



*Quality is Inside-Out: Re-Thinking Priorities for  
Assessment and Quality Assurance*

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## *“Inside-Out” as a Guiding Metaphor*

...Intended to Signal Two Things:

- The Way We Do Assessment is Often Wrong-Headed, Despite Our Best Intentions
- In the Long Term, Meaningful Assessment Can Only Emerge From within Each Institution’s Academic Culture



We need to re-think our approaches to match this reality





## *Requirements of Assessment and Quality Review: A Contradiction and a Contention*

- **“Quality Assurance”** demands clear public standards, rigorously applied, with results communicated openly to all public stakeholders
- **“Organizational Learning”** demands flexible inquiry, applied contextually, and shared confidentially with those who “own” the process
- When tried simultaneously, **the first always wins**





## *The Context for Assessing Quality in the United States*

### **Or why you can't learn anything from us... !**

- Over 3600 Diverse Institutions of Higher Education
- Fifty Sovereign States that Fund and Regulate Public Colleges and Universities
- Seven Regional [and Five National] Accrediting Bodies that Recognize Institutions
- An Academic Culture that Emphasizes Research and Individual Staff Responsibility for Teaching





## *Origins of the “Assessment Movement” in the United States [c.1985]*

- **Internal:** Loss of Coherence in the Curriculum and Growing Knowledge About How to Improve Teaching and Learning
  - > **Objective:** Promote Institution-wide “Cultures of Evidence” Centered on Student Learning
  
- **External:** Pressure to Demonstrate “Value for Money” from States and Society
  - > **Objective:** Shift Focus of Accountability from Resources to Results





## *Three Distress Signals in Typical Assessment Practice*

- Reification and Compliance Behavior
- Assessment “Added-On” to Teaching/Learning Processes and Unconnected to Institutional and Faculty Priorities
- Results of Assessment Unconnected to Decisions that Matter





## *Design Dilemmas Involved in Assessing Performance at All Levels*

- Managing Consequences
- Managing Openness
- Managing Diversity
- Managing Perspective



## *Managing Consequences: Core Problems*

- Should There be Any Consequences at All?
- If so, Positive or Negative? [..and Which Should Be Associated with High or Low Performance?]
- How Big Should Any Incentives Be?
- Should Consequences be Individual or Collective?



## *Managing Consequences: Some Lessons*

- Consequential, but Not *Too* Consequential
- Values/Priorities Dictate Direction of Incentives
- Reward Risk-Taking, but Don't Reward Not Trying
- Tailor Incentives to Things that Affected Parties Can Actually Control or Act to Change
- Emphasize *Collective* Responsibility





## *Managing Openness: Core Problems*

- Will Disclosure Distort Peer Judgements?
- Will It Suppress Healthy “Bad News”?
- Will It Promote Managing Numbers Instead of Fixing Problems?
- How to Inhibit “League Tables” and Ranks?
- How to Educate non-Academic Audiences?





## *Managing Openness: Some Lessons*

- Establish Clear Public Benchmarks
- Share Results Among Bounded Consortia and User Communities
- Develop “Semi-Public” Means of Communication
- Use Multiple Sources and Avoid False Precision
- Report Actions and Plans Along with Results





## *Managing Diversity: Core Problems*

- How to Recognize, but Limit, Unreasonable Claims of Distinctiveness?
- How to Uphold Standards without Promoting Standardization?
- Should Absolute Levels of Achievement be the Question, or instead “Value Added”?





## *Managing Diversity: Some Lessons*

- Make Explicit Adjustments for Context
- Separate Basic Compliance from Deep Engagement
- Use Indicators to Flag Deviation, Not Punish “Poor Performance”
- Use “Portfolios” and Similar Methods that Allow Choice, but that Can Accommodate Common Judgements





## *Managing Perspective: Core Problems*

- How to Encourage “Best Practice,” Not Just Achieving “Minimum Standards”
- How to Recognize that Change is Developmental and Continuous?
- How to Avoid Measuring Everything that Moves





## *Managing Perspective: Some Lessons*

- Develop [and Critique] an Explicit Theory of Change
- Create Opportunities for Meaningful Engagement and Reflection
- Use Real Examples to Illustrate Performance
- Track and Benchmark Progress Over Time





## *The Tactics of Assessment: Success Factors*

- Visible Metaphor of Scholarship
- Beginning with Real Problems and Processes, not with “Method”
- Consistent Messages from Leadership
- Periodically “Re-Socializing” the Community
- “Closing the Loop” with Action





## *The Tactics of Assessment: Inhibiting Factors*

- Too Much Data, Too Little Information
- Alien Language and “Management Culture”
- Burnout and Leadership Turnover
- Changing the Rules





## *In Sum, What Does an “Inside-Out” Approach Require?*

- Recognition that Some (but not All) Things are Knowable
- An Open and Accessible Store of Information About Organizational Condition and Performance
- Problem-Solving that Minimizes “Finger-Pointing”
- Clear Follow-Through on Decisions Made and Why They Were Taken





*...and How Can External Quality Assurance Agents Promote It?*

- Manage Ends, Not Means
- Periodically Benchmark Collective Performance
- Reward Individual Contributions to Common Ends
- Use Marginal Resources to Fix Problems
- Adjust for Context and Avoid “False Equity”





## *Developing Learners and Organizations: Some Concluding Thoughts*

- Improvement is About Transformation, Not About Adding New Things
- Demands External Feedback on Performance Delivered in Actionable Ways
- Requires Active Reflection and Engagement Around a Matter of Perceived Importance”



