Growth of Institutional Assessment in Higher Education

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This fall, the Federal Government implements its new higher education rating system, which aims to provide a framework for students to make informed decisions about college choice (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The intent is that the rating system will report on a range of measures for each institution, including access, affordability, and outcomes such as graduation rates, transfer rates, and graduate earnings (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). This move has prompted considerable discussion, concern, and skepticism both within and outside the higher education sector, regarding both the method and the reasoning behind it (Carey, 2014). Some critics argue that the rating system will not measure core educational values such as critical thinking or problem-solving (McCulloch-Lovell, 2014). While the push to promote greater accountability in higher education is not new—the 2006 U.S. Department of Education’s Spellings Report, for example, noted the need for institutions to develop broader and greater accountability measures (Bogue & Hall, 2012)—the difference this time are the Federal spending implications. By 2018, this rating system will be tied to Federal aid spending (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), providing an added impetus to colleges to improve performances in the areas defined in the rating system. While shrinking state funding and rising costs in recent years have already led institutions to focus increasingly on the assessment of their activities (Geiger, 2011), the new ratings system adds another layer of urgency to the need to develop thorough practices in order to demonstrate accountability.

The growing importance of assessment as an emerging trend in higher education is one that has been discussed at length in recent literature (Astin & Antonio, 2012; Bogue & Hall, 2012; Hrabowski, Suess, & Fritz, 2011; Hockfield Malandra, 2008). Institutions are essentially in agreement over accountability measures, although their methods of assessment will vary
according to their specific needs (Howard, McLaughlin, and Knight, 2012). However, there is less agreement among other stakeholders, namely, political leaders and the business sector (Bogue & Hall, 2012). Although all three groups are in agreement that accountability measures are integral to an institution’s operations, their views diverge considerably on what constitutes assessment and what needs to be measured (Bogue & Hall, 2012). This is a critical factor that needs to be addressed within higher education and among policy makers and the business sector.

### Historical context

The practice of institutional assessment in higher education is not a recent development. Rather, it has been in place since at least the turn of the twentieth century, when colleges would conduct self-studies in order to identify specific issues relevant to their institution (Howard et al, 2012). The growth of an assessment culture, however, stems from the rise in influence of national, regional, and professional accreditation bodies, and the need for institutions to meet the reporting requirements of these bodies (Hockfield Malandra, 2008). In order to comply with rigid accreditation requirements, higher education institutions have, over the decades, developed well-established mechanisms to assess, measure, and report on outcomes in order to meet standards set by accreditation bodies and verified through a peer review process (Hockfield Malandra, 2008).

The traditional view of accreditation bodies is that they serve a number of basic purposes. They encourage institutions to improve programs by establishing standards, enable easier transfers for students between institutions, and raise the overall standards of a profession (United States Office of Education, 1959). Another key purpose of accreditation, however, is to provide guidance to the public on which institutions to select (United States Office of Education, 1959), and it is this purpose that today has become one of the primary drivers of accountability and
ultimately, assessment practices, within institutions. Many organizations conduct accreditation—in addition to the six regional associations that are charged with accrediting colleges and universities, another group accredits programs in specific fields, and an additional fifty groups accredit programs for specific professions (Glidden, 1996). The six regional accreditation bodies are responsible for setting standards for the majority of higher education institutions in the country—public, private, and for-profit (CHEA, 2015). In the 1990s, the focus of these regional accreditation bodies shifted increasingly to measuring student outcomes and institutional effectiveness indicators, causing colleges to reexamine their existing assessment methods (Bogue & Hall, 2003).

In tandem with the growing influence of accreditation bodies and their corresponding outcomes reporting requirements, has been the emergence of dedicated institutional research departments within higher education institutions (Sanford, 1995; Taylor, Webber, & Jacobs, 2013). The integral role played by the institutional research department within the overall assessment culture of an institution has its roots in the establishment of the American Council on Education and regional equivalents in the 1940s and 1950s (Howard et al, 2012). These bodies were created to address issues within higher education both within states and nationally, and their formation gave rise to the need for a structured assessment process in colleges, that could operate independently from academic departments (Howard et al, 2012). Today’s institutional research department serves many functions, with one of the primary functions being involved in the process surrounding assessment and accreditation nationally (Howard et al, 2012).

**Current assessment practices**

Existing literature on assessment address a broad range of methodologies and practices, and while consensus exists on the “what and how” of assessment, it is clear from the research
that current practices are broad and institution-dependent. In addition, location plays a factor in how an institution adopts particular outcomes measures, which vary across the country, reflecting state-specific needs (Howard et al, 2012).

Moore (1986), describing accountability as the “relationship of institutional outcomes to institutional goals” (p. 51), sets out a comprehensive process for assessing, measuring, and reporting outcomes. Moore notes that because outcomes are often are not well-defined or easy to measure, it poses a challenge to administrators (1986). Rather than attempting to define a particular measure of effectiveness, Moore suggests that administrators and faculty come to a consensus on a narrow, specific set of criteria that can be used to demonstrate effectiveness.

At the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), the administration’s focus is on integrating information technology into the broader assessment process (Hrabowski, Suess, and Fritz (2011). In a discussion paper, Hrabowski et al (2011) describe how technology can be utilized to assist assessment practices, noting that information technology can pull complex data sets from different sources and create data models to assist administrators in planning and assessment. In addition, UMBC’s institutional research department already collaborates on assessment projects with the information technology department, student affairs, and academic programs (Hrabowski et al, 2011). This approach also includes the involvement of faculty, who are considered central to the success of developing new outcomes measurement practices within the institution (Hrabowski et al, 2011).

