

# Perceptions of College Faculty Regarding Outcomes Assessment

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**ABSTRACT:** The perceptions of college faculty regarding outcomes assessment were explored using a qualitative interview research approach. Three faculty members at a liberal arts college in the United States were interviewed about their understandings, reactions to, and concerns regarding the assessment movement. Faculty members differed in their understandings of assessment and articulated a number of concerns with the current emphasis towards implementing assessment in higher education. Faculty understood assessment to be a primarily quantitative endeavor and a means of accountability as well as a process of identifying learning objectives. In addition, faculty expressed resistance to the idea of assessment and perceived it to be a distraction rather than an important aspect of the teaching-learning process. Some faculty thought that the growing importance of outcomes assessment was indicative of a lack of trust in the ability of faculty to competently perform their duties. Implications of these findings for engaging faculty in the assessment process are discussed.

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The scenario is common at colleges and universities across the United States. The regional accrediting body has just completed their 10 year review of the college's academic program. The report is fairly positive, with commendations for the successful development of new academic programs, impressive scholarly achievements by the faculty, and responsible management of institutional resources. However, the review team notes that there is little discussion on campus about what students actually learn during their college years. They would like to know what, and how well, students are learning as a result of their completion of the academic programs. In other words, the review team wants the college to develop an "assessment plan" to document the attainment of student learning outcomes.

The academic dean gets the ball rolling, and within a couple of semesters a campus-wide assessment committee is formed, each department has an "assessment" contact, and assessment plans are developed for each academic program. Perhaps a consultant is scheduled to talk to the faculty about the various ways to "do assessment" in academic programs. Some people on campus, especially faculty, aren't quite sure what the "assessment" work has to do with the real purpose of college, which is teaching, learning, and research. But the accrediting body is happy, and many stakeholders are free from worrying about the topic for at least a couple of years.

Although contrived for the purpose of this paper, the previous scenario tells a story that is probably fairly typical on a number of college and university campuses in the United States. Since its birth in the early 1980s the assessment movement has grown rapidly, especially in a political and cultural environment that is increasingly demanding educational accountability in measurable terms (Ewell, 2002). Accrediting agencies for colleges and universities, state boards of education, and legislative bodies are calling on higher education institutions to measure how well students are learning in their educational programs. Proponents of higher education reform are also presenting assessment as a method for improving instruction, especially at the undergraduate level, and as a tool for continuously improving the educational experience (Banta, 2002).

## *Outcomes Assessment*

The term "assessment" has multiple meanings in the field of education. However, in this study, the term "assessment," or "outcomes assessment," refers to the evaluation of student development in educational programs, whether it be academic, personal, or social (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). This evaluation is something other than an end-of-course grade, and is often geared towards measuring and evaluating learning outcomes that exist at the college-wide or major level rather than the individual course level. The types of activities and products that could be considered examples of outcomes assessment are numerous, including standardized tests in an academic area (i.e., psychology, biology), portfolios of writing achievement, student self-reports of knowledge or attitudes, or completed reports of original research. The purpose of assessment is also an important component of the term, as noted in this definition of assessment in higher education:

Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development (Marchese, 1987, as cited in Palomba & Banta, 1999).

This emphasis on assessment as a useful practice for evaluating student learning is an important difference between outcomes assessment in higher education and the more common understanding of assessment in an individual course (a paper-and-pencil test, course assignment, etc.). In higher education outcomes assessment, the

assessment information is gathered for the purpose of evaluating how well the activities (courses, expectations, internships, etc.) of the academic major are helping students attain important learning outcomes.

Although widely implemented, the assessment movement has had little effect on the day-to-day activities of faculty, and is viewed by most with suspicion and disregard (Ewell, 2002; Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). This state of affairs creates a difficult situation for colleges and universities initiating or conducting assessment programs. If individual faculty members remain disengaged from the process, there is little hope that assessment will fulfill its stated goal of improving student learning and development. It also creates a quagmire of wasted rhetoric and resources. Student assessment becomes a key component of an institutions path to continued accreditation, money and resources are committed to its maintenance, all while faculty remain on the sidelines, wondering when this latest educational innovation will pass.

