Overview

Barbara D. Wright

"Assessment" has become the designation for a broad range of methods and processes designed to improve higher education. Over the seven years since the first postsecondary assessment conference, jointly sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and the U.S. Department of Education, there has been an enormous upsurge of activity in assessment on college campuses. This activity is inspired in part by state or accreditor mandates, but more importantly by colleges' genuine concern about their students and what students are getting out of their college education. Assessment as it is evolving on college campuses, not only in this country but also abroad, is a powerful tool for understanding the educational process and making it pay off in more effective teaching, learning, and administrative procedures. That is an important goal for everyone, from Harvard on across the spectrum, but particularly for those institutions, often in urban settings, that serve nontraditional students or those who study in the face of particular social, economic, cultural, and other disadvantages.

No postsecondary institution today can afford to ignore the current assessment movement, yet there is confusion on campuses, even today, about what assessment really is and what it really means. There are folks who are convinced that postsecondary assessment *must* mean standardized, norm-referenced testing of the kind that has taken place for years at the K–12 level, despite the protestations of assessment practitioners and despite the fact that there is a powerful movement *against* that very kind of assessment at the K–12 level. There are those who believe assessment *must* mean kowtowing to know-nothing politicians and supplying meaningless data for draconian "accountability" schemes, despite the fact that most state mandates are not so foolish. There are those who insist assessment is the first, not-so-subtle step toward a mandated curriculum and the end of academic freedom, despite a clear trend toward development of local approaches adapted to particular institutional missions, faculty interests, and curricular emphases.

Over the last six years, the American Association for Higher Education's (AAHE) Assessment Forum has helped the higher education community to recast assessment as a student-focused, faculty-controlled activity aimed, above all, at *improving teaching and learning*. Assessment understood in that fashion has become a task to which most faculty can sign on in good conscience. And while this view of assessment may not be universally shared, it has become the dominant view on campuses, and is also beginning to be held by most state boards of higher education and even in many statehouses. The thousands of campus practitioners who have attended Assessment Forum conferences over the years have helped policy makers to see that if they demand a narrow, vindictive kind of accountability, they are *not* going to get real educational improvement, and they won't like the results. The Assessment Forum, through the positions it has taken, has in effect begun to "deconstruct" the traditional dichotomy between assessment for educational improvement and assessment for accountability.

Embedded in the work of the Forum is the suggestion that there is in fact a *continuum* of reciprocal responsibility for *both* accountability and improvement that stretches from the classroom and the advising office to the statehouse. Granted, institutions must be accountable to legislatures and taxpayers for their educational effectiveness. But legislatures must also be accountable for supplying the necessary funding and fostering the right climate for educational reform: a climate in which risktaking and candor, not avoidance or the status quo, are rewarded. College instructors involved in assessment will begin to think of themselves as accountable to their students for delivering the very best education of which they are capable, and students, coached in self-assessment, gradually can become more engaged in and accountable for the quality of their achievements. Educational improvement must be the ultimate point of all that effort, along the *entire* continuum. Assessment is a powerful tool that can serve in many ways on many different levels.

With this still evolving notion of assessment in mind, I set to work assembling a collection of essays on assessment that would illustrate the great variety of efforts underway and prove useful for the readers of *Metropolitan Universities*. I wanted essays on a variety of *domains* for assessment (i.e., basic skills, general education, the major, or student development), using a variety of *methods* (i.e., portfolios, surveys, performance assessment, classroom assessment and interviews, as well as more traditional measures), and illustrating the way various institutions had not merely adopted but *adapted* assessment to their own students and circumstances. I wanted essays that would show assessment straddling traditional boundaries between "units" of educational activity and helping us to create functional *connections* where all too often there has been compartmentalization or—worse—dichotomization: for example, between basic skills and general education, or between general education and the major, or between college and students' later work on the job or in the community. I wanted to demonstrate how assessment prods us to make explicit connections between students' intellectual development and their personal development, or between what happens in the classroom and in the culture of the institution as a whole.

As the contributions began to arrive, I realized they illustrated still another quality of assessment. Some of the articles in this collection, like Richard Larson's on portfolios, focus clearly on the nuts and bolts of assessment itself; others, like Roberta Ching's and Charles Moore's piece on assessing ESL skills, focus less on the assessments and more on the findings, the insights into educational practice, that assessment has led to. Still other pieces fall somewhere in between on this continuum. The fact is that assessment cannot and should not be viewed as an activity that takes place for its own sake, in a vacuum. It is—or at least, done right, it *should* be—inextricably intertwined with the educational processes and results that we as educators care passionately about.

I am grateful to the colleagues I invited to contribute to this collection for their enthusiasm, their eagerness to share their work, and their good-natured tolerance of my rather pushy editing style. One article by Barbara Fuhrmann and Robert Armour on assessment of professional specialization appeared in the winter 1992 issue of *Metropolitan Universities*. Because of

space limitations, several more will appear in the next issue. But I originally conceived of them as a coherent collection, and that is how I discuss them in the following pages.

