Noel C. Womack, James O. Nichols, and Karen W. Nichols

Assessors, faculty, and administrators at metropolitan universities face many unique challenges when assessing instructional programs and educational support services. The purpose of this article is to explore the assessment and improvement of educational programs and administrative services at metropolitan colleges and universities. The task requires an understanding of five important assessment-related issues with three key implications for metropolitan institutions in particular.

The Department's Role in Improvement of Educational Programs

Maintaining effective instructional programs and educational support services for students has recently become more critical to higher education institutions because the actions of regional and professional accrediting associations and many state governments (Astin, 1991; Banta, 1993; Nichols, 1995). Program and service maintenance involves tracking functional improvements by assessing educational (student) outcomes or the administrative (educational support) objectives that institutional departments intend to achieve. Intended educational outcomes describe student knowledge, skills, or abilities developed by departmental core courses and degree programs. In contrast, intended administrative objectives describe activities supporting institutional functions and educational affairs. Assessment is the collection of data that measure and evaluate objectives and outcomes to determine their contributions to institutional effectiveness. Either achieving or failing to achieve intended outcomes and objectives then inspire changes or improvements in instructional and educational support operations.

This article explores the assessment and improvement of educational programs and administrative services at metropolitan colleges and universities through the primary academic unit—the department. The next section discusses developing intended student outcomes and administrative objectives, while the third section cites prerequisites for assessing student learning and administrative objectives. Next, we discuss how to use assessment results to improve programs and services; explain the issues of implementing assessment at the department level; and identify implications for asses-

sors. Finally, the article differentiates metropolitan institutions from other higher education institutions.

Developing Student Outcomes and Administrative Objectives

Documenting intended student outcomes and administrative objectives intensifies departmental commitments to effective achievement of the institution's mission to teach, conduct research, and serve (Nichols, 1995). Serving urban students' needs (practical education and training) satisfies the teaching component of the mission, and providing information (research findings) to urban consumers (such as business or political leaders) satisfies the research component. Further, institutions serve communities through relationships founded in research or teaching collaborations. Thus, the evaluation and improvement of student outcomes and educational support objectives can enhance the institution's edge on its competitors. Faculty and departments use the results when designing departmental activities. Providing students with opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for graduation, graduate/professional education, or employment is thus an important practical use of assessment results to enhance institutional effectiveness.

Granted, most faculties would welcome the opportunity to transform assessment results into better educational experiences. However, providing such opportunities may require an academic department to commit hours that are not available, so that assessors should not expect faculty and students to devote very much time to new assessment activities. Instead, the most helpful question might be, "What educational experiences does this department provide?" This focus helps academic planners and departmental assessors refine learning outcomes for activities that are taking place. Moreover, because improved instruction originates from a comprehensive evaluation of student learning data, one implication for developing intended outcomes is understanding that it is *not* the academic department's operational processes that are the focus of the assessment (Nichols, 1995). Operational processes are important in assessing intended educational support objectives, but knowledge, skills, and abilities are critical in assessing intended student outcomes. A second implication for developing intended student outcomes is that establishing criteria for success (the standards at which the intended outcome is achieved) precedes instructional improvement. Having a numeric level of achievement is vital to the improvement of departmental assessment. Also, academic backgrounds and academic preparation levels influence the development of student outcomes across the spectrum of different educational experiences with which urban students start higher education. A wide variety of educational backgrounds suggests that departments might separate out intended educational outcomes for substantially different groups of entering students.

In contrast to student outcomes, administrative objectives are influenced by community needs as well as student needs. Intended administrative objectives focus on services available to support urban students' educational goal achievements or departmental operations (e.g., providing research information to off and on-campus consumers). Intended objectives for student, academic, and administrative affairs departments support institutional and departmental policies and emphasize that serving students is

the priority. Recognizing that various extracurricular responsibilities (jobs and families) that consume urban students' free time are detrimental to providing and assessing services, administrative departments at metropolitan colleges and universities must make educational support services efficient, effective, and readily available to reach students who may both work full-time and attend college. Furthermore, using surveys and questionnaires to ascertain student satisfaction with educational support services facilitates improvement of such services.

Assessing Student Outcomes and Administrative Objectives

To be sure, embedding assessment in departmental operations and involving departmental staff in its activities ensures a useful assessment program and improves course effectiveness. Whereas departmental administrators often assume full responsibility for reports, the whole department assumes responsibility and fully participates in formal assessments. All departmental faculty members (if not a general education committee) evaluate general education courses offered by the department for improving the institution's core offerings. If those do not meet an acceptable level of quality, faculty revise the curricula. Obviously, institutional effectiveness depends partially on the quality of the general education program.

