Barbara Walvoord. *Assessment Clear and Simple: A Practical Guide for Institutions, Departments, and General Education.* **San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004**

Walvoord, writing from much experience in accreditation mandated institutional assessment, notes that higher education contains too many variables to make precise assessment possible. *Proof* about student learning is not possible. Therefore, assessment in higher education is the gathering of *indicators* helpful in decision-making (2). The complexity and variability of factors in higher education renders objective data or standardized testing less than optimal as an exclusive data source. In other words, where feasible, objective indicators can be sought; but a suitable combination of quantitative and qualitative assessment is more useful. And, it is possible to secure indicators even about "higher" goals without reducing all measures to simple objective style questions.

In sum, "Assessment means basing decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, staffing, advising, and student support upon the best possible data about student learning and the factors that affect it" (2).

The essential processes of assessment involve the following:
- Determine what it is that you desire students to learn.
- Gather evidence about how well they are achieving the goals for learning. This includes direct evidence of student work; and indirect evidence from interviews of students and alumni, tracking job placement and job performance.
- Synthesis and analyze the evidence for needed improvement in program and other institutional activities.

Assessing more complex learning goals is difficult but not impossible. For example, intentions such as growth in sensitivity (e.g., to poverty and justice), growing capacity for critical thinking, capacity to suspend assumptions, literacy in the fields pertinent to one's program (e.g., biblical, theological, social scientific), capacity to work with people of diverse backgrounds, growth in spirituality, ethical decision-making, and so on, are among the more desirable qualities in higher education. "To make good choices about how to nurture those qualities, educators need indicators about how well students are achieving them" (3). Sample criteria include: student recognizes, and is able to engage acceptably, alternative points of view; student is evaluating personal value system(s) against worthy criteria; student accepts people while rejecting racism, injustice and so on. Surveys can gather data from alumni and students related to how well they learned to think independently, read with intent, formulate ideas clearly, communicate clearly, dialogue effectively, identify and engage moral and ethical problems, help people to address their own problems, and so on. Questionnaires can elicit data about alumni and student behavior in agencies and programs outside the classroom.

In reality, we are constantly making informed (subjective) judgments about faculty writing and presentations, student responses, about teaching, about student admission, faculty hiring, and so on. The issue is not that these forms of judgment are inappropriate because they aren't "objective," but whether or not we are exercising sound judgment in the determination and exercise of criteria for such judgments. For example, when faculty critique one another's work or writing, are they applying criteria consciously or unconsciously considered to be acceptable or

"scholarly"? Similarly, the education industry has developed forms of evaluation of student work to address the problem of unfair grading practices. For example, external reviewers address the problem that one judge of a student's work may be, or is often, an inaccurate determiner of quality. However, when different judges of a student's work disagree on its quality, other measures of student performance are included and factored into the total picture of understanding or performance.

Whatever the mode of learning (campus-based, distance learning, nonformal learning), if assessment indicates student weaknesses in particular areas, then institutional personnel examine all that affects student learning: pedagogy, technology, clarity of materials, access to materials, learning formats, testing formats, and so on.

Assessment in higher education is now part of the "unavoidable condition of doing business" (5), but it is still controversial. Faculty are wary of external interference over faculty credentials, control of curriculum, testing strategies, and anything that seeks to objectify what they believe is the "art" of teaching.

The need for assessment is being driven by both internal and external factors. The internal perceptions include such concerns as: the curriculum is not as effective as it could be; that faculty (and students) are not being employed optimally in learning; that divisions among departments are inefficient and wasteful of time, energy, and money. External factors may be more noticeable and strident and generally relate to quality and competency of graduates.

Assessment is not effective if it is viewed merely as compliance; if it results in pervasive hostility and resistance from faculty and staff; if it gathers data no one is using; if only the administrators are involved; and if the process is too complicated for consistent use.

Yet, despite the controversy and wariness, legitimate questions can be asked:
- We're spending time and resources trying to achieve student learning—is it working?
- When we claim to be graduating students with qualities like 'critical thinking' or scientific literacy,' do we have evidence of our claims?
- We have the impression that our students are weak in area X—would more systematic research back up this impression and help us understand the weakness more thoroughly?
- When we identify a weakness in our student' learning, how can we best address the problem?
- How can we improve learning most effectively in a time of tight resources? (Walvoord 2004, 5-6).

