
ASSESSMENT?

YES!

WITHIN LIMITS

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Assessment" has become the academic buzzword of the nineties. Should we throw up the barricades and resist this trend at all costs? Should we offer unqualified support? Should we give the whole idea a qualified "maybe?" If the answer is "maybe," how can we navigate successfully the murky assessment waters, crowded with circling alligators (in the guise of legislators and taxpayers) anxious to prove they are getting their money's worth out of our academic hides? If we let the alligators determine the outcome, we will find ourselves swallowed up by their definition of academic standards. On the other hand, if we don't dally too long, we can use the debate over assessment as an opportunity to define standards ourselves, specify how they will be evaluated, and make a case for the resources necessary to uphold them. Furthermore, a plan for assessing our major programs provides us with a mechanism to improve our programs; especially in times of budget crisis, we cannot afford to let such an opportunity pass us by.

The question of why we should develop assessment procedures can thus be rather simply answered. If we don't, someone else will do it for us. To some extent, others already have. SACS mandates assessment of institutional effectiveness in Standard III; the Board of Regents has required the development of an "assessment model" for each major. And even greater threats to academic integrity are about, as members of the Board of Regents debate schemes for laying off tenured professors and the state cuts the budget to the bone. We can try a legal defense against these developments, but we had best not rely on a positive outcome. We might be better served by using assessment to demonstrate that these activities undermine the integrity and quality of our academic programs. If the state of Georgia is really serious about improving the quality of higher education, it can't go around releasing experienced faculty and eliminating budgets for equipment and other necessities. But we have to prove this point. If we don't account for our academic quality, the assumption will be that we don't have any.

To defend the principle of assessment is all well and good, but it leaves a few troublesome questions. Just what is it we are to assess? How? What uses will be made of the results?

What should be assessed is the quality of each major offered at KSC. Are students acquiring the knowledge and skills they should, according to generally recognized standards in each discipline? Differences of opinion concerning the requisite knowledge and skills are, of course, inevitable. But to discuss the matter forces departments to focus on just what they should be do-

ing and how well they are doing it. The issue goes beyond what basic information students should know, to how we expect students to research, synthesize, analyze, apply, and communicate this information effectively.

To measure accurately such skills with standardized tests would be impossible. But tests yielding scores which can be compared are just what the public often wants. We must resist this simplistic approach at all costs. We must take the lead in convincing the community that assessment can—indeed must—take a variety of forms, most of which may not yield quantifiable results. Senior seminars, in which students develop and solve research problems, or "senior portfolios" of students' work, are examples of devices which can be useful. If we choose to steer away from the shoals of standardized testing in assessing our programs, we must make a strong case in our defense, arguing that, if assessment procedures are to be useful, they should (1) be based on appropriate academic standards, (2) involve a variety of methods, and (3) evolve over a period of years. In doing so we must communicate clearly and effectively, avoiding the murky waters of jargon which the public often takes to be (and sometimes rightly so) a pretentious cover for intellectual sloppiness.

How, then, should results from program assessment be used? First, a statement of how they should not: to evaluate faculty or individual students. We already have a "mustard book" full of procedures for evaluating faculty; students are evaluated in each class. The focus instead should be on improving our major programs by exam-

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to accommodate the diverse student populations found among the many institutions in the Georgia System.

3. Mandated assessment imperils minority views. When used as the arbiter of truth, externally mandated assessment penalizes heterodoxical opinions which may not conform with those of the majority. Under these conditions, those being assessed—whether students, faculty or institutions—could conceivably be forced to sacrifice honesty and truth for the sake of a positive evaluation.

4. Mandated assessment is faddish. As the latest in a long line of “quick fixes” for American education, mandated assessment has not yet had the opportunity to undergo the kind of comprehensive research and development required for substantiating its value as an intellectually sound academic practice.

5. Mandated assessment is reductionistic. Instruments designed to test universal “values” and “analytical skills” oversimplify those concepts to the point of meaninglessness, making them useless for dealing with actual situations requiring true comprehension and intellectual acumen.

6. Mandated assessment reinforces an erroneous view of higher education. Colleges and universities are not factories designed to turn out a specific quantity of goods, all stamped with the System’s seal of approval. It is pernicious even to entertain the notion that human beings can be quantified like manufactured products.

7. Mandated assessment usurps the prerogative of the faculty. Thus far, the American system of higher education has thrived because academia has been able to restrain those who are uninformed and unqualified—well-meaning though they have been—from interfering with and thereby restricting the free pursuit of knowledge.

8. Mandated assessment undermines the integrity of the professorate. Advanced degrees earned by the faculty attest to the teachers’ professional certification in their fields. It is anti-intel-

lectual to assume that anyone outside the field is competent to dictate curriculum or evaluate the professional conduct of those within; and internal assessment already exists.

9. Mandated assessment deflects attention from the real problems of higher education. All the pressure to make institutions accountable for the way they spend tax dollars camouflages the fact that the amount of money being spent on our System has decreased over the past decade. We already know the System has declined. What we need is a larger budget, not more tests.

10. Mandated assessment diverts funds from where they are most needed. Especially now, with Georgia’s serious financial problems, it is reckless and irresponsible to invest any time or money in an assessment program which, in the final analysis, will tell us what we already know that in higher education, Georgia has slipped from first to among the last of the Southern states. Any available funds should be spent on faculty, staff, equipment, campus maintenance, etc.—on that which truly will improve the quality of education in this state.

The assessment movement seems to be propelled by a series of well-meaning, though uninformed, external forces. In the private sector, citizens and the business community, concerned about economic competitiveness in the state, erroneously believe mandated assessment will guarantee educational accountability. Responding to public opinion, legislators, in turn, have pressured the Board of Regents—a group of non-academics—to mandate assessment for every unit in the University System of Georgia. However, these outside forces in themselves constitute a grave threat to academic freedom, for any external interference with academia, regardless of its intention or guise, by its very presence restricts the open pursuit of knowledge.

We must vehemently reject any attempt to tamper with our intellectual integrity; and above all, we must vigilantly resist being shackled by the barely disguised “mind-forged manacles” of the assessment movement.

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ining our curriculum, our teaching methods, and our content. It must be a collegial exercise in which all faculty are involved, with experimentation and open discussion encouraged.

What then, of those hungry, circling alligators? We should seize the initiative and attack them with a cutting edge or two. If taxpayers really want “quality education,” they have to provide the resources. And assessment methods should provide the data to prove the case. How can we teach critical thinking to classes already holding 50 students, classes which we are told to increase in size?

The alligators had better put their money where their mouths are; there’s only so much they can take out of these old academic hides. So, colleagues, we’d better assess what we are about and clearly articulate why we can’t do it with a few simple exit exams. If we navigate the waters successfully we may even convince legislators and other taxpayers that we need more faculty, better laboratories, and adequate library holdings. We may even convince a few that the most important mission of undergraduate education should be to teach students effectively and that to do so justifies a reduced teaching load as much as doing research. But we can’t do any of this unless we decide what students should learn, how we will know if they have done so, and how we will use this information to improve our major programs.

