

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE CONSUMER PROGRAMS

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Higher education has been asked or mandated by legislatures, governing boards, and/or commissions to develop and implement outcomes' assessment or value added testing. The Education Secretary challenged higher education with a list of goals for the year 2000 related to student proficiency and mastery (Bacon 1990). Reasons given for assessment are to provide consumers (student, employers, etc.) with accurate, timely information on student, program, and institutional performance; improve instruction; and provide data for accountability.

Assessment efforts whether voluntary or mandatory are in the early stages. There is neither extensive experience nor a body of research to build upon in fulfilling requirements. Institutions and programs developing and refining assessment efforts are taking approaches that span the spectrum from use of general assessment instruments (e.g., ACT College Outcome Measures Program) to measure general education outcomes at the college level to identification of measures collected over time at the program or major level.

The essence of the Colorado mandate is to 'provide a way for colleges to inform potential students of performance expectations.' Institutions are to annually report students' performance and achievement to the Colorado Commission of Higher Education, legislature, and public. Failure to implement an accountability program can result in loss of up to two percent of state funding to the University. Programs are to be assessed at the major level in addition to the university level which appears to be independent of department plans. A plan should include:

- (1) Goals and Objectives for knowledge, skills, and capacity that are qualifiable and easily evaluated with data including retention, completion, after graduation performance, student/alumni satisfaction;
- (2) Means of gathering and assessing data;

- (3) Plans to disseminate data (as widely as possible to interested parties); and
- (4) Plans for using data in curriculum change, teaching methods, and assessment procedures.

The plan for our major, Consumer Sciences, includes the following assessment factors:

- (1) Satisfactory completion of specific experiences (projects, papers, presentations, internship, etc.);
- (2) Overall performance;
- (3) Pre and post assessment of skills and knowledge identified with the major; and
- (4) Post baccalaureate evidence of graduate study, continuing education, certification or licensure, career advancement, citizen participation, life satisfaction.

Though this is a beginning, review of courses and other student activities to ensure inclusion of a breadth of experiences has begun. In advising, students are encouraged to seek volunteer and intern experiences that enhance learning. Concerns center around identification and use of appropriate measures, resource demands to initiate and implement this effort, and potential uses and misuses of assessment. The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education noted that assessment should provide an institution with decision making information.

It is important to explore opportunities for common and/or joint efforts among consumer programs to optimize efforts for comparatively small programs at universities. Bureaucrats, potential students, parents, or faculty looking for new locations, etc., will attempt comparisons of the outcomes reported whether or not that is the intent. The message already received is that although each major is to develop a plan, the Commission expects to do inter-institutional comparisons.

Some questions need pursuing. If a program targets transfer students, can similar outcomes be expected for non-transfer students? What are suitable measures of outcomes? When and how often should data be collected? How is teaching to an assessment program discouraged or encouraged? If the system has an incentive plan, how can consumer programs earn a fair share? The list of questions is long.

REFERENCES

- Bacon, Kenneth H. (1990), Education Secretary Calls on Colleges to Raise Standards, Wall Street Journal, 122 (5;January 22): B5A.

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