1

The Philosophy and Logic of Assessment

One of the distinguishing features of U.S. colleges and universities is their fondness for assessment. Practically everybody in the academic community gets assessed these days, and practically everybody assesses somebody else. Students, of course, come in for a heavy dose of assessment, first from admissions offices, later from the professors who teach their classes, and increasingly from administrators complying with state accountability requirements. Students are also active participants in the assessment business, with end-of-course evaluations that are widely used by colleges and universities and various forms of web-based assessments of professors. Professors subject each other to the most detailed and rigorous assessments when new professors are hired or when a colleague comes up for tenure or promotion. Administrators also assess faculty, and in many institutions, have the final say in faculty personnel decisions. Administrators regularly assess each other, and sometimes the faculty and the trustees also take part in assessing the administrators. Finally, the whole institution is regularly assessed in a highly detailed fashion by external accrediting teams made up of faculty and administrators from other institutions.

Why do we do all this assessment and what does it accomplish? Although there is no doubt that some useful assessments take place, we have the strong impression that assessment in U.S. higher education could stand improvement. Our assessment efforts are handicapped in part because we are not really clear about what we are trying to accomplish, and in part because we perpetuate questionable practices out of sheer habit, for convenience, or to fulfill purposes that are unrelated, or at best, tangential to the basic mission of our colleges and universities. This book thus presents a detailed critique of assessment practices in higher education and outlines specific ways in which

Copyright 2012. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
All rights reserved. May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.

EBSCO Publishing : eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost) - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV
AN: 473028 ; Astin, Alexander W., Antonio, Anthony Lising.; Assessment for Excellence : The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education
Account: s8863559.main.ehost

assessment can be strengthened and improved. Much of the book is devoted to procedures for assessing *students*, not only because the current assessment movement is heavily student focused but also because the usefulness of our faculty, administrator, and institutional assessments depends in part on how effectively we assess our students.

To some degree, the inadequacies of current student assessment practices have been responsible for the emergence of two trends in U.S. higher education. In the first edition of this book it was pointed out that national reports on higher education (e.g., Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984; Association of American Colleges, 1985) had been highly critical of contemporary assessment practices and that increasing numbers of individual institutions were undertaking major revisions in their student assessment activities (Paskow, 1988). These trends have only intensified during the ensuing two decades. In 2000, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (NCPPHE) began issuing biennial state grades on higher education performance (*Measuring Up*) and judged all fifty states to be seriously lacking in the area of assessment of student learning. Several years later, the release of another national report wielded similar criticisms. The Spellings Report on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) criticized higher education for its limited demonstration of student learning and called for more sophisticated assessment in the name of public accountability.

Furthermore, the rapidly growing interest among regional accrediting associations and federal and state policy makers in improved *outcomes assessment* and *accountability* in postsecondary education that was also noted in the first edition (Ewell and Boyer, 1988) has continued to escalate. In response to *Measuring Up* and the Spellings Report, a number of states have either implemented or are planning accountability-driven policies addressing the assessment of student learning (Zis, Boeke, and Ewell, 2010). Further, federal pressure is being placed on accreditors to alter requirements to focus less on an accounting of institutional *processes* that assess student learning and more on the documentation of the actual learning *outcomes* themselves (Ewell, 2010). One accrediting body, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, is moving forward with this outcomes-assessment–driven accreditation philosophy. However, in many important respects, these policy trends show little promise in addressing the limitations of traditional assessment procedures, and in some cases, they threaten to make things even worse (see chapter 11). Considering that this most recent focus on outcomes assessment and accountability appears to be taking hold on a national level, it is an opportune time to take a critical look at assessment in higher education and to consider how this potentially powerful tool might be used for the benefit of students, faculty, and institutions alike.

