

Assessment Dualities and Challenges

By J. Fredericks Volkwein
Penn State University
<Volkwein@psu.edu>

Thanks for inviting me to share with you some of my thoughts about assessment. My perceptions are heavily influenced by my experiences, first as an undergraduate at Pomona College and then as a graduate student at Cornell. My sojourn through the assessment landscape also includes experiences as an Assistant Dean of Students, as an Executive Assistant to the President, as a Director of Institutional Research and Planning, and most recently as a faculty member. Perhaps even more relevant is my authorship of one departmental and three institutional accreditation self-study documents. I narrowly escaped a fourth such assignment only by moving from New York to Pennsylvania. Lastly, I have been influenced greatly by my service on a “Dirty Dozen” accreditation site-visit teams.

Defining Assessment

- ◆ “... the systematic gathering, interpretations, and use of information about student learning for purposes of improvement.” (Marchese, 1997)
- ◆ Assessment tends to be locally designed and executed evaluation research intended to determine the effects of a college or university on its students, centered on learning outcomes, for the purpose of improving teaching and learning (AAHE Assessment Forum, 1992).
- ◆ Student Outcomes Assessment is the act of assembling and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative teaching and learning outcomes evidence in order to examine their congruence with an institution's stated purposes and educational objectives (Middle States, *Framework for Outcomes Assessment*).

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I think this AICUP Workshop is a sign that we find ourselves in the grip of a national obsession that gives every indication of becoming an enduring feature in our environment. What then do we mean by assessment? Nationally, the language surrounding assessment is rather straight-forward. Higher Education bodies and accrediting agencies alike have articulated definitions of assessment that contain these major elements: a focus on undergraduate student outcomes, linked to educational goals, based on empirical evidence, and improvement oriented.

At first pass this seems doable enough, until one starts considering the complicated nature of the task. First, there are multiple levels of assessment and variable actors, outcomes, and evidence to be assembled at each level. Driven by a diverse economy and society, higher education is now a complex industry of public and private educational providers, and an array of quality assurance, funding, accreditation, and certification mechanisms have evolved reflecting this complexity. There are four major areas of higher education quality assurance reflected in the literature:

- 1) The classroom/course/student level—assessing the performance, certification, and learning outcomes of individual students.
- 2) The individual faculty member— assessing faculty performance in teaching, scholarship, research, and service.
- 3) The department and program level— reviewing, evaluating, and accrediting academic and administrative programs and services.
- 4) The University or institution level— regional accreditation, performance reporting, governance control.

Levels of Evaluation	Dominant Focus of Evaluation and Primary Responsibility for Quality Assurance	
	Efficiency/Cost	Effectiveness/Quality
Institution/Campus	State and Local Government Governing Boards & Trustees	Presidents & Chancellors Regional & National Accreditation Bodies State higher education agencies, trustees, & governing boards
Discipline/Program/Department	Campus administration, especially financial officers	100 academic & vocational accrediting bodies and societies State higher education agencies Campus Provosts/Deans
Individual Faculty Member/Researcher/Instructor	Federal and Foundation Grant Providers	Federal and Foundation Review Boards Campus Provosts/Deans
Classroom or Individual Student/Graduate	Campus Financial & Enrollment Mgmt. Officers Federal and State Financial Aid Authorities	The Faculty State and Professional Licensure, such as for teachers, lawyers, nurses, physicians, accountants, social workers, engineers, architects.

Table 1. Levels of Evaluation and Quality Assurance in the USA (Volkwein, 2006)

As if this picture isn't complicated enough, look what happens when you just focus on one of these elements, namely undergraduate student learning outcomes? Four decades ago Alexander Astin gave us a map of affective and cognitive outcomes to guide our studies of college students. Each one of these outcomes provides conceptual and measurement challenges enough to provide a full employment bill for Institutional Researchers at every college.

