Overview

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In the spring and summer of 1993 *Metropolitan Universities* devoted two issues of the journal to the topic of assessment. In the first, Barbara D. Wright stated in her introductory essay that, "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....[the intervening years have] helped the higher education community to recast assessment as a student-focused, faculty-controlled activity aimed, above all, at *improving teaching and learning*" (p. 3, original emphasis). Since that time assessment for institutional effectiveness has spread across the country at all levels of higher education, public and private.

As with much of the current higher education management terminology and processes, strategic planning and assessment for continuous improvement have migrated from the private sector to the public sector as the demands for greater accountability from state legislatures, corporate entities, and the public have increased. Public higher education is now being required to demonstrate, in a public manner, the success of its educational mission through production of highly qualified graduates and good stewardship of resources.

Although institutional assessment has been the norm for decades, many campuses still struggle with exactly what to assess and how to assess it. In that regard, some will argue that nothing has changed since the earlier volumes on this topic. It is the case, however, that much growth in both understanding and sophistication has occurred. When assessment became the watch-call for state legislatures, state higher education governing bodies, and regional and professional accrediting bodies, the focus was on results in institutional processes and production measures, e.g., graduation rates, retention rates, and degree production. In more recent years, the focus and the demand for accountability at all levels have shifted to student learning outcomes, i.e., what students learned as graduates of higher educational institutions. Faculty and administrators at the campus level have had a tremendous impact on changing the perception of state agencies, legislatures, and the public about assessment.

The other shift is the growing recognition that institutions of higher education are not all the same. Measures of outcomes and processes for achieving outcomes are different at flagship research institutions compared to regional, comprehensive campuses, between small, private, liberal arts institutions and large public universities, and between rural, residential campuses and urban or metropolitan campuses. This does not mean that student learning outcomes cannot be measured and reported, but it does mean that different measures may be needed for different types of campuses with different missions. Since higher educational institutions serve different student bodies and have varied missions, outcome expectations will differ and different measures may likely be needed to accurately reflect the success of urban campuses in meeting their own mission.

One result has been that campuses are engaging in much more detailed and extensive strategic planning to best use resources devoted to assessing student learning outcomes and institutional effectiveness. Many campuses have engaged in planning and assessment for years, especially in the arenas of financial resources and student enrollment, but planning processes have been quite variable. Major research institutions have tended to focus planning on the acquisition of research funds and the production of doctoral students and scholarly publications. Private institutions have focused more on the recruitment of students through balancing educational reputation with tuition costs to ensure a revenue stream to support the operations of the college. State institutions have concentrated more on providing typically generic educational opportunities for people living in the immediate vicinity, with some emphasis on the particular needs of the local regional economy.

The current issue is an attempt to see where we are in assessment on urban and metropolitan campuses as we enter the twenty-first century. The recognition that urban and metropolitan campuses do have explicit missions that focus on serving their target communities in addition to their degree-seeking students; that urban campuses have student bodies that are typically divergent from traditional, residential campuses; and that urban campuses comprise a large portion of the college graduates each year has made these campuses into laboratories for innovation and creativity in meeting the challenges of assessment. Encouraged by national organizations with a focus on higher education, e.g., the Pew Charitable Trust, the Carnegie Foundation, and the American Association for Higher Education, these institutions have begun to share efforts to develop processes and measures to achieve desired outcomes.

John Cole and Michael J. Nettles of the University of Michigan begin the examination of assessment with an update on the status and trends in assessment at the statewide level, presenting findings from a survey of state academic officers on their experience. One revealing result was a disjuncture between assessment objectives and assessment outcomes. In particular, state academic officers listed increased accountability to the public (including state elected officials) and improved student learning as the primary assessment policy *objective* followed by improved teaching. Although the primary *outcome* reported was also increased accountability to the public, the second was to promote planning on campuses. The importance of planning as an outcome reflects the critical need of urban campuses to pay close attention to both the trends in student enrollment patterns and to resource availability.

Victor Borden of Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis provides a look at how urban institutions differ from traditional ones, both as institutions and their student bodies. He discusses the general characteristics of urban institutions and establishes the need to develop new and different measures of their effectiveness, and then briefly summarizes three interinstitutional efforts to articulate and assess urban university effectiveness. The three initiatives are still works in progress; however, he provides a preliminary list of measures, and argues for scrutiny of institutional processes and structures that support the urban mission, and assess the contributions of urban and metropolitan universities to individuals and communities.

Focusing on more specific aspects of campus structure and processes, Noel C. Womack, James O. Nichols, and Karen W. Nichols delve into the pivotal role of the department in the assessment process. It is through the department that two necessary assessment processes occur: it is where faculty buy-in and involvement will most likely occur, and it is where assessment can have the greatest impact on student learning outcomes. When departmental faculty are involved in developing expectations of student learning and engage in collecting and/or receiving data on learning outcomes that can enhance their own teaching and curriculum, the assessment process has obtained a heightened level of success and institutionalization necessary for long-term success and impact.

The following two articles discuss the development of what has become a pervasive tool in assessment—the student survey. As student learning has become a central focus of campus assessment, the characteristics of the student body and student perceptions have become important factors in determining how well campuses across the nation are doing.

Vasti Torres, Johanna Glode, Kathi Ketcheson, and Don Truxillo at Portland State University report on a collaborative effort among three urban universities funded by the Pew Charitable Trust to develop an entering student questionnaire that is designed to obtain information on urban student performance before students enter the university and encounter the curriculum, so as to create a baseline for measuring change as students progress. Gathering information relevant to urban students that affects their abilities to persist and succeed at urban institutions can also help campuses plan and act to enhance the educational experience for a nontraditional set of students.

Sally Andrade and Tammie Aragón Campos of The University of Texas at El Paso provide a thorough description of how they developed a graduating senior survey. As students prepare to graduate, their perceptions of their educational experience have become popular indicators of higher education's success in educating them, at least as part of the outcome. There is much to be gained by profiling a campus' graduating seniors' success stories as one way of examining processes and policies, rather than concentrating exclusively on those students who do not persist.

Sherwin Davidson, Seanna Kerrigan, and Susan Agre-Kippenhan of Portland State University address another critical component of urban campus assessment—the link between the university and the surrounding community. Urban universities have missions that directly connect them to their communities in ways that many traditional institutions do not. Much attention has been devoted to the development of courses to involve students in community or service learning opportunities. These authors broaden this idea of connection with the community to include a multiple-approach, collaborative model for faculty involvement with ongoing institutional support and to build community outreach into faculty scholarly agendas. If links to the community are a part of an urban university's mission, assessing the processes and structures that enable the linkages to occur becomes a critical piece of the overall strategy for effectiveness at urban institutions.

Finally, I present a model for "closing the loop" between the strategic planning, goal-setting activities of a campus assessment process and the use of outcomes information to affect decisions. The University of North Carolina at Charlotte is one example of directly linking formal academic strategic planning with the annual report documents as an explicit feedback loop for sharing success in accomplishing goals and objectives. An electronic, Web-based component allows units to share results broadly and continuously.

The articles in this issue on assessment illustrate the sophistication and the subtleties that exist as campuses struggle to do a better job. It is a testimony to the success of the assessment movement and to the assessment processes themselves that urban campuses have undertaken the many initiatives included in these pages, taking very seriously the goal of meeting the educational needs of their students, of enhancing their services, and of assisting faculty to provide quality instruction. No one argues that they do assessment perfectly, but few would now maintain that there has been no value in the process of discovery and the results of assessment for student learning and institutional effectiveness.