Certainly, a department has the power to change programs and services. Faculty use the assessment program to monitor student and program performance, and administrators use it to monitor campus and community services. Metropolitan institutions have special needs to consider when assessing programs and services, and standardized assessment instruments have not always reflected, for example, minority students' true performance. Consequently, acquiring the best instruments for the students' demographic composition (those that allow local questions to be added) is a possible solution to increasing the appropriateness of performance evaluation. Also, outcomes reflecting urban student needs should be used in departmental assessment. For instance, urban students often require course work but not a degree, or they may require child care but not housing, so outcomes should reflect that degrees and housing are not priorities. Moreover, since urban students demand a high-quality education for time and money expended, faculty and administrators must improve programs and services using information from assessment results.

The faculty maintains and improves instructional programs (including core courses) for students (Astin, 1991). Core courses in the general education program, which may distinguish the institution for academic excellence, are only as effective as the faculty desires. Evaluation can lead to improving the effectiveness of core offerings and ensure that students' time and money are not wasted. Indeed, the faculty must coordinate departmental core courses with the institution's intended outcomes in general education to provide linkage to the institution's mission and goals. Because urban students of various ages and educational backgrounds attending metropolitan institutions present academic goal achievement challenges, general education standardized assessment instruments, such as ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (ACT-CAAP), are useful for evaluating nontraditional student development through the core curriculum and for validating those areas that require improvement.

Using Assessment Results to Improve Programs and Services

In particular, improvement requires metropolitan universities to show how instructional programs and student services elucidate the institutional mission and goals (Nichols, 1995). Linking programs and services to the institution's goals provides an opportunity to assess achievement of intended student outcomes and administrative objectives. As an illustration, if an institutional goal is to improve technology in educational support services, then answering the question of how technology-based services in the library improved this year is one possible means of assessment. That is, library assessors could examine changes in technology-based services and determine student satisfaction with the new offerings. A significant change in library technology paired with satisfied students indicates that the library's educational support services improved. Thus, assessment results can be used to improve programs and services for students, thereby exemplifying the core missions of the institution—teaching, research, and service. In fact, assessors should first study the institution's mission statement before beginning assessment efforts.

Assuming a mission statement is in part the documentation of a leader's vision, planners create the mission statement to articulate the vision of an institution's future. Institutional planning documents commonly articulate the relationships among outcomes, goals, objectives, and the mission statement. In the plan, the institution's mission and goals are delineated, and its departments should then link their outcomes and objectives with the institutional goals. In an institutional planning document, as an illustration, the purpose of assessment could be to improve the institution's instructional programs and services. Because institutions and departments are accountable (as documented in mission statements) for administering high quality educational experiences, studying student outcomes and administrative objectives assessment results gives administrators data that may result in modifying educational processes and programs.

Assessment results are also used by faculty, students, and administrators to generate ideas for improving programs and services (Nichols, 1995). Analyzing the effects of curricula on students helps faculty improve instructional content, techniques, and delivery as well as student motivation and learning. Examining academic objectives yields information that may help to adjust the department or school culture for better student service. Similarly, student affairs personnel use assessment results to organize and improve services: counseling, tutorial, housing, financial aid, and health. For instance, assessment results from a counseling center may indicate that urban commuters need more accessible and efficient assistance in adjusting to college, so counselors' offices can be relocated near classrooms. Thus, assessment at metropolitan institutions is valuable for documenting that student services complement academic experiences. In fact, administrators must make faculty and students aware that decisions on laboratories, libraries, and technologies are partially based on assessment results. Current students must also know that the privilege of evaluating courses, majors, departments, instructors, and extracurricular activities helps to improve programs and services both for themselves and future students. Often, mature students at urban or metropolitan institutions take such responsibilities seriously and expect to see action resulting from their evaluations.

Successful assessment leads to understanding departmental functioning and improving functional effectiveness (Nichols, 1995). A minimum standard (criterion) that indicates acceptable performance (for success) confirms outcome or objective achievement, and a measurable outcome or objective is one that has such a criterion for success. Using appropriate assessment tools for outcomes and objectives produces appropriate data. The measurable outcomes and objectives are evaluated for meeting, exceeding, or failing to meet the criteria for success, and institutional programs and services are improved by the feedback that assessment processes bring forth. Meeting or exceeding a predetermined criterion for success confirms that programs or services are performing as well as or better than expected. Failing to meet a criterion for success does not mean that the assessment process has failed. On the contrary, such failure may indicate either that the department's performance (reflected by assessment of a given outcome or objective) is not up to the minimum standard determined beforehand or that the criterion was not feasible for the assessment of that particular outcome or objective. At that point, the program or service represented by the outcome or objective can be modified for better performance, or the criterion for success manipulated for better measurement. Performance, it is hoped, will meet or exceed the appropriate criteria for success during the next assessment period and therefore reinforce the department's effectiveness.