Astin's Map of Outcomes

<i>Data</i>	<i>Outcome</i>	
	<i>Affective (598C)</i>	<i>Cognitive (598A)</i>
Psychological	Attitudes and Values Educational and Career Goals Satisfaction Personal/Social Growth	Basic skills General Education & critical thinking skills Knowledge in the Major Intellectual Growth Acad. performance-GPA
Behavioral	Choice of major Choice of career Student-body leadership Community leadership	Educational attainment Occupational attainment

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Since this one table provides enough material to fill two semester-long graduate courses at Penn State, it is not possible for me to cover the entire terrain of assessment in these brief remarks. Instead, I see my role as articulating a few challenges that you probably will need to grapple with as you navigate the assessment terrain on your campus. So over the next 30-40 minutes, I want to throw you a few hooks that you can grab onto and pull back and forth in your sessions throughout the day. So here are just a few challenges that you may already be facing.

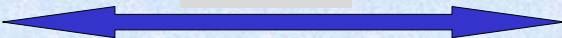
Assessment Challenges

- * **Evaluating for external accountability versus assessing for internal improvement**
- * **Bureaucratic versus Academic organization and values**
- * **Conflicting views about quality in Higher Education**
- * **Current trends in accreditation.**
- * **Assessment Questions.**

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The Ancient Roman God Janus is the God of Doors and Gateways. Like the two sides of a door, Janus has two faces -- one looking outward and one looking inward. While Janus encourages us to consider the external as well as the internal aspects of our endeavors, Janusian thinking also reminds us that when we pass through a door we are simultaneously entering and leaving. This insight of one action being viewed in opposite ways recognizes the dual nature of almost everything we do. Commencement is both an ending and a beginning. For every action in the physical (and political) world, there is a reaction. When we strengthen the student experience inside the university, we simultaneously make the institution appear more attractive externally.

The Effectiveness Continuum



External Accountability,
Regulation, & Control

Internal Evaluation,
Self-Assessment, &
Improvement

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Universities face many Janusian dualities. In particular, assessing institutional effectiveness requires us to serve twin masters - the need for internal assessment for purposes of improvement, as well as the need for external performance reporting for purposes of accountability. Resolving the tension between the internal and the external uses of assessment and performance is a classic Janusian

challenge. In public and private institutions alike, we must do both. Facing internally, we need to improve ourselves and to become better teachers, learners, scholar/researchers, and administrators. Facing externally, we need to demonstrate our effectiveness and be accountable to key external stakeholders: taxpayers and legislators, tuition payers and trustees.

The Inspirational and the Pragmatic. To resolve this tension, I describe these opposite forces as the inspirational versus the pragmatic - Doing something because you want to versus doing something because you have to! (Volkwein 1999).

Dual Needs- The Inspirational & The Pragmatic

- Internal Needs (the inspirational)
 - ↗ Instructional & Research quality assurance
 - ↗ Student Educational attainment
 - ↗ Program Improvement
 - ↗ Constructive Change

- External Needs (the pragmatic)
 - ↗ Accreditation
 - ↗ Public accountability

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The inspirational foundation for evaluation and assessment is doing it for self-improvement, especially for the enhancement of student learning and growth. We in higher education are at our best when we carry out educational change, assessment, and evaluation not to please outsiders, but to satisfy ourselves—to achieve an organizational climate of ongoing development and continuing improvement.

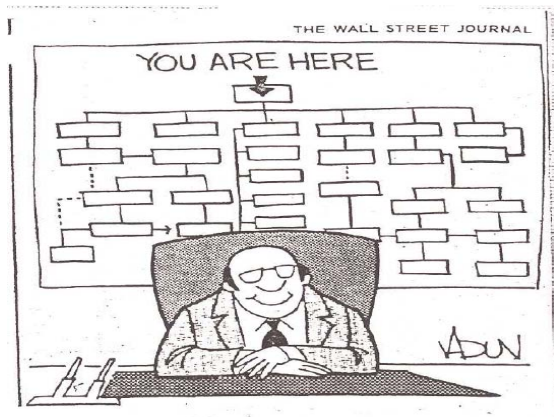
The Pragmatic foundation for evaluation and assessment recognizes the external need to demonstrate our accountability to stakeholders: legislators and trustees, taxpayers and tuition payers. Moreover, assessing institutional effectiveness enables universities to successfully compete for enrollments and resources and gain a strategic advantage over others. In an atmosphere of scarcity, those campuses that can measure their effectiveness and reshape themselves will do better in the competition for enrollments and resources and faculty than campuses

that cannot do so. And on the campus, those academic departments and programs that are able to provide Presidents and Provosts with evidence about the impacts they are having on their students will be more successful in the competition for campus resources than academic units not able to provide such evidence.