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

ASSESSMENT MEASUREMENT AND EVALUATION

In this book we view *assessment* as the gathering of information concerning the functioning of students, staff, and institutions of higher education. The information may or may not be in numerical form, but the basic motive for gathering it is to improve the functioning of the institution and its people. We use *functioning* to refer to the broad social purposes of a college or university (i.e., to facilitate student learning and development, to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and to contribute to the community and the society).

As commonly used today, the term *assessment* can refer to two different activities: (a) the mere gathering of information (measurement) and (b) the use of that information for institutional and individual improvement (evaluation). We believe that there is a fundamental distinction here between the information we gather and the uses to which it is put, and that this distinction is often blurred when people talk about assessment in higher education. Evaluation, of course, has to do with motivation and the rendering of value judgments. For example, when we give an examination in a college course (measurement), there are many ways in which the results can be used or evaluated. Many of us who teach in academia sometimes give course examinations primarily for recordkeeping purposes; because our institution requires us to give grades, we make students take exams so we have some basis for awarding a grade. Under these conditions, we professors are merely measuring and not evaluating because the evaluating is done by others (i.e., by the college registrar who determines whether the student should be put on probation or awarded honors, by the students who are trying to judge their own academic progress, and by the employers or graduate and professional schools who use college transcripts to help them make employment or admission decisions).

In other situations we professors might indeed be interested in evaluating the information generated by our examinations. We might want to gauge the effectiveness of our pedagogical efforts or to decide what kind of written or oral feedback to give to our students to facilitate their learning of the course material. Students might be interested in evaluating their own test results for the same reasons (e.g., to know their strong and weak points to become more effective learners).

Similar distinctions between measurement and evaluation could be made for almost any other higher education assessment activity: admissions testing, placement testing, testing of graduates, assessment of faculty and staff, and institutional accreditation. Because assessment and evaluation are inextricably linked, we will argue that assessment policies and practices in higher education should always give full consideration to the evaluative uses to which any measurement will be put.

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

THE GOALS AND VALUES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A basic premise of this book is that *an institution's assessment practices are a reflection of its values.* In other words, the values of an institution are revealed in the information about itself that it gathers and pays attention to. A second, and perhaps more fundamental, premise is that *assessment practices should further the basic aims and purposes of our higher education institutions.* We might consider these two premises, respectively, as the "is" and the "ought" of assessment in higher education.

What, then, are the goals or aims of higher education? Despite the enormous diversity of U.S. higher education institutions, most of us subscribe to the notion that the system has three basic goals: education, research, and public or community service. We like to call these the *social purposes* of higher education, in the sense that it is primarily for these purposes that these approximately 4,500 institutions were created in the first place and that the society and the public continue to support them. It is true that individual institutions now espouse many other goals and purposes—to grow, to achieve "excellence," or merely to survive—but education, research, and public service continue to be their fundamental reasons for existence.

Although different types of institutions assign different priorities to these three purposes—the major universities put more emphasis on research; the community colleges put more emphasis on serving the community—all types of institutions share a common commitment to the educational function. Indeed, the fact that we call our colleges and universities *educational* institutions signifies this shared responsibility to educate our students. It is also worth noting that much of the current debate about assessment and reform in higher education focuses on the educational process. Research universities have been criticized for emphasizing research to the neglect of undergraduate education or for compromising their public service mission by employing highly selective admissions policies that limit educational opportunities for underrepresented groups. Community colleges have been criticized for emphasizing such things as funding and enrollment growth over high quality teaching and learning. Similarly, public pressures to use more competency testing or outcomes assessment reflects a concern about how much students are actually learning in our colleges and universities. This concern was dramatically illustrated by the recent study, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Arum and Roksa, 2011), which generated tremendous public interest.

Although the three basic functions of higher education institutions are frequently seen as competing with each other, there are many ways in which they can be complementary and even mutually reinforcing. Thus, effective education and effective research are clearly important forms of public service;

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and to conduct research on teaching, learning, and the educational process is certainly one way to enhance teaching. At the same time, effective teaching can obviously contribute to the development of more skilled researchers.