Issues of Implementing Assessment at the Departmental Level

Although institutions are accountable to stakeholders for the quality of educational experiences, departments can actually improve this quality (Nichols, 1995). Implementing assessment at the departmental level strengthens the institution because it involves faculty, staff, and students. Faculty control the department's curricula and educational opportunities. Staff members provide services through contact with students. Students in the departments have roles in implementation or in data provision. Improvements made from assessment results are implemented by institutional members who understand students' financial, intellectual, and physical needs. One important consideration in departmental-level assessment is increasing faculty and staff involvement.

Faculty and staff certainly contribute as members of the institution's assessment committee (Gray and Banta, 1997), which is an educational opportunity for institutional members who serve on it, as well as for the institutional members who are served by it. Because assessment efforts can be derailed by only a few objectors, service on the committee is used to educate as many people as possible about the benefits of assessment. The committee annually reviews assessment reports from certain departments and makes suggestions to ensure compliance with the institution's reporting guidelines. Encouraging faculty and staff to report assessment research and findings from their experiences at conferences is but one way to make assessment meaningful outside program and service improvement.

Additionally, examining assessment results to determine the effectiveness of programs and services enables assessors to generate improvement strategies (Nichols, 1995). If the assessment results indicate that a criterion for success is not met, then the department must determine the reason. Obviously, improving programs and services

requires information on current and desired performance levels. The offices of registrar, financial aid, and institutional research typically have reports that can be used to analyze current provisions for urban students as well as to plan future provisions. Current performance reflects whether the criterion for success was met; but desired performance involves detailing how the department will modify the related function and outcome (or objective) to meet or exceed a future criterion. For example, the current criterion for success indicates that 50 percent of urban remedial students will utilize tutorial services. But, when 63 percent of these students use the services, assessors must decide whether to continue assessment using this criterion or change it to a higher one (e.g., 60 percent). Departments must eliminate any anxiety about sharing assessment results (e.g., not meeting a criterion for success) because the results are actually used by decision-makers to strengthen programs and services for students and the institution. Hiding assessment results, therefore, will only weaken the department's assessment program.

Another responsibility of the institution is to inform students about assessment projects. As early as summer orientation, students should be informed about the institution's commitment to improving programs and services and the expectation that students will share the responsibility. Making assessment an institutional priority helps motivate students to complete surveys and perform well on assessment instruments. Giving them feedback about performance creates a bond between the institution and the students, and encourages them to support the department's culture of continuous improvement. Also, students should serve on committees concerning assessment planning because their ideas concerning assessment strategies and intended outcomes or objectives are valuable for understanding what they want to know, think, or do as a result of educational experiences.

Equally important, the quality of assessment efforts may be affected by limitations of resources or of assessment tools and measures (Gray and Banta, 1997). Financial constraints may limit a department to developing an assessment instrument rather than purchasing one from a national publisher. In addition, time constraints limit when students or faculties are available to take or administer an instrument.

Implications for Assessors

Institutional assessors are responsible for educating the campus community about assessment, maintaining its importance, and supporting assessment efforts in departments (Nichols, 1995). Helping departments recognize areas for improvement resulting from assessment is a challenge for assessors.

Institutions support assessment by establishing an office and employing staff to support departmental assessment needs (Gray and Banta, 1997). For example, urban faculties and students may not have extra time after classes, on weeknights, or on weekends for assessment instruments, so assessment staff devise in-class assessment activities or associate them with institutional activities (such as orientation) when students are available. Academic, administrative, and student affairs divisions require various degrees of assessment expertise—especially in instrument design. A particular concern is determining the validity and reliability of qualitative instruments such as

portfolios. Portfolios are valuable tools for gathering data on programs and services, but maintaining them with acceptable validity and reliability is also imperative. The assessment staff must also be visible on campus, so as to promote assessment as a practical activity.

Another obligation of the staff is to educate the campus community about the purpose and value of assessing programs and services. An orientation for the institution's assessment committee will annually reach 10-15 people and their departments. Annual presentations for new department chairs are useful for explaining institutional assessment policies and guidelines. Additionally, a presentation for departmental assessors reaches not only chairs but faculty and staff members who coordinate the departments' assessment endeavors. Following up and meeting privately with both chairs and assessors of departments is worthwhile for planning campus assessment education and choosing future committee members.