Thus, the simultaneous and competing needs for both internal improvement and external accountability provide the first foundation for demonstrating institutional and program effectiveness. The regional accrediting associations also are helping to resolve this dichotomy by requiring each campus to present evidence of student learning and growth as a key component in demonstrating the institution's effectiveness. This is especially visible in the publications and written standards of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. To be accredited, each institution is expected to gather and present evidence that it is accomplishing its educational goals and producing improvements both inside and outside the classroom -- improvements in the new student experience, in academic advisement, in mentoring, in residential life, in teaching effectiveness, and in the General Education Curriculum.

Balancing Efficiency and Effectiveness

Universities are fascinating organizations because we house several strong cultures within the same organizational structure. One of the strongest is the administrative culture -- the bureaucracy, where authority and responsibility are based largely on one's position in the hierarchy.



Another strong culture, of course, is the faculty's academic or professional culture, where authority is based not so much on one's position as it is on one's knowledge or expertise, and where decision making is less hierarchical and more collegial (Etzioni, 1964; Birnbaum, 1988).

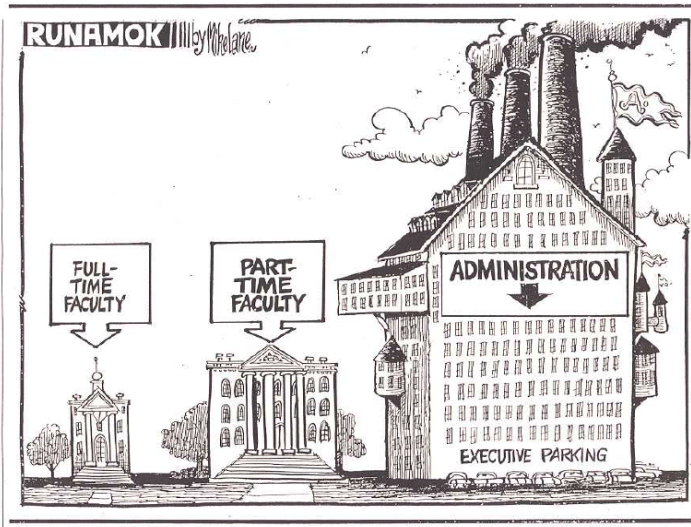


"Now, the round table symbolizes our equality while my fancy chair and golden crown signify that I am, perhaps, just a smack more equal."

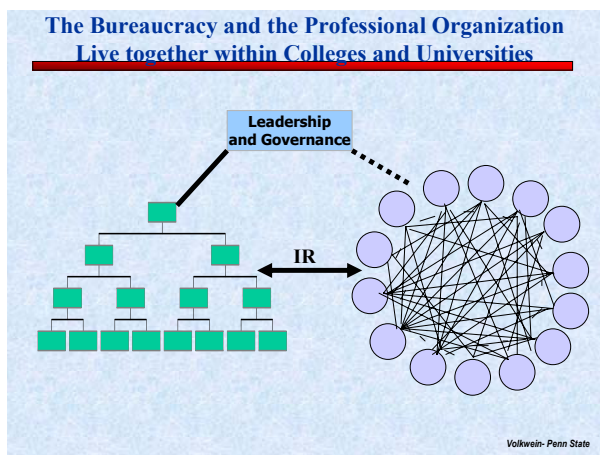
The major goal activities (transmission of knowledge or teaching, discovery of knowledge or research and scholarship, and application of knowledge or service and outreach) are carried out by the academic side of the organization, so its needs and value system generally dominates. This is why university Presidents and Provosts generally need to have faculty experience and PhDs in order to be selected. The "loose-coupled" faculty culture needs autonomy and freedom from the operational concerns of the university, and places a high value on maintaining educational quality and effectiveness, on protecting standards, and on participatory decision making.