#### *Research on faculty perceptions of outcomes assessment*

Although faculty involvement is crucial to the successful implementation of assessment in higher education, very little formal research has been conducted on the topic. Most of the current literature addressing the faculty role in outcomes assessment is primarily descriptive in nature (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003; Muffo, 2001; Palomba & Banta, 1999). This literature provides basic descriptions of the assessment process, case studies of successfully implemented assessment programs, and advice to administrators on how to implement assessment programs. Although formal research on the perceptions of faculty regarding outcomes assessment is lacking, professionals in the field of assessment have offered a number of ideas regarding the faculty response to assessment.

Muffo (2001) asserted that it is inevitable that faculty will resist assessment and identify it with the accountability movement. This is a tremendous difficulty, in that proponents of assessment in higher education insist that assessment will only be effective in improving college teaching and learning to the extent that faculty "own the process" (Muffo, 2001). Reasons for faculty resistance have been offered in the literature (Grunwald & Peterson, 2003). One reason offered for faculty resistance is the current reward system in higher education, which emphasizes the production of research as a primary measure of faculty performance. Although one could argue that this reward system differs depending on the characteristics of the particular institution, this line of reasoning suggests that faculty are rewarded for research and scholarly contributions rather than for their efforts to improve teaching and assess student learning. Another reason offered is the association of assessment as a vehicle for individual faculty performance rather than as a stimulus for educational improvement. If faculty perceive the assessment movement as a "monitoring system" or a "performance review," they will be less likely to become involved in assessment efforts. Finally, if faculty members perceive that assessment is being imposed from the outside and bears little relevance to the day-to-day process of teaching and learning, there is little chance that they will consider assessment as a beneficial use of their time. Closely related to this reason is the perception that there is little evidence that assessment will actually improve student learning.

In addition to offering resistance to the implementation of assessment, advocates insist that many faculty have little training in how to "do assessment" (Muffo, 2001). This lack of training and familiarity with assessment is likely due to the nature of doctoral education. Most college faculty are trained to be experts in their particular academic discipline and to advance the knowledge base in the discipline through research and scholarly work. Issues of educational concern, such as pedagogy, classroom assessment, evaluation of learning, and instructional modifications, may be of personal interest to individual faculty members, but may not have been addressed in their doctoral level training. The questions raised by the assessment movement may be entirely new considering the doctoral experiences of many faculty members, which tend to focus on training researchers in a particular discipline rather than training teachers of that discipline. When combined with the emphasis on scholarly production in issues of promotion and tenure in many universities, there may be little incentive to learn how to do assessment on one's own time.

Considering the lack on research on faculty perceptions of the assessment movement and the crucial role that faculty play in the eventual success of assessment programs, this study was conducted to explore the reactions of faculty members to the assessment movement. What do faculty members think of the assessment movement? What concerns do they have? A better understanding faculty member's perception of assessment would be useful in developing approaches for increasing faculty investment and engagement in assessment-related efforts.

## **Method**

I interviewed three faculty members at a small liberal arts college. Because of the possibility that one's understanding of outcomes assessment and willingness to participate in assessment activities may be influenced by academic background, I chose to interview faculty members in different disciplines, including one in the natural sciences, one in humanities, and one in business. I am unaware of research that investigates the relationship between academic

discipline and attitudes towards assessment, but thought that faculty members in education and perhaps disciplines with a more “quantitative” approach (i.e., psychology, mathematics) may be more open to the idea of outcomes assessment. Although I am unable to answer this particular question with the present study because of the limited sample, this hypothesis may provide an impetus for further research.

An important consideration in both the development and analysis of this research project is the nature of the institution where the interviews took place. The institution was a small, liberal arts college that was religiously-affiliated. Although the majority of the faculty at this particular institution were trained at the doctoral level, the clear emphasis was on undergraduate teaching rather than the production of scholarly research. Course teaching loads are heavier than at most larger universities, and research expectations are minimal. In many ways, the faculty role is very different from that of a faculty member at a large doctoral institution. The faculty member typically teaches a large variety of classes, is heavily involved in committee work and other institutional service, and is expected to devote a significant amount of time to working with undergraduate students. The typical demands of “publish-or-perish” are much less pressing in this environment, and decisions for promotion and tenure are primarily based on teaching effectiveness and service to the institution and community. In many ways, one would expect that faculty members from this institution are prime candidates for “jumping on the bandwagon” of outcomes assessment. With this in mind, I thought that it would be an ideal environment for exploring faculty members’ reactions to and concerns regarding the outcomes assessment movement. If resistance is encountered in this environment, it is reasonable to think that the resistance would only be intensified at large, research-oriented universities.

