

## **Educational Assessment at the Washington State Public Baccalaureate Institutions**

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The Winter 1998 (Volume VIII, No. 8) issue of **Adult Assessment Forum** highlighted assessment in Washington State by focussing on the community college system and their praiseworthy efforts. This article extends the description to include assessment at the six state public baccalaureate institutions, each of which is self-governing and has its own Board of Regents. Formal assessment activity was mandated in the late 1980's and at that time the State Legislature gave responsibility for oversight to its Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB). Fortunately, the institutions' relationship with the HECB and its staff has been positive throughout, and their orientation has been toward facilitation, support, and advocacy rather than prescription. But it did not necessarily seem that way at the beginning.

The HECB's initial foray into assessment in the mid '80's was aimed toward standardized testing, with comparisons among all state public institutions and national norms. Many faculty saw the assessment movement as another example of pernicious meddling, and some administrators saw it as another unfortunate border incursion. Fortunately, the 1987 HECB master plan called for the institutions to conduct pilot studies to assess the usefulness and validity of administering nationally normed tests of communication, computation, and critical thinking to rising juniors (Council of Presidents, 1989). Of significance here are the ways in which it set the course for formal assessment activities in Washington State.

1. The planning and conduct of the study took two full years, which allowed extensive discussion among faculty and administration within campuses and across campuses and with the HECB and state legislature.
2. The pilot study was conducted as a fully cooperative effort among the baccalaureate and two-year institutions. The high level of cooperation and trust set the ground work for what has continued to be a highly cooperative and mutually helpful effort. Each institution has benefited greatly from interactions among colleagues on specific topics and at the grander annual statewide assessment conferences.
3. Most importantly, the pilot study set the direction for assessment away from the extensive use of standardized tests for comparing institutions toward programs based on each institution's culture and mission and toward greater emphasis on improvement relative to accountability. At each campus, the emphasis changed from what would have been a highly centralized student-testing program with minimal faculty involvement to a more decentralized effort involving a wide circle of faculty and students.
4. At the urging of the HECB, the State legislature earmarked about \$185,000 annually to each institution for assessment work, which has been in place since 1989.

### **Assessment at the Institutions**

The HECB prescribed six categories of assessment activities (e. g., end-of-program assessment) and required regular reports on activities and campus impact. Yet, each campus has enjoyed a great deal of freedom to tailor its assessment programs to its

particular needs and culture. We present brief descriptions of the six institutions' assessment programs.

*The University of Washington (UW)* is a major research university with approximately 25,000 undergraduates and 10,000 graduate and professional students. While maintaining its position as the leader in grant and contract funding among public universities, UW has placed increasing emphasis on quality undergraduate education, emphasizing, among many initiatives, increased student participation in faculty research.

UW adopted a model of assessment that combines centralized activities, most notably regular surveys of students, with distributed activities, most notably end-of-program assessment by academic departments. Additionally, faculty are given modest funds to pursue assessment-related research of mutual interest to them and UW. As examples, coordinated surveys are administered to new students, seniors, and alumni one, five, and ten years after graduation; each department is asked to produce an annual report on assessment activity; and faculty have conducted major studies of student writing portfolios.

Assessment's impact has been profound but subtle because the institution is complex and conservative and because change is incremental and driven by multiple forces.

Nonetheless, assessment results have contributed to countless curricular (e. g., new course offerings) and instructional (e. g., new science learning centers) improvements.

Student opinion about a wide variety of educational components is readily available and used. A user-oriented, relational database of wide scope is available to the campus community for bringing student performance data to bear on various questions. Over the

life of the assessment movement, honest appraisal of successes and failures is increasingly functioning as a key element of the institution's intellectual and moral life. As UW has been called upon to plan strategically and improve stewardship of limited resources, commitment to assessment has deepened. For more detail, please consult [www.washington.edu/oea/assessmt.htm](http://www.washington.edu/oea/assessmt.htm).

*The Evergreen State College* (TESC) is a liberal arts college of about 4,000 students. TESC is primarily an undergraduate college but does offer three small graduate programs in Public Administration, Environmental Studies and Teaching. TESC has acquired national distinction for its innovative approach to teaching and learning. Thematic interdisciplinary study and collaborative team-teaching are major features of the curriculum. There are no departments, no formal majors, no grades and no faculty ranks. Students receive narrative evaluations assessing their individual academic development and, with faculty assistance, design individually tailored academic concentrations.

