

The Nature and Value of Assessment

By Chris Burnham
Department of English
New Mexico State University
On behalf of the General Education Assessment Task Force

Academic assessment is thoroughgoing, providing crucial information and direction to all the stakeholders of an institution, to central administration, to the colleges, the departments and programs, to individual faculty and students, and to the various publics the institution serves.

The mission of the New Mexico HED Assessment Task Force is to create and maintain a culture of assessment in post-secondary education. This entails educating the agency and legislature, the public, and the administrations, faculty and staff, and students of New Mexico institutions concerning the nature of assessment and the central role it can play in defining and promoting excellence in academic programs.

Assessment can play a strong positive role in recruiting and retaining students of all levels. The results of assessments can be used to identify and advertise high-quality programs. In addition, ongoing assessment can identify elements in programs for at-risk students that are especially effective and can guide subsequent program and curriculum development. Assessment can identify strengths and weaknesses within students so that strengths can be maximized and weaknesses remedied. Strong assessment programs make institutions attractive to parents concerned with the value of education and the well being of their children. In addition, strong assessment programs can convince taxpayers that they are receiving value for their investments in education and that they should increase their support of New Mexico higher education.

A strong commitment to continuous assessment is a hallmark of excellence in an agency, an institution, and an individual. Assessment is central to academic leadership.

A Culture of Assessment

A culture of assessment considers assessment a normal and natural element of instructional programs and instruction per se. A culture of assessment focuses on student learning outcomes, the specific skills, knowledge sets, dispositions, and values inherent in a subject area or field of specialization, needed for effective performance within the subject or field. This includes learning how to learn within a subject or field. Success is achieved when learners understand not only what needs to be learned but also how to learn and how to assess the value of the new learning.

A culture of assessment assumes the purpose of assessment exceeds simply measuring student learning outcomes. It is complete *only* when it has created a feedback loop that assures assessment information will be used to inform subsequent instruction so that instruction can be made more effective as a result of the assessment.

A culture of assessment understands the role of assessment and assures that assessment programs are sustainable and they provide accurate and useful information. Academic assessment is part of the work of instruction, not an add-on that steals valuable time away from instruction. Assessment completes instruction and should inform subsequent instruction.

A culture of assessment differentiates evaluation and assessment. Evaluation results in creating an inventory of skills or concepts that ranks performance along a scale from absence to mastery. Evaluation is *summative*, generally coming at the end of a process, such as assigning a grade in a course. Assessment is *formative*; it is concerned with what constitutes successful performance and how performance can be improved. Assessment involves evaluation, establishing value for certain elements and establishing a hierarchy within that scheme. However, the work of assessment is not complete once the values have been assigned. Assigning the values is the first step in the process of establishing targets for improvement and establishing plans to achieve that improvement. This makes assessment *responsive*.

Assessment Caveats

Assessment is often associated with evaluation and considered a high-risk and dangerous activity. This often leads to assessments that highlight successes and disguise shortcomings. A culture of assessment recognizes that assessment involves risk. The program must provide an atmosphere of risk-taking and support that encourages the honest recognition of shortcomings. It must provide support that allows those assessed to develop plans for improvement. This support must be tangible, including time and financial resources. Improved performance must be recognized and rewarded. When an assessment program includes all these elements, recognition of risk, provision of resources, and rewards for improvement, then it is complete and the results can be used in high-stakes decision making concerning budgeting, continuing existing programs, and initiating new programs.

Academic assessment must be *transparent* in all respects. The subjects of assessment, whether programs, departments, faculty, or students, need to know how the assessment program works, what criteria and standards underpin the assessment, and how information generated by the assessment will be used. The subjects of the assessment need to play a role in the design, implementation, analysis, and communication of results, as well as with planning for continued development and re-assessment.

An assessment program needs regularly to assess itself to determine whether stakeholders are getting what they need through the assessment. Assessment programs evolve over time. New ideas need to be vetted. Old ideas need to be discarded. A healthy assessment program requires continuous research and experimentation. An assessment program is itself a form of instruction.

A Philosophy of Assessment

The New Mexico Higher Education Department is committed to its mission of providing high-quality undergraduate and graduate education to meet the needs of New Mexico and its students. These needs include providing excellent instruction in general education which concerns the basic skills, knowledge sets, common traditions, and civic and moral values that provide the

foundation for intellectual and personal development through a lifetime. The New Mexico Higher Education Department is similarly committed to provide subsequent specialized education in majors and programs designed to equip students for successful careers in business, government, and the professions. The agency also recognizes that change occurs at an ever-increasing pace, so its institutions regularly consider how they must change and adjust to meet the needs of our students and the state. Excellence and dynamism are keys to success in New Mexico post-secondary education.

Assessment is central to measuring and maintaining excellence. Because assessment supports continuous quality improvement, it is crucial in promoting dynamic change.

Assessment is a means of identifying and promoting excellence. Before a program can claim excellence, the program must identify the key elements—intellectual, personal, civic, and professional—that characterize excellent performance in its field of action. These elements constitute student learning outcomes in the program. The program must identify these elements in concrete and measurable ways and establish criteria by which to determine not only performance at exit but especially to provide students pathways toward achieving excellence. Faculty within a program must regularly assess student progress so they can provide feedback and direction as students follow their paths to excellence.

An assessment must be *valid*, that is, it must *measure actual performance* that demonstrates varying levels of success. In addition, assessment must be *authentic*. The performance to be measured must be *realistic* in terms of the subject area or skill being measured. The measurement should be *direct*; that is, when evaluating a skill such as writing, the performance should involve actual writing that is appropriate in terms of audience, purpose, and context. Assessments must also be *reliable*, that is the same result would be achieved if the assessment were conducted by other qualified individuals or if repeated at a different time. Assessment must also be sensitive to context, accommodating the rich diversity of institutional missions across the state.

The responsibility for developing and conducting assessment programs must ultimately rest with the faculty who teach in the program. Faculty recognize that they are responsible for continuous growth in their profession. Growth, however, includes not only gaining command of new knowledge within their specialization but also continuously reflecting upon their own teaching practice. Graduate and professional education have prepared faculty to keep abreast of developments in their field. However, graduate and professional education have only recently begun to investigate how students best learn and teachers best teach within their fields. Faculty must continuously assess their pedagogy so that they can enable their students to learn new content and to learn how to learn in their field, allowing students to adjust to the changing demands of the life and the workplace after graduation. Assessment is a primary means through which teaching faculty improve performance.