Another important characteristic of the institution was its history and exposure to the outcomes assessment movement. Although discussions regarding the need to begin an assessment program had taken place in previous years, the institution did not have a formal assessment program on record. A few years prior to the implementation of this study, the Academic Policies Committee of the faculty suggested that all academic programs assess outcomes by implementing end-of-the major standardized exams. At the time of the study, few departments had actually implemented this suggestion, and there was no formal recognition of an outcomes assessment program on campus. However, outside demands by accrediting agencies were beginning to prompt a move towards a formal and institutionalized assessment program. The institution was facing a new accreditation cycle from the regional accrediting body, and this body was requiring institutions to provide evidence of continuous improvement processes in a number of areas, including the area of student learning. Although institutions are provided a great deal of flexibility regarding the specific types of assessment implemented, the accreditation body is concerned that institutions are assessing student learning outcomes on a regular basis and using the information to make improvements in their academic programs. With this movement towards the new accreditation process, a variety of discussions regarding assessment had taken place on campus by the beginning of this study. However, no specific plans for action were implemented.

The three faculty members were interviewed in their offices at a time of their convenience. An interview schedule (see appendix A) was constructed with preliminary questions, although a semi-structured approach allowed for deviation from the schedule. The actual interviews ranged in duration from approximately 40 minutes to an hour and a half. Interviews were recorded on a miniature tape recorder and transcribed into the NUDIST 6 computer program for qualitative analysis.

I was primarily interested in identifying the perceptions of, reactions to, and important issues that faculty raise regarding the outcomes assessment movement. Questions in the interview schedule (see Appendix A) were designed to explore issues noted in the literature as possibly important to faculty and to also assess exposure to and initial reactions to assessment. Are faculty generally resistant to the idea of assessment, as noted by some proponents of assessment (Muffo, 2001; Palomba & Banta, 1999)? What does assessment mean to them, and how do they envision assessment affecting their institutions? What concerns do they have regarding assessment? By asking these questions, I hoped to identify important themes that could inform faculty, assessment practitioners, and administrators about the faculty experience of the new demands for academic assessment.

My approach to data analysis was guided by the “issue-focused analysis” approach articulated by Weiss (1994). This approach focuses on gathering data from respondents regarding particular issues, events, or processes of interest. Although generalizations to faculty members at other institutions are unwarranted due to the limited number of respondents in the study, general reactions and possible issues of concern could be identified. Would the respondents offer resistance, as predicted by the literature? What form would the resistance take, and why? What concerns emerged during the course of the interviews? These questions guided the subsequent analysis of the responses.

## Results

*What does the term 'assessment' mean to college faculty?*

One issue that seems crucial to an understanding of faculty perceptions of assessment is their interpretation of the term. Assessment is a buzzword used in many different educational contexts, and the possibility of widely divergent understandings of the term is likely. Considering this possibility, I asked respondents to describe their exposure to and understanding of the term assessment, more specifically as the term 'assessment' is used in the outcomes assessment movement.

A few themes emerged from the interviews that help to create a picture of how faculty understand the term 'assessment.' One of these themes is the idea that assessment is a quantitative endeavor, a process of assigning some type of number to student learning. All respondents indicated that the idea of quantifying student learning was an essential concept in assessment. One respondent even stated that accrediting agencies wanted some type of "test score" to document student learning. Although one respondent insisted that the process of assessment is something that faculty have always done, the new emphasis on "quantifying" so that others can evaluate student learning is new.

All of the respondents expressed concern with the idea of quantifying learning, and some were especially skeptical because of the nature of their particular academic discipline and the nature of learning in that discipline. One respondent working in the humanities had this say:

We are working in an essentially unquantifiable area. Can students read and interpret text? Can students write? And so there is a bit of subjectivity to that, to that kind of evaluation.

