WHITE PAPER

How to generate purposeful change on your campus: A realistic approach to institutional assessment

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How to generate purposeful change on your campus: A realistic approach to institutional assessment

"A disturbing and dangerous mismatch exists between what American society needs of higher education and what it is receiving. Nowhere is the mismatch more dangerous than in the quality of undergraduate preparation provided on many campuses. The American imperative for the 21st century is that society must hold higher education to much higher standards or risk national decline."

This sober warning, issued by the venerable Kellogg Commission in a summary report on the state of higher education, conveys a clear challenge to those who lead institutions of higher learning: Take an unstinting look at your institution, be forthright about your findings, and take steps to begin improving the quality of the undergraduate experience on your campus. It's a situation leaving no doubt that a comprehensive institutional assessment program is no longer a luxury, but an imperative.

At a recent teleconference, Noel-Levitz senior executive Dr. Charles C. Schroeder presented the framework for a systematic approach to assessment and suggested tools to help institutions address this critical concern. This paper shares key observations and recommendations from that presentation.

Laying the groundwork

"...institutions must commit themselves to a path to self-awareness and improvement..."

The demand for institutional assessment is driven by challenges that are well-known to higher education professionals. College costs are rising at a pace that is much greater than the rate of inflation, raising expectations along with them. Student populations are increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic identity, preparedness levels, and reasons for attending college. Colleges face growing demands for access, affordability, and accountability, even as they confront charges of inefficiency and waste.

Against this backdrop, institutions must commit themselves to a path to self-awareness and improvement that is anchored by three basic propositions:

1. Our mission is to design an undergraduate experience that is empowering and transformational.
2. We must measure our success as educators on the basis of the quality of the encounters we arrange.
3. If quality lies in the encounters we arrange, then we must ensure that these encounters are powerful, even transformational ones.

These principles lead institutions to certain defining questions: How do students experience our institution? What evidence do we have to demonstrate that our programs and services are meeting their expectations? What experiences, programs, and services facilitate (or constrain) student success? A meaningful assessment program will address these issues in a way that impacts the institution's mission, strategic planning, improvement initiatives, and accountability.

Meanwhile, the institutional environment frequently throws up barriers to building an effective assessment plan. These include the tendencies to be "goal-free and data-averse" as well as activity-oriented rather than results-oriented; the tyrannies of custom and busyness; and the sense that assessment is too complex and difficult for the non-research-minded faculty member or administrator. The lack of adequate resources is another recurring theme.

Principles of good practice

As originally identified by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), Schroeder shares eight principles that shape an effective assessment initiative, affirming that assessment:

- Begins with *educational values;*
- Works best when the programs it seeks to improve have *clear, explicitly stated purposes;*
- Requires attention to outcomes but also to the *experiences that lead to those outcomes;*
- Works best when it is *ongoing, not episodic;*
- Fosters wider improvement when *representatives from across the educational community* are involved;
- Is most likely to lead to improvement when it is *part of a larger set of conditions* that promote change;
- Is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as *multidimensional, integrated,* and revealed in performance over time; and
- Provides a vehicle for educators to meet their *responsibilities to students and to the public*.

As an example of this approach, the president of Wisconsin's Alverno College initiated a process of assessment and performance improvement on her campus by challenging faculty members to answer two central questions:

1. What would students miss if they didn't take your class?
2. What should liberally educated people be able to do with what they know?

The ensuing discussion set the stage for an assessment program that included explicitly stated goals, a student-centered focus on learning, and coherent language and definitions. Subsequently, the entire campus community was enlisted as "partners in learning" in a faculty-driven program that incorporated recurring feedback and a commitment to continuous improvement.

An assessment approach

Simply stated, an assessment plan should be designed to answer these questions: What are students like when they enter your institution? What is the nature of their experiences at your institution? What are they like when they leave your institution, or, do they have the knowledge, skills, and characteristics they need to be successful?

Schroeder recommends a systematic assessment approach built on the model created by Sandy Astin of the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, which calls for gathering information in three areas:

"…an assessment plan should be designed to answer these questions: What are students like when they enter your institution? What is the nature of their experiences at your institution? What are they like when they leave your institution…?"