On the other hand, the administrative bureaucracy supplies the support services that make faculty goal activities possible. The administrative culture is much more tightly-coupled and hierarchical, more cost conscious, and values control and efficiency (Volkwein, 1999, 2006). The academic side pushes for autonomy and decentralization, the administrative side for direction and control.



These two university cultures have learned to live and work together, one giving a higher priority to efficiency and frugality, the other giving a higher priority to educational and scholarly effectiveness.

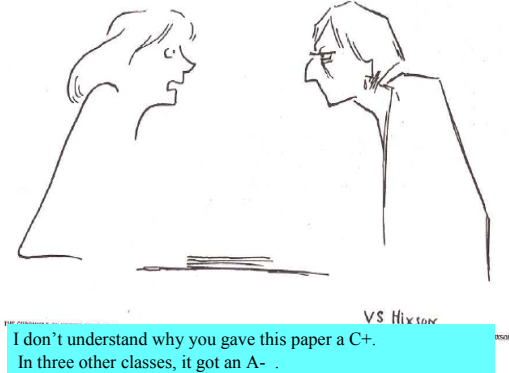


Both cultures have external and internal faces. The administrative culture's external face is toward strategy, resource acquisition, and accountability. Its internal face provides direction, support, and structure. The academic culture adheres to external standards for research and scholarship and values loyalty to the discipline with its outer face. Internally, the academic culture provides instruction and university service. The arrangement reflects a modern balance between the almost universal need for managerial direction and cost control, while simultaneously maintaining high standards in research and teaching. Within the same academic year, a university may be asked simultaneously to reduce spending and to improve its educational outcomes. The university administration addresses one problem, while the academic professionals address the other.

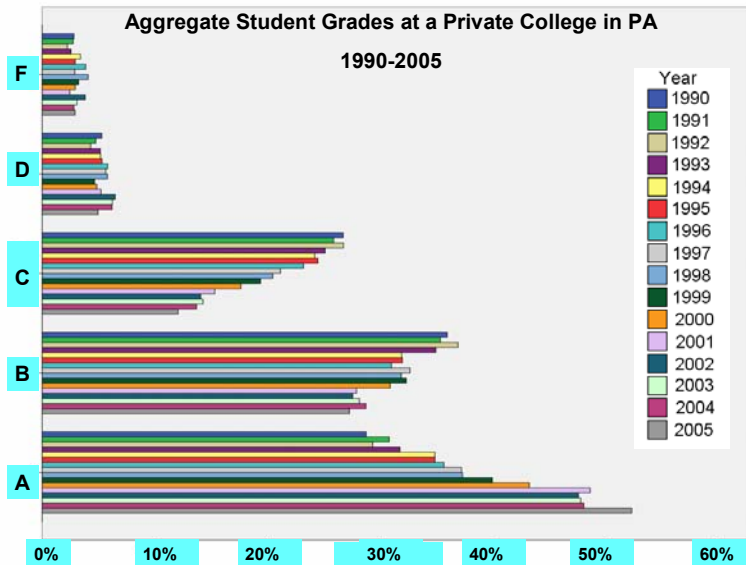
Four Assessment Challenges in American Higher Education

I. Perhaps the greatest obstacle to faculty support for assessment is the extra workload and the feeling that “I already assess student performance in my courses.” Most faculty members devote a great deal of effort to evaluating student learning in their courses and assigning grades, and they groan when they hear the word *assessment*.

Why Not Use Course Grades for Assessment?



