

Assessment And Quality: The Never-ending Challenge

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Higher education has relied on assessments of learning for generations. The SAT, ACT, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT and GRE ostensibly test fitness for study. Licensure exam results in fields such as nursing, law and accounting are touted as a way to assess the quality of institutions. Programmatic accreditors expect external validation of learning (e.g., Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs and ABET). The U.S. Department of Education continues to add outcomes to the College Scorecard to improve students' insight into quality. More and more states' higher education funding formulas focus on outcomes. Since at least the early 1990s, accreditors have been expecting assessment of student learning as a condition of accreditation.



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And yet, it seems that no matter where you look, people are questioning the length, the cost and the quality of the university degree. Many would say that quality seems to be getting worse, rather than better. In 2011, Arum and Roksa wrote *Academically Adrift* based on longitudinal results of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). Their conclusion: Students don't learn what they need to at universities. Their assumption: The CLA is a good way to evaluate learning at universities. In general, of course, universities have not subsequently embraced the CLA.

Some employers are forgoing the degree as a requirement for employment, believing they can determine through a battery of tests which candidates are more likely to succeed, rather than using degree attainment as a proxy for skill. Alternate credentials are proliferating, including certificates, badges, skills and competencies. In short, there is a significant lack of trust in the ability of universities to adequately educate and evaluate students.

And universities tar one another with that same brush: We don't trust each other. The GRE was created because educators did not think it was possible to evaluate the ability of institutions to prepare students to succeed at graduate-level study based only on the institution's evaluations of their students. The purpose of the SAT and ACT was to provide a level playing field for high schoolers, because an "A" isn't necessarily an "A" everywhere. Recently, however, these assessments have fallen out of favor because they are not neutral along several important social dimensions.

We are in the midst of a battle of assessments. Our tests are better than your tests. Your tests don't test what is important. Your tests don't test what we teach. So as long as you can pass our tests, it doesn't matter how you got here. In fact, direct assessment and competency-based education approaches arose from this last belief. These sorts of arguments, at their root, also contend that unless I taught it, you don't know it. What other reason would there be for the draconian approaches to credit transfer at many institutions? In the higher education context, assessments are about more than determining if a

particular student is well-prepared for a particular activity. They also provide insight into whether and how to improve. Since the 1990s, in fact, regional accreditors expect the assessment of learning as part of the continuous improvement of the institution. Can assessments deliver?

To be accurate and reliable, an assessment must be very specific. There is a great deal of evidence that it is possible to teach to a test, along with a great deal of evidence that doing so is not in the best interest of students or institutions. As Carol Schneider and Lee Shulman wrote, “The better the arguments we can make regarding the validity of any given measure—whether of knowledge, skills or some other virtue—the less appropriate that measure is as the basis for consequential decisions about a student’s overall learning gains, much less as the sole determinant of an institution’s educational quality.”¹

In our era of data and evidence, there is an inordinate focus on measurement, ranking and results. The problem we face is that it takes a generation to truly determine the value of an education. We don’t have that long to wait and, in my opinion, we are not going to find the “best” way to assess no matter how hard we try. Assessment and quality just aren’t that closely linked. At the same time, throwing up our hands isn’t the answer either. We must keep at it. The solution? No single solution.

At Purdue Global, we take assessment very seriously and recognize that one assessment or one way of assessing will never be sufficient. I guess we follow the carpenter’s rule and measure twice, or perhaps five times. In other words, we triangulate assessments to avoid the shortfalls of any one and to improve our quality by finding, among the many types of assessments we employ, relevant measures informing how we are doing. For example, we use both the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Academic Libraries of Indiana (ALI) to evaluate student engagement. We assess every student’s performance on every outcome in every class every term, using carefully designed and tested rubrics. We evaluate our faculty to ensure interrater reliability. When the results aren’t good enough, we retrain them on the rubrics. We use external tests of competency when they are available, and we are disappointed that more institutions don’t participate and that more tests in more disciplines aren’t available. We keep track of performance on licensure exams. We use the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE’s) first-destination survey to determine how well our graduates do in the workplace. We compare their incoming salaries with those they command when they leave our institution. We follow our graduates to see how they do several years after graduation. And we try to get better at each of these measures. It’s exhilarating and it’s exhausting.

Sometimes we measure once and cut and measure, and cut and measure and cut and measure again. For example, we are on a multi-year journey to improve our introductory composition course. That journey may never end. Currently, our success rate for this first term course is nearly seven percentage points higher than it was three years ago. Why? We have made more than thirty changes. We didn’t make them one at a time. That would have taken fifteen years. So, we don’t really know. And that’s ok. Assessment is a path to improvement, but it isn’t the only one. Sometimes it’s important to try things and see what happens as quickly as possible. We aren’t afraid to try and fix.

Of course, a university isn’t made up of just courses and their assessment. There is a great deal of interstitial matter that leads to a complete education. We work with employers to understand what they value and how we can ensure that our students achieve what their prospective employers are looking for. And what employers wanted last year isn’t necessarily how they measure quality now. Working together on how to evaluate results is much better than the battle of the tests.

For some, quality is the journey rather than the result. Perhaps, the intellectual distance students travel ought to be a measure of success. A community college that helps a student grow and complete a credential offers that particular student higher quality than a ranked university where the same type of student drops out in the first term. Maybe learning while earning is a good way forward for some. Maybe for others, a career starts after the completion of a certificate rather than a whole degree. Assessments can help here, but won’t tell the whole story.

It’s important to measure what matters, but what matters depends on context. Assessment for its own sake, or for the sake of accreditors, will never be a panacea and higher education’s measurement journey will never end. Quality is a moving target. We are compelled to find better ways to measure and then we must face the reality that they still aren’t exactly right.

¹ https://cae.org/images/uploads/pdf/19_A_Brief_History_of_Student_Learning,_How_we_Got_Where_We_Are_and_a_Proposal_for_Where_to_Go_Next.pdf

(The views and opinions expressed in this Op-Ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.)