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Linda Watts
University of Washington, Bothell, lswatts@uw.edu

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Linda Watts
University of Washington-Bothell

Although higher education now seeks to involve more students than ever before in high impact practices, as educators we still struggle with how optimally to assess student learning in and across such experience and contexts. Many of the items in our assessment toolkits were designed to document student learning through more traditional processes (such as lecture) and products (such as end-of-term research papers). While these items continue to be valuable, they may prove insufficient to our current varieties of pedagogical practice and goals for student engagement.

On the Importance of a Navigational Compass

Today's leaders in U.S. higher education face ever more difficult decisions than did their predecessors regarding responsible steward-ship of (often declining) campus resources. When I began my career, my compass point—my "true north"—in such pivotal moments was "the best interest of the students." For the most part, I believed that so long as a decision was made in the favor of student learning, other campus constituents typically benefitted, as well. In part, this is because on some level, faculty and staff usually are retained to serve the central mission of a university: teaching and learning.

As my career advanced, while I continued to prioritize the best interest of students when choices proved difficult or resources scant, my understanding of that process gained complexity. The more I considered students as a diverse population (with distinct preparations, outlooks, goals, and expectations), the more challenging it became to imagine them as a uniform population with wholly common needs. Not all learners thrive under the same conditions, require the same services, or advance in the same manner or rate. At times, the interests of student constituencies do not simply differ, they clash. If conflict is the inevitable result of lives spent in one another's company, how might institutions of higher education model productive ways for meeting such challenges equitably? Gradually, my language for describing my compass point began to shift from "the best interest of the students" to the decision that would have "the most profound impact on the learn-

ing experience of the most students." Although I still strive to lead in a manner that has pervasive positive impacts for all stakeholders, I am less inclined to assume that students want or need the same things merely because they attend the same institution. My revised metric allows me to consider the stakes (the most profound impact) in tandem with the population as a whole (the most students).

As a result, I now allow consideration of measures that will have tremendous benefits for a subpopulation of students (especially a historically underserved population), even when those measures have less direct effect for the rest of the student population. For instance, a program that better addresses the needs of first-in-family undergraduates speaks to a common good. When traditionally underserved populations in higher education receive better attention, they persist and succeed at higher rates, creating a benefit to the entire campus in terms of campus culture, diversity, and vitality.

Such an awareness tends to trouble the language of "best practice" in higher education, since it tends to imply a unitary standard of value. While it is true that some instructional practices have wide, if not universal, benefit for learners, there are limits to this single-formula approach. Even if it were possible to reach agreement about best practices, there remains the work of implementing those ideas across divergent institutions of higher education. How, then, does one align recommended practice with these lived-world realities?

On the Changing Climate of Expectation for Assessment: From Teaching to Learning

One of the areas of most dynamic growth within U.S. higher education is assessment, the effort to document impact of educational practices on learning, both while students are enrolled and after they conclude their studies. While educators have always endeavored to be self-aware, in recent years that process has started to extend beyond what is taught (pedagogy) to reckon what is learned (outcomes). Assessment can occur at any level at which learning may be documented—assignment, course, course sequence, year of study, major, and degree. Recent turns in educational discourse may be described as marking a shift from an instructor-centered paradigm (teaching) to a student-centered paradigm (learning), consistent with a more inclusive and egalitarian learning environment.

Best practices in higher education assessment, then, do more than answer the demands of internal reauthorization or external reporting. They attune students and faculty to the implications of their educational

choices and the lasting results of their shared work. Historically speaking, as the student population in U.S. higher education grew and diversified, educators found themselves challenged to think more fluidly and flexibly about how to direct their pedagogy to the benefit of all students.

As the focus within higher education shifts from teaching to learning, something of an assessment movement has taken shape. Through such efforts, educators make more transparent to students, and to the public, their expectations for student performance and their criteria for academic excellence. Such transparency can help more students pursue, achieve, and demonstrate college success, thereby further enhancing higher education.

While institutions of higher education may boast a variety of prominent statements about their core activities (mission, values statement, and the like), these documents are typically aspirational. Assessment—whether of a course, program, or school—calls for educators to do more than state ideals and vow to strive toward them. Today's assessment strategies demand that higher education set out clear and measurable goals and objectives, collect data regarding action toward those goals and objectives, and use those findings to inform and reform future practice.

This turn in higher education assessment often calls for faculty and academic staff to undertake professional development to support their work in crafting learning goals for courses, writing and applying rubrics for assignments, reading and responding to degree portfolios, and devising action plans to continue improvements to the curriculum and build its impact on student learning. By making benchmarks and success indicators in higher education more visible and legible to students, assessment of student learning also favors democratization of higher education. Students are better able to discern and meet (or exceed) expectations for their performance as learners.

On the Distinctive Challenge of Assessing Student Learning through High-Impact Practices

In the context of professional development efforts currently underway at my campus, I have had frequent opportunities to speak with colleagues regarding the challenges of assessing student learning in higher education. In recent years, much has been made of "high impact practices" in higher education, as they have been articulated by George Kuh and other educators. Not only do these approaches to undergraduate learning favor student engagement, but they also promote persistence, retention, graduation rate, and success following graduation. Although higher education now seeks to involve more students than ever before in educational experiences that incorporate high-impact

practices, as educators we still struggle with how optimally to assess student learning in and across such experiences/contexts.