The history of TESC's commitment to the evaluation of student outcomes began with the decision at inception to replace the traditional grading system with narrative evaluations of student performance, intended to provide students with a rich, individually tailored assessment of their performance. The formal assessment program at TESC attempts to preserve engagement of the faculty through a focus on the improvement of teaching and learning in the classroom. It also helps address the increasing demands for educational efficiency and effectiveness at the institutional level. Reports had been produced on: quantitative skill development; seminar skills; writing skills; cognitive development; satisfaction studies of current students, alumni, employers, and graduate school faculty; student use of the curriculum; multicultural awareness; student retention; as well as two

year-long ethnographic studies of the culture of teaching and learning. Assessment results have been used to focus improvement efforts in several areas within the academic program and student services, including skill building, freshman retention, curricular coherence, and student advising.

*Washington State University* (WSU) is the State's land-grant research university and serves 21,000 students at its main campus in Pullman, its three branch campuses, and in its distance education program. Central to WSU's mission is the interrelationship of instruction, research, and public service/outreach along with a commitment to general education curricula that enable students to develop the ability to think critically and to express themselves both orally and in writing. WSU's assessment program focuses on student and faculty involvement as the key ingredients in student learning.

A prime example of student involvement in assessment is WSU's nationally recognized "Writing across the Curriculum" initiative. This program provides students with many opportunities to practice their writing skills through "writing in the major" courses, and participation in the junior writing portfolio requirement. All WSU students are required to demonstrate successful performance on a writing qualifying examination prior to graduation. WSU is beginning to see improved satisfaction ratings for writing on its alumni survey as evidence of the effectiveness of this writing across the curriculum initiative. To involve faculty in assessment efforts WSU's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has a specific mission to encourage assessment of student outcomes and the use of assessment results for curricular improvement through faculty support, community building, instructional technology, and classroom assessment. More information may be obtained at [www.wsu.edu/~aaa/](http://www.wsu.edu/~aaa/).

*Western Washington University (WWU)* is a comprehensive liberal arts university of 10,900 undergraduates and 750 post-baccalaureate students. WWU was ranked No. 2 among public regional universities in the west, according to U.S. News & World Report, as well as among the top eight nationwide, and places a strong emphasis on high quality undergraduate education.

For more than two decades, a key part of WWU's commitment to providing high quality undergraduate education has been a university-wide assessment program which seeks to help WWU define what it does, how well it does it, and how it can improve. WWU formally initiated its assessment effort in the 1980's, then expanded with the statewide assessment program in 1989, and remains committed to both its extended assessment activities and participation in a revised 1999-2000 accountability program.

WWU views institutional assessment as the integration of traditional outcomes assessment, performance accountability, and student learning outcomes as three facets of one integrated whole. These domains are united by their common purpose of informing and improving both the quality and efficiency of student learning. Assessment efforts at WWU will increasingly be focused on initiatives that support efforts of academic units to improve student learning, improve faculty productivity and effectiveness, and deepen and integrate student learning across the curriculum. For more specific information please refer to [www.wwu.edu/~assess](http://www.wwu.edu/~assess).

*Central Washington University*, a comprehensive regional university, serves 8,400 students on the Ellensburg main campus and three satellite campuses. Approximately 75 percent of CWU's graduates are transfer students. Every effort is made to integrate

program review, accreditation self-study, and assessment activities into one process linked to strategic planning and budgeting. As a result of this effort, the institutional mission statement and values have been sharpened and departmental/programmatic student learning outcomes are being clarified. Weaving these processes together is making continuous quality improvement a part of the fabric of the institution.

One example of positive change is that, as a result of giving all students who had accumulated between 90-110 quarter credits a basic skills test, the English department developed student learning outcomes for English 101 and 102 and standardized the curriculum and delivery for all sections. Training was initiated and required for all teaching assistants. Students now must demonstrate writing proficiency before passing either course. The learning outcomes were made public to all faculty so that students can be held accountable for their performance; and faculty can refer students to the writing center if deficiencies are evident.

Generally, the primary reason faculty are committing to long-term involvement is their belief that assessment can improve student learning and development. Funds have been provided for faculty development and training, individual faculty projects, and nationally known consultants. Departmental retreats, using findings from alumni and graduating senior surveys and other end-of-program assessment data, have been beneficial in engaging faculty in serious dialogue about student learning outcomes. As a result, collaborative discussions have resulted in reformed curricula to which departmental faculty are committed.

