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General Education Assessment, the Spellings Report, and Standardized Testing:

What Should Your Institution Do?

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Assessment as a National Higher-Education Reform Movement

- Unusually powerful because it has captured the accreditation process
- Externally generated
- Based on public disaffection and anger
- Assumptions
 - Higher education is broken
 - Faculty are not doing their jobs
 - The way to fix that is to hold faculty and institutions accountable for the “outcomes” of student learning
 - The educative process is like a production process: student is raw material, institution improves the material, one should be able to measure the results
 - Because the public pays for higher education, it has the right to set the standards by which higher education will be allowed to operate

The Issues

- How will institutions, the government, and the public determine whether students are meeting educational goals?
- How public will this information be?
- How standardized will the measures be?
- Who will enforce the requirements for assessment?

Events

- 2000: Measuring Up: National Report Card. Every 2 years since. Very influential on federal thinking. Gave every state “incomplete” because lack of data.
- Spellings Commission
 - U.S. Dept. of Education “Commission on the Future of Higher Education” Report issued September 2006
 - Higher education lobby and supporters fought back proposals to
 - Set minimum standards of student achievement for all colleges and universities
 - Generate measures of learning whereby colleges could be compared to one another
 - Abolish regional accreditation agencies in favor of a single federal agency with career evaluators rather than faculty/administrators acting as peer reviewers
 - 2008: Congress clarified that colleges can establish their own unique missions, BUT they MUST assess student learning—that part remains strong and unchanged, with bipartisan support. (“Colleges Emerge the Clear Winner in the Battle over Accreditation.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 1, 2008, p. A19).
 - Mix of direct and indirect, qualitative and quantitative measures

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- Institution must use information for decision-making
- Accrediting bodies can ask for follow-up reports, visits
- The Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)
 - Launched by American Assn. of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and National Assn. of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC). Attempt to take control rather than have it done to us.
 - Institutions who volunteer to participate agree to publish, in a common format:
 - Information traditionally available, e.g. graduation rates, cost
 - Scores on measures of student engagement (National Survey of Student Engagement: NSSE)
 - One of three direct measures of learning: Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), or Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP)
- NSSE releases scores to *USA Today*
 - More than 250 schools agreed to release their scores, out of 1200 that have administered NSSE since its debut in 2000
- AAC&U launches program for e-portfolios

The Crystal Ball

- These issues will not go away.
- Expect more pressure on all institutions to measure and to make results public

What Should Your Institution Do?

- Explain the situation to faculty
- Join AASCU/NASALGC VSA program? AAC&U program?
- Explore standardized measures
 - Ask key faculty to take the tests and ascertain whether they are teaching in such a way as to help students do well on the test
 - Administer measures quietly to a sample of students
- Put a strong, well-articulated gen-ed assessment program in place
 - Articulate clear goals
 - Identify sites of data collection
 - Classrooms
 - Institution-wide measures
 - Choose a mix of measures for both types of sites
 - Direct tests of knowledge
 - Classroom work
 - Standardized tests
 - Indirect
 - Measures of student/alumni/employer perceptions
 - Retention, placement, etc.

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- Identify how information informs decisions
- Consider basing assessment of gen-ed on student classroom work, evaluated by faculty at the lowest level possible

Types of Direct Assessment for Gen-Ed

Source of Data	Construct assignment	Set criteria, compose rubric	Evaluate/interpret data	Action
Classroom Work analyzed by faculty	Individual faculty, department, or gen-ed groups	Individual faculty, departments, or gen-ed groups	Individual faculty, departments, or gen-ed groups	Faculty, dept, gen-ed
Standardized Test	testers	testers	testers	Faculty, dept, gen-ed
Portfolios	Individual faculty	Institutional group of faculty	Faculty readers	Faculty, dept, gen-ed

A Plan

- Sources of Data
 - All gen-ed courses are reviewed periodically and asked to demonstrate 3 things:
 - Goals are consonant with Gen-Ed goals
 - Courses include measures of student achievement of those goals
 - Improvements are made at course and department level on the basis of the measures
 - Courses in certain key areas (e.g. first-year composition, first-year seminar, learning communities, basic math) carry out intensive assessment
 - Standardized test results and surveys are widely disseminated in useful form to departments and/or gen-ed groups
 - Portfolios are used in specific areas (e.g. writing) for well-defined purposes
- How data are used for improvement
 - Departments or gen-ed groups meet periodically to take action based on the data about student learning
 - These groups report and recommend to a higher body that integrates data and makes recommendations to decision-making bodies.