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Assessment

Toward a Lasting Reform

Assessment does not in itself promote educational quality, but may foster quality when it is integrated into the workings of academic departments. This integration requires a professional culture and institutional structure that support collaboration around teaching and the acceptance of collective responsibility for student learning. Culture-building processes, including collaborative planning activities, are just as important as the "products" of planning and assessment. The article suggests two vehicles for integrating assessment into the department: inserting "pieces" of assessment in ongoing departmental activities (i.e., advising); and gathering data about clearly focused, concrete questions that are linked to specific options for interventions (i.e., changing the sequence of program courses).

The assessment movement in higher education has made considerable progress since its inception in the mid-1980s. Participation has expanded to include a large array of institutions. Goals have been clarified, and new methodologies have been developed. These trends are not sufficient, however, to declare unqualified success. Initiating reforms, difficult though it may be, is often easier than maintaining them. An assessment office or requirements that assessment data be included in periodic program reviews are not in themselves indications that the reform has become institutionalized. The new initiative must become a valued, integral, and ongoing part of an organization and maintain the integrity of the goals that were the lifeblood of the reform.

Reform efforts, in higher education and elsewhere, frequently become institutionalized by creating new structures or organizational mechanisms at the margin, without the necessity of systemic change. That approach is useful in some instances.

However, assessment demands more profound change. Successful assessment requires the engagement of the faculty—as part of its professional responsibility—in sustained and ongoing collaboration centered on good teaching and good learning. The expediency of tinkering at the margins should give way to attempts to influence the core— that is, the academic department and the very definition of what a faculty member does.

The full integration of assessment into academic life will depend on the inroads it is able to make into the workings of the academic department. Institutionalizing assessment at this level presents two challenges. The first is developing a comprehensive approach capable of affecting the very culture that supports the values and priorities of most faculty. The second pertains to the integrity of the goals of reforms. Institutionalization requires not

only clarity about one's goals but also the capacity periodically to revisit these goals and reconstitute the structures that are meant to further them, so as to ensure a good fit between ends and means.

Maintaining an integral link between goals and means should not be conceived as a purely technical task, a revival of such schemes as "management by objectives." Rather, it requires an organizational culture and reward structure that promote both personal growth and collective commitment to superordinate goals that cannot be attained by single members of the group, to organizational self-reflection, and to acceptance of the personal consequences—uncertainty, discomfort, and change— that may accompany the process. If we fail to understand and work with this dynamic, our reforms are likely to become fossilized: that is, the means will be institutionalized rather than the ends.

How should assessment initiatives be structured so as to promote the right type of institutionalization? This paper aims to help assessment practitioners formulate their own answers to this question. It does so by discussing the goals of assessment, the requirements of sound institutionalization, and the characteristics of academe that support or undermine such requirements. This analysis identifies several specific issues that are at the heart of any institutionalization effort. The focus is mainly on assessment at the departmental level, since this is the core of academic institutions, the locus where assessment needs to engender real change.

Assessment for What?

Assessment is usually invoked to ensure educational quality. However, this only begs the question, as there is no unified position on *how* assessment should serve this end. Two models linking assessment to educational quality have been advanced, one founded on market assumptions and the other on professional ones.

The first model maintains that an informed public will use product information in ways that reward quality and withdraw support from substandard producers. In the case of higher education, students are the "finished product" and learning outcomes assessment provides the requisite "product information" on which such decisions as college attendance and budgetary and other supports can, presumably, be based. Full disclosure—an institutional "report card," for instance—and market mechanisms presumably ensure that quality prevails.

The professional model takes a different approach. It relies on the application of rigorous standards to the providers of services, on the assumption that the professional's knowledge and code of ethics, supported by the vigilance of the profession as a whole, are the best guarantees of quality. Traditional definitions of professional quality have focused more on "input" and "process" measures than on "outcomes" ones. The professional model does reserve a place for the quality of "outcomes" or "products," but maintains that the complexity of professional evaluation requires the professional community itself to be the final arbiter of quality.

Professional definitions of quality have exerted a more profound influence than market ones on the evolution of the higher education

assessment movement in the 1980s. There are some new twists, however. Outcomes assessment policies by legislatures and accrediting agencies are set in the context of a crisis of public confidence in all our institutions. If the model of professional self-evaluation is to prevail over the market model, academe needs to be responsive to calls for the demonstration of learning outcomes. This requires a shift from *statements of intent* about the knowledge and experiences to which the faculty expose students to the *assumption of responsibility* for ensuring and demonstrating that learning has, in fact, occurred. Failing this, the market model may again raise its head.