The trouble is that faculty assign grades using inconsistent standards. We aggregate course grades each semester and over the student's career to produce a Grade Point Average. But student learning is multi-dimensional and the grade in most cases is but a crude reflection of actual student performance. More importantly, professors use a mish-mash of criteria and standards to assign grades. When they assign grades, some faculty use goal-driven evaluation: How well has the student met the learning goals in this course? Others use improvement-driven evaluation: How much has the student improved in knowledge or gained in skill? Still other professors use comparison evaluation, and grade students on a normal curve, valuing each student's performance only in relation to others. Additionally, we all know colleagues who grade mostly on student effort: if students work hard and come to class regularly, they will probably get a good grade regardless of how much they have learned. **Finally, there is the dirty little matter of grade inflation shown in the following chart of grading trends since 1990.** Under these conditions, it is impossible to use cumulative grades as reflections of student learning.



2. A second major challenge in higher education is that we think we know how to measure efficiency and cost, but we do not agree about what it is that constitutes quality. There are at least three competing models or philosophies about what it is that constitutes excellence in higher education (Burke and Serban 1998; Burke & Minassians, 2002; Volkwein, 2005).

Competing Views of Educational Excellence

(Burke and Manassians, 2002; Volkwein, 2004)

- **Resource/Reputation Model** emphasizes the importance of financial resources, faculty credentials, student test scores, external funding, and ratings and rankings.
- **Client Centered Model** emphasizes good educational practices, student satisfaction, faculty availability, alumni feedback, low tuition and high aid.
- **Strategic Investment Model** emphasizes the importance of return on investment, cost-benefit analysis, expenditure controls, regulation and compliance, and productivity measures such as admissions yield, graduation rates, time to degree, and expenditures per student.

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First, the academic community traditionally embraces the **Resource/Reputation Model** first articulated by Astin (1985). This model emphasizes the importance of financial resources, faculty credentials, student test scores, external funding, and reputation ratings and rankings by experts. Under this model, faculty, sometimes joined by accreditation bodies, argue for more resources to support educational effectiveness. This drives up costs and attends to inputs rather than outcomes.

Second, many parents, students, and student affairs professionals cling to a **Client Centered Model**. This market-oriented model derived from the literature on quality management emphasizes all possible student services, faculty availability and attentiveness, student and alumni satisfaction and feedback, low tuition and high aid. Seymour articulates this model in his book *On Q: Causing Quality in Higher Education* (Seymour, 1992). Under this model, the first priority of a college or university is to fulfill the needs of students, parents, employers, and other "customers" of higher education. Institutions that best meet the needs of their constituents are considered to be the most effective. Under this model, an organization's customers rather than the views of experts, define quality. Good customer service is very labor intensive and emphasizes the student experience over student outcomes.

Third, the business and government community generally believes in the **Strategic Investment Model** (Ewell in Ruppert, 1994; Volkwein 2005). This model emphasizes the importance of return on investment, cost-benefit comparisons, results-oriented and productivity measures such as admissions yield, graduation rates, time-to-degree, and expenditures per student. Under this model, government officials and even trustees evaluate each new initiative in light of its perceived payoff. This is the only one of the three dominant models that has the potential to dampen costs.

Campus Conflict

Faculty and many Accrediting Bodies tend to embrace the **Resource/Reputation Model** and argue for more resources to support educational effectiveness.

Students and Parents mostly embrace the **Client Centered Model** and want all possible services and faculty attentiveness.

Government officials and Trustees mostly adhere to the **Strategic Investment Model** and are interested in management efficiency, increased productivity, and cost control.

University Administrators are caught in the middle of these conflicting value systems and are hiring institutional researchers to help them decide what to do.

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In any case, these competing views of educational excellence are interpreted differently by different higher education stakeholders. Hence, there is a potential for misunderstanding, if not outright conflict, and Presidents frequently feel caught in the middle between faculty and accreditors, students and parents, government officials and trustees.

3. Accreditation Trends

A third challenge is that the accreditation process has undergone dramatic changes in the past 20 years (Ewell, 2005; Wolff, 2005). As noted above, one clear trend places student outcomes assessment at the center of the accreditation review.