Appropriate assessment criteria are needed in several areas:
- Faculty identify criteria relevant to learning in their disciplines.
- Faculty, administrators and trustees identify criteria that govern course development in departmental and institutional curricula, define a suitable graduate, and inform faculty, administration and trustee behavior.

- Students identify criteria that indicate the extent to which course and testing procedures are just and commensurate with purpose and objective statements.
- Institutional review boards will determine criteria that govern sharing of student information in relation to student privacy regulations. For example, while it is appropriate for a faculty member or department to indicate that a certain percentage of a certain category of students performed lower or higher on an assessment protocol; it is not appropriate to share performance indicators of individual students by name to those outside the classroom.

No one has ever had the right to prepare and teach a course just as he or she pleases.

To a certain degree, assessment does occur at several levels. Teachers concerned about instructional improvement assess how well students do on particular test items as a way to determine areas of pedagogical lack of clarity or student limitation. Administrators and trustees assess institutional indicators as a way to make decisions about budgets. Assessment is ongoing in any institution with a certain degree of effectiveness. Current mandates to develop an assessment strategy are not therefore a call to develop something we are not already disposed to do; the focus on assessment is in reality a call to do better what we are already doing. Therefore, one of the stages in an assessment strategy is to conduct an assessment audit.

Conducting as Assessment Audit
What are the various departments doing, in what areas, and with what degree of perceived effectiveness? What areas of improvement are identifiable? "The purpose of the audit is to tease out from your culture the activities that the external accreditor calls 'assessment,' but that the faculty [and others] may not be labeling that way at all" (Walvoord 2004, 34).

An assessment audit includes the following stages:
- Identify mission and goals statements
- Discover what is happening in relation to assessing goal achievement
- Inform and/or translate what is already happening in assessment to the various audiences that comprise the organization (e.g., faculty to administration, trustees to faculty and administration), to stimulate mutual understanding, and to promote collaboration
- Determine actions that have the energy to gain widespread campus support in order to improve student learning
- Prepare a *report* (what is being done) and determine what, if anything, the audit suggests about an assessment *plan* (what will be done in the future).

Identify all those areas in an institution where assessment may already be occurring (even though personnel in those areas may not have identified the process as assessment). Such areas can include the following:
- How do the various departments or divisions of the institution gather data to inform hiring, curriculum review and development, program planning, equipment purchasing, promotion, grant writing, and so on?
- What assessment processes are in place related to professional accreditation?

- What performance review cycles exist for the various departments and how is data gathered to inform that review?
- How is data elicited to inform student affairs matters? (e.g., orientation of new students, understanding the particular needs of international students, recognizing and providing appropriate interventions for student problems, monitoring student indebtedness, evaluating student use of the facilities for learning, accessing resources, housing, meals, and so on)
- In what ways is data gathered and used to inform strategic planning?
- How does the institution gather data from alumni and agencies that employ its graduates?
- How is information gathered to inform understanding about student applications, matriculation, and retention?
- On what does the information technology division base its decisions about financial allocations, implementation of technology, and so on?
- How does the institution foster faculty development in relation to responsibilities for teaching and learning, research, and service?
- How is data gathered to inform administrative performance at all levels?
- In what ways is assessment used to inform decisions with regard to advancement, institutional promotion, capital campaigns, and so on?
- How does student government gather information to inform their recommendations and concerns?
- How are matters related to campus safety and development informed?

Asking department heads or staff persons to complete a survey or to write out what they are doing, is generally the least effective way to do an assessment audit. More information about what is in place and how it operates by sitting down with people and asking them what they do. And the more personal ways of doing the audit, will promote collegiality. Assessment is not something carried out by the assessment police! To encourage conversation, ask department heads and/or other personnel to talk about the changes that have been made in the past year. Then ask them what prompted the changes—how did the need for the change become apparent. Through persistent probing, assessment processes, however informal, can often be identified. "For example, one chemistry department annually held a meeting of faculty in which those who taught follow-on courses in a sequence told each other what the students in the follow-on courses needed, and they decided on changes for the following year. This is responsible, sensible, and useful assessment, even though the chair would not have listed it on a questionnaire . . ." (38). During the interviews, collect as much paperwork as is relevant.