In fact, the emphasis on quantifying student learning, and more specifically limiting assessment to some type of test, stood out as one of the major concerns of faculty regarding the assessment movement. One faculty member, when responding to a question regarding his initial reaction to the assessment movement, had this to say:

How do you measure it? There's so many different ways you can look at it. Student perceptions, students can say I learned a lot in this class, this program, that may or may not be the case. At one level I have a problem with standardized testing although at one level I think standardized tests have a place in it. And I do think that, the notion of a portfolio also fits with that. As long as you don't define assessment as a test, I think you've got something that has some meaning and validity. If you define it just as saying you've got to get a certain score on a test just to prove that you're competent, then there's, there's some sort of a problem. Although, you know, to enter into the profession I'm dealing with you've got a qualifying exam, you've got to pass the test. So how does that impact the education that you do? Do you find yourself teaching to the test or not, so I know that happens. But, if what's on the test is what's important that's not such a bad thing.

Clearly, faculty were very concerned with the perceived quantitative nature of assessment. Why the need to quantify the learning outcomes of a graduate? One respondent indicated that perhaps there is a lack of trust in professionals, in this case college faculty, to ensure that students have met a certain standard. While not mentioning a specific lack of trust, other respondents noted the importance of accountability in the emphasis on assessment. This line of thinking about assessment suggests that with a lack of faith in the ability of professionals to hold to a common standard of excellence, perhaps an outside measure of learning (rather than simply the faculty member's informal evaluation) is needed to maintain adequate academic standards. The idea that assessment may be an effort to "ensure quality" among faculty is consistent with one of the major reasons for resistance to assessment offered in the literature (Palomba & Banta, 1999). When faculty perceive assessment as a method of individual accountability, they are more likely to have negative attitudes towards its implementation.

A final meaning that emerged from the interviews was the idea of assessment as identifying learning objectives. Of all the meanings presented, identifying learning objectives appeared to most resemble the notion of assessment described in the higher education assessment literature (Banta, 2002; Muffo, 2001; Palomba & Banta, 1999). Two respondents specifically mentioned assessment as a process of identifying important learning objectives for both programs and courses and continually assessing the attainment of those objectives. If the students in a particular program failed to meet or performed poorly on the identified objectives, then some intervention would need to take place – either adjusting the objectives or changing the strategies to reach them – with a focus on continually improving the educational process. All of the faculty in the study implied that it was easier to describe the process of

assessing learning in an academic program than to actually implement an assessment process that would help evaluate the achievement of objectives.

Although there were some common understandings of the meanings of assessment among the faculty members interviewed, their conceptions of the term were varied enough to suggest that they may have picked up unique understandings of assessment from a variety of sources. In this particular study, two respondents mentioned meetings sponsored by the education department that were primarily geared towards accreditation of the college's education programs. At many small, liberal arts institutions, teacher certification programs are influential because of the high percentage of education majors among the student body. Faculty teaching in academic content areas that lead to teacher certification in a particular discipline were involved in a variety of meetings related to new state teacher certification requirements. These new requirements emphasized assessment of teacher knowledge and competencies as an essential part of the teacher preparation program. Another source of information was the general discussion at the college level of the assessment demands being presented by regional accrediting agencies. Because the college was in the process of renewing its regional accreditation, a variety of discussions took place in forums such as faculty and committee meetings. In these meetings, faculty picked up bits and pieces of information related to assessment and the need to address the topic of assessment for future accreditation. In contrast to the discussions on assessment at the college level, respondents reported that the topic of assessment was rarely talked about in their academic disciplines in such settings as professional journals and conferences. Although talk of assessment was not prevalent in their academic disciplines, faculty mentioned that the topic was coming up in discussions with colleagues from other institutions. Many faculty were aware of, and somewhat concerned about, the new move towards assessment and accountability. One respondent understood the various assessment demands in a particularly threatening way, stating that the department might be evaluated on the scores that individual students receive on a standardized test.