Here we have one of the threads to be woven into the fabric of institutionalization. If assessment is to promote educational quality by fostering a *revamped* professional code of conduct, one that acknowledges the importance of learning outcomes and accepts the principle and practice of accountability to external audiences, then the *collective* faculty must assume responsibility for the *overall* learning of students. Given the culture and organizational environment of higher education, gaining acceptance for this revamped definition of professional responsibility is no small task. For instance, in calling on the faculty to articulate and work toward at least some common goals, it invokes nothing less than the transformation of most academic departments from loose aggregations of fairly autonomous individuals into coordinating and integrating units. The typical "congenial anarchy" must be transformed into an organizational structure that balances the individual's need for autonomy and the department's need to fulfill its overall mission.

This takes us to a more encompassing goal of assessment. Assessment raises a fundamental, enduring question that goes to the core of the educational enterprise: what are students actually *learning* in our schools? This question has been asked by many outside the academy, of course, but posing it in earnest inside its walls shifts the focus from providing answers to consumers to creating spaces for faculty and students' reflection about teaching and learning. Here assessment encompasses much more than measurement, becoming nearly synonymous with good educational practice. Where teaching tends to be highly individualistic, assessment provides the opportunity to articulate superordinate, program-level learning goals—the glue that may hold together otherwise fragmented educational experiences. Where students are not involved in their own learning, assessment (including self-assessment) helps them become self-reflective learners by providing them appropriate feedback and knowledge. Instead of being an occasional, marginal activity to satisfy outside audiences, gathering information on student performance becomes part of an organic educational whole, a self-reflecting learning community.

Modeled initially on evaluation and measurement, assessment has become a different and perhaps more complex undertaking. It is about *redefining* professional self-evaluation, *changing* institutional culture, and *developing* new practices and theories of measurement. Figure 1 illustrates some of the implicit links between assessment and improvements in educational quality.

Figure 1: Links Between Assessment and Educational Quality

I
Assessment

Faculty set collective learning outcome
goals; curriculum, pedagogy, other
practices are congruent, support goals;
information on goal achievement
contributes to cycle of professional
self-reflection.

II
Professional Self-Redefinition;
Culture Change

Faculty value sound data on student
learning; engage in collective
discussions on learning; revise
curriculum, pedagogies, other practices
as needed; ongoing collective
self-reflection on teaching and learning.

III
Educational Quality
(Outcome based)

High levels of knowledge, academic
skills, and personal growth for all
students; increased ability to learn
independently, be self-confident,
self-reflective learners.

As one moves from the market model to professional self-redefinition and on to culture change, assessment becomes less a technical task that could be performed by measurement experts and increasingly a complex, human relations task for which the faculty themselves must assume responsibility. Transcending systematic data collection, institutionalization becomes more a matter of developing relationships and processes that facilitate commitment to *collective* goals and *informed* discussions of teaching and learning and foster openness to the changes suggested by this collective self-reflection.

Given this broader definition of assessment, the relationship between assessment and academic culture (as shown in I and II above) becomes symbiotic rather than one-directional. Organizational value systems and their attendant priorities may facilitate the entry of assessment, while assessment, especially when accompanied by organizational supports, will go a long way toward stimulating the desired culture change. This relationship between assessment and academic culture is vital to establishing the link to improving educational quality. Conversely, its absence will signal the institutionalization of means and the victory of bureaucratic compliance.

Assessment and the Academic Environment

Academic environments present special difficulties for the institutionalization of assessment. Common goals are few and there is little formal coordination of activities, except at the level of the individual faculty member. In the language of organizational theory, academic organizations are characterized by "loose couplings." Committee members, for instance, tend to be "chosen for locally idiosyncratic reasons to represent larger interests, which themselves are not homogeneous. The resulting contacts become links between individuals rather than links

between administrative units, and the resulting 'commitments' become difficult to implement." (Weick, 17) Given the paucity of mechanisms for creating consensus, goals might be articulated but left purposely vague. This environment supports the value of faculty autonomy and the contributions that result from it but makes achievement of collective goals problematical. It allows faculty members in a department to pursue different interests and specializations that may be obscure even to their departmental colleagues, while relying on tradition to provide coherence to undergraduate teaching and learning.

These characteristics of academe constitute a significant problem with regard to the two requirements of institutionalization I have identified: (a) cultural change and (b) maintaining the integrity of goals. If integration occurs largely as an ad hoc and individual matter, if goals continue to be vague, how are department faculty to agree about what constitutes excellence in student learning or work together and make changes in order to pursue it?

There is hope. Cultures are not monolithic. The assessment movement has, in fact, joined a growing "subculture" whose agenda is to reassert the centrality of teaching and learning in all of higher education. Even discipline-based associations, traditionally the bastions of research-based definitions of excellence, have begun to focus in greater numbers on teaching and undergraduate education. Common ground exists between this trend and an intrinsic aspect of the faculty ethos: interest in teaching and the value of informed reflection. Studies such as that by Ann Austin and Zelda Gamson have repeatedly shown a long-standing preference for teaching among the majority of faculty, even at research institutions. Fueled perhaps by the national dialogue, this interest seems to be growing. As Parker Palmer put it in a recent interview in *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, there is a "hunger among faculty to reflect on teaching and learning."

