Background Information on Assessment in Higher Education from the U.S. Perspective
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Overview of this Document

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1. Context and Definitions of Assessment

• Nearly 20 million students are enrolled in postsecondary educational institutions in the United States

• Higher education landscape is increasingly influenced by external forces
  • Changing student characteristics and needs
  • Technological advances
  • Intensified competition for students
  • Economic and competitive pressures
  • Public skepticism about educational quality

• What is meant by assessment? A clearly understood, widely shared definition has always been one of the highest barriers to the advancement of the field

• Many definitions of assessment exist, some emphasizing accountability and others improvement of student learning as its principal purpose

• A range of methods for investigating the phenomenon and outcomes of students’ learning

• The systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development

• Measurement of what an individual knows and can do

• The term outcomes assessment in higher education has come to imply aggregating individual measures for the purpose of discovering group strengths and weaknesses that can guide improvement actions

• While assessment mainly focuses on student learning, broader definitions focus on institutional effectiveness

• Assessment is the process of providing credible evidence of resources, implementation actions, and outcomes undertaken for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of instruction, programs, and services in higher education
2. Assessment’s Beginnings and Growth

- The “assessment movement” in the U.S. largely began in the 1980s with calls for greater accountability and transparency from federal and state governments, regional and specialized accreditors, and governing bodies of institutions themselves.

- **Three publications in early/mid 1980s** contributed to an increasing emphasis on assessment:
  - *A Nation at Risk* (1983): America’s failing K-12 system
  - *Involvement in Learning* (1984): Conditions of excellence needed in higher education, including student involvement, high expectations, and assessment and feedback
  - *The Self-Regarding Institution* (1984): Calls for accountability stem from a desire to understand what is happening in complex institutions

- **States** began enacting accountability measures that accelerated what was becoming a national assessment movement; Tennessee, Colorado, New Jersey, and Virginia as early adopters of performance funding

- **Federal government**: all federally approved accreditation organizations to include in their criteria for accreditation *evidence of institutional outcomes*

- External stimulus for assessment moved from states to regional associations; they began to issue specific *outcomes assessment directives for institutional accreditation*

- **Discipline-specific bodies** also created *guidelines for program accreditation*

- Throughout the 1990s, **institutions responded** to these external mandates by establishing *assessment programs on campuses*

- American Association for Higher Education set forth nine *principles of good practice for assessing student learning*, including:
  - The need for clear educational goals
  - Recognition of the multidimensionality of learning
  - Importance of tracking outcomes over time
  - The need for involvement by a broad range of stakeholders

- Barr and Tagg’s (1995) influential *Change* article offered a persuasive new “learning paradigm” in which instructional practices focused on the *design of powerful learning experiences and environments*, rather than on information transfer

- **Rewards and recognition** for faculty attention to teaching were examined and debated
• The scholarship of teaching—a forerunner of the current Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement—emerged

• Two reports from the early/mid 2000s exemplified the continued intensity of assessment activities:
  • In 2000, Measuring Up (National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education): issued biennial state grades on higher education performance and found all fifty states to be seriously lacking in the area of assessment of student learning
  • In 2006, Spellings Report on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education) further criticized higher education for its limited demonstration of student learning and called for more sophisticated assessment in the name of public accountability

3. Assessment Today

• Although the assessment movement primarily began with calls for external accountability, today the role of assessment in higher education is increasingly focused on improving institutions’ educational effectiveness

• Scholars have emphasized transparency and use of assessment results to guide improvements in student learning and success

• The longstanding culture of compliance has clouded the most important, actionable purpose for collecting evidence of student accomplishment: improving teaching and learning

• National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) developed its Transparency Framework in response to the needs for both transparency and improvement:
  • Student learning outcomes statements
  • Assessment plans
  • Assessment resources
  • Current assessment activities
  • Evidence of student learning
  • Use of student learning evidence

• Two recent initiatives—Tuning Process and the Degree Qualifications Profile—focus on consensus, alignment, student-centeredness, and communication as elements needed to support coherent learning experiences for students

• VALUE rubrics and Multi-State Collaborative as a means of promoting more authentic work, including student agency/ownership

• Involvement in assessment and improvement has broadened into institutional areas beyond the classroom to include co-curricular, community, and international learning contexts