

## *A conversation on accreditation and assessment*

**John M. Norris**  
**University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

Theology Department, University of Notre Dame, March 30, 2009

### **A. Mandates and principles of accreditation in U.S. higher education**

#### 1. *What is accreditation?*

Accreditation in higher education is defined as a collegial process based on self- and peer assessment for public accountability and improvement of academic quality. Peers assess the quality of an institution or academic program and assist the faculty and staff in improvement. An accreditation of an academic program or an entire institution typically involves three major activities:

- SELF-STUDY
- PEER REVIEW
- COMMISSION JUDGMENT

*Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2006, p. 19)*

**Regional Accrediting Agencies**  
e.g., *North Central Association*

**Professional Accrediting Agencies**  
e.g., *The Association of Theological Schools*

#### 2. *What practices are mandated for accreditation?*

↻ **Capacity review**

↻ **Educational effectiveness review**

Program mission/purpose → Student learning outcomes → Assessment

Assessment mandate, e.g., WASC (2008):

The program has a fully-articulated, sustainable, multi-year assessment plan that describes when and how each outcome will be assessed and how improvements based on findings will be implemented. The plan is routinely examined and revised, as needed.

Assessment mandate, e.g., ATS (2008):

1.2.2 Evaluation is a critical element in support of integrity in educational efforts, institutional renewal, and individual professional development. Evaluation is a process that includes: (1) the identification of desired goals or outcomes for an educational program, or institutional service, or personnel performance; (2) a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information related to the desired goals; (3) the assessment of the performance of the program, service, or person based on this information; and (4) the establishment of revised goals or activities based on the assessment. Institutions shall develop and implement ongoing evaluation procedures for employees, students, educational programs, and institutional activities.

#### 3. *Why emphasize outcomes assessment?*

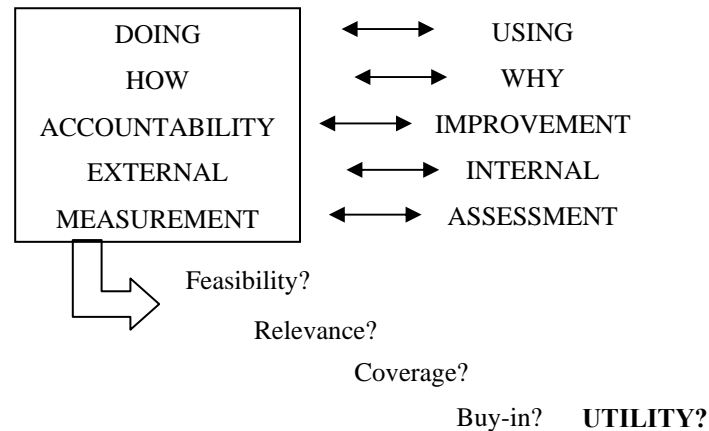
- Outcomes embody the essential purpose of an educational program: developments in knowledge, skills, dispositions of learners
- Requires rethinking of educational programs as something more than the delivery of experiences or the exposure of learners to information
- Calls for articulation of curriculum and instruction in support of targeted outcomes; demands integrated vs. isolationist thinking
- Provides a clear statement of educational program value; answers the question "How do you know?" with evidence of educational effectiveness

#### 4. *What principles should guide these efforts?*

- Academic freedom + peer review
- Local ownership over mission, goals, outcomes
- Local determination of how to assess
- Internal, formative focus of assessment cycle
- Constancy of purpose, but responsiveness to change

## B. Challenges to useful assessment in higher education

### 1. Misrepresentation, misperception



Berger (2008): “This emphasis compels us to justify our values and methods by translating them into the quantitative, quasi-scientific methods... We are not asked to identify what we want our students to know or understand or be prepared intellectually to grapple with. Rather, we are asked for the behaviors that our students will exhibit that will demonstrate their learning—and we are told that we must develop a quantitative instrument that will measure these behaviors.”

### 2. Knowledge-base

American Academy of Religion (2008): “A second challenge is that many of us find our programmatic assessment plans (as well as our knowledge of assessment, in general) to be in their infancy.” (p. 12).