*Eastern Washington University* (EWU) is regionally based and comprehensive, with approximately 7,600 undergraduates and 900 graduate and professional students. Centers of excellence include an outstanding general education program, education, health sciences, creative writing and music programs. EWU's mission is to be student centered and to prepare broadly educated, technologically proficient, and highly productive citizens. This mission has provided a powerful catalyst for the involvement of the university community in assessment. Consequently, assessment efforts have been directed toward the establishment of an annual institutional effectiveness cycle to determine if the mission is being fulfilled, if the assessment requirements of the HECB and our regional accrediting agency are being met, and if institutional effectiveness is being improved.

Currently EWU conducts centralized activities, primarily surveys of students, both national and self-developed, and distributed activities, primarily end-of-program assessment by academic departments. Along with an intensive end-of-program assessment initiative, EWU has maintained its commitment to excellence in general undergraduate education and has implemented a significant outcomes-assessment program based on feedback from employers, alumni, current students and direct measures imbedded in courses. EWU continues to involve more and more of its community in assessment efforts, which is leading to improved student learning.

### **Assessment and Accountability**

In 1997, the State implemented a quantitatively-based accountability system. Because of the paucity of valid, quantitative measures of important student outcomes, the institutions

are held accountable for the improvement of highly aggregated measures of efficiency (e. g., graduation and attrition rates). While the accountability system is theoretically independent of assessment, its impact on the latter can be seen in two ways. First, efforts are aimed at improving our standing on current state-prescribed measures. This targeting of assessment energies can be good, but only insofar as increasing the standing on the given measure is an outcome of value and can be accomplished without sacrificing other valued outcomes.

Secondly, assessment activities have focussed on adding meaningful measures of student learning outcomes to the array of current accountability measures. It is well recognized that a fundamental problem with our current measures is that they do not relate directly to *effectively* educating our students. An extensive review of other states' accountability efforts has yielded no more promising measures, nor has exploration of the research literature. Student learning outcomes, given their richness and idiosyncrasy, do not readily lend themselves to quantification along one or a few dimensions.

We are exploring new approaches to accountability through complex analysis of student products, currently focussed on seniors. Work has begun on assessing student writing, and a pilot study was completed in the summer of 1998

([www.washington.edu/oea/asessen.htm](http://www.washington.edu/oea/asessen.htm)). We have begun efforts to assess quantitative reasoning and technological literacy by similar means. Ironically, this work seems to hold greater promise for assessment than for accountability. That is, it shows promise for improving instruction and instructional programs. Less certain is that it will yield simple measures that can index the quality of education. However, one can make a strong case that accountability is no better demonstrated than by serious efforts of this type.

## **Impact**

In the brief descriptions of the individual campuses above, we tried to provide a sense of assessment's impact. A complete list of specific changes that assessment activities have fostered at each institution would better demonstrate impact and probably more clearly illustrate differences in emphases. However, such a list, should one be possible, would also far exceed our page limits and the reader's patience. Assessment's impact is also evident across institutions, mostly in the form of cultural changes, and the following generalizations can be made.

First, over the past ten years a much clearer sense of the need for evaluation of programs has evolved. This change is most evident in, though by no means limited to, proposals for new programs and innovations. It is now standard practice that all such proposals have to be accompanied by a serious evaluation plan. Second, there is an increased focus on measuring student outcomes and accepting these outcomes as a vital component of any evaluation plan or pedagogical discussion. It is not unusual to see academic departments building their curriculum around student achievement goals. Third, as faculty reorient their instructional goals toward student learning and away from teaching process, new and more effective ways for students to learn emerge. In particular, one can see increases student involvement in their own learning through learning centers, such as writing and math centers, through courses that use collaborative learning techniques, and through real-life experiences, such as internships and service learning courses.

Fourth, there is an increase in strategic planning on the campuses, the data needs for which place assessment in a crucial position. This increase is caused partially by external

pressures, but it must be noted that institutions can use strategic planning because decision-making data are available, and these data are available because of the assessment movement. Finally, the assessment movement has brought about significant increases in collaboration among institutions and sectors. Annually, over the last ten years, a three-day statewide assessment conference is held that draws over 300 faculty and administrators from the State's community, technical, and baccalaureate institutions. Annual assessment colloquia, each focussing on a specific topic, are also held for faculty of baccalaureate institutions. There is also mutual collaboration among the assessment coordinators and the Washington Center, an organization that fosters statewide collaboration for instructional improvement. In sum, the impact of assessment has been incremental and sometimes hard to see when viewed up close. When viewed cumulatively and with perspective, it must be judged as substantial and beneficial.

### **Reference**

Council of Presidents and State Board for Community College Education (1989, May). *The Validity and Usefulness of Three National Standardized Tests for Measuring the Communication, Computation, and Critical Thinking Skills of Washington State College Sophomores*. Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing.

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