

**Educational Research and
Evaluation**

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**HOW MIGHT WE BEGIN?
DEFINING ASSESSMENT/
EVALUATION STARTING
UP, AND ANTICIPATING
BENEFITS**

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Here are three of the questions that need to be dealt with to effect changes in undergraduate education through assessment/evaluation.

1. How do we characterize assessment/evaluation?

Do we characterize assessment/evaluation with an eye toward outcomes we have clarified in advance, with the goal of providing feedback to students or faculty on progress? Do we see assessment/evaluation as a process of collecting information and giving feedback, improving and trying again, or as a one-time test? Do we employ assessment/evaluation not only for its accountability function but also for its development function? For the individual student, do we simply grade or credential, or do we give feedback and insist on students meeting standards we set? For the institution, do we simply account for effectiveness, or do we research student outcomes and use the results to improve the program?

2. What kind of outcomes do we measure?

Do we concentrate on measuring only the amount of knowledge students have acquired? Or do we also measure their abilities and how they use them in a variety of situations? Do we also try to measure the broad outcomes of college that seem to make a difference for later personal and professional life? What are the standards by which we judge achievement and where do they come from—from what is possible to achieve, or only from what most students can do now?

3. Who will be involved in assessment/evaluation and how do we insure involvement?

How do we involve students in assessment so that they experience increased confidence and can learn and assess their abilities on their own? Are faculty involved in assessment, research and evaluation of learning and student outcomes with the same intensity as they have traditionally been involved in researching their discipline? How can we channel information from student performance on assessments into further student achievement? How can we use information from evaluation to improve the curriculum, and to improve faculty understanding of student learning and abilities?

Here are four ways to begin that have worked in some settings.

- 1. Focus faculty involvement on assessment/evaluation issues built around current practice.** To do this, inventory what kind of assessment, evaluation, and instructional or educational research is being conducted at your institution. Where is assessment/evaluation happening? What kind of measures are faculty, various administrative and other student services using? Who are the assessment/evaluation “experts” on your campus? What kind of feedback are they using to communicate improved performance to students? What kind of expert judgement is in place in departments? What kinds of assessments could currently be reshaped so they could be administered to students across a department, or even across a school or college?

- 2. Generate information on broad student outcomes that is tied to the curriculum.** Decide what outcomes you want to measure before you look for instruments—not the other way around. Since few instruments are “out there” that measure or match your institution’s broad goals, take a “do it yourself” attitude toward assessment/evaluation. This means trying out some newer types of instruments. Some newer measures of outcomes such as values development and critical thinking enable comparison of students against standards drawn from what is possible for students to achieve, rather than standards set only by what students at other colleges can do now.
- 3. Faculty assessment of individual student learning is usually an integral part of institutional function; do the same for research and evaluation.** Identify a person or an office that might gather and synthesize information about students already being collected in relation to college-wide outcomes, and could collect and analyze new information. This person or office would rely on and involve the faculty and create evaluation strategies from the ways faculty assess students.
- 4. Link the information generated from assessment/evaluation to curriculum development.** If you have started assessment/evaluation with a clear purpose, where the process used and the instruments designed or chosen are carefully linked to curriculum and curriculum goals, you can ask, “What is the link between the findings and curriculum development? Who will use the findings?” It is the link between research findings and curriculum development that is often missing. Plan ways to disseminate the findings that capture the attention and involvement of students and faculty.

If we begin in these kinds of ways, how might the character of undergraduate education change?

- The institution could become more centered on student outcomes and on a curriculum that insures them. The quality of the interaction between student and faculty could improve, and the discussion about student learning and student outcomes could become a central focus in the institution.
- Students, faculty and administrators could become more confident of their own abilities to effect self and institutional improvement. Energies could become more focused on new goals rather than on anxiety and worry about how well one is achieving.
- Student learning, faculty teaching, and administrative decision-making and reputation could be based more on evidence and less on supposition.
- Enhanced involvement in learning and performance, and internalized, lifelong values and skills for learning could result.