

ED420244 1998-00-00 Proclaiming and Sustaining Excellence: Assessment as a Faculty Role. ERIC Digest.

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ERIC Identifier: ED420244

Publication Date: 1998-00-00

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Source: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education Washington DC. | BBB32577 _ George Washington Univ. Washington DC. Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

Proclaiming and Sustaining Excellence: Assessment as a Faculty Role. ERIC Digest.

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We are now over 10 years into the most recent wave of interest in assessment in higher education. In many states, publicly supported institutions of higher education have developed assessment programs in response to mandates from coordinating boards. All the regional accrediting associations articulate expectations for assessment, and attention to assessment has moved beyond publicly supported institutions into the private sector. National surveys of leaders in higher education suggest that assessment has been institutionalized quite broadly in American higher education.

These same surveys, however, suggest that campus leaders remain unconvinced about the real benefits of externally mandated assessment and fear misuse of its results. Moreover, although campuses nationwide (with a few notable exceptions) have responded to expectations for the development of assessment programs, faculty have not yet in any substantial numbers recognized and embraced local assessment efforts.

"Proclaiming and Sustaining Excellence: Assessment as a Faculty Role" explores the various sources of faculty's resistance to assessment and suggests ways to approach assessment that are more congenial to the traditional faculty role. In addressing administrators and faculty, the authors identify major conceptual, methodological, and policy advances over the past decade that may facilitate the faculty's greater engagement with assessment. Administrators are provided with useful frameworks for understanding the faculty's resistance and suggestions for approaches to assessment that respond to these sources of resistance. Faculty are provided with ways of thinking about assessment that comport more naturally with their traditional understandings of the faculty role in the academy.

WHAT ADVANCES IN ASSESSMENT MAKE IT MORE

CONGENIAL TO FACULTY? Eight major shifts have occurred in the broad frameworks that have informed assessment practice: (1) focusing on the development of talent rather than simply displaying resources; (2) moving away from assuring minimal competency; (3) broadening the focus beyond linear, goal-centered approaches; (4) highlighting epistemological differences among the disciplines; (5) redirecting the focus to students and their learning processes; (6) making direct ties to teaching practice; (7) thinking of improvement as a continuing agenda; and (8) attending to the politics underlying judgments of effectiveness. Each of these broad theoretical shifts has shaped developing assessment practice to make it more congenial to faculty interests and dispositions.

Five broad changes in practice or assessment methods are also discussed: (1) fitting measures to a local context; (2) seeking convergence of multiple measures; (3) involving new disciplinary perspectives; (4) valuing authenticity; and (5) distinguishing between measurement and judgment.

Changing policies governing assessment include (1) changing notions of accountability; (2) the move to performance indicators; (3) barriers to the institutionalization of assessment; (4) false starts that incur hostility from the faculty; and (5) significant inroads on campuses toward the acceptance of assessment.

HOW HAVE DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS APPROACHED ASSESSMENT?

Practices at several institutions have been cited repeatedly in the literature on assessment over the past two decades. Specific institutional contexts and cultures have enabled or fostered the development of very different approaches to assessment at each institution. Six different institutional approaches are described: (1) assessment as part of an institution's fabric; (2) assessment as related to accountability; (3) assessment as an administrative service; (4) assessment as scholarship; (5) assessment as an opportunity for teaching; and (6) assessment as an add-on responsibility. Campuses where assessment falls into one of these categories are discussed in terms of the role faculty play in assessment.

HOW CAN ASSESSMENT BE VIEWED AS A FACULTY ROLE?

Six conditions are necessary if faculty are to view assessment as an integral part of their role:

1. Assessment must be embedded in a fiscal and policy context that supports innovation under administrative leadership providing vision and support.
2. Assessment must be grounded in significant questions that faculty find interesting.
3. Assessment must rely on evidence and forms of judgment that disciplinary specialists find credible.
4. Assessment must be rooted in a language and metaphors appropriate to the context.
5. Assessment must be identified as a stimulus to reflective practice.
6. Assessment must accommodate the nature of faculty life in the academy.

"Proclaiming and Sustaining Excellence" concludes by offering a set of principles for developing effective assessment programs that will engage faculty in meaningful assessment.

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This ERIC digest is based on a full-length report in the ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report series Volume 26, Number 3, "Proclaiming and Sustaining Excellence: Assessment as a Faculty Role" by Karen Maitland Schilling and Karl L. Schilling. This report was prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education in cooperation with the Association for the Study of Higher Education and published by the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at the George Washington University.

This publication was partially prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. RR-93-002008. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the department.

Title: Proclaiming and Sustaining Excellence: Assessment as a Faculty Role. ERIC Digest.

Note: For the full report, see HE 031 295.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

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Descriptors: Accountability, College Faculty, Educational Assessment, Faculty College Relationship, Faculty Evaluation, Higher Education, Models, Program Evaluation, Resistance to Change, Teacher Attitudes, Teacher Role

Identifiers: ERIC Digests

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