

From expectations to results

AAHE's 15th Assessment Forum

by Amos Lakos

The American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum held its 15th and best-attended conference, "From Expectations to Results: What Are We Finding, and How Are We Improving?" on June 23–27, 2001, in Denver, Colorado.¹

The conference focused on assessment issues and activities in institutions of higher learning. The high attendance (more than 1,800 participants) at the conference, the overall quality of the program, and the intense involvement of the participants signaled that assessment of academic and institutional outcomes (especially assessment of student learning) is becoming a constant and mature concern in academe, and that universities and colleges are feeling pressured (especially from accreditation bodies) to deliver assessable learning outcomes.

A recurring theme was the need to win over faculty to assessment of learning outcomes and the efforts needed to make assessment systemic in institutions of higher learning.

The conference sought to provide a forum for discussing questions about the collective responsibility for Teaching/Learning Outcome Assessments. To quote Peggy Maki, executive director of the AAHE Assessment Forum, the goal of the conference was: "To raise the collective academic institutional curiosity about student learning, about learning outcomes, about assessment of learning outcomes . . ." The conference emphasized the collective re-

sponsibility of academic institutions to articulate shared expectations and to examine ways to assess and support these responsibilities.

Maki exhorted the conference participants to seek ways to align expectations with sound local pedagogy, to use multiple methodologies of teaching, learning and assessment methods, and to close the assessment loop between missions and educational objectives and the goals and the achievement of educational outcomes by creating real changes and improvements in academic institutions.

The conference attracted educators, institutional research professionals, managers, and librarians. It afforded a valuable opportunity to discuss assessment issues with participants of diverse backgrounds, responsibilities, and types of institutions. The conference afforded the participants an opportunity to learn, to compare challenges and possible solutions, and to create new networks of cooperation for the future.

Making the most of college

Richard J. Light, professor of Education and Public Policy at Harvard University, opened the conference with a plenary address on "Making the Most of College: How Assessment Can Help Both Students and Us," in which he reported on research conducted on more than 90 campuses on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies, advising methods, assignments

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to foster learning, and the effects of racial and ethnic diversity on student learning.

He summarized some of the key findings that help students make the most of their college education: advising college students early to focus on their learning goals and making the effort to connect individually with members of the faculty. He also singled out time management as a critical measure of success and the need to teach the sciences in groups. His presentation underscored the need for continuing collaborative assessment work and creating positive learning environments for both students and teachers.

Creating positive assessment cultures

A number of sessions were devoted to the creation and enhancement of positive assessment cultures. The need for strengthening a culture of assessment in institutions of higher education was continuously mentioned, as well as the challenge of getting faculty to buy into ongoing learning assessment programs. A number of sessions discussed ways to overcome inhibitors to systematic assessment programs and identified the need for concerted and targeted work to change organizational and professional cultures.

Although it was clear that the main motivator for assessment is external—namely the various accreditation bodies—many sessions focused on getting beyond the accreditation pressure, changing institutional cultures toward assessment of learning outcomes, and finding better ways to close the assessment loop between goals, processes, assessment, and actions.

A panel of presidents, provosts, and faculty from Truman State University, Middlesex Community College, and Morehouse College discussed institutional challenges and solutions for creating a shared and collective commitment to assessing student learning and efforts to build organizational cultures that nourish that commitment. Some of the highlights are:

- articulated institutional goals,
- creating motivation for student learning by focusing on institutional integrity and effectiveness,
- commitment has to be proven every day by plans and deeds,
- need to make faculty own the process,
- need to create the value of assessment culture,

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- make assessment systematic—give it structure, provide skills, and methodologies,
- assessment is an expectation at hiring time,
- provide leadership and administrative support—show presence, and
- keep programs vital and changing.

The panel made clear that to create a longlasting environment for assessment of student learning, it is essential to have a sense of right, a long-term commitment by institutional leaders, and actual processes on the ground.

A session describing the transformational changes undertaken at the University of Charleston in West Virginia was particularly rewarding, since it described a complete campuswide effort involving multidisciplinary change with an emphasis on learning. It involves the whole campus and is based on creating learning communities that are expected to change.

Margaret Malmberg, provost and dean of the faculty, noted, "When systems change, the last of the resisters will believe 'it's really going to happen.'" She emphasized the work they are doing to make faculty "own the assessment process" and their emphasis on explaining the institutional assessment culture to new faculty and staff.

The library, information literacy, and partnering with faculty

The academic library community presented four sessions: library initiatives and activities designed to achieve student learning outcomes by focusing on integrating information literacy into the curriculum, developing ways to measure information literacy outcomes, developing partnerships with faculty, and creating a culture of assessment in libraries and across campus.

The ACRL "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" was

highlighted and examples of partnerships with faculty were presented. Library programs that integrate the standards into the curriculum in partnership with faculty were presented by Debra Gilchrist from Pierce College, Janet DuMont from King's College, Anne Fiegen from California State University-San Marcos, Hannelore Rader from University of Louisville, Lyn Cameron from James Madison University, and Gregory Heald from the University of Northern Colorado.

Carla Stoffle, from the University of Arizona, presented ARL's "New Measures Initiative" with emphasis on the Higher Education Outcomes Research Review, which is designed to develop new roles and responsibilities for university libraries in advancing student learning through outcome assessment. Efforts to make this all happen by developing a culture of assessment in libraries, was presented by Amos Lakos from the University of Waterloo.

Conclusion

Although assessment in institutions of higher education is becoming a necessity, it is not part of the organizational culture. External accreditation bodies still drive institutional assessment.

For academic libraries, this conference is of special value. It affords an opportunity to showcase our commitment and our considerable contributions to learning outcomes and to learning outcomes assessment. Increasing awareness about the ACRL "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education" and the work done on many campuses by librarians to integrate the competencies into the general curriculum and to assess student learning outcomes is an important task.

Future AAHE Assessment conferences should be important forums for librarians to attend, learn, and present their considerable assessment work and their community partnership building with faculty. It will afford librarians an important opportunity to build collaborative relationships with our most important partners as well as enhance the status of libraries in advancing the goal of learning outcomes.

Note

1. The detailed program of the conference is available from: <http://www.aahe.org/assessment/2001/final%20program/finalprogram.pdf>. ■

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