

2003 AAHE Research Forum

**A Richer and More Coherent
Set of Assessment Practices**

A Research Agenda

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

What research best benefits educational policy and practice? The AAHE Assessment Research Forum each year helps to answer that question. In 2002, for example the Forum generated a set of issues that included “Defining and Assessing the Ineffable” and “Transforming Institutional Cultures,” which were explored in this year’s conference.

The dialogue between researchers and educators is essential in clarifying research agendas for the future. Through two interactive sessions, the 2003 Assessment Research Forum generated this new research agenda focused on assessment practices.

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What is the Purpose of the Research Forum? Involvement and critique from educators in dialogue with researchers is a critical element for achieving clarity about what research will benefit educational policy and practice. The AAHE Research Forum is convened biannually to involve individuals committed to research and scholarship in higher education. The Forum stimulates educators' involvement in creating a research agenda that speaks to current educational concerns. Each agenda is developed around the conference theme. Thus, educators and researchers can continually rely on the Forum agenda as an up-to-date source of common research questions that flow from the year's most central educational issues. The Forum enables educators to provide leadership and support for those researchers who share educators' interests, who speak clearly to educators about their findings, and who actively respond to educators' most pressing questions.

Since 1985, the AAHE Research Forum has provided leadership from educators for bridging the gap between research and practice, and has enabled educators and researchers to define the kinds of contexts that need to be reshaped within colleges and universities for research findings to benefit students.

The AAHE Assessment Forum has traditionally brought together a wide range of interested educators, and has been successful in defining current issues central to inquiry in higher education. There are other forums at which research results are presented and discussed, but many of them are not regularly attended by or directed toward higher education administrators and faculty. AAHE membership has the desire and potential to stimulate research among its members, and to engage the research community in continual dialogue about research questions and findings that directly relate to educational practices for governance, for teaching and learning, and for student development.

What is the Forum Process and Product?

- 1. The Invitational Pre-Conference Session.** Educators (selected from conference experts) generated research questions on topics that emerged as central to the conference theme through a specially designed group process. Experts on each topic served as group leaders and synthesizers. Each topic group reviewed the current issues around their topic and discussed with those who currently, or are likely to, research the year's agenda. Questions were synthesized in each group, and session leaders edited and prepared them for distribution at the All-Conference session.
- 2. The All-Conference Forum and Panel.** Forum leaders brought the questions generated in the pre-conference session to the attention of the conference membership and involved the larger audience in discussion of issues and research questions in their own settings. Forum leaders also elicited discussion of research questions by an expert on the year's conference theme. Our expert this year was **Peggy Maki**, AAHE Senior Scholar, Assessing for Learning. Group discussions on each topic followed and allowed for more focused critique and discussion of the pre-conference questions.
- 3. The Research Agenda and Its Dissemination.** Following the session, forum leaders edited and integrated questions from topic group syntheses and individual worksheets for a final agenda. The history and rationale for the American Association for Higher Education Research Forum are described in M. Mentkowski and A. W. Chickering, Linking Educators and Researchers in Setting a Research Agenda for Undergraduate Education, *The Review of Higher Education*, 1987, 11(2), 137–160.

Prior Agendas:

- *The Classroom Researcher's Research Agenda*, 1987
- *A Research Agenda in Support of Our Highest Calling*, 1988
- *Improving the Odds for Student Achievement: A Research Agenda*, 1989
- *The Future of the Professoriate: A Look in the Mirror*, 1990
- *Achieving the Promise in Diversity: A Research Agenda to Inform the Issues*, 1991
- *Reclaiming the Public Trust: A Research Agenda to Explore the Validity of the Criticisms*, 1992
- *Reinventing Community: A Research Agenda to Create Common Purposes, Build Commitment, and Sustain Improvement*, 1993
- *A Research Agenda for Envisioning the 21st Century Academic Workplace Through Responsive Academic Citizenship*, 1994
- *The Engaged Campus: A Research Agenda to Serve Society's Needs*, 1995
- *Crossing Boundaries: A Research Agenda Toward Productive Learning and Community Renewal*, 1996
- *Learning, Teaching, and Technology: A Research Agenda for the Way We Work*, 1997
- *Taking Learning Seriously: A Research Agenda for Learning*, 1998
- *Organizing for Learning: A Research Agenda*, 1999
- *Diversity and Learning: A Research Agenda*, 2000
- *Private Gain and Public Good: A Research Agenda for Achieving Balance*, March, 2001
- *Enacting a Scholarship of Assessment: A Research Agenda*; June, 2001
- *Learning in Context: Who are our Students? How do they Learn? A Research Agenda*; March, 2002
- *Supporting a Shared Commitment to Assessment: A Research Agenda*, June 2002
- *Good Work in Challenging Times: A Research Agenda*, March 2003

Previous agendas are available from Marcia Mentkowski, Educational Research and Evaluation, Alverno College, 3400 South 43rd Street, P.O. Box 343922, Milwaukee, WI 53234-3922.