Because most of the current interest in assessment in higher education is concerned with the assessment of students, a good portion of this book is concerned with assessment as it relates to the teaching-learning process. More specifically, we argue that *the basic purpose of assessing students is to enhance their educational development.* Another way of saying this is that assessment of students, more than anything else, should advance the educational mission of our colleges and universities.

In the same spirit, we argue that assessment of college and university faculty should enhance their performance as teachers and mentors of students and as contributors to the advancement of knowledge. Again, this is another way of saying that assessment of faculty should enhance the teaching and research functions of the institution.

These propositions about the proper function of assessment in higher education might appear, on the surface at least, to be straightforward and reasonable, perhaps even self-evident. The problem seems to be that most assessment practices today are not well suited to higher education's basic purposes, and some practices appear even to undermine those purposes. How did we reach such a state? And what can be done about it?

ASSESSMENT AND EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

Most of us who serve as higher education faculty or administrators would agree that we are committed to promoting the "excellence" of our institutions. If pressed a bit on the matter, most of us would also say that by excellence, we mean excellence in teaching and excellence in research (the third basic function of higher education, service to the community, is usually not mentioned, especially in the four-year institutions, but for the rest of this discussion we can assume that the community is being well served if the institution is able to deliver excellent teaching and excellent research). So far, so good. We are committed to excellence and by that we mean excellent teaching and excellent research.

Up to now we have been dealing with the excellence concept on a purely verbal level, and at that level it seems that we are indeed promoting the purposes for which our institutions were established. However, we all know that actions speak louder than words, and it is in the things we actually do to promote excellence that difficulties begin to arise. Assessment, of course, is one of the means by which we try to operationalize our notions about excellence.

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Traditional Views of Excellence

What specific policies and practices in higher education do we justify on the grounds that they promote excellence? What really matters to us? Where do we direct our attention and to what ends do we direct our energies? What do we pay attention to? Where do we allocate our precious budget dollars? What, in other words, are the values that govern our efforts to achieve excellence? Although there are many possible answers to such questions, during the latter part of the past century there were two conceptions of excellence that came to govern much of what we did. For simplicity we can label these, respectively, as the *resources* and *reputational* conceptions of excellence (Astin, 1985a). What is especially important about these two views is that they were seldom stated explicitly but rather were implicit in our policies and practices. The problem here is that the pursuit of excellence in terms of resources and reputation is only tangentially related to our more fundamental societal purposes, and especially to our educational function.

The *resources* conception is based on the idea that excellence depends primarily on having lots of resources: the more resources we have, the more excellent our institution. The resources that are supposed to make us excellent are of three different types: money, high-quality faculty, and high-quality students. Money can be measured in terms of our endowment, income from public and private sources, the amount we actually spend, and the things money can buy (e.g., libraries, laboratories, physical plant, faculty, and students). Faculty can be of high-quality according to several different definitions, such as the highest academic degree they hold or the reputation (see below) of the institution where they received it, but the "highest-quality" faculty (i.e., the ones who are most sought after and who command the highest salaries) are almost always the ones who are widely known for their research and writing. "High-quality" students are those who earned high marks in high school and who receive high scores on college admissions examinations.

The reputational view of excellence is based on the idea that the most excellent institutions are the ones that enjoy the best academic reputations. In U.S. higher education, there is a folklore that has evolved over the years that implicitly arranges our institutions into a kind of pyramid-shaped hierarchy, or pecking order. A few prestigious institutions, such as Harvard, Yale, Berkeley, and Stanford, occupy the top positions in the hierarchy, whereas the bottom layers include most of the two-year colleges and a large number of small four-year colleges that are largely unknown outside of their local communities. We refer to the pecking order as folklore largely because it is part of our belief system rather than something that has been established independently through systematic study and analysis. It is possible, we might add, to determine the

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

positions of institutions in the pecking order by means of reputational polls in which people are asked to rate the "excellence" or "quality" of colleges and universities (Astin and Solmon, 1981; Solmon and Astin, 1981). Under the reputational view, then, the excellence of an institution is determined by its position in this reputational hierarchy or pecking order.