Faculty often use rubrics to help them plan their courses—but most often these rubrics are carried around in one's head or used unconsciously. Logically, in preparing a course, one thinks of learning outcomes that are achievable given the time frame, environment, and student capacity; then one crafts learning activities to foster development related to the outcomes; decisions are made about what content is needed, when, and, if necessary, in what sequence; and finally the faculty member determines how best to get feedback from the students about how well (to what degree or extent) learning outcomes are achieved. Examination of student responses should be part of a feedback loop to help the faculty member strengthen aspects of the course (or even the program within which the course is embedded). Often, faculty members will

go through this process of planning without having an explicit rubric in front of them. To know how faculty make decisions about their courses is part of assessment. Conversations with faculty about how they design and determine student achievement in relation to outcomes will show that the process is relatively similar from faculty member to faculty member regardless of discipline. However, there will be interesting differences in design. Encouraging faculty conversation about how they design courses is often very helpful for faculty who are newer to the craft.

The <u>Audit Report</u> includes responses to the following questions:
- What oversight for assessment exists?
- What resources and structures are in place for assessment?
- What learning goals exist and how are they used in assessment?
- What institutional goals exist and how are learning goals pointed toward these goals?
- How is student learning measured?
- In what ways are indicators of student learning used in quality improvement of teaching, resource availability and quality, curriculum review, faculty review, review of testing practices?

The audit report should also include judgments about the strengths and limitations (or under-utilized aspects) of the various assessment processes and instruments currently in use. In this sense, the assessment audit shows how existing assessment processes can be used and strengthened. In most cases, it will not be necessary to create an assessment strategy from "scratch".

The <u>Assessment Plan</u> includes elements such as
- What areas of development need to be addressed in order to improve student learning?
- What procedures/processes will be developed and used in order to gather indicators to help us execute quality improvement in those areas that affect student development and learning?
- In what basic processes and people groups of the institution is assessment embedded in an ongoing process? For example, elicit assessment data as part of the recurring review of departments and programs; connect assessment data about learning with new initiatives such as improvement of retention, development technological support base, encouragement of learning teams of students and alumni, facilities improvement, catalogue revision, and so on.
- Use assessment processes to inform professional development of faculty and staff.
- Require assessment information when departments request more funding for specific initiatives, new faculty, and so on.

If assessment is embedded into most institutional processes, a separate plan may not be necessary; and certainly the frantic effort to develop assessment strategies just prior to the accreditation visit, will be a thing of the past!

Maximum effectiveness of ongoing assessment requires a coordinator (often an associate or assistant provost) who will work closely with all departments and who will assist faculty in

development of criteria and designs for testing. The coordinator will work with a permanent or ad hoc committee at strategic points in assessment planning and reporting.

Embedding assessment in basic processes and group functioning is the most important aspect of the plan. It avoids the tendency to require every department to have an assessment plan in place by such and such a date—thereby making the document an end in itself. It ensures that people groups will not see assessment simply as gathering data for a report submitted to accreditors. Assessment becomes an energizing activity when embedded in basic processes (such as financial reporting, enrollment reporting, physical plant updates, library reporting) and made part of what people do (faculty meeting, staff meetings, departmental gatherings, student gatherings, alumni contacts, committee meetings, class meetings). "Doing" assessment with no link to anything else is non-productive and guarantees that assessments will be seen by faculty, staff, trustees, and administrators as merely a report done elsewhere to satisfy an external body. *When assessment is embedded in the ongoing life of the school, information and ideas generated by assessment are more likely to be seen as informing what people dream about for the school, what they want to do better, and new initiatives that further their mission as a school.*

Assessment should be linked to compelling processes and initiatives already underway, or that are part of institutional dreaming: a new program initiative, identifying needed areas of curriculum development, an aspect of professional development for a people group, a, identifying and supporting alumni in their work, securing alumni and student support for a campus wide initiative, designing an innovative approach to education, and so on. Any initiative is made stronger by assessment data; any dream made more realistic by assessment information.

