

# REASSESSING (AND DEFINING) ASSESSMENT

by Thomas A. Angelo

## *Second draft definition*

**W**hat is assessment? I'm often asked, as I suspect other assessment advocates are, to provide a 100-words-or-less answer. But though we've talked about and struggled with assessment for more than a decade now, we've yet to come up with a widely acceptable definition. What I think

we need — and I hope the AAHE Assessment Forum can provide — is a definition that: expresses the core educational values behind assessment; recognizes the need for improvement *and* accountability; and prompts campus teams to construct their own, more appropriate and useful "local" definitions.

So, in an April 1995 *Bulletin* article, "Reassessing Assessment," I proposed a first-draft definition and invited comments and suggestions from the network of practitioners who connect through AAHE's Assessment Forum. In response, more than forty readers wrote, emailed, or phoned. About half those messages were of the "I agree" or "Good idea, thanks" variety. The balance were detailed, substantive responses, suggesting everything from minor changes in wording, to major changes in content, to rethinking of premises, to entirely different approaches.

The following two pages display a few representative excerpts from the responses. Due to the limited space, they can only hint at the richness and complexity of the letters and faxes (sometimes several pages long) those

*Assessment* is an ongoing process aimed at understanding and improving student learning. It involves making our expectations explicit and public; setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality; systematically gathering, analyzing, and interpreting evidence to determine how well performance matches those expectations and standards; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance. When it is embedded effectively within larger institutional systems, assessment can help us focus our collective attention, examine our assumptions, and create a shared academic culture dedicated to assuring and improving the quality of higher education.

excerpts represent. (Numbers in brackets key to the list of contributors on page 9.)

## **Five Common Themes**

There was near total agreement among contributors that assessment should focus primarily on improving *student* learning — rather than on the broader, vaguer "higher" learning I had suggested.

That said, several writers also noted the importance of not limiting its focus to student learning *in the classroom*, of including the wide range of processes that influence learning:

"[Assessment] must begin with the learning of the individual student in the individual classroom. . . . In addition, we must assess the effectiveness of advising, dispensing financial aid, providing library services and child care. . . ." [3]

Third was the value of a systems approach — understanding assessment as a *process embedded within larger systems* and as a *tool for organizational learning*.

Along these lines, there was also general agreement that we should use assessment more effectively

to "focus our collective attention" at departmental and institutional levels. And several contributors advocated using assessment as a vehicle to *create linkages and enhance coherence* within and across the curriculum.

Managing the inherent tensions between *assessment for improvement and assessment for account-*

*ability* was a fifth major theme. While most respondents favored putting improvement first, all accepted the need for accountability: "Assessment for improvement is the only meaningful type of assessment: accepting responsibility for improving programs and services means being accountable to somebody" [6].

An old saw holds that a camel is a horse designed by committee. Given its multiple "parentage," the hybridized second draft definition above may not be a thoroughbred, but I hope it will prove to be a hardy, useful workhorse. My goal in offering it is *not* to arrive at a final, "camelized," one-size-fits-all definition. Rather, I hope the thoughtful contributions that informed it, partially revealed by the next two pages, will generate further discussions on campuses and in departments. To the extent that this revised, 92-word definition succeeds, the contributors deserve the credit. Please direct any comments, criticisms, and suggestions to me. ■

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# Just some of the response . . .

Perhaps "focusing our collective attention" could instead be "focusing our collective attention as campus communities." [13]

I would add two items under "examining our assumptions." First, . . . the assessment process requires us to examine our assumptions about teaching and learning. . . . Second, [it] helps us to clarify issues of professional ethics and professional responsibility at all levels of the institution. [6]

Is assessment *part* of an improvement system or, as the draft implies, *the* improvement system? . . . The draft definition may be making extravagant claims when it implies that assessment (without any reference to structure, principles, and practices) can create a shared academic culture. [1]

I'm very uncomfortable with "continuously improving." . . . Isn't anyone going to at least mention the Enlightenment assumption here about human perfectibility? . . . I don't think that we know that there aren't ceilings to what all students can attain. This is not a form of resting on the oars; it's a way of saying that no matter how innovatively we row, or how hard, there may be students we won't help arrive, and there may also be a limit, in some respects to what any student can achieve in a given time. . . . Yes, we can improve what we do, but no, the implication that whatever we do will never be enough is profoundly distressing and inhibiting. [2]

## *First draft definition*

Assessment is a means for focusing our collective attention, examining our assumptions, and creating a shared academic culture dedicated to continuously improving the quality of higher learning.