The extremely popular institutional rankings published annually by *U.S. News and World Report* give considerable weight to measures of each institution's resources (e.g., students' admissions test scores) and reputation as determined by polls of academics.

An important feature of these two traditional views of excellence is that they both produce similar rankings of institutions. That is, the institutions that occupy the top positions in the reputational hierarchy tend to be the same ones that have the most resources of money, prestigious faculty, and high-performing students (Astin, 1985a). On reflection, this close association is really not so surprising; having a great deal of resources can help to enhance your reputation, and having an outstanding reputation can help to attract money, prestigious faculty, and bright students. Reputation and resources, in short, tend to be mutually reinforcing.

The Talent Development View

For a number of years Astin has been critical of these traditional conceptions of excellence (1985a), primarily because they do not directly address the institution's basic purposes (i.e., the education of students and the cultivation of knowledge). To focus our institutional energies more directly on these fundamental missions, he proposed the adoption of an alternative approach called the *talent development* conception of excellence. Under the talent development view, excellence is determined by our ability to develop the talents of our students and faculty to the fullest extent possible. The fundamental premise underlying the talent development concept is that true excellence lies in the institution's ability to affect its students and faculty favorably, to enhance their intellectual and scholarly development, and to make a positive difference in their lives. As far as *educational* excellence is concerned, the most excellent institutions are, in this view, those that have the greatest impact—"add the most value," as economists would say—to the students' knowledge and personal development.

Excellence and Assessment

These different conceptions of excellence have obvious implications for assessment activities. For example, if we operate according to the resources

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

and reputational views of excellence, we would tend to focus our student assessment activities on the entering student because excellence in these terms depends on enrolling a student body with the highest possible grades and test scores. On the other hand, if we believe that our excellence is a function of how well we educate our students, that is, if we embrace a talent development approach, we would be more inclined to assess changes or improvements or growth in our students over time. Under the talent development view, then, excellence is determined by the quality and quantity of student and faculty *learning* and *development.* This is basically the approach taken in several recent large-scale longitudinal studies (Arum and Roksa, 2011; Astin, 1993).

If we consider for a moment the assessments that attract the greatest attention from college faculty and administrators, most, if not all, seem to reflect adherence to the reputational and resource views of excellence: the average test scores and grade-point averages (GPAs) of the entering freshmen, rankings in reputational polls, faculty salaries, the amount of extramural research funding, the size of the endowment, the dollar amount of annual giving, the annual income from state appropriations, and the size of the enrollment (which, for most institutions, translates directly into income). This relative lack of institutional interest in assessments that relate to the educational or talent development mission is probably responsible, in part, for the growing interest of public officials in outcomes assessment and in making institutions more accountable. Unfortunately, most of the assessment remedies that have been proposed or tried at the state level are ill-conceived and may actually do more harm than good. (The pros and cons of such state-mandated assessment activities are discussed in detail in chapter 11.)

This brief critique of our traditional views about excellence in higher education is not intended to suggest that resources and reputations are not important. Institutions need resources to function and they need reputations to attract both students and resources. At issue here is whether abundant resources and excellent reputation are viewed primarily as ends in themselves rather than as means to achieving excellent educational ends (talent development). Research has shown, however, that the quality and quantity of student talent development that an institution is able to achieve bears only a weak relationship, if any, to its level of resources or to its reputation (Astin, 1968b, 1977, 1993; Bowen, 1980, 1981). This finding would suggest that those institutions with the most resources do not necessarily use their additional resources to enhance the talent development process. Nevertheless, it should be noted that if we look at student growth as measured only by standardized tests, there is some recent evidence to suggest that students will show more improvement in performance if they attend prestigious, resource-rich institutions (Arum and Roksa, 2011; Astin, 1993).