### 3. External threats

Eaton (2009): the accreditation and assessment “...model is frequently at odds with government-directed evaluation schemes that often rely on standardization of expectations and quantitative analyses that cannot capture the nuances of such complex phenomena as student achievement.”

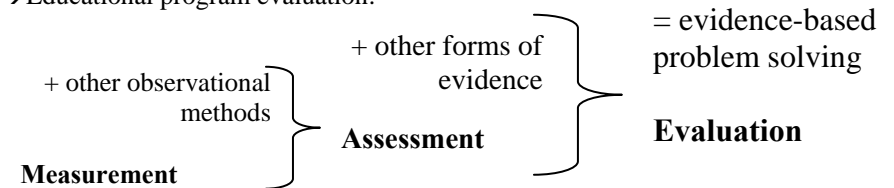
### 4. Static, inflexible, overwhelming model

- State degree program or course learning outcomes
- Develop or adopt assessments for all learning outcomes
- Collect and analyze data on a regular (usually annual) basis
- Use findings persistently for improving curriculum and instruction

## C. In pursuit of useful assessment

### 1. What do we (and accreditors) really mean by “assessment”?

→ Educational program evaluation:



Light (2001), on the special case of outcomes assessment in higher education:

“...a process of evaluating and improving current programs, encouraging innovations, and then evaluating each innovation’s effectiveness. The key step is systematic gathering of information for sustained improvement. And always with an eye toward helping faculty or students work more effectively.” (p. 224)

### 2. What are the characteristics of useful educational evaluations?

- (a) **Participation:** the individual intended users of evaluation participate directly in all evaluation processes, from asking questions to collecting data to making recommendations for change;
- (b) **Process:** evaluation is pursued iteratively as a process, not an end-game;
- (c) **Feasibility:** sufficient time and resources are allocated and evaluation activities are focused on key problems at hand;
- (d) **Relevance:** the evaluation produces interesting, credible, and immediately relevant findings;
- (e) **Propriety:** findings are reported in a timely fashion, communicated in a way that can be readily applied by intended users, and maintain respect for possible impact on individuals;
- (f) **Accuracy:** interpretations and recommendations are contextualized to the specific program setting, disciplinary variables, people (see Patton, 2008; Norris, 2006)

### 3. How do we get there? A utilization-focused approach to assessment

- Identify intended users of assessment information, including representatives of those stakeholders most likely to take an active role in making decisions on the basis of student learning assessment  
→ **Assessment committee & coordinator**
- Sketch out current needs for assessment of student learning, in terms of *who* needs to know *what* about students for *what purpose* and with what intended *consequences* → **Assessment review & plan**
- Prioritize assessment-related questions in light of the realities that (a) assessing all possible student learning outcomes all the time will tend to overwhelm the capacities and resources of assessment users, and (b) questions may be about factors that affect learning, as well as learning outcomes themselves → **Priority questions & Timelines**
- Develop, adapt, adopt methodologies, with an eye towards maximizing the *accuracy/fidelity* of the information that will be collected → **Information-gathering methods** (not just measures)
- Collected and analyze assessment data with attention to the *propriety* of the process, including validity/reliability of procedures and rights of participants → **Answers to priority questions**
- Analyze, interpret, and act upon information gleaned from assessment data, according to a reasonable timeline → **Departmental meetings**
- Engage in subsequent cycles of renewed prioritization, assessment implementation, and use → **Iterative reform**

#### **Example. Utilization-focused assessment in one college humanities program**

Pfeiffer and Byrnes (2009) discuss one cycle of outcomes assessment in a German Studies program at Georgetown University. A committee of faculty, administrators, and graduate assistants prioritized the need to understand current and former students' perspectives on the *identity and value of the undergraduate major* in German. Methods were surveys and focus groups which sought insights into the contributions that German studies made to personal, academic, and professional goals of the students. Importantly, the project targeted alums who had completed degrees prior to or following a curriculum innovation. Findings indicated that student learning had been impacted clearly and positively by the innovation: post-innovation students reported greater degree value, awareness of their outcomes, and satisfaction. Further, positive comments were about features that pre-innovation graduates found less satisfactory, and which had undergone change during the innovation. Recent students also indicated a variety of features in need of adaptation, especially diversified course offerings in profession-related subjects. The GUGD has implemented revisions, including adding a course, reducing expectations for one highly intensive course, facilitation of study abroad opportunities for all students, and increased incorporation of technology into course delivery. These changes will themselves be monitored in subsequent cycles of assessment.