Assessment requires making expectations and standards for quality explicit and public; systematically gathering evidence on how well performance matches those expectations and standards; analyzing and interpreting the evidence; and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance.

— AAHE Bulletin, April 1995, p. 11

I would prefer to see the second sentence . . . [give] equal weight to providing diagnostic information and gathering evidence on how well performance matches standards. The best kind of assessment combines these two emphases and does not require a "second round" to get at meaningful analysis and interpretation of data. [9]

Information most helpful to . . . continuous improvement . . . is comparative. . . . I would then suggest the insertion of the words "comparative and relevant" between "requires making" and "our expectations and standards for quality." [5]

Why is there no mention of the *student* . . . ? We believe that at the heart of any definition should be *student learning*. [1]

I think the word "student" needs to become an *explicit* part of the definition. [13]

I would suggest . . . an explicit mention of improving . . . student learning in the definition. [14]

I would like the definition . . . [to recognize] that assessment is "student centered" and that institutional outcomes objectives "add intellectual design to student learning" by connecting and integrating knowledge and skills more explicitly into a unified whole. That is its potential power and intellectual beauty. [11]

The phrase "of higher learning" . . . bothers me the most. Do you mean ". . . the quality of learning in higher education"? . . . Does it mean higher in the Bloom *Taxonomy*, or critical thinking, or in college, or what? [10]

My first suggestion is that . . . "higher learning" . . . be broadened to "higher education." [9]

We certainly endorse making standards explicit and public, although we might be inclined to talk about *criteria* rather than *standards*. [1]

How about adding a phrase at the end ". . . improve performance and enhance development, both in and out of the classroom." [6]

### Other approaches

It seems to me that . . . your draft definition is rather a gloss, or even a mission statement, for assessment rather than a definition. I would suggest using Ted Marchese's definition ["the systematic gathering, interpretation, and use of information about student learning for purposes of improvement"] but modifying it to conclude ". . . for purposes of continuous improvement and documented accountability." You could then go on from there with your own sentences, which would form an appropriate statement of "how's" after the "what" of assessment. [8]

Assessment is a critical process of organizational learning . . . [It] focuses organizational attention on the processes and outcomes of student learning, forcing the examination of assumptions about inputs, outputs, and the design of systems. . . . [It] creates a culture of continuous improvement of people, processes, and performance. [4]

Assessment is an ongoing process, which, if appropriately designed and implemented, will be an integral part of the instruction that takes place in the classroom. Assessment must be designed to address every level of cognitive ability and should be developed horizontally (i.e., department or college level assessment) and vertically (i.e., student to professor to college to university established outcomes). The evidence should show "how well performance matches. . . ." [7]

### On the one hand . . .

Recently I received a letter from

someone who wrote, "I have read Tom Angelo's definition of assessment . . . and he seems to be confining the definition to classroom learning." . . . I do not see that you have left out . . . program and institutional effectiveness. On the other hand, those aspects of assessment are not explicitly addressed. [3]

A few suggestions: "Assessment is an ongoing strategy for focusing an institution's collective attention by examining its assumptions. . . . Assessment requires not only establishing standards but also making the expectations . . . gathering evidence on how well actual performance. . . ." [12]

### . . . But on the other

The definition . . . does seem to place a priority on program or institutional assessment. . . . Thus, [it] is not as broadly encompassing as might be intended. . . . Assessment of students to provide individual feedback, and evaluation that results in further learning, is central. [1]

### A remaining question

Finally, what is the role of judgment in assessment? . . . The significant judgment process for interpretation of evidence and for making decisions is inferred and not made explicit. . . . It does not note the centrality of making judgments at the student, department, and broader levels; it does not clarify who is involved nor the processes that help create meaningful judgments. . . . Our experience is that a major influence in creating a coherent curriculum is the development of a community of judgment. [1]

### Contributors

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