2003 RESEARCH FORUM LEADERS

Judith Reisetter Hart, Senior Research Analyst, Educational Research and Evaluation, Alverno College

Terrell Rhodes, Vice Provost for Curriculum and Undergraduate Studies, Portland State University

Glen Rogers, Senior Research Associate, Educational Research and Evaluation, Alverno College

RESEARCH AND EVALUATION APPROACHES FOR A SCHOLARSHIP OF ASSESSMENT

The assessment movement has many conceptual roots. Peter Ewell in his chapter in *Building a Scholarship of Assessment* (Banta & Associates, 2002) draws attention to assessment precursors in the field of program evaluation and a more defuse scientific management movement. Program evaluation arose in relation to large-scale federal programs, but also has been the site of divergent approaches, such as action research. The evaluation literature stands out in how it has conceptually systematized a broad range of approaches to achieving accountability and improvement. The scientific management movement has more specifically supported those approaches that link strategic planning, program review, and budgeting. Scientific management contrasts with a more grass-roots tradition of social science research into college outcomes, reflected for example in Pascarella & Terenzini's *How College Affects Students*. This research has provided a scholarly basis for models of adult learning and growth. But, as Ewell notes, assessment has generally been broad and not deep, experienced as something for external reporting, and so carried out as a separate activity by an "office." Likewise, assessment has tended to be limited to discrete case studies rather than building a broader scholarship of inquiry. What research and evaluation approaches would deepen the meaningfulness of assessment to faculty and support the work of policy-makers? What role can new technologies play? What research and evaluation questions are most central to understanding the sources of student learning outcomes? What kind of assessment studies are needed at the center of a scholarly field of assessment?

On Assessment Theory

How do we move from program and classroom assessment as accountability to program and classroom assessment as research?

How do we use a "utilization-focused" theoretical model of assessment as our framework for a systematic process of evaluating student learning?

How can we relate the theory of assessment with research to enhance or sustain institutional outcomes assessment to promote research and evaluation approaches?

How do we ascertain the nature of assessment theory that supports assessment system design efforts of disciplinary faculty?

How can formative assessment to characterize and support learning be supported when the call for accountability becomes more demanding?

On What We Value

Should we recognize both theoretical and applied research in assessment as a matter of scholarship for faculty?

How do we recognize the range of research from quantitative and qualitative research to action research and interest groups?

How do we encourage student research in assessment as scholarship in subject areas on campuses?

How do we use data collection and analysis for identifying students whose backgrounds put them at risk or are not engaged in learning and then relate this research back to instruction?

How do we help campus environments value assessment as research and scholarship?

How do we frame our assessment questions to address a variety of stakeholders (faculty, students, administrators, lawmakers, etc.)?

How can we involve more faculty and students in assessment research?

How can we promote the value of various assessment/research approaches (formative, summative, qualitative, quantitative, etc.)?

On Creating Institutional Structures

What is the most effective means of supporting assessment on campus? A centralized office? A de-centralized approach?

There has been a proliferation of assessment offices on campuses (within academic units, student affairs, campus-wide offices, etc.). What are the effects of these offices and structures on the college? Do structures vary by institutional type? What themes emerge in terms of student involvement with assessment? Does positioning of an (or several) assessment offices affect the climate of assessment or the type of dialogue related to assessment and/or learning? Are certain structures associated with assessment offices associated with certain barriers, supports, etc. for assessment or dialogue on learning?

How can we connect the need of graduate/doctoral students to learn how to design and implement research to need of institutions/programs/departments for information about effectiveness of individuals and existing practices?

What is the nature of institutional structure that supports the development of an assessment culture?

On Research Methodology

How do we advance teaching and learning by designing instruction to assure learning based on qualitative and quantitative data from the classroom?