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

To summarize: our major purpose in reviewing these different notions about excellence has been to show that the values underlying our traditional notions about institutional excellence or quality in higher education are not necessarily consistent with our fundamental societal missions of education and research. Although there are several other problems connected with these traditional views of excellence (see chapter 10 and Astin, 1985a), our immediate concern is with how adherence to these views has affected our assessment activities. Let us now consider what some of these effects have been.

WHY WE ASSESS

Why do we test and grade students? What ends are served when we evaluate faculty performance? For many forms of assessment, there are really two levels at which such a question can be answered: the immediate purpose of the assessment activity and the underlying value. For example, one could argue that we require prospective students to take admissions examinations to (a) help us select our students (the immediate purpose), or (b) enhance the excellence of the institution (the underlying value). Any given assessment activity can also serve multiple purposes and multiple values. However, in this discussion our focus is primarily on the values—and in particular, the different views about excellence—that undergird our principal assessment activities in higher education.

There are at least four different institutional activities that involve assessments of students: admissions, guidance and placement, classroom learning, and credentialing or certification. What types of assessments do we use in connection with each activity and what values and what conceptions of excellence do they support? Let's start with admissions.

Admissions

Many of us who work in colleges and universities tend to forget that we are responsible for much of the assessment activity that goes on in the secondary schools. These activities include the grading system that produces class ranks and GPAs, as well as a number of large-scale testing programs that examine more than 2 million secondary school students each year. The largest of these, of course, are the Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) given to eleventh graders and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) given to twelfth graders.

Such tests and the student's GPA and class rank are used by individual colleges and universities to help decide whether or not a student applicant should be admitted (i.e., the higher the scores, the better the student's chances

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

of being admitted). Although other factors are also given consideration in the admissions decisions of many colleges, the immediate goal in using GPAs and test scores is to enroll students with the best possible GPAs and the highest possible test scores.

One immediate consequence of reliance on these assessments in admissions is that it encourages a great deal of competition among institutions. The competition among colleges for high-scoring students is so great that many colleges these days employ generous scholarships, personalized direct mail, and a variety of other sophisticated and expensive marketing techniques to try to attract such students. The National Merit Scholarship Program, which annually utilizes the PSAT to screen about 1 million candidates, encourages colleges and universities to sponsor a number of Merit Scholars each year. In return for agreeing to attend one of the sponsoring' colleges, high-scoring students can greatly increase, and sometimes guarantee, their chances of being named Merit Scholars.

What motivates colleges and universities to use admissions assessments in this fashion? Why is the high-scoring student so heavily favored over other students? Although there are many ways to answer such questions (see below), anyone who has worked in academe for very long will tell you that *selective admissions signifies academic excellence.* The more selective the institution, the more excellent it is presumed to be. Indeed, many college faculty and administrators routinely use the average high school GPAs or average admission test scores of the entering freshmen as a sort of barometer of institutional quality or excellence. If scores go up, quality is assumed to be on the increase; if scores go down, quality is assumed to be on the decline.

Why is such an index so closely watched and so highly valued? There are at least two respects in which high scores are valued. First is the belief that "having bright students makes us a better institution." This is, of course, the *resource* notion of quality, namely, that we attain quality merely by having a lot of resources (in this case, bright students). The more we have, the higher the quality.

The second sense in which having a select student body signifies quality has to do more with its market implications: "if so many bright students want to come here, we must be pretty good." This is, of course, the *reputational* conception, in which we view our excellence or quality in terms of what others (in this case, bright prospective students) think of us. Both of these notions are conveniently codified (unfortunately, given our discussion) in the still-popular *U.S. News* college rankings. To be highly selective is to be highly ranked or academically excellent.