The collection opens with my own primer on assessment: a very basic, practical introduction to some of the vocabulary, concepts, purposes, and assumptions of assessment that sets the stage for the contributions that follow. I owe much of my own understanding of assessment to my colleagues at AAHE, Ted Marchese and Pat Hutchings. The next piece explains how assessment at Johnson C. Smith University led Michael Kidda and his colleagues to look for alternatives to traditional basic skills remediation, and describes how subsequent assessments have shown the effectiveness of the radical alternative the university adopted. The piece also argues eloquently for the kind of *context*—one of faith in students and their ability to learn—that is the precondition both for good assessment and good education.

Next, Richard Larson provides a concise overview of an approach to assessment that is gaining rapidly in popularity: portfolios and their use to assess one particular basic skill, writing. Larson argues that despite their seeming cumbersomeness, portfolios can be manageable and offer significant improvements over more traditional approaches to writing assessment. Unlike writing, English as a Second Language (ESL)—and the effectiveness of ESL programs—has not been in the assessment spotlight, yet arguably acquisition of proficiency in English is the single most important step that students from non-English-speaking backgrounds can take toward success in college and in their working lives afterward. In their article, Roberta Ching and her colleagues from the California State University system share the more finely differentiated diagnosis of ESL students' skills and needs that thoughtful interpretation of assessment results has provided them.

The next cluster of articles highlights another assessment method growing in popularity—performance assessment—and makes connections via assessment from training in the major or professional field to general education and to students' performances in the workplace and in civic life after graduation. Thus Michael Knight and his colleagues describe their work at Keane College of New Jersey in developing and implementing performance assessments. In the last issue, Barbara Fuhrmann and Robert Armour of Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond discussed the ways in which liberal education outcomes, like skill in writing or critical thinking, can be assessed within the major or professional field. In one of the articles held for later publication, Marcia Mentkowski, finally, reports on findings from Alverno College's longitudinal study of alumnae. She notes that we *assume* there is transfer of cognitive and affective learning from college to the workplace or to community service, yet we understand little about that process. Using examples from Alverno, she suggests that we begin with a more careful definition of the knowledge, skills, and values that do transfer, and calls for closer examination, via appropriate assessments, of how that transfer occurs.

Roger Loeb, too, is concerned with the way college prepares students not just professionally but socially, politically, and culturally for life after graduation. His focus, however, is on the time students spend on campus,

and the ways in which assessment has helped him and his colleagues at the University of Michigan-Dearborn to better understand students' particular needs, in and out of class, at specific points in their college careers. Arturo Pacheco, from the University of Texas at El Paso, is also concerned about students' overall development and the role that campus life plays both in academic success and in personal development. Pacheco approaches assessment from the vantage point of an institution where the Hispanic "minority" is in fact a majority; he ponders the adjustments in assumptions and assessment methodology that this implies, and offers examples of the adjustments his own campus has made. Like Pacheco, Joan Shapiro of Temple University is interested in using assessment to make the campus a more welcoming and supportive place for minority as well as majority students. Additionally, though, her article illustrates how permeable the membrane between program or project evaluation and assessment has become. In fact, contemporary assessment is highly eclectic and owes a debt of gratitude to the hard-won wisdom of evaluation practice.

Held for the next issue of *Metropolitan Universities* are four articles which turn back to methods, this time not tied to particular disciplines or domains. Thomas Angelo offers an introduction to classroom assessment, a set of highly adaptable and effective techniques that K. Patricia Cross and he developed that keep assessment front and center in the classroom, between teacher and student, where real day-to-day teaching and learning takes place. Turning from the micro- to the macrolevel, Thomas Streckewald describes the use of surveys to get at overall institutional effectiveness, explaining how Thomas Edison College adapted surveys to fit its unique mission and structure as an institution designed specifically to serve working adults. Marjorie Lavin of Empire State College reminds us that assessment strategies designed for traditional eighteen to twenty-two year-old students may not be appropriate for returning adults and suggests some alternatives.

This set of articles on assessment concludes, finally, with Novella Keith's observations on how assessment, and the self-reflective, responsive attitude toward education that assessment implies, cannot succeed unless it becomes embedded, indeed thoroughly interwoven, in the culture and structures of the institution as a whole. Keith describes some of the barriers to such transformation through assessment and makes suggestions for overcoming them. And with that we come full circle, back to the point Kidda's article makes about the institutional context both for successful assessment and for successful education.

The collection as a whole can only begin to suggest the variety of approaches to postsecondary assessment and the complexity of the interrelationships that characterize it: relationships between assessment, institutional mission, campus culture, the collective intellectual biography of the faculty, student preparation or ambitions, and the expectations of society for higher education. The collection, in other words, is merely an introduction, a sampler. My co-contributors and I hope that the readers of *Metropolitan Universities* will find it intriguing enough to stimulate their own further study and experimentation.