How do we encourage mixed methods and varied strategies of measurement in assessment so that changes are grounded with triangulation?

How do we relate all the data collections and analyses on a campus to each other in order to set up a systematic approach to assessment?

How can we better use measurement theory to support and improve our assessments?

What research designs are being adapted by departments doing program assessment?

CURRICULUM-EMBEDDED APPROACHES TO INTEGRATING STUDENT AND PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Curriculum-embedded assessments are an integral part of the work that a student does in a learning program, including but not limited to assessments completed in a course. Some accrediting agencies are trying to draw forth more committed institutional responses by explicitly encouraging embedded assessment approaches. Faculty are increasingly developing capstone courses, portfolios, and other embedded assessment strategies in order to both promote integrative student learning and for the purposes of program improvement and accountability. To promote student learning, faculty typically use an iterative process of explicitly defining intended student learning outcomes and corresponding rubrics in relation to assessment stimuli that elicit high fidelity performance. In addition to judging performance, faculty also give students individualized feedback, inasmuch as student learning is the goal. However, aggregating judgments of high fidelity performance assessments for program accountability purposes often requires additional steps that strengthen the credibility and transportability of judgments. These strategies might involve faculty jointly reviewing student performances at the department level or additional judges systematically rejudging selected performances. In either case, the integration of student and program assessment also generally requires rethinking faculty roles and rewards. What features of curriculum-embedded assessment promote collective responsibility for student learning outcomes and program improvement? What features promote accountability to policy-makers? What features promote student achievement, engagement in their learning, and the coherence of the degree? What are implications for faculty development?

On Guiding Change

How can we preserve the faculty's disciplinary knowledge while engaging them in the scholarship of pedagogy? How does the synthesis affect what they do?

What has to be in place from institutional, departmental, and cross-departmental levels for curriculum-embedded approaches to be successful?

How can faculty be persuaded that there is a collective responsibility for course-embedded assessments—i.e., public and private?

On Research Approaches

Are curriculum-embedded approaches yielding reliable and valid results? How much and what type of data are needed?

What is faculty's current level of knowledge concerning curriculum-embedded approaches to assessment? Have we established the current level of knowledge concerning curriculum-embedded approaches?

How do external standards (e.g., disciplinary, regional) interact with the development and use of curriculum-embedded approaches to assessing student learning?

What are good practices for aligning outcomes and evaluation tools?

How can technology be harnessed for curriculum-embedded assessments?

How can we use the variety of assessment modalities in assessing general education?

On Curriculum

What are the challenges to developing, maintaining, and refining a curriculum-embedded approach? What are the administrative issues?

We use curricular frameworks to structure and deliver education. What do we need to study about curriculum as an entity in higher education that will contribute to the uses of curriculum-embedded assessment?

How do curriculum-embedded assessments contribute to the developing identity of students and of departments?

How do various participants affect the development of curriculum as a rich, lived experience—including the assessment strand?

How are new faculty integrated into understanding the curriculum?

What are student attitudes/perceptions toward curriculum-embedded instruction?

What is the connection between curriculum-embedded assessments and grades?

What is the connection between high stakes testing and course-embedded assessments?

TRANSFORMING INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES

Educational reform in higher education has increasingly focused on the need to transform institutional cultures. Legislators emphasize accountability to particular societal needs, and educators emphasize improving particular forms of student learning. At the same time, there is general agreement on the need to foster collaboration in achieving institutional missions and that this requires a culture of improvement. Centering on student learning as an institutional goal can be the defining transformational step. Assessment within institutions is generally seen as a key lever for creating an institutional culture of improvement, inquiry, responsibility, and (in the language of some circles) quality. For example, regional accreditation agencies in the U.S. have increasingly emphasized demonstrating student learning outcomes and using assessment for improvement. In this context, achieving a shared clarity about program and institutional outcomes can be a key step. But, external demands may or may not encourage administrators and faculty to take collective responsibility for inquiry into learning outcomes. This kind of transformation of institutional culture requires creating effective venues for faculty to reiteratively probe their deeply held assumptions about learning and the relation of learning to curriculum and assessment. What kind of assessment fosters a culture of collaborative inquiry into student learning outcomes? What assumptions do faculty, administrators, and students now hold about how learning is fostered? What assumptions do faculty and administrators hold about their respective roles in program and institutional assessment? How will the roles, commitments, and identities of faculty and staff formed in one culture be appreciated or changed as part of the process of transforming culture?