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INPUT	**ENVIRONMENT**	**OUTCOMES**
Entering characteristics	Full range of experiences	Desired results

Input characteristics, in addition to obvious traits such as sex, age, race, desired major, and the like, should include other variables that determine how students interact with their experiences on and off campus, such as their entering expectations, values and beliefs, socioeconomic status, intellectual and social confidence, and learning styles. In addition, colleges should be asking questions about whether new students understand the purpose of a college education, what kind of family support they have, and what sort of support they expect from the institution. Tools such as the Annual Freshman Survey (CIRP) track the characteristics of first-year students; the Noel-Levitz Retention Management System™ (RMS) may be used to determine the receptivity of incoming students to assistance from the institution and their likeliness to drop out.

Assessment should also track *environmental characteristics* including opportunities for involvement; the sense of belonging or community; the ethos of care; the quality of transactions between students, faculty and staff; campus traditions and rituals, and the presence of innovative structures such as learning communities. These provide context for a range of questions such as:

- How do students spend their time and how does that influence educational outcomes?
- What patterns characterize students' movements through the institution?
- What undergraduate experiences facilitate or inhibit students' learning and success?
- What pedagogical approaches foster higher levels of student learning?
- How satisfied are students with their experiences at the institution, including their interactions with service areas?

A key to understanding the *outcomes* of the educational experience is the concept of student engagement, which Schroeder defines as:

"…the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities, inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities."

This, in turn, comprises two components: *what students do* (time and energy devoted to educationally purposeful activities) and *what institutions do* (using effective educational practices to induce students to do desired things).

The touchstone: student satisfaction

Student satisfaction with an institution's programs, services, and facilities is the starting point for targeting institutional improvements, Schroeder asserts, providing a lens to view the quality of the student experience and serving as the catalyst for broadly based campus conversations.

Several quantitative tools are available to measure students' perceptions while enrolled in college, including such surveys as Your First College Year (YFCY), the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ), the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory™ (SSI). Using the SSI, an institution is able to determine both satisfaction levels with various aspects of the college experience and the relative importance of these areas to students, while measuring the precise gap between expectations (importance score) and performance (satisfaction score).

A related program is the Noel-Levitz Research Assistant™ service, which is especially valuable for institutions without on-campus research expertise. This service employs a three-year modular research system that incorporates numerous sequential surveys and provides analysis and expert consultation regarding institutional performance in a variety of areas.

Assessing outcomes

Ultimately, institutions must answer the essential questions of whether they are making a difference in students' lives and what value they are adding to the student experience through their investments in resources. This means defining desired outcomes in areas such as complex cognitive skills, interpersonal development, practical competence, civic responsibility, academic achievement, and educational persistence and attainment. These might be measured by answering questions such as:

- What do students learn over time in a program of study?
- What are students able to do with what they know?
- How satisfied are alumni with the education they received?
- How satisfied are employers with your graduates?

A variety of instruments are available here, as well. Among them are the ACT Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP); the Noel-Levitz Research Assistant Senior Survey, Alumni Survey, and Employer Perceptions Survey; and the ETS Major Field Achievement Tests (MFAT), GRE Subject Tests, Alumni Survey, and College Outcomes Survey. Other tools include senior comprehensive examinations, capstone projects, portfolios, exit interviews, focus groups, and external evaluators.

Schroeder recommends a wide-ranging, multiple-measures assessment model that incorporates the perspectives of student tracking data, satisfaction surveys, outcomes assessment, national standards assessment, cost-effectiveness studies, and comparable institution assessment.

Getting started

Faced with the perhaps daunting task of developing a thorough assessment program, Schroeder suggests that institutions should begin with resources they already have on hand, such as basic retention and graduation data. While conducting a preliminary data audit, campus leaders should also work to build a shared, overarching vision of the institution that will drive the assessment process. Faculty involvement and leadership are critical at this stage, in order to ensure a bottom-up investment in the course of evaluation and change.

Other start-up strategies include the following:

- Experiment with pilot programs in receptive departments;
- Use the early results in immediate, identifiable ways;
- Visit other campuses to explore and evaluate "model programs;"
- Make sure to allocate adequate human and fiscal resources in order to avoid a pattern of "aggressive neglect"; and
- Teach your campus community to view assessment not as a one-time initiative, but as an ongoing, scholarly activity that fosters continuous improvement.