In part, it seems counterintuitive. Why would high-impact practices in education prove more difficult to evaluate (in terms of student outcomes, whether individually or in the aggregate) than low-impact approaches? Once examined closely, however, the dilemma makes more sense. In the pre-digital days when information transmission and content mastery often stood at the center of undergraduate education, pre- and post-tests of student comprehension proved more helpful indicators of student progress. Now that "information is free" in the digital age, higher education faces increased pressure to demonstrate more transformational learning in baccalaureate education—shifts in perspective, insight, reasoning, decision-making, and capacity. For these purposes, information-based testing proves less pertinent or sufficient as a success indicator. We must look elsewhere to document and measure the effects of higher-order thinking and practice.

Indeed, once we begin to ask more textured, contextualized outcomes of undergraduate study (not just how many syllables are usual in a haiku, but what the possibilities and constraints of such a form are on expression of the human condition), we must identify different strategies for determining and documenting that/how students learn. For instance, students may arrive in higher education supposing themselves already skilled critical thinkers. After all, they have received solid performance reviews through high school and have gained admission to higher education. Once they engage in substantive undergraduate learning about critical thinking, however, their self-assessments may become less hyperbolic and more modest. They have the sense that they know less (than they supposed) and wonder more (than they once did). Such a drop in self-perception regarding critical thinking from first-year to senior-year may in fact represent growth in the performance category, even though the self-assigned score might decline. That is, students have a deeper appreciation of what critical thinking involves and contributes, and they temper their claims about their own proficiency based upon that new evidence and understanding.

Given this curious dimension of student metacognition, in which students may in fact reveal growth in perception through increased humility in self-report, it may be that assessment of student learning in an era of high-impact practices may require modified approaches:

(1) Effective assessment of student learning through high-impact practices likely demands more parties than the instructor functioning as assessor. In part, students need to contribute through self-assess-

ment and reflective practice. Further, in the context of internships or community-based learning/research, learning partners (at agencies or other placements) play a crucial part in documenting student progress and growth.

(2) Experientially-based activities, such as study abroad, may call for assessment strategies that provide more than entry and exit data. In fact, the effects of an experience such as study abroad may not be fully known until subsequent studies, during which the student demonstrates enhanced global understanding or awareness of cultural diversity in the conduct of work following their return to campus.

(3) The lasting benefits of a common intellectual experience, such as a core undergraduate curriculum, may best be documented longitudinally. That is, a student may perform more successfully within their upper-division work, including study within their chosen major, as a result of a positive learning foundation. Customary assessments of such shared experiences such as general education, however, tend to focus on performance within individual courses and/or at the lower-division level.

(4) Students participating in learning communities may grow in ways beyond or apart from grades earned and degrees conferred. Indeed, some of the most profound gains through such communities of inquiry may be manifest in such dispositions/behaviors as student engagement, intellectual risk-taking, and a willingness to seek out learning opportunities and enroll at one's optimal challenge-level. Therefore, while learning communities typically boast of effects such as retention, persistence, or time-to-degree (all relatively easy to measure and compare), the deeper effects may be more elusive to document.

(5) While undergraduate research relies upon some foundational skills and protocols of investigation, its enduring value in the learning lives of undergraduates far exceeds familiarization with those procedures of inquiry. At their best, students involved in undergraduate research learn how to pose and refine important questions, engage in thoughtful dialogue with other scholars, and become part of the contest for meaning among competing truth claims. While a given research activity, or its product, might hint at these levels of performance, the deeper learning in terms of capacities as a critical and/or creative investigator, may need to be examined through less conventional means than direct appraisal of the resulting presentation or publication.

(6) When writing-intensive instruction targets growth not only of composition but of cognition, long-term student improvements may first involve some short-term setbacks. As students complicate their thinking and elevate its expression, they may—at least for an interval

of time—find that their prose suffers. In part, this is the result of their movement away from writing formulas, moving from a template of report to a rhetorical frame of discovery. Once students raise the stakes of their writing, they may find that the increased nuance of their ideas and arguments requires them to forge new approaches to their writing, ones capable of conveying the greater sophistication of their insights. One familiar example can be found in the student who begins to incorporate counterargument within argumentative/persuasive writing assignments. When this practice is first attempted, a student may find it difficult to hold different possibilities in tension, both within their minds and within their compositions. With practice, however, their arguments become more fully reckoned and more compelling as a result.

(7) Collaborative assignments and projects defy higher education's preoccupation with the individual, entrepreneurial model of monitoring student performance. While stakeholders in the community and the workplace speak emphatically to the importance of collaboration, the tendency remains to either assess individual contributions to a group project or to treat the group as a single entity. Still, the value of collaborative practice would appear to suggest that the whole is more than the simple sum of its parts. Further, ongoing collaboration among students may mean that educators need to involve students as participants in assessment through such means as guided peer review.

(8) Capstone courses/projects, while they represent culminating moments in an undergraduate career, may need to be assessed at least in part based upon how the students then negotiate degree transition. In other words, how do the process and product of capstones position a student for success in gaining entry (to employment or advanced study), performing at a mature level once gaining entry (whether on the job or in the graduate/professional classroom), and advancing within those chosen endeavors?

On the Need for Transformed Assessment
to Document Transformational Learning

Increasingly, the emphasis is less on 'What do we know?' than on 'What can we do with what we know?' New directions in higher education, including but not limited to the incorporation of high-impact practices, cause students and instructors alike to speak of learning as a transformation (rather than as a transfer of information or an incremental growth in existing abilities). The discourse of transformative education challenges educators to revisit the premises, practices, and purposes of assessment of student learning. A paradox stands at the

center of outcome-based teaching in higher education: How does an educator guide a student to become a more self-directed learner? In order to engage this paradox productively, not only our educational expectations for our student's growth, but also our rulers for measuring such progress, may need to change.

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