Building assessment on existing grading practices. Grading is a "direct" measure of learning that is typically in the control of the instructor. To be used as part of the institution's assessment plan, four elements are required:
- The measure itself (examination, project, portfolio, departmental standardized test, and so on).
- The measure is congruent with learning goals for the course.
- Criteria developed by the instructor, the department, or the field itself, to be used to evaluate student response. The criteria must be detailed enough to help identify student strengths and weaknesses. (In most if not all cases, the criteria are given to the student so that they know how and why they are being "graded".)
- Analysis and interpretation of the results of the direct measure.
- Feedback to department and/or institutional decision-makers concerning student strengths and weaknesses *as a way to inform program improvement*.

An accreditation agency will assert that grades cannot be used to satisfy their assessment mandate. This is correct when the institution attempts to provide a statistic such as 60% of students in their senior year got B- to B in their major field of study. A letter grade, by itself, does not provide sufficient information about the nature of student *learning*. However, if the institution describes the explicit criteria *in relation to* student performance and includes the nature of the feedback to the department and/or institution from direct measures, the grading process is a legitimate part of an assessment plan.

Accrediting reviewers are less interested in the content of data (how well students are doing); and more interested in seeing what purposeful, ongoing structures and processes are in place with regard to assessment for continuous improvement. Reviewers basically want to know if processes are in place to inform all faculty, staff, administrators of the development of student learning in relation to goals.

Teachers commonly use rubrics to display criteria, and to make criteria explicit to students. Grade reports can include student performance displayed on the rubric. A department seeking information about a particular program's effectiveness can use the results from application of evaluative criteria; or, they may select a small number of criteria that are most critical to evaluating program effectiveness.

Two do-able data gathering strategies:
1. The best way to find factors that are affecting student learning is to ask them. For example, ask students to indicate degree of usefulness of various tools used by an instructor (e.g., project guide, survey instrument); invite students and alumni to describe how a department could do better; half way through a course, invite students to comment on what is working and what isn't.
2. Rigorous experimental research (with random assignment of students to control and treatment groups) is not feasible for assessment. However, it is possible to do comparative studies. For example, compare student performance early in the course and later in the course; elicit incoming understanding about subject matter and compare with understanding a number of weeks into the course.

Designing goals as basis for assessment. It should be obvious that without goals (or more simply, without statements of intent or desire), assessment can't function—there is nothing to assess. Basically, three different sorts of goal statement can be distinguished.

1. Institutionally comprehensive statements often take the form: "When students graduate from (institution or program), we want them to be able to …." (Statements such as "students will participate in . . .", or "students will be exposed to . . ." , or "this course emphasizes the following", or "the curriculum stresses the following" are not goal statements. These are strategies used to move students *toward* achievement of one or more goals.)
2. The highest level goal statements are often institution wide, relate to program, and reflect intentions related to what faculty, typically, most prize: developing capacity for critical thinking, spiritual formation, capacity to develop other leaders, personal critique and development of ethical standards, ability to work within diversity, and so on.
3. Program specific goal statements are *relatively* enduring intentions articulated by faculty in particular departments.
4. Course specific goal statements often change from year to year, or even semester to semester to reflect faculty development in relation to a subject matter, or in relation to what assessment revealed about what needs to change in course emphases.

One common fallacy in assessment is that higher more abstract goals cannot be assessed. For example, one of the higher goals could be "Students demonstrate ethical behavior, or act in

accordance with sound ethical principles in professional and personal situations." Clearly, a complete catalogue of data about ethical behavior is impossible. However, faculty can determine *indicators* of ethical behavior and attitudes by noting how students think and respond through written assignments, observations, simulated experience, personal conversations, group feedback, and so on.