Although there are many colleges and universities that are not in a position to practice selective admissions (especially community colleges and other "open admissions" public institutions), nearly all institutions value the highly

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

able student and virtually no institution deliberately seeks out or favors the less well-prepared student.

Assessment for admission to graduate and professional schools follows much the same pattern as assessment for undergraduate admissions. Indeed, just as the undergraduate colleges determine much of the assessment that goes on in the secondary schools, so do the graduate and professional schools determine much of the assessment that involves undergraduates. Undergraduate colleges and universities give course grades and compute undergraduate GPAs in part because the graduate and professional schools need them for admission purposes.

At the same time, the graduate and professional schools use a variety of nationally standardized tests in making their admission decisions: the various Graduate Record (GRE) examinations, the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), the Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT), and the Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT), to name just a few. These test scores together with undergraduate GPAs are used in much the same way as are the undergraduate admissions devices, and for pretty much the same reasons.

In short, this discussion of the admissions process suggests that the student assessments that we require as a part of the admissions process are used primarily to promote the resources and reputational conceptions of excellence.

Before leaving the subject of admissions, we should note that it is possible to rationalize the practice of selective admission in terms of how it can also promote talent development. Although such arguments seldom constitute the real reasons for selective admission, they will be considered in some depth in chapter 10.

Guidance and Placement

A second major student assessment activity concerns student guidance and placement. Here, more than with any other assessment activity, the basic motive seems to be to enhance the teaching-learning process (i.e., to promote talent development). Institutions use a variety of tests—national as well as local—to place students in appropriate courses and to help them make decisions about courses, majors, and career plans. Because this type of assessment is designed to enhance the talent development process, it will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6.

Classroom Assessment

The third major area of student assessment activity occurs in connection with college courses. Three major forms of assessment are involved here: course exams, assessment of course projects (homework, term papers, etc.), and course grades.

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Some educators believe that the mere use of these classroom assessments can facilitate the talent development process by serving as incentives for the student to learn. Because the possible incentive value of assessment will be considered in chapter 9, we are concerned here with the use of the information generated by these different classroom assessment procedures. A major reason for assessing class projects and for giving classroom exams is to grade students. Thus, all forms of classroom assessment can be and often are used to generate course grades. These grades, in turn, contribute to the overall GPA for each student. The principal justification for GPAs, of course, is that they are needed to help employers and admissions departments of graduate and professional schools make decisions about applicants. Because most of the graduate and professional schools, like the undergraduate colleges, rely on GPAs to identify the "best" students, classroom grading is frequently used to support the resources and reputational views of excellence. Just as a high GPA can be used to award various types of academic honors, so, too, can a low GPA be used to expel students or to put them on probation. But high GPAs can also be used to assign students to special honors courses and a low GPA can be used as an indicator that the student needs special assistance. It would seem that these last two uses of the GPA are perhaps its only truly educational functions. Practically all other uses of the GPA are either administrative (e.g., to determine eligibility for probation, suspension, course credit, graduation, or honors) or for purposes of screening and selection (e.g., by employers and graduate and professional schools).

An interesting aspect of the GPA is that it tells us very little about what a student actually knows or what that student's competencies or talents really are. The GPA is thus primarily a relativistic or normative measure. That is, the primary information contained in a course grade pertains to the student's performance in relation to other students. Thus, the "best" students get As, whereas the "worst" students get Cs or lower grades. This relativistic quality of grading is reinforced by the practice of grading "on the curve." Such a procedure attempts to allocate certain numbers of As, Bs, and Cs, and so forth, regardless of how well the class as a whole is performing.

Besides their relativistic quality, course grades also reflect little of what the student has actually learned in the course. Harris (1970) studied the relationship between course grades and actual learning as measured by tests given before and after a course. He found that test score gains of students who had received failing or near-failing grades were comparable to the gains of the students who had received high grades. In other words, course grades did not really reflect the amount of learning that was occurring among students. In short, course grades appear to be a relatively poor indicator of how much students are actually learning in a course. Rather, what they tell us is how well the students are performing in relation to one another at a particular point in time.