This new discourse at the broadest, systemic level is matched by the increasing visibility of supportive activities on campuses: faculty development programs, teaching effectiveness centers, supports for teaching assistants and new instructors, teaching portfolios for faculty review, collaborative learning, and, sometimes, collaborative teaching. Some professional organizations—those that accredit business and education schools and nursing programs, for instance—are turning away from prescribing curricula, moving instead toward requiring a demonstration of learning outcomes. If they do not add to but, rather, substitute for existing reporting requirements, and if they are undertaken in the spirit I advocate, such exercises can and do contribute to the faculty and student "conversation" about learning.

Institutionalizing Assessment: Some Practical Suggestions

Assessment initiatives require both supportive norms and values— which must be created if they are not already part of the departmental culture—and integration into ongoing departmental activities. Ideally, a supportive departmental culture includes a set of common and valued

student learning goals, the norm of faculty collaboration and coordination in matters related to teaching and student learning, self-reflection and self-assessment, both at the individual and collective level, and an orientation to change in the service of learning and improvements. Integration of assessment with ongoing activities accomplishes two important things: it provides additional supports for the desired culture, as well as ensures that mechanisms are available for the implementation of improvements. What are some of the ways assessment can be institutionalized to facilitate accomplishing these ends?

Creating Supportive Norms and Values

Norms and values do not exist in isolation from the larger structures that influence our behavior. In hostile environments, alternative personal values can be maintained only with great difficulty, if at all. Thus it must be understood that the ability of a department to instill and reinforce values supportive of assessment goals cannot be isolated from the values of the institution, the discipline, or the society of which the department is a part. This caveat must be kept in mind in considering what might be done at the level of the department.

It is helpful if the creation of supportive norms and values is seen, from the beginning, as a requirement of sound institutionalization. From this perspective, the process becomes part of the product. Culture-building processes must be considered to be just as important as the more instrumentally oriented "products" such as departmental goals, assessment instruments, reports, and so on, that are usually the focus of assessment initiatives. Building a supportive culture requires positive answers to the following questions: Is the process truly collaborative? Does it build commitment to a set of superordinate learning goals for which faculty will willingly sacrifice some of their autonomy? Does it encourage conversation and self-reflection about teaching and learning?

Departments should avoid approaches that define assessment in terms of measurement and embrace those that focus on assessment as a collaborative faculty effort to improve student learning. Given time and resource constraints, it may seem expedient and efficient to seize on an existing test or to undertake planning by allowing the curriculum specializations of individual faculty members to become de facto assessment specializations. However, in the long run, such choices are likely to lead to the institutionalization of an ineffective assessment model.

With some forethought, the norms and values of assessment and academic culture can be aligned in ways that are mutually supportive. Every time peer review of programs and teaching is conducted perfunctorily or made the servant of politics, the value of professional self-evaluation and teaching is diminished. Conversely, we can begin to act "as if" these activities retained the salience assigned to them by tradition and ideology, that is, we can begin to take them seriously. Of course, it helps greatly if the same message is conveyed through several well-respected and powerful vehicles such as professional associations, influential academics, accrediting agencies, and the like.

There are other, internal carriers for new values and norms. Without necessarily using the term, language and practices supportive of assessment should be included in activities the faculty consider important or undertake routinely and thoughtfully: curriculum review, preparation of course syllabi, student assignments and exams, student advising, new course descriptions, applications for internal grants, faculty peer review, and so on. All carriers should provide support for creating or reinforcing superordinate goals, assuming joint responsibility for student learning, and participating in dialogue about teaching and learning. The ultimate test of the incorporation of assessment into the departmental culture is, of course, when its practices become part of the faculty's ongoing work routine.

Integrating Assessment into Departmental Activities

Assessment should become an integral part of departmental activities. This means that the approach to good education that is intrinsic to assessment becomes part of one's work; it does not mean that one should measure everything. Two approaches to integrating assessment in departmental activities may be useful. The first is to "infiltrate" these activities by inserting wherever possible "pieces" of assessment by means of questions and procedures that prepare the ground. The second is to select specific areas of learning for departmental investigation and action. Here assessment is integrated through a cyclical process that leads from a question to changes in aspects of the department's work. Generally, the aim of both approaches should be to create structured occasions through which faculty and students can put specific learnings into broader perspective, seek and obtain feedback on what has been learned, and consider alternatives. The last part is especially important. The dialogue of assessment is not merely sharing; it is a focused search for improvements.

