

What is Good Assessment Practice?

By Don Sutherland

By now, faculty, staff, and administrators are reasonably familiar with direct and indirect assessment measures. They also know that assessment takes place (or should take place) at the course, program, and institutional levels.

If not, a large gap exists between a school's current assessment practices and the Middle States Commission on Higher Education's (MSCHE) expectations. With assessment now explicitly embedded in every MSCHE accreditation standard, the existence of such a gap could be perilous, resulting in either requests for follow-up reporting or even sanctions. However, hazardous as such a gap might be in a world where accreditation remains of paramount importance to colleges and universities, good assessment practice is about much more than meeting accreditation requirements. Good assessment practice would be sustained on its own merits even if accreditors disappeared completely from the Higher Education landscape.

Nineteenth Century English cleric and writer, Charles Caleb Colton, wrote in *Lacon, Or, Many Things in Few Words: Addressed to Those Who Think*, "In the pursuit of knowledge, follow it wherever it is to be found; it is the produce of all climates, and like coin, its circulation is not restricted to any particular class." That simple advice essentially captures the elements of good assessment practice.

At its heart, good assessment is inquiry. It is a process of discovery. It is a journey of exploration that runs across campuses and far beyond. Along the way, one can encounter thick forests of courses, programs, and non-academic services; one must consider the needs and desires of large and increasingly diverse populations of people: students, faculty, administrators, and other internal and external stakeholders; one must navigate vast oceans of data. The overriding goal of good assessment is to make courses, programs, and institutions ever better.

Good assessment is vital to institutional success. Without it, a gloomy future of stagnation, or worse, decline is inevitable. With good assessment, an institution has a chance to harness the dynamic world in which it operates. It can seize opportunities, overcome challenges, and serve students in ways that allow them to build meaningful and rich lives.

Colton advised that one "follow" knowledge "wherever it is to be found." Assessment produces a wealth of findings that informs an institution of where it has been and where it currently stands. Such information may even give it some insight into where it is headed.

All those findings are meaningless if they are locked away in files (physical or electronic) or confined in isolation among various academic and non-academic units. Nokia provides an illustration of the risks associated with a failure to use assessment information. At a time when Nokia was the mobile phone industry leader, its R&D efforts produced features that today are found on the iPhone. Its R&D investments and efforts were in vain, as Nokia did not act on the results of those activities. Nokia lost its industry leadership position. The iPhone is now the exemplar.

Institutions that fail to incorporate assessment findings into their decision-making could face a similar fate. Sound decisions need to be evidence-based. In today's increasingly knowledge-intensive world, information is becoming the most valuable currency for recognizing and realizing opportunities. Absent the use of assessment results (common problems under the outgoing MSCHE Standards 7 or 14), an institution cannot credibly demonstrate that its decision-making is, in fact, evidence-driven.

Decision-making and governance processes that exclude significant assessment input are, at best, little more than exercises in satisficing. The long-term opportunity costs from foregoing the more optimal evidence-based approaches to decision-making and governance can be substantial. The high degree of interconnectedness between academic and non-academic activities and their impact on student outcomes (learning and post-graduate) can lead to a cascade of little failures that accumulate over time. Each little failure reduces an institution's strategic flexibility. It becomes a little more difficult for that school to recruit and enroll promising students; academic and non-academic activities erode producing weaker student learning, retention and graduation outcomes; it becomes more difficult for such institutions to retain productive faculty; employers and graduate schools become a less confident in that institution's graduates with fewer such graduates recruited by prospective employers and graduate programs; outside funding from foundations, corporate donors, and alumni begins to dry up; and, growing resource constraints exacerbate the problems affecting such institutions. In some cases, a self-reinforcing cycle that leads to institutional failure can take hold. In others, an institution can become chronically weak for an extended period of time. Therefore, no institution should be surprised that MSCHE has embedded assessment in all of its new accreditation standards.

Furthermore, Colton observed that knowledge "is the produce of all climates, and like coin, its circulation is not restricted to any particular class." In a January-February 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article, Martin Reeves and Daichi Ueda of the Boston Consulting Group and Simon Levin, Professor of Biology at Princeton University explained, "...frontline employees have valuable information that typically isn't transmitted and amplified. Leaders need to engage with those employees to discover innovations that could improve robustness." They could well have been describing some sources of useful assessment information. Such information is almost everywhere within a college's ecosystem. It can be found among all academic and non-academic programs. It resides with every internal and external stakeholder, ranging from students to accreditation bodies.

At the April 18-20, 2016 Assessment Network of New York (ANNY) annual conference, Jillian Kinzie, Associate Director of the Center of Postsecondary Research & NSSE Institute, told her audience that data is actionable when it is focused on the "needs and interests of users." She explained that data is actionable when the questions and interests of users drive assessment, evidence-gathering priorities are determined at the beginning of a project, and relevant assessment and Institutional Research personnel are at the table with stakeholders.

Middle States seeks to leverage the value of good assessment in its accreditation processes and reports. In describing how institutions can create a useful Self-Study process and report, MSCHE explained:

At the heart of the Self-Study process is an intention to use the process to discover areas of strength and weakness, to make appropriate recommendations, and to implement those recommendations to enable an institution to achieve its mission and related goals and objectives. The institution must focus on issues of importance to the institution...to help the institution realize many benefits as it continuously improves the quality of its educational programs and services.

Does that sound familiar? It should.

An institution with good assessment practices does not wait for the Self-Study process to begin to make discoveries and implement appropriate recommendations to guide its continual improvement. With good assessment practice, it is already doing so in real-time, all the time. Proactive institutions are far better positioned for excellence than those that wait for the discrete timelines built around the accreditation process for their serious inquiry and analysis.

The popular narrative of ‘unexpected and uncontrollable circumstances’ determining institutional outcomes notwithstanding, institutional success is, in large degree, a matter of choice. Good assessment is both a choice to succeed and an investment in success.

Select Attributes of Good Assessment Practice:

- Assessment is mission- and student-centric
- Assessment seeks important and actionable information tied to the needs and interests of the institution and all of its major stakeholders
- Assessment is embedded in all academic and non-academic units, programs, and activities
- Assessment occurs on a regular basis
- Assessment uses direct and indirect information
- Assessment findings guide governance, decision-making, planning, budgeting, and other major activities
- Use of assessment findings results in institutional innovation and measurable improvement (especially in student outcomes)
- Assessment and Institutional Research personnel are engaged with all major stakeholders
- Assessment practices and policies are regularly assessed