Accreditation bodies, not only at the regional level, but also in many disciplines (like engineering and business), have shifted their policies and processes away from meeting rigid quantitative standards for inputs and resources, and toward judging educational effectiveness from measurable outcomes. This paradigm shift was led by several of the regional accreditors (most prominently Middle States, North Central, and Western), who revised their manuals and review processes to give greater attention to student learning outcomes and program goal attainment as the institution's demonstration of its educational effectiveness. These trends began in the 1980s, but gathered strength during the 1990s as one accrediting group after another shifted away from bureaucratic checklist approaches that emphasized admissions selectivity, resources, curricular requirements, facilities, faculty credentials, and seat time. They now focus their reviews on attaining educational objectives, particularly those related to student learning.

Accreditation Sea-Changes in past two Decades

1. **Most Accrediting Bodies have shifted away from the earlier over-concentration on resources and other inputs toward a concentration on outcomes in the belief that results matter most.**
2. **Many though not all accrediting bodies have shifted away from a summative focus on meeting explicit standards toward a formative focus on goal attainment and self-improvement.**
3. **Regional Accrediting Bodies have encouraged institutions to base their accreditation self-study on existing processes, like strategic planning or program evaluation, rather than to generate a one-time, stand alone self-study document that evaporates as soon as the site visit team leaves the campus.**

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A second related trend in accreditation is the greater emphasis on improvement. Outcomes assessment evidence is now the centerpiece of educational effectiveness, and using that evidence to improve is a hallmark of healthy institutions and

programs. Regional and program accreditors alike are prodding all in higher education to build "cultures of evidence" that feed into continuous improvement systems that are the hallmarks of a self-renewing, learning organization. This trend is reflected most visibly in the Baldrige-based Accreditation for Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) of the Higher Learning Commission of North Central. In addition, accreditation practice has begun to separate the compliance (or meeting standards) function from the self-study (or improvement) function (Ewell 2005). This is perhaps most visible in the WASC two-stage review model where the first visit focuses on "capacity" and the second visit on "effectiveness."

Accreditation Sea-Changes in past two Decades

4. At the institutional level, Presidents and Chancellors are using the accreditation self-study as a "chariot for change" (Ratcliff, et al., NDHE 2001).
5. Federal, State, & Trustee interest in efficiency & cost-containment contrasts with accreditation, faculty, & alumni interest in effectiveness and quality.

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4. Competing Assessment and Evaluation Questions

A fourth assessment challenge arises from the frequent lack of clarity of assessment goals. Evaluation and assessment force us as professionals to engage in evidence-based thinking, but the nature of the evidence we gather depends upon the question one asks at the beginning of the process. Institutional effectiveness generally seeks answers to one or more of these generic evaluation questions: Does the institution or program meet or exceed certain standards? How does the institution or program compare to others? Does the institution or program do a good job at what it sets out to do? How can the institution or program be improved? Is the institution or program cost-effective? As drivers for assessment activity, each of these questions – standards, comparisons, goal attainment, improvement, and cost-effectiveness -- has a relevant contribution to make to the overall effectiveness wardrobe (c.f., Volkwein, Chapter 6, 2004).

Effective Organizations and Programs can Ask Five Questions, and Answer them Positively:

- 1. Do we meet or exceed external standards?**
This is the traditional accreditation question
- 2. Do we compare favorably to others?**
This is a normative question
- 3. Are we meeting our Goals?**
This is a congruence question
- 4. Are we getting better?**
This is an improvement question
- 5. Are we getting the most for our investment?**
This is the productivity question

Q1. Does the institution or program meet standards? Summative, criterion-referenced evaluation is the traditional accreditation approach, and requires assessing institutions, programs, and individuals against criteria established by an external authority. Consequently, this criterion-based form of assessment overrides local control and autonomy, and places a high priority on ensuring minimum levels of competence or performance. It also requires agreement and clarity about the standards and how they are to be measured. Whether applied at the institution, program, or individual student level, such assessment usually leads to summative decisions about continuance and discontinuance.