A collaborative approach similar to the UMBC example is echoed by Pettersen (2015), who proposes that performance measures used by management in the private sector be integrated into the assessment process. Pettersen (2015) argues that because academic outcomes are not always easily measurable, metrics drawn from management or “management control logic,”
could be integrated into the assessment process, or “academic logic,” to provide more meaningful measurement indicators, “multiple logics” (p. 36). These multiple logics would result in an educational system where performance measures were developed by management professionals but outcomes indicators were developed by academics (Pettersen, 2015).

A study of Norwegian universities by Hovdhaugen, Frølich, and Aamodt, (2013) found that higher education institutions adopted different accountability measures in response to shifts in government policy. The researchers note that a change in the country’s funding system for higher education from one that was based on number of students per institution, to one that was based on graduation rates, caused a marked, sudden increase in the assessment of retention rates among higher education institutions (Hovdhaugen et. al., 2013). In this case, the financial consequences were enough to prompt universities to take action.

**Limitations to current assessment practices**

Astin and Antonio (2012) note that certain measurements are easier to obtain than others. In terms of measuring learning outcomes, specifically, because they cannot always be empirically validated, assessment tends to be based on value judgements (p253), which in turn compromises any report on institutional effectiveness and accountability. In addition, they argue that a failing of the present system is that what ends up getting measured will depend on the perspectives of the institutions in question, which essentially limits how meaningful the overall process is. Ultimately, they believe that institutions often have in place inadequate assessment models that fail to measure the full scope of the university’s worth, instead focusing on resources or reputational excellence (Astin & Antonio, 2012). While the lack of an overarching, comprehensive assessment practice is one limitation, as noted above, more critical is the
disagreement over what constitutes accountability, and essentially, what needs to be measured (Bogue & Hall, 2012).

Bogue and Hall (2012) sought to examine the differences among the expectations of three sectors—academic, business, and political—on the purpose of assessment. Through surveys, they examined views of individual stakeholders from these three groups, to derive information on what they felt was needed in higher education in order to improve outcomes, and found a lack of consensus regarding the mission and purposes of higher education (Bogue & Hall, 2012). Their survey asked participants to rate the importance of their satisfaction with six areas: “preferred definitions of accountability; effectiveness of existing accountability instruments or policies; priorities in higher education mission and purpose; importance of accountability stakeholders; expected outcomes of accountability policy; and importance of accountability” (Bogue & Hall, 2012, p16-17). These themes were taken from their literature review of the topic. The survey was sent to academic, business, and political leaders in five states in different geographical and institutional accreditation regions—Connecticut, Georgia, Michigan, Colorado, and Oregon. Their findings showed that little consensus exists among academic, business, or government groups on these measures of accountability. Their conclusion is that the implication of this disagreement over core accountability statements among the three sectors is dire, as it will likely hinder the development of a strong, overarching accountability system, which they argue is needed in higher education (Bogue & Hall, 2012). The authors also note that while the focus on the development of a trained workforce is an important aspect it is not the sole purpose of higher education.
Conclusion

Ultimately, today’s assessment-driven culture in higher education has been brought about by a confluence of factors, both within institutions and externally. While rising costs and the decline in state funding that took place from the 1970s through the 1990s (Geiger, 2011) are a few of the contributing factors, the recent move to implement a college rating system that will grade institutions according to outcomes and ultimately tie these grades to Federal funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), is another contributing factor. For these reasons, institutions will be forced to adopt rigorous assessment measures in order to prove their effectiveness and justify their existence in the future.

The new college rating system continues to draw considerable concern from higher education institutions on how measurement of some of the indicators will be conducted. Representatives from the American Association of Community Colleges, for example, have noted concerns about how to track academic milestones, which can differ at community colleges (“Colleges Take Issue,” 2014). In addition, other college leaders have asked for the ratings to be split into smaller groups, or for the administration to consider student characteristics (Bidwell, 2014). Other administrators have noted that some of the data will be difficult to collect—measures such as employment after graduation, for example, will require institutions to survey students after they have left college (Bidwell, 2014). One interesting perspective that has emerged from discussions of the ratings system is that of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, who proposed instead that the government select ten common metrics for all institutions, and an additional 40 metrics from which institutions could choose five to report on (Lederman, D. Stratford, M., and Jaschik, S, 2014). This approach would enable institutions to have some flexibility in their assessment practices.
As assessment practices continue to develop and expand to meet changing government requirements, the challenge will be for the stakeholders involved to come to a consensus on what constitutes accountability (Bogue and Hall, 2012). In addition, institutions will need to rise above the limitations of assessing merely in terms of what Astin and Antonio (2012) refer to as “reputational views of excellence (p252), and conduct assessment practices that truly explore the value of higher education in society.

One area that has been absent from any discussion on accountability and assessment measures in higher education is the voice of the students. Even Bogue and Hall’s study (2012) concerning the perceptions of three key stakeholder groups—academia, business, and political leaders, failed to consider input from students. The addition of this important group of stakeholders would perhaps have led to different results. Future studies on assessment practices in higher education will need to incorporate a wider range of voices.
References


