

Assessment:

Coming Of Age

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In the 1970s, the U.S. educational system begot the assessment movement. Many thought — and perhaps hoped — it would be a passing fancy, an educational fad that would fade away, if effectively ignored. But during the 1980s, assessment grew to adolescence and, like any troubled teenager, it had its supporters and detractors. More embraced by legislators and academic administrators, some faculty depreciated the assessment process as unnecessary and time-consuming, an inappropriate expectation of overburdened instructors and academic departments. But on to the 1990s! Assessment gurus emerged on the national and local scene and within disciplines, spawning conferences, workshops, and a cottage industry of consultants. Assessment developed and matured into a vigorous young adult, to such an extent that it is institutionalized at virtually every level of education. State legislatures mandate it; accrediting bodies require it; professional educational associations support it and create tools for its implementation; and teachers have begun to think of it as a good idea for themselves and their students.

If assessment has come a long way — and become an integral part of the educational endeavor — that raises a question as to whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. This article — written by two would-be gurus of assessment in the communication field — argues that assessment is a good thing by describing its benefits and providing a snapshot of what an effective assessment program might look like.

But first, we begin by clarifying some terms and processes for the benefit of the novice reader and as a point of departure for our discussion.

Clarifying Terms ... the "A" Words!

Assessment, accountability, and accreditation are activities conducted by or done to the academy that are related to one another and to the evaluation of the process, impact, and outcomes of education.

* Assessment is a process by which faculty and administrators evaluate the worth of one of their main activities:

educating students. More specifically, assessment is a program of planned activities that includes tools and measurement devices which, when applied, evaluate student learning.

This definition provides a clue to why assessment has become institutionalized. It is a process by which instructors, departments, and educational institutions find out whether they are accomplishing what they intend in the classroom and in their educational programs. In an era when those processes are under scrutiny, assessment provides evidence of accomplishing one's pedagogical goals.

*Accountability is the broad process by which academic institutions, on behalf of the public, are held responsible by legislatures and other interested regional and local agencies. One part of accountability is being held responsible for providing evidence that students are learning what you claim they are learning, whether in a course, a department, or an entire school. Of course, schools are held accountable regarding factors other than student learning, such as fiscal responsibility, responsiveness to community needs, and the caliber of scholarship of their faculty.

Given this description, one can see that the results of assessing student learning inform the process of being held accountable. That is, if you prove through valid, reliable, and multiple assessment techniques that students are learning x, y, and z, and if you said that x, y, and z is what they should learn, then the results of assessing student learning are a useful part of the institution's accountability report.

*Accreditation is what happens for or to an academic institution or program — such as a teacher education program — if by being held accountable, the school proves it is carrying out its responsibilities efficaciously. Accreditation is granted by the U.S. Department of Education, and sanctioned by regional accrediting associations and discipline-specific organizations.

So assessing student learning can be viewed as supporting and informing accountability and accreditation. It has become an integral part of the educational fabric of our culture, in part, because of a desire for increased accountability in

education. Additionally, at any school and on any campus, assessment has other benefits that may not be immediately apparent to its detractors.

Benefits of Assessment

Legislatures, accrediting bodies, state boards of education, and internal reviewers all want to know if the education of students is having the desired effect. While the form of questions and requirements posed by these groups may vary, they seem to come down to six fundamental questions that are asked of faculty teaching courses, administrators chairing departments, and heads of academic institutions:

1. Who are you and why do you exist (Mission)?
2. What do you want to accomplish (Goals and Objectives)?
3. What procedures will you use to determine if the goals/objectives have been met (Assessment)?
4. What are the results of your assessment processes (Analysis)?
5. What changes will you make to your goals/objectives/outcomes/processes based on these results (Application of Results)?
6. What evidence do you have that this is a continuous cycle (Continuous improvement)?

As you can see from this list of questions, assessment is a circular process of educational program definition, review, and revision. It may be this circularity that interests agencies responsible for educational accountability. However, the processes also make good academic sense. Answering these questions provides a number of advantages for students, schools, and faculty and teachers.

Benefits to students.

When we answer the above questions, students reap the reward of a more dynamic and enhanced education. The end product, of which students are the beneficiaries, is constantly monitored, improved, and more responsive to their needs. Also, the results of assessing their learning can be shared with the students, so they can monitor and take pride in their own individual and collective achievements.

Benefits to schools.

When teachers have a clear idea of their school or institutional mission (and you may be surprised how many different concepts of "why we exist" are present on the average college campus), teachers are more able to act in concert with each other to meet that mission. When schools, departments, and teachers clearly describe their educational outcomes, then students, the public, and teachers themselves have a better sense of what students are to learn. This leads to more effectively designed educational programs and strategies, and therefore to overall improvement in the schools themselves.

Benefits to teachers and faculty.

The result of a dialogue about pedagogy and how to assess it is a better-informed and less competitive group of instructors, regardless of grade level. Not only is their end product improved, faculty who work together toward positive reform typically are more enthusiastic and committed and less

defensive. The process of developing an assessment program together invigorates both academic content and the academic professional.

Characteristics of Good Assessment Programs.

Given that assessment is here to stay and has benefits for various stakeholders in education, an important question to ask is what it looks like when you are doing it well. Here is a top ten list of the characteristics of good assessment programs, derived from the literature of accreditation associations, academic campuses, and professional associations. Variations on this list have proven useful for developing assessment programs for courses, academic departments, and entire schools.

A Successful Assessment Program

1. Flows from an institution's mission, the educational purposes and department's mission and goals, and course-specific goals and student outcomes.
2. Emerges from a conceptual framework for student learning.
3. Is marked by faculty ownership, responsibility, and involvement.
4. Has institution-wide support.
5. Relies on the use of multiple methods and measures.
6. Supports equal access and equity, and honors diversity.
7. Provides feedback to students, teachers, and the institution.
8. Is cost-effective.
9. Leads to desirable and valuable change and improvement.
10. Includes a process for evaluating and assessing itself — the assessment program.



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