



Higher Education Assessment— Who Are We Assessing, and For What Purpose?

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For the past several years, policy makers of both political parties have taken to the stump to talk about the inadequacies of the U.S. higher education system, despite the fact that it remains the envy of the world. It seems odd to me that on one hand, policy makers are working hard to convince everyone that they should go to college, while at the same time they are questioning the value and quality of a college education. That is a little like complaining that the food is bad, but the portions too small.

As a former policy maker, I believe firmly that the federal government has an important role to play in protecting the taxpayer dollar, and the taxpayer spends lots of them on the Federal Student Aid program. And as a former educator, I also believe in the power of assessment as a useful tool in evaluating an individual student's performance and in monitoring the success of educational courses and programs in meeting their unique and stated goals. But the idea of the federal government moving beyond their fiduciary responsibility to enter into the world of learning assessment frightens me because any standard measures of learning imposed upon the system would serve only to destroy the very attribute that makes our system so strong and unique—the diversity of purpose and pedagogy among institutions. But basic skills and higher learning are two very different things.

It is important that the federal government confirm the financial integrity of institutions that collectively receive billions of taxpayer dollars, but this is achieved through

accounting and audit standards, not student assessments. Similarly, it is important to demonstrate to taxpayers that there is sufficient return on the generous investment they make in students who benefit from federal student aid. But the return on investment can hardly be determined while students are still in college or even as they take their first jobs.

So perhaps the impetus for greater assessment comes from reports of low retention and graduation rates among current students. Well, the truth is that we don't really know how many entering freshmen will actually earn a degree because the data collection system collects data on only a fraction of students. The 60 percent of students who transfer between institutions, and all part-time students, are excluded from the system that focuses on the now-rare first-time, full-time student. Making policy decisions based on Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data is like making policy decisions for the nation based on the profile and performance of a single state.

Some will argue that we need standardized assessments so that parents and students can compare institutions with widely divergent costs to determine which offers the best value. But institutional averages will never be predictive of the benefits realized by a single individual, and will further disadvantage the hard-working, exceptional students at all but the most selective institutions. Those of us who strive for democratic meritocracy in our higher education system would love to find a way to level the playing field for all students, but in reality, nothing that we can do on the

side of educational quality or student assessment will trump the advantage of admissions selectivity, or the power of aristocratic meritocracy.

So then we come to the issue of knowledge and skills among recent college graduates. Some believe that we can expand access to college, while also improving quality and increasing retention and graduation rates. When thinking of this, I am reminded of a T-shirt I once saw on a computer technician that said, "speed, reliability, low cost... pick two." For all of those employers who complain about the skills and abilities of fresh college graduates, I would offer this advice—stop recruiting students based on the institutions they attended and start recruiting employees based on the portfolio of work they present during the application and interview process.

Fortunately, rising from the frenzy of harried attempts to federalize higher education assessment, the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project singularly holds the greatest promise for holding accountable those with the greatest responsibility for improving the quality of higher education: the students, themselves. Far from federal mandates, standardized measures or narrow learning outcomes, the VALUE project honors institutional diversity and autonomy while providing tools that will enable institutions to evaluate, and thus for students to demonstrate, the learning that they accomplished through their own hard work, dedication, and commitment. Our students deserve nothing less. ■