### 4. Why bother?

- Retain power to define who we are and what we do in higher education
- Understand, improve, and raise awareness about who we are and what we are doing in higher education
- Develop the capacity for reform through inquiry that is embedded within our values systems
- Fulfill our responsibilities to the public, to funders, to students:

“We have a social and moral responsibility towards our students and towards society at large to state as clearly as we can what it is that we do for them and why what we do is valuable.” (anonymous survey respondent)

- Engage in a scholarship—rather than a bureaucracy—of educational assessment (e.g., *Theological Education*, AAR initiatives)
- Align curriculum and instruction → Raise awareness about learning targets and value among students, faculty, institution → Increase assessment information actually being used → Improve student learning (processes and outcomes) → Decrease frequency & number of useless assessments!

### F. Selected References and Resources

#### **Articles on Assessment and Evaluation in U.S. Higher Education**

- American Academy of Religion (2008). *The religion major and liberal education—A white paper*. Retrieved February 22, 2009, from [http://www.teagle.org/learning/pdf/2008\\_aar\\_whitepaper.pdf](http://www.teagle.org/learning/pdf/2008_aar_whitepaper.pdf)
- APA. (2006). Outcomes assessment. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 69(2), pp. 94-95.
- Arnowitz, S. L. (2000). *The knowledge factory: Dismantling the corporate university and creating true higher learning*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Barrington, L. (2003). Less assessment, more learning. *Academe*, 89(6), 29–32.
- Buckman, K. (2007). What counts as assessment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? *Thought and Action*, 23, 29-37.
- Carstens-Wickham, B. (2008). Assessment and foreign languages: A chair's perspective. *ADFL Bulletin*.
- Chase, G. (2006). Focusing on learning: Reframing our roles. *Modern Language Journal*, 90(4), 583-585.
- Eaton, J. (2009). There's a lot right about regional accreditation. *Inside Accreditation*, 5(1). Accessed March 15, 2009 at [http://www.chea.org/ia/IA\\_2009.01.20.html](http://www.chea.org/ia/IA_2009.01.20.html)
- Engelmann, D. (2007). Assessment from the ground up. *Inside Higher Education*, August 14.
- Ewell, P. (1991). To capture the ineffable: New forms of assessment in higher education. *Review of Research in Education*, 17, 75-125.
- Graff, G. (2008). Assessment changes everything. *MLA Newsletter*, Spring. HTML document, retrieved March 01, 2008 from: <http://www.mla.org/blog&topic=121>

Hersh, R. (2005). "What Does College Teach?" *The Atlantic Monthly*, 296(4),140-143. Retrieved February 22, 2008 from <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200511/measuring-college-quality>.

Lederman, D. (2008). Calling out colleges on student learning. *Inside Higher Education*, January 31.

Liskin-Gasparro, J. (1995). Practical approaches to outcomes assessment: The undergraduate major in foreign languages and literatures. *ADFL Bulletin*, 26(2), 21-27.

Meacham, J., & Miller, R. (2006). *Assessment of liberal education outcomes: Findings from interviews with faculty, administrators, and students*. American Association of Colleges and Universities. Retrieved February 22, 2008, from [http://www.teagle.org/learning/pdf/assessment\\_of\\_liberal\\_education\\_outcomes.pdf](http://www.teagle.org/learning/pdf/assessment_of_liberal_education_outcomes.pdf)

Modern Language Association (2008). *Language, literature, and liberal education*. Retrieved February 22, 2009, from [http://www.teagle.org/learning/pdf/2008\\_mla\\_whitepaper.pdf](http://www.teagle.org/learning/pdf/2008_mla_whitepaper.pdf)

Norris, J. M. (2009). Special issue: Understanding and improving language education through program evaluation. *Language Teaching Research*, 13(1).

