



*Assessing Assessment:
Successes, Failures, and the Future*

Peter Ewell

National Center for Higher Education
Management Systems (NCHEMS)

NCSU Assessment Conference

April 14, 2005





Looking Back: Origins of the Assessment Movement Two Decades Ago

- Undergraduate Reform Reports of 1985-86
- *Internal Stimulus*: Call for More Coherent Teaching/Learning Approaches and Information for Improvement
- *External Stimulus*: Stakeholder Demands for Information on “Return on Investment”
- Tensions in Motive and Message Ever Since





Why Didn't Assessment Go Away?

- Pressure to Produce Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes Never Let Up
- By Early 1990s, Accreditors Replace States as Primary External Stimulus to Get Started
- Intermittent Federal Interest in Assessment as an Element of National Accountability
- But Resulting Faculty Ambivalence About a Process Seen as “External” and “Administrative”





Looking Back: What's Been Accomplished?

- Assessment Is for the Most Part Perceived as Inevitable and Legitimate
- Vast Majority of Institutions Have Statements of Learning Outcomes (General and Programmatic)
- A “Semi-Profession” of Folks Involved in Assessment
- Steadily Growing Sophistication with Respect to Methods of Gathering Evidence



Looking Back: What Hasn't Happened?

- Authentic Integration of Assessment into Faculty Cultures and Behaviors
- Assessment Activities Still Largely “Added On” to the Curriculum Instead of Being Embedded In It
- Systematic and Widespread Use of Assessment Results for Institutional and Curricular Improvement
- Proactive and Sincere Institutional Engagement with Accrediting Organizations Around Topics of Assessment





Major Challenges: Institutional

- Faculty Involvement
- Consistent Support from Top Leadership
- Lack of Time and Burnout
- Use of Results in Decision-making
- Organizational Incentives and Communication





Major Challenges: Technical

- Truly Authentic Instruments and Evidence-Gathering Techniques
- Benchmarking Against External Standards
- Student Motivation and Involvement
- Managing the Assessment Process





Involving Faculty

- Start with the Curriculum
- Work on Real Problems Somebody Has
- Language of Inquiry and Scholarship
- Colleagues Learn from Colleagues
- Remember You Won't Convert Everybody





Top Leadership

- Don't Change the Rules
- Transparent Communication and Decision Processes
- “Packaging” Decisions Around Evidence
- Board's Fiduciary Responsibility for Institutional Good Standing and Quality of Academic Product





Lack of Time and Burnout

- Don't Try to Do Everything at Once
- Start Small with a Demonstration of the Complete Assessment Cycle
- Stop Doing Things when you Add New Things
- Develop and Implement a “Succession Plan”





Using Assessment Results

- Use Involves More than Just “Decision-Making”
- Establish Action Expectations *Before* You Start Assessing
- Avoid the “Perfect Data Fallacy”
- Create Opportunities for Collective Deliberation and Reflection About Results
- Map Out Specific Opportunities for Use in the Decision Cycle





Organization and Communication Issues

- Package Results Around Problems
- Don't Do a "Data Dump"...Establish a "Data Dialogue" Instead
- Disaggregate
- Emphasize Positive (and Collective) Rewards; Avoid "Gotcha"
- Don't Hold People Responsible for Things They Can't Control





New and More Authentic Assessment

- Electronic Portfolios
- Embedded Examination Questions and Associated Rubrics
- Behavioral Inventories
- Complex Simulations and Assignments
- Authentic Large-Scale Assessments (e.g. RAND/CAE CLA)





External Benchmarking

- Look First at Existing External Examinations (e.g. Licensure)
- Periodic Validation of Local Assessments with National Instruments
- Institutional Partnerships or Consortia
- Stakeholders as External Examiners (or as Partners in Designing Assessments)





Student Motivation and Involvement

- Make It Count
- Transcript Individual Results
- Share Individual Results for Diagnostic Purposes
- Share Collective Results and Actions Taken in Response
- Involve Students in Interpreting Results





Keeping Assessment Manageable

- Harness Existing Opportunities for Assessment Instead of Creating New Ones
- Don't Try to Measure Everything that Moves
- Sample Whenever You Can
- Drop Things If You Don't Use Them





Looking Forward: Changes that Might Affect Assessment in the Next Decade

- Technology
- Changes in Teaching/Learning Process
- Accountability
- Student Attendance Patterns (e.g. Multi-Institutional Attendance)





Impact of Technology

- Individually-Tailored Assessments
- Complex Simulations with Participant Intervention and On-Demand Resources
- Immediate Feedback
- Mastery-Based Self-Paced Instructional Designs
- Portable Personal Portfolios





“Revolution” in Teaching and Learning

- Increased Modularization with Culminating Mastery Assessments
- Assessments Emphasize Connection-Making Across Contexts and Fields
- Assessing Collaboration and Team Behavior
- Assessing “Deep Understanding”





Increased Accountability

- Demand for Comparative or Benchmarked Results
- Pressure for More Public Disclosure of Assessment Results
- Use of Results to Allocate Resources
- Outcomes Aligned with Public Purposes





Complex (Multi-Institutional) Attendance

- Competency-Based Articulation
(Qualifications Framework)
- Assessment-Based Sub-Credentials
Awarded on Completion of Modules
- Aligning Discipline-Based Standards
Across Institutions (e.g. QUE)





Concluding Thoughts

- The Central Tension of “Accountability vs. Improvement” Is Still with Us After 20 Years
- Assessment Will Inexorably Become More Embedded and Authentic
- Assessment Will Hopefully Link with Standards and the Scholarship of Teaching
- We Will Probably be Back to These Issues 20 Years from Now!