Also, recently hired institutional members can provide an opportunity to emphasize the importance of assessment in otherwise nonreceptive departments (Gray and Banta, 1997). If assessment is part of the leader's vision and the administrative expectations that permeate institutional operations, then departments with new staff can make a strong assessment program a priority. Losing assessment strength when assessment proponents leave the institution can be avoided if the assessment office maintains its importance throughout leadership transitions.

Assessors face challenges regarding improvement: planning, evaluating, and using assessment results to improve institutional functions commands time (Astin, 1991). Using assessment results to improve programs and services requires that departments understand assessment. If the assessment staff continually educates the institution, understanding is not the primary issue—instead, studying outcomes or objectives to change programs or services becomes more important. The challenge is helping department assessors and chairs learn to recognize improvement indicators and variables that affect student performance on assessment instruments. For example, when a criterion for success is not met, perhaps the teaching method could be improved, or the students' performance was less than expected because they did not study or learn the subjects the instrument assessed. What can be done to improve student learning or performance as measured by assessment instruments, given a certain department and its resources, is the question departmental assessors must answer.

Differences among Metropolitan Institutions

Metropolitan institutions differ from traditional higher education institutions in faculty characteristics, student characteristics, and student learning assessment methods and techniques. Assessors new to metropolitan institutions must be familiar with these differences if they are to perform effective institutional assessment.

Faculties and students have various interests in urban educational opportunities. For instance, faculty members may work in other institutions or industries and not have time to assist students. The metropolitan institution offers more resources for teaching, researching, and service responsibilities than the traditional institution. Similarly, urban students have family, work, and personal responsibilities that limit educa-

tional experiences. Thus, attending an institution in the city of residence satisfies the educational requirements of the student while allowing an opportunity for other important commitments. The decreased time faculty members have to devote to assessment and the decreased time students have to be assessed outside classes influence the existence and quality of the metropolitan institution's assessment program. Therefore, assessors must develop efficient (in-class or campus-wide) assessment activities for faculty and student participation.

Urban students may be older than traditional college-age students who are typically 18-22, and may be first-generation college students with full-time jobs and family commitments even before starting college. Metropolitan institutions' educational experiences are meaningful to working students and applicable to future jobs. Indeed, completing college course work or degree programs may give students advantages for job promotions or qualifications for new jobs. However, because of current job or family commitments, urban students may attend classes irregularly over many years and at different institutions before completing degree programs. Accordingly, assessors must consider that a blend of educational and institutional influences may contribute to student outcomes assessed at the end of degree programs, and determine if assessment is necessary earlier and more often than at the end of programs.

Urban students from various educational backgrounds attend metropolitan institutions. The quality of the educational experiences before the equivalency exam or graduation from city or suburban high schools affects college academic performance. Regardless of academic preparation, metropolitan universities educate and prepare all students for future work opportunities in the city. Consequently, assessors who understand the educational needs and learning styles of students attending their institutions select appropriate assessment instruments to collect the most valuable data.

Metropolitan institutions' remedial programs are more important than honors programs, given that the majority of urban students come from substandard educational backgrounds. In fact, they must provide urban students with the academic foundations to complete advanced higher education courses. Because a primary responsibility of a metropolitan institution is to increase urban students' opportunities for advancement in society, administrators must be aware of improvement possibilities in remedial programs. Assessing and improving the effectiveness of remedial programs is a priority for institutions aiming to provide quality educational opportunities for students without quality educational backgrounds.

Conclusion

Assessors, faculty, and administrators at metropolitan colleges and universities have five issues and three implications to consider when evaluating and improving educational programs and administrative services. The first issue, developing intended student outcomes and administrative objectives, requires understanding the institution's mission, the current instructional and administrative offerings, and the desired instructional and administrative offerings. The second, assessing student learning and administrative processes, involves the entire department, as well as committees across departments. The third is that faculty and administrators must use assessment results to

improve institutional programs and services. The fourth is that department level assessment allows control of assessment and improvement, but it is often limited by availability of resources. Finally, institutional assessors support departments by educating faculty and staff and maintaining assessment importance through leadership transitions.

The following implications are unique to metropolitan institutions: urban students and faculty demand efficient yet effective educational experiences in addition to maintaining extracurricular commitments; urban students begin college careers with various educational backgrounds and academic preparation levels; remedial educational programs and standardized assessment instruments both significantly improve the effectiveness of the institution. Assessors, faculty, and administrators must be aware of these issues and implications to effectively assess and improve their institutions.

Suggested Readings

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