social research think of its methods -- what high expectations they have for it! Somehow, by doing

"research," problems will be made clear, the solutions to follow in course is a myth behind the ordering up of assessment.

In reality, even the best of research (or professional evaluation) seldom fully explicates a problem, and it never tells you what exactly to do to solve it. That will be doubly so for on-campus assessment endeavors, which in most cases will be home-made, small-scale, done by nonspecialists, and have as their topic frustratingly complex matters of student learning.

The issue I raise, then, is that of what to expect from the doing of assessment. From years of campus visits, my answer is considerably more modest than policy makers might hope for -- at least on the accountability/public-information side of the ledger. The healthy expectation is that better information than existed before will be on campus conference tables, information that will prompt and inform discussions that might not otherwise have occurred, and from which action may follow if parties of interest find conditions that support their act. Over the long run, assessment should be expected to put new questions in the air; heighten collective attention to the undergraduate function; promote greater clarity about goals and their realization; build a culture of evidence about student learning; and be the occasion for many small, cumulative changes (improvements, one hopes) in curricula, teaching, and ultimately learning.

Not incidentally, it will not be assessment per se that brings about these changes. People will; people who care about student learning and undergraduate reform and who find the necessary incentives and support for acting in situations as they arise. (Recall that it was not the New Jersey College Test of Basic Skills that created that state's acclaimed Algebra Project; a man named Charles Pine did.) Assessment seen this way is less an independent force or agent -- the first half of a cause and effect equation -- than it is a mindset about student learning and enabler of people minded to improve it.

Several observations follow from this. One is that expectations for assessment need thoughtful management at the state level. I cringed at the report here that the State of Washington had just handed its community colleges $400,000 to "do assessment, we'll want results in 18 months" (my paraphrase). What can be meant by "results" in a period of months?

A lot of the "evidence" about the impacts of assessment is just not going to come forward in simple terms ("We did X, it caused Y") or as a quantitative quick-take. Authentically done, with the improvement of learning as the longer-term aim, much of the evidence will take the form of signs and traces, as stories told about small steps and apparent effects. Can busy people in state capitals hear stories? Can they "settle" for indirect evidence, like slow, steady improvement in aggregate rates of student attainment?

State agencies, I suspect, in turn will find need themselves for evidence in support of their assessment initiatives; but what shall be the character of that evidence? Might there be grounds here for campus-state conversation? How, jointly, can we know this is working and worth the effort?

There is another potential lesson here. That is, if it be people who make change, what is our strategy for their support? Will there be money just for assessment (asking questions, understanding problems), but never for pursuit of solutions? In posing this question, I advance one more reason for assessment's unfolding in a context of an appropriately funded program of undergraduate reform.

APPENDIX A

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES
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