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

Many teachers evaluate course examinations and class projects primarily for purposes of grading; they read the test results or examine the class project and simply assign a grade. Such practices would not appear to contribute much to the talent development process. Grading course examinations and class projects can, of course, be used to enhance talent development. In such cases the nature of the feedback provided by the professor normally goes considerably beyond merely assigning a grade (see chapter 9). The assessment of the exam performance or the class project involves specific feedback concerning particular aspects of the student's work. In this way, it is unfortunate that most such assessment occurs only after the course has been completed, at a time when students are probably not motivated to benefit from the feedback and are instead looking forward either to vacations or to the next academic term. Clearly, these assessment techniques can be of most benefit when they come in the form of midterm projects or exams. Feedback provided to the student at such times is more likely to benefit the learning process because the student is still in the process of attempting to master the course material.

Credentialing and Certification

We have already described what is probably the most widely used credentialing technique, the class grade and the GPA. Students are awarded degrees if their GPAs are above a certain minimal level. But there are other ways in which student assessment in higher education is used to support credentialing and certification. For example, new students entering an undergraduate institution for the first time can frequently "test out" of certain introductory courses if they are able to achieve relatively high scores on various types of standardized tests. The most widely used technique of this type is the Advanced Placement (AP) examinations administered by the College Entrance Examination Board. Sixty percent of all full-time freshmen entering college for the first time have taken at least one advanced placement examination (Pryor et al., 2009). This percent has grown by half since the late 1980s (Astin et al., 1989). Provided that students are able to achieve certain minimal scores on these examinations, most colleges will award course credits simply on the basis of the examination score.

Certification by examination exists in many other forms. One of the most common uses of assessment for certification purposes is the professional credentialing that occurs in fields such as medicine, law, accounting, nursing, and school teaching. Because these tests are generally administered by professional associations or by state agencies rather than by higher education institutions, they will not be considered further here. There are, however, other widespread uses of testing for certification within academe. Most common

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

are basic skills or proficiency tests whose passage is required to receive an undergraduate degree. Florida and South Dakota require such demonstrations of proficiency, and Georgia requires students to demonstrate historical and constitutional knowledge of Georgia and the United States. Similarly, many community colleges use ACT's Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency as an exit exam for their associate degree programs.

ASSESSING FACULTY PERFORMANCE

Much of the assessment of college faculty is carried out for purposes similar to the assessments of students (i.e., to support the resources and reputational views of excellence and to support certain administrative practices). Thus, candidates for faculty positions are frequently assessed in terms of how much their presence will enhance the institution's reputation and of the quantity of resources that the candidate is likely to attract in the form of research grants or top students. In many research universities, the prospective faculty member's capacity to contribute to talent development (teaching competence and commitment to students) gets little, if any, consideration in the review process.

Much the same can be said of how we assess incumbent faculty. Although the faculty member's ability to develop student talent (e.g., as reflected in student course evaluations and more recently, classroom observations) gets some consideration when faculty members come up for review, research productivity and national visibility (or the promise of such productivity and visibility) usually receive much greater weight in hiring decisions and in decisions concerning tenure and promotion. Except for the pretenure review that some universities now use several years in advance of the final tenure review, practically all assessments of faculty or prospective faculty are designed for purposes other than to develop the faculty member's talents.

SUMMARY

This brief overview of traditional uses of student assessment suggests that much of the assessment that goes on in academe (particularly the use of classroom grades and standardized tests for admission to undergraduate and graduate school) is intended primarily to support the resources and reputational conceptions of institutional excellence. High-achieving students are not only viewed as prized "resources" by the undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools, but their presence in the institution is also regarded as a means of enhancing the institution's reputation. Much of the rest of the student assessment

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

that goes on in academe is employed either for administrative or certification purposes.