Mission statements, often laboriously created, are used as major indicators in assessment processes. However, to what extent is a mission statement effective as an assessment tool; or to what extent are questions asked related to the mission statement effective measures of student learning? What evidence can the institution produce that students understand and are acting in relation to the mission statement. (That 85% agree, or 6% disagree, with a particular article in a mission statement is not an adequate indicator of learning or understanding.) In most cases, the language of a mission statement is to inspire or stimulate high ideals, and not to serve as the basis for assessment. The mission statement will be used more effectively in assessment as faculty and other stakeholders are asked for more precise indicators. For example: When you meet a graduate from (our institution) what do you expect to see? What particular behaviors, attitudes, or knowledge/understanding will demonstrate to you that students do, in fact, understand this/these items in the mission statement? What would indicate to you that a student has actually learned/internalized this item in the mission statement?

In faith-based schools, a mission statement may simply be a statement used as a way to secure theological compliance—expressed as agree or disagree. Again, this is not a measure of student learning related to understanding meaning or application of the mission statement. However, it is appropriate to ask how new faculty, staff, trustees, and students are enculturated into the mission statement ideals.

Walvoord provides an example of a mission statement extended into goal statements that became the basis for assessment. This particular private, Catholic university was commended by the regional accrediting agency for this combination statement. Here is part of the mission statement:

> The University prides itself on being an environment of teaching and learning that fosters the development in its students of those disciplined habits of mind, body, and spirit that characterize educated, skilled, and free human beings. In addition, the University seeks to cultivate in its students not only an appreciation for the great achievements of human beings but also a disciplined sensibility of the poverty, injustice, and oppression that burden the lives of so many. The aim is to create a sense of human solidarity and concern for the common good that will bear fruit as learning becomes service to justice. (Walvoord 2004, 33)

The assessment committee worked with a variety of campus groups in determining the following goal statements:

The University seeks to develop students who:
1. Pursue knowledge and evaluate its consequences
   a. Think critically, abstractly, and logically to evaluate and solve problems
   b. Integrate new information to formulate principles and theories and display an openness to different viewpoints
   c. Share the desire for intellectual creativity and the acquisition of knowledge
2. Communicate clearly and effectively in both written and oral forms

3. Demonstrate knowledge and abilities in chosen areas of study
   a. Develop an understanding of resources and procedures of fields and the ability to use them
   b. Possess an appropriate core of knowledge in chosen fields
4. Appreciate their social and moral responsibilities
   a. Reflect upon the spiritual, moral, and ethical dimensions of life
   b. Display the moral dimensions of their decisions and actions
   c. Contribute to society as an active member (Walvoord 2004, 33)

The *goals* became the basis for assessment because the goal statements suggested assessment measures that would in turn provide indicators as to how well the mission was being realized. For example, note the verbs in the sub items to each goal. Surveys could ask students and alumni about the extent to which they learned these goals; journals, course assignments, internship reviews, and so on could indicate student learning in the areas identified by the goals. "Well-stated goals at the institutional level should be broad enough to reflect the full aspirations of the institution yet specific enough to suggest measures that will give at least some indication of whether the learning is being achieved" (Walvoord 2004, 34).

Strategic Questions
1. What questions about student learning are most important to the institution, to the constituencies? What data should we be gathering to help us address these important questions? For example:
   - Questions related to student admissions and retention require comparisons among statistics related to applications, matriculation, retention, and graduation.
   - Questions about employability of graduates in relation to degree programs require examination of data related to alumni placement and service.
   - Questions related to student apprehension of knowledge and capacity to apply and practice in new situations require information about student perception of their own learning; and indications of student learning from external perceptions (tests, performance reviews).
   - Questions related to what assists or limits student learning requires information related to teaching and learning processes, testing procedures, variability in learning tasks/assignments, student portfolios, prior education.
   - Questions related to behavior, attitudes, formation require development and examination of various suitable indicators of student development.

2. How is data collected, distributed and used? For example:
   - To what extent and in what ways is information about student learning used in decisions related to promotion, reappointment, hiring, and tenure?
   - In what ways and to what extent is student learning and development affected by student support systems?
   - How are faculty generated criteria used in assessment and in what areas?
   - What aspects of the institution intentionally seek and use data to inform decision making?
   - Who reviews data for what purposes?

To what extent are any assessment processes intrusive or inappropriate relative to privacy laws, workplace standards, academic freedom, and so on.