Although some confusion existed regarding the meaning of assessment, respondents demonstrated a fairly broad knowledge of the many types of assessment that might be utilized. Some of the assessment methods mentioned by faculty included student and alumni surveys, standardized exams, portfolios, video tapes, rubrics for course assignments, and informal interviews of former students. Some respondents were comfortable with informal methods of assessment, such as interviews with former students, while others saw a need for a more systematic approach to gathering data.

#### *Faculty reactions to assessment*

One of the reactions that I was particularly interested in was the perceptions of faculty regarding the "novelty" of outcomes assessment. Was this something new? Or did they see it as something that educators have been doing all along. One respondent felt very strongly that assessment was something that faculty have been doing all along.

My reaction to that has been interesting to me because there is an implication that this is somehow new, that this is, oh gee, we have to do assessment, as if we haven't been doing it for decades, for centuries. And therefore the name assessment now, interesting enough now I discover, has started taking on, now that's what some bureaucrats out there need to do, in order to be convinced that, we've known all along what's going on, all along what's happening, and what our students are doing, and what they're not doing, and so. We can write that in letters of recommendation, and all that good stuff, it's worked for decades. Somebody out there needs to know officially, and therefore, it's for their benefit rather than ours.

This response seems to imply that the focus of assessment for this particular faculty member is on the individual student, an understanding that in a broad sense is fairly accurate. Some students excel, others do poorly, and individual faculty are certainly able to "assess" and "evaluate" how much an individual student has learned. However, in the context of the outcomes assessment movement, assessment is focused on the systematic evaluation of data from a group of students to improve an educational program (Palomba & Banta, 1999). This reaction in particular illustrates well the varied meanings that individual faculty attach to assessment. These varied understandings likely influence the types of attitudes and reactions faculty members have towards implementing assessment.

Even beyond the variability in how faculty members understand assessment, reactions to assessment were complex. In one respect, respondents were very open to the idea of evaluating the outcomes of a program of study. All respondents agreed that assessment of outcomes, whether formal or informal, was a natural and perhaps expected activity for academic departments. At the same time, respondents noted the difficulty in measuring something as complex as learning in an academic major. Also, respondents wondered whether assessment information would ever

be examined after it is gathered. One respondent stated, when asked whether departments should assess the outcomes of their programs of study as opposed to simply individual courses:

That is tougher. I mean it's...give me a good handle on that and...that to me is the hard part and that is why I say that it can't just be take a test. It is one part of it and the other thing that I think you would find a faculty member saying, you gather all of this data and no one ever looks at it. A lot of assessment, you want to look at it, go ahead. And that is where I think that people will think that it is just a waste of time.

Although the respondents in this study were generally positive about the idea of assessing academic programs, one respondent sensed that there was tremendous skepticism among faculty members regarding assessment. What was particularly interesting about this particular respondent's comments was the description of resistance to changes in assessment in specific courses as opposed to large program level objectives. The respondent mentioned that they had sensed resistance even to the idea "of having to write something down that's a descriptor of an A, or a B, or a C paper, that's been concerning to people."

Another reported on experiences he has had with colleagues at various meetings related to assessment. This respondent also noted the general resistance to the idea of assessment.

We talk about it, ....., this was our primary topic of conversation. And, again, it was, it wasn't necessarily a focused discussion, it was a, some were advocates of it, a few were advocates, and most of the others, most of them were griping about needing to do it as an extra, somewhat they thought unfruitful, profitable thing. But, it's there, it's constantly there.

This particular respondent later discussed what may be one of the primary reasons for faculty resistance to the idea of outcomes assessment. The respondent mentioned that in his limited exposure to applications of assessment, he had not seen any credible evidence that it would make a difference in student learning. Noting the amount of time required to implement assessment, this respondent noted that it was discouraging to hear of efforts to implement assessment that seemed to have little effect on the actual performance of students in the classroom.