About the only form of student assessment that is clearly designed to support the talent development view of excellence is the testing done in connection with guidance and course placement. Of course, feedback from classroom examinations and assignments or course projects *can* be used to enhance talent development if the feedback is informative and well timed, but such examinations and projects are often used primarily, if not exclusively, to generate course grades.

Much the same can be said about our assessments of college faculty and administrators: they are done primarily to serve the reputational and resources views rather than to enhance talent development. Assessments of faculty for hiring, tenuring, and promotional purposes tend to put disproportionate weight on qualities that are likely to enhance the institution's resources and reputation. Similarly, administrators (especially chief executive officers) are heavily rewarded if they are successful in expanding the institution's resource base and in enhancing its reputation or image. Since faculty and especially administrators are seldom judged in terms of their contribution to the talent development process, assessments of faculty and administrator performance seldom yield any information bearing directly on this process.

HOW CAN ASSESSMENT PROMOTE TALENT DEVELOPMENT?

The major purpose of this book is to show how assessment can be used to enhance the educational and research functions of colleges and universities by promoting talent development among both students and faculty members.

There are essentially two different ways in which assessment activities can contribute to talent development among students, through direct effects on the learner and indirectly by enlightening the educator. Assessment can directly affect the learner, for example, when students are motivated to learn because they know they will be examined or when they improve their knowledge or competence as a result of the feedback they receive from a test. Similar direct effects occur when professors strive to be more effective teachers because they know they will be evaluated by their students or when they improve their teaching as a result of the feedback they receive from such evaluations or from their assessments of students. The use of assessment as direct feedback is discussed in detail in chapter 9.

Assessment promotes talent development more indirectly when it enlightens or informs the educator about the effectiveness of various educational

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use

policies and practices. It is interesting that most of the discussion and debate about assessment these days concerns this indirect use of assessment rather than assessment designed to influence the learner directly. For this reason, most of this book (with the exception of chapter 9) is devoted to a consideration of how assessment can be used to inform educators about those educational policies and practices that are most likely to be effective in enhancing talent development. (Direct feedback of assessment results to students and faculty, incidentally, happens to be one of these educational practices.)

The principal means by which assessment results can help to enlighten professors and administrators is their use as an aid to *decision making.* Educators are continually confronted with decisions that can affect the talent development process: what to teach, how to teach it, whom to admit and on what basis, how to orient and advise students, what courses to require, how to structure the students' residential and social life, and how to test and evaluate students' performance. These decisions involve choices among alternative courses of action: this requirement rather than that requirement, this teaching method rather than these other methods.

Assessment results can be of considerable value in making such decisions because they can provide information about the likely impact of alternative courses of action. Chapter 2 presents an evaluation model—the input-environment-outcome model—that shows how assessment information can be most effectively used for this purpose. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 elaborate different aspects of the model (outcomes, inputs, and environments, respectively). Chapter 6 discusses various ways of analyzing assessment data. (Readers who desire more detail about statistical methods for data analysis should also read the appendix.) Chapter 7 discusses how assessment results can be used to enlighten and inform the practitioner.

Chapter 8 discusses the practical, technical, and political problems associated with building an adequate database consisting of student input, environment, and output data.

Chapter 9 discusses how assessment can be used to affect the learning process directly among both students and faculty. Chapter 10 reviews various ways in which assessment has been used to limit educational opportunity and suggests how it might be used instead to enhance and expand opportunity.

Chapter 11 discusses the assessment "movement" in various states, suggesting ways in which institutions can minimize the negative impacts of such externally mandated assessments and employ them instead to strengthen the talent development process.

And chapter 12 summarizes the major points of the book and considers various future directions that assessment in U.S. higher education might take.

EBSCOhost - printed on 4/23/2020 3:15 PM via VANDERBILT UNIV. All use subject to https://www.ebsco.com/terms-of-use