On Managing Change

What are transformational bottlenecks and how have some institutions risen above them?

How do we assess the impact of faculty involvement on the assessment effort (In particular, the uses of faculty time, presence of merit-based outcomes, and shaping roles and rewards)? Can we incorporate the discipline-based models of generating scholarship to a broader model of institutional assessment?

What is the responsibility of the upper administration—initial and ongoing—in regard to program assessment?

What is the most effective utilization of technology that affects the transformation of institutional culture?

What resources are important and/or absolutely necessary, and where are they coming from?

What accrediting-external agency-formats work best?

How do we ensure that stakeholders in all key roles—e.g., IT staff as well as faculty and administrators—be involved in change?

Who are the key change agents who can propagate transformation through campus institutions? Why do faculty consider their course assessments irrelevant to program and institutional assessment?

How can we create assessments of learning outside the classroom? What are the links to the academic programs?

On Decision-Making

How do we maintain a Quality Assurance emphasis within the assessment discussion such that we emphasize validity, we emphasize the appropriate questions and problems, and we have evidence of continuous improvement?

How do we make the distinction between accountability and improvement in assessment while maintaining an effective balance, and which incentives have the most impact on each?

What are the most effective decision-making models that do two things: (a) that account for varied institutional types, sizes, and cultures, union versus non-union environment and that link budgeting and planning, (b) decision-making that is evidence-based and reflects sound theory and scholarship?

How do we move beyond a judgmental yes/no accountability to a collective responsibility that supports improvement?

On Creating Discourse

How should we develop theories of assessment? Should we draw from existing theories of leadership, decision-making, and management, or allow theories to be discipline-based, or institutionally-based?

What is going on—MECHANISM for whole faculty meetings, etc., to share assessment success and problems?

What are the varied sources of communication and documentation about assessment that emerge in the institutional culture that MOVE the critical discourse to the next level?

What structures would promote and reward common discussions about student learning outcomes? How will these venues support trust and collaboration?

PARTICIPANTS

Jeana Abromeit
Alverno College

Maria Aguirre
University of Puerto Rico

Mary Allen
California State University

Virginia Anderson
Towson University

James Anderson
North Carolina State
University

Robert Armacost
University of Central Florida

MaryAnn Baenninger
Middle States Commission on
Higher Education

Donald Bennion
Eastern Michigan University

Margaret Boorstein
C.W. Post Campus of Long
Island University

Claire Bronson
Western New England
College

Rebecca Burton
Alverno College

Celina Byers
Oakland University

Darren Cambridge
AAHE

Steven Cavote
University of Nevada, Reno

Joan Costello
Inver Hills Community
College

Maria Cseh
Oakland University

Diane Douglas
Bellevue Community College

Eliot Elfner
St. Norbert College

Eugene Finnegan
Calumet College of St. Joseph

Teresa Flatby
University of South Florida

Dianne Gardner
Illinois State University

Janice Grackin
Stony Brook SUNY

Peter Gray
United States Naval Academy

Edith Gunner
Oregon State University

Michael Harris
Eastern Michigan University

Julie Jantzi
Azusa Pacific University

Marilyn Jaquish
Northwestern Michigan College

Badih Jawad
Lawrence Technological University

Robin Jeffers
Bellevue Community College

Ann Kizanis Klapper
Western New England College

Loretta Knapp
Long Island University

Bobbi Lathrop
University of Georgia

Ann Lin
Wilkes University

John Mahaffy
University of Nevada, Reno

Margaret Malmberg
University of Charleston

David Marshall
The Evergreen State College

Brenda Masters
Oklahoma State University

Sherry McCarthy
William Woods University

Christine McKeag
University of Evansville

Julia Pet-Armacost
University of Central Florida

Sue Pieper
Truman State University

Joseph Polka
Southern Connecticut State
University

Margaret Price
Oxford Brookes University

Judith Reisetter Hart
Alverno College

Terrel Rhodes
Portland State University

William Rickards
Alverno College

Glen Rogers
Alverno College

Warren Sandmann
Minnesota State University,
Mankato

Wendy Troxel
Illinois State University

Kuppalapalle Vajavelu
University of Central Florida

Maria Vaz
Lawrence Technological
University

Daniel Weinstein
Lower Columbia College

Thomas Zlatic
St. Louis College of Pharmacy