Method One: Infiltration

Curriculum Review. When engaged in curriculum review, one should ask for evidence of the effectiveness of the old and new curricula, not in terms of faculty perceptions, but in terms of actual student learning. What are we trying to do with this course or cluster of courses and are the students learning it? What is our evidence? Curriculum review could begin with a review of course syllabi and student assignments, as described below.

Course Syllabi and Student Assignments. Many departments routinely collect course syllabi. Faculty could be asked to include in their syllabi a statement of what students will learn through the course, how course assignments are expected to contribute specifically to this learning, and how course learning outcomes contribute to the development of broader program outcomes. It may be easiest to introduce this step during a regular program review.

Of course, faculty frequently approach such exercises in a compliance mode rather than as meaningful activities. These same exercises can, however, support the meaningful integration of assessment if they are

taken seriously. This means, for instance, that, regardless of the actual attitudes of the faculty, one makes the review meaningful by acting on the information. For example, one might use the information to construct a grid of implicit departmental learning outcomes and the collective instructional and curricular practices through which students are expected to acquire such learnings. The grid could then serve to put the question back to the faculty in a second iteration: "Is this what we want for our students? If so, is what we are offering helping them achieve it? How successful are these assignments? How do we know?" Student assignments and projects can also be used for documentation and discussion. In particular, assignments that span more than one course and faculty member can serve as mechanisms of integration and collaboration for the faculty as well as the students.

One should not consider such tasks completed because they have been undertaken once. Simple, fundamental questions must be revisited occasionally to forestall the tendency for goals to become confused or displaced and to avoid the loss of congruence between goals and means.

Student Advising. Integrating assessment pieces into departmental advising is only feasible if advising itself is undertaken seriously rather than viewed in a mode of compliance. In the past decade, efforts to increase student retention have identified the importance of faculty in advising and mentoring students. Departments concerned with improving their advising procedures could use the process to engage in a more meaningful dialogue with each student about her/his goals, needs, and learning. Assessment information could further deepen the conversation. At critical points in the student's career, such an in-depth examination might be undertaken by a team of faculty.

Method Two: Linking "Research" Questions to Interventions

To the extent that assessment resembles research, an applied rather than a pure model should serve as a guide. Consideration of alternative approaches to teaching and learning should involve focused questioning, linked to program learning outcomes, about a limited set of alternatives. If the concern is the curriculum, one could ask questions such as the following:

- Given the desired learning outcome, what are students asked to do, in which courses, to help them accomplish this outcome?
- What differentiates high-performing from low-performing students, in terms of courses taken, assignments completed, and so on?
- Is the sequencing of courses and assignments appropriate? Do we need more or different assignments or course materials, and if so where could they be inserted?
- Are some students bypassing some requirements, and does this affect their performance?
- How can low-performing students get extra help? Through collaborative learning? Through peer tutoring by members of student organizations?

The questions could of course be different. What is important is that they point to specific areas for information gathering and intervention: course assignments, sequencing, advising, faculty development, pedagogy, student involvement, and so on. When the department's task is defined as linking assessment to improvements, gathering and analyzing information is only a small part of the undertaking. It is the subsequent actions taken, and not measure-ment itself, that determine how well assessment will achieve its goals. These actions, undertaken in integrated fashion, will involve many facets of the department's work. It is wise to impose strict limits on what one chooses to examine at any one time and to assume that careful implementation of no more than two or three selected changes will require much more time and effort than the task of measurement itself.

This approach will make the best and most realistic use of limited time and produce tangible results fairly quickly. Not incidentally, the changes one implements will provide much of the substance of reports to outside entities, should these be required.

Toward a Lasting Reform

In this paper, I have placed assessment in the broader context of academic culture, of professional responsibilities of academics, and of educational quality defined in terms of student learning. Seen in this light, the task of institutionalization becomes both more demanding and more meaningful than it would be if assessment were equated with measurement and evaluation.

Assessment now becomes an agent for self-renewal rather than a seal of quality. Starting from a new compact between higher education and society, it calls on institutions to reaffirm the value of teaching and learning and on faculty to join together to envision and work toward overarching goals for improving learning. It asks faculty and students to assume joint responsibility for achieving these goals. And it provides a reminder that the task is never quite done, that there are some simple but important questions that must be asked not once, but time and again: What is the important learning we expect of our students? How are *we* taking responsibility, collectively, for their learning? How are *they*? What do we do well? Where do we need to improve? Keeping these questions firmly in view and acting on the answers should serve higher education well through the difficult times that seem to lie ahead.

Suggested Readings

Austin, Ann E., and Zelda F. Gamson. *Academic Workplaces: New Demands, Heightened Tensions.* ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report No. 10. Washington, D.C.: Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1983.

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