Begin the process with a clear purpose that can be translated into measurable goals, Schroeder emphasizes, and avoid dwelling on issues that are of little importance to students. Think of your organization as a relay team, and make solid hand-offs at each phase. Above all, don't get bogged down in discussions about proper instruments, but instead keep asking the fundamental questions: What are we trying to accomplish, and how might we know if we are doing so?

In summary, improving institutional effectiveness by creating powerful, transformative undergraduate experiences is a critical activity that requires a compelling vision, focused and intentional efforts, collaboration and partnerships, systematic assessment and feedback, and a willingness to challenge assumptions and take risks.

Featured in this article

Dr. Charles Schroeder, Noel-Levitz senior executive, brings a wealth of experience as an administrator and writer on student affairs and the student experience. Dr. Schroeder served as a chief student affairs officer for 22 years, most recently at the University of Missouri–Columbia. He served two terms as president of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). A prolific writer and editor, Dr. Schroeder has published more than 60 books and articles on higher education. Among his many publications, he edited (with Phyllis Mable) *Realizing the Educational Potential of Residence Halls* (Jossey-Bass, 1994) and is founder and first executive editor of the bi-monthly *About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience*.

About Noel-Levitz

A trusted partner to higher education, Noel-Levitz helps systems and campuses reach and exceed their goals for enrollment, marketing, and student success.

To help with goal attainment, our 30 full-time consultants and 50 associates bring direct experience from their previous and current positions on campuses as consultants, enrollment managers, marketing leaders, retention directors, institutional researchers, financial aid directors, faculty, student affairs leaders, advising directors, and more.

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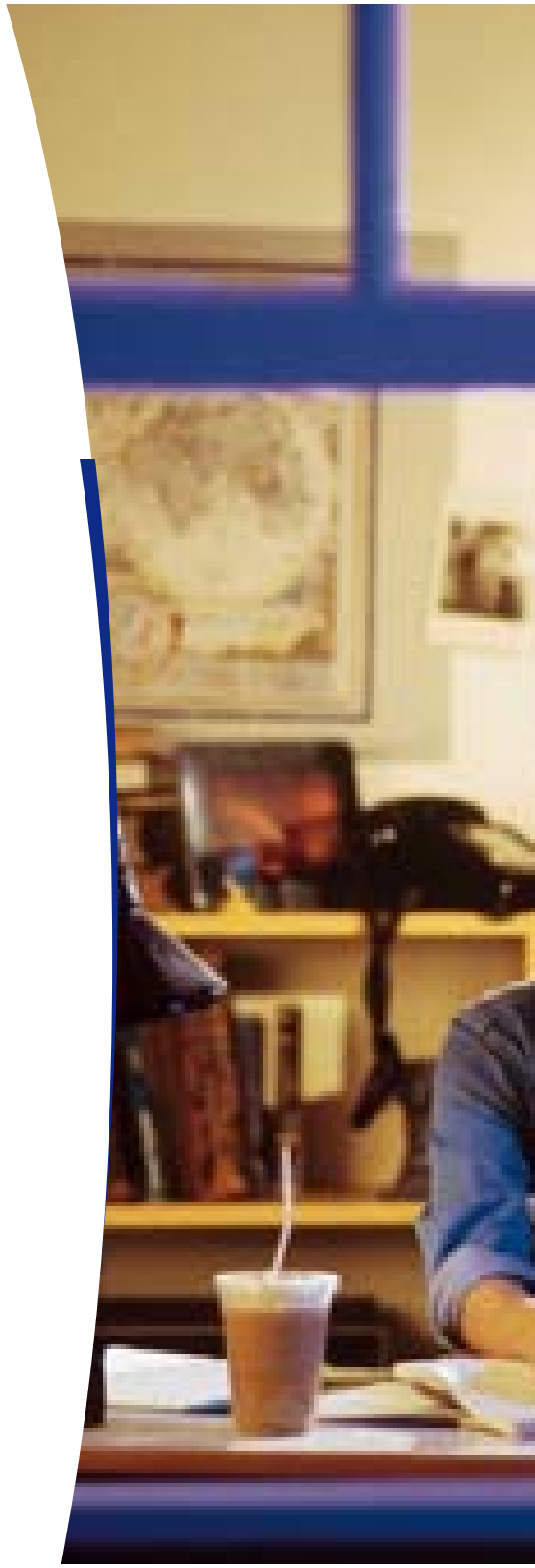

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