Norris, J. M. (2006). The why (and how) of student learning outcomes assessment in college FL education. *Modern Language Journal*, 90(4), 576-583.

Penn, J. (2007). Assessment for 'us' and assessment for 'them'. *Inside Higher Education*, June 26.

Pfeiffer, P., & Byrnes, H. (2009). Curriculum, learning, and identity of majors: A case study of program outcomes evaluation. In J. M. Norris et al. (eds.), *Towards useful program evaluation in college foreign language education*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii, National Foreign Language Resource Center.

Richardson, M. (ed.) (2004). *Tracking changes in the humanities: Essays on finance and education*. Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Solloway, S., & Brooks, N. J. (2004). Philosophical hermeneutics and assessment: Discussions of assessment for the sake of wholeness. *Journal of Thought*, 39(2), 43-60.

Summers, D. (2004). Prospects for the humanities as public research universities privatize their finances. In M. Richardson (Ed.), *Tracking changes in the humanities: Essays on finance and education* (pp. 47-80). Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Wiggins, G. (1994). The truth may make you free, but the test may keep you imprisoned: Toward assessment worthy of the liberal arts. In J. Stark, & A. Thomas (eds.), *Assessment and Program Evaluation: An Ashe Reader* (pp. 545-556). Needham Heights, MA: Simon Schuster.

Windham, S. (2008). Redesigning lower-level curricula for learning outcomes: A case study. *ADFL Bulletin*.

#### **Texts on Assessment in Higher Education**

Allen, M. (2006). *Assessing general education programs*. Boston: Anker Publishing.

Angelo, T. A., & Cross, P. K. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college teachers*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bryan, C., & Clegg, K. (eds.) (2006). *Innovative assessment in higher education*. London: Routledge.

Costa, A., & Kallick, B. (1995). *Assessment in the learning organization: Shifting the*

*paradigm*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum.

Hernon, P., & Dugan, R. E. (eds.) (2004). *Outcomes assessment in higher education: Views and perspectives*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited

Hernon, P., Dugan, R. E., & Schwartz, C. (eds.) (2006). *Revisiting outcomes assessment in higher education*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Howell, S., & Hricko, M. (2005). *Online assessment and measurement: Case studies from higher education*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.

Leskes, A., & Wright, B. (2005). *The art and science of assessing general education outcomes*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

Light, R. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Maki, P. (2004). *Assessing for learning: Building a sustainable commitment across the institution*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Maki, P., & Borkowski, N. (eds.) (2006). *The assessment of doctoral education: Emerging criteria and new models for improving outcomes*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Norris, J. M. (2008). *Validity evaluation in language assessment*. New York: Peter Lang.

Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Walvoord, B. (2004). *Assessment clear and simple: A practical guide for institutions, departments, and general education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wiggins, G. (1998). *Educative assessment: Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

#### **A few web sites on assessment in theology and religion programs:**

- Association of Theological Schools, *Resources on assessment* <http://www.ats.edu/Accrediting/Pages/AssessmentResources.aspx>
- American Academy of Religion, Liberal Education and the major [http://www.aarweb.org/Programs/Religion\\_Major\\_and\\_Liberal\\_Education/default.asp](http://www.aarweb.org/Programs/Religion_Major_and_Liberal_Education/default.asp)
- List of publications on assessment in *Theological Education* <http://atadeansresources.blogspot.com/2006/05/theological-education-journal.html>

#### **See also these web sites on humanities outcomes and assessment:**

- Teagle Foundation, *Resources on liberal learning* <http://www.teaglefoundation.org/learning/resources.aspx>
- Wabash College, *Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts* <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu>
- Association of American Colleges and Universities, *Assessment page* <http://www.aacu.org/issues/assessment/index.cfm>
- American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Initiative for Humanities and Culture* <http://www.amacad.org/projects/humanities.aspx>
- Assessment Reform Group <http://www.assessment-reform-group.org/>

**Contact me on any related issues:** [jnorris@hawaii.edu](mailto:jnorris@hawaii.edu)  
<http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/evaluation>

<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~jnorris>