Q2. How does the institution or program compare? Answering this question requires comparison against external norms and benchmarking against peer institutions and programs. Comparison assessment recognizes that institutions and programs are competing, and that many in society like to “keep score” and identify who’s on top. Using regional and national comparisons has legitimacy with some stakeholders, especially the parents of traditional college students. This explains the interest in US News ratings and rankings, and assumes that competition for faculty and students will drive each institution either to improve or to see its market position deteriorate. Whether based on perceived reputation or objective statistics, comparison assessment requires no consensus about performance levels or standards—it merely shows how your college or program stacks up against the competition. As a driver for assessment, comparison measurement requires the selection of appropriate reference groups and common information about them.

Q3. Is the institution or program meeting its goals? Internal referenced, goal-driven assessment is important and relevant at every level – individual students and faculty, classroom, program, department, and institution. What should our

students be learning? What are the goals and purposes of this program? What is the university's particular mission? Answers require clear, measurable goals & objectives. This formative assessment concentrates on narrowing the gap between goals and actual performance, and thus requires measures or judgments of congruence and incongruence.

Q4. Is the institution or program improving? This improvement-driven evaluation compares institutions, programs, and individuals against themselves over time. Formative, self-comparison requires consistent, longitudinal data, or at least Time 1 and Time 2 data, and recognizes that all institutions and programs are at different starting points, and assumes that every student, faculty member, and program can improve.

Q5. Is the institution or program cost-effective? This is the harsh, productivity question and compares costs with benefits, expenditures and resources with results. Such evaluation usually involves a high degree of professional judgment to go along with the measurement. The costs of higher education constitute an enormous national investment, and universities are under pressure to demonstrate that teaching, research, and service programs are being conducted economically. These external accountability concerns stimulate current legislative and trustee interest in class size, faculty workload, administrative salaries, time-to-degree, loan default, economic impact, and research productivity, among others. Internally, some universities use measures of productivity and performance to assess various administrative and academic support services.

So, let me return to the Janusian image and close by suggesting that you concentrate your assessment efforts on answering three inspirational and three pragmatic questions. Answering them well will give you high marks among accreditation team members and trustees alike.

Key Questions (The Inspirational)

- What should our students be learning?
(The goals question)
- What are our students actually learning?
(The measurement question)
- What should we be doing to facilitate student learning?
(The improvement question)

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Key Questions (The Pragmatic)

- Are we meeting public and professional expectations?
(The accountability/accreditation question)
- What evidence indicates our quality?
(The performance measurement question)
- Are we getting better?
(The improvement question)

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Thus, we have a complicated collage of evaluation and assessment challenges for institutions, programs, faculty and students. The faculty mostly assesses individual students by assigning them grades in individual courses. Rarely are students evaluated holistically in a way that captures large chunks of the educational experience. Provosts, deans and chairs mostly evaluate faculty *ad seriatum* and most thoroughly at the points of promotion and tenure. Federal and foundation sponsors, as well as publishers and editors, also focus on particular manuscripts and particular research proposals of particular faculty. Rarely however, is a faculty member's overall contribution to institutional and program goal attainment a matter of documented review. Academic Program Reviews are widespread, including as they do both formative internal reviews and summative external reviews by specialized accreditors. Institutions have great difficulty summarizing the outcomes of these scattered program, faculty, and student assessments in a digestible self-study that accurately reflects upon institutional effectiveness. The variety and complexity of these program, faculty, and student assessments are enormous, hence we have much work to do.



References

There are several especially good readings for assisting institutions with their outcomes assessment programs. Perhaps the best 20 pages ever written on outcomes assessment are contained in

- Patrick Terenzini's article, "**Assessment with Open Eyes**" (JHE, 1989).
- Several books by Trudy Banta and her associates, *Assessment in practice: putting principles to work on college campuses* (Banta, et al. 1996), *Assessment essentials: planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education* (Palomba & Banta 1999), and *Building a scholarship of assessment* (Banta et al., 2002), constitute helpful resources for campus assessment efforts.
- Linda Suskie's book, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* (2004) is indeed a practical guide.
- Additionally, there have been several constructive national attempts to develop guidelines and standards for good assessment practices. The most significant of these are the AAHE *Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning*, and the recommendations of the AAC&U (from *Our Students' Best Work*, 2004).

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