Perhaps another reason for the general sense of resistance among faculty members is the usual and often well-founded skepticism concerning new educational trends. One respondent noted that these trends tend to come around every few years and that most tend to lose their energy with time. The general sense is that many of these trends, often sparked by state Department of Education requirements for teacher education programs, are of little value to the actual educational process. One respondent noted a particular call by the department of education requiring departments to document what they were teaching in their courses. Displaying a remarkable insight into the rationale behind the new call for assessment, the respondent stated:

It happened earlier with the department of education, see, we rewrote all of this stuff, to be able to demonstrate where in our courses we address all these things. And I also thought that's kind of silly because just to say that I do this in chapter 3 when I do this topic, so they know that, big deal, now they want to know what are the students learning, rather than did you do it. Did you cover it in class? That was the earlier question, which was really kind of a massive undertaking as well. All these, showing where each standard is addressed.

Although the skepticism regarding the "new educational trend" of assessment was strong, one respondent felt that assessment was still a worthwhile activity to pursue.

Yea, and I'm kind of skeptical. And I know some of my colleagues who have been in this much longer than I am, are skeptical. We do tend to see educational trends come and go. And so they're a little bit skeptical. But my sense, if we would talk about pedagogy more, that there would be a little bit more of a longer lasting, that's a timeless issue. Cause Socrates talked, you know.

This respondent recognized the skepticism and resistance among other faculty, but expressed a hope that implementing assessment would be a positive development by stimulating discussion about pedagogy. This respondent seemed to sense a connection between the move towards outcomes assessment and an evaluation of pedagogy that in the end might impact learning simply by prompting a discussion among faculty regarding educational goals and teaching methods to help students reach those goals.

### *Faculty concerns with the assessment movement.*

A primary concern expressed by the respondents was the lack of time available to actually implement assessment. Assessment is viewed as a process that is “added-on” to regular instruction. Related to this concern is the general feeling that the new assessment will be of no benefit to students. One respondent stated his major concern with the new outcomes assessment movement was not the demand for accountability, but a feeling that assessment will not benefit his students.

I think my major concern in the whole arena is ... all of us have a limited amount of time, and we ought to spend that time to benefit our students to the greatest extent. And I haven't seen how the time spent on all of this formal assessment procedure is gonna end up benefiting our students. As much as that same time spent in, just sitting and helping them, you know if nothing else.

What was interesting about the respondent's mention of the lack of time was the apparent discrepancies between respondents regarding their own interpretations of assessment. One respondent said that it takes time to “create objectives” in the syllabus and then write an exam to measure achievement of those objectives, an apparent reference to assessment in a particular course. Others mentioned formal program assessment and the amount of time it would take to set up the assessment program and constantly review data. One respondent discussed how the lack of time would be even more pressing at a research institution, where a faculty member would be pressured to “get three articles sent off” while also implementing assessment. Clearly, faculty viewed the implementation of assessment as a process that will take a lot of time and energy with little benefit to themselves or their students.

In addition to mentioning the lack of time for assessment, faculty also expressed concern regarding how the information will be used. As mentioned previously, one respondent expressed the fear that they will spend a tremendous amount of energy gathering assessment data only to see that the data was never examined. This sense of confusion regarding who the primary benefactors of the assessment data are stands in sharp contrast to the ideals of assessment as laid out by assessment proponents (Palomba & Banta, 1999). In its ideal form, assessment data is gathered primarily for the faculty, to be used to evaluate how well the academic program is meeting its stated goals and objectives. The data can also be used to document that the academic program is monitoring its effectiveness. The concept of outcomes assessment as a method of accountability or even ‘surveillance’ was prevalent among the respondents, as evidenced by one faculty member who expressed concern that the department would be evaluated by the numbers rather than through a comprehensive evaluation process.

The concern for gathering data and then never looking at it again was related to the faculty concern that assessment is administrator driven. All of the respondents agreed that at the present time assessment is administrator driven rather than faculty driven. Why is assessment administrator driven? Because accrediting agencies are requiring that outcomes assessment be addressed. One respondent did, however, express a desire to see assessment transformed into a faculty driven process.

No, it's something we have to do to satisfy the outside people. And that's, I think, sometimes discouraging to me. I think it should be part of what we are doing..internally. But, it tends to be that, I guess you always do, you know, the squeaky wheel hits the oil, and so if we're gonna lose our accreditation in some way that's kind of a barrier that we have to jump over. Yea, but I do wish that we had more concern over the program.

## **Discussion**

As mentioned in the literature, outcomes assessment in higher education is a controversial and irritating movement in the minds of many college faculty members. Although one respondent mentioned that like many educational innovations, the push towards assessment will likely fade away, it appears that the demand for outcomes assessment is embedded as a primary method for stimulating change in higher education. Major accrediting agencies appear to be committed to the use of assessment as a key indicator of the quality of an institution. In the process of accreditation, the tide has shifted from an examination of the “inputs” of an institution (i.e., endowment, faculty credentials, facilities) to an emphasis on the “outputs” (i.e., student learning, student change) of a college education.

What is clear is that the move towards assessment is certainly something that faculty perceive as being imposed on them from the outside. This study identified a number of issues that may be contributing to the resistance among faculty. First, there are many different understandings among faculty regarding what assessment actually is, even in a small liberal arts college in which faculty interact quite frequently and are primarily concerned with undergraduate instruction. These understandings include the idea that assessment is a quantitative measure of student learning, that

it is primarily a vehicle for faculty accountability, and that it is a process of identifying learning objectives. Of all of these understandings, the notion that assessment is a vehicle for faculty accountability is one that may be especially harmful to the successful implementation of outcomes assessment. Assessment proponents have predicted that when faculty express this understanding of assessment, they will resist (Palomba & Banta, 1999). This appeared to ring true in the responses of the faculty members in this study. As assessment programs are developed on individual campuses, it is particularly important to be clear about the purposes of assessment and how the information will be used in order to address faculty concerns.

Another finding that emerged from this study is that some faculty remain unconvinced that assessment is a worthwhile educational innovation. The reasons for this are varied, and many may relate to the partial and idiosyncratic understandings of assessment by individual faculty members. Some may feel that assessment has been happening all along and the new version of outcomes assessment is merely an exercise to satisfy outside interests. Others perceive that the development of assessment will take too much time away from important instructional activities. It appears that until assessment is associated with concepts such as teaching, learning, pedagogy, etc., it will garner little respect from faculty. The one respondent who did see the potential for outcomes assessment to stimulate discussion regarding pedagogy tended to have a more positive perception of assessment as a whole. Whether the link between assessment and pedagogy is established appears to be an extremely important issue as institutions seek to involve faculty in assessment activities.

A major limitation that weakens the conclusions that can be drawn from this study is the fact that only three faculty members were interviewed. These faculty members may or may not be representative of other faculty members at the institution in which the study took place. Even so, this study has identified some of the concerns that faculty at a small liberal arts college may have as assessment programs are introduced and developed. Future research is needed to test the generality of the concerns. For example, do faculty at larger institutions (with higher research expectations) have similar concerns regarding assessment? How do faculty at institutions with well developed assessment programs understand assessment? Do they have more positive attitudes towards outcomes assessment? How do attitudes towards assessment relate to other variables such as the academic discipline of the faculty member and their conceptions of teaching? These and many other questions will need to be explored to better understand the faculty experience of outcomes assessment. Considering the amount of money, time, and energy being devoted to the development of outcomes assessment in higher education, it is wise to gain a better understanding of the concerns of a key constituency, the faculty.

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## Appendix A

### "Perceptions of faculty members regarding outcomes assessment"

#### Interview Schedule

1. What does the term "assessment" mean to you?
1. When did you first hear of the term?
  - i. If unfamiliar with assessment, discuss current understandings of higher education (collection of data regarding student learning, assessment of cognitive objectives, affective objectives, behavioral objectives)
  - ii. Discuss fields with assessment requirements (education, engineering, social work).
  - iii. Examples of assessment (testing, systematic evaluation of student products, portfolios, comprehensive examinations)
  
- 1.
2. Have you been involved in any workshops or special training related to assessment?
  - i. What was the focus of these training experiences? Developing better tests? Using alternative assessments? Assessing program level objectives?
2. Has "assessment" been an important topic in your academic discipline?
  1. When and where has it been discussed? Conferences, Journals?
  2. Can you describe the discussions?
  3. What concerns do faculty members in your discipline have regarding assessment?
    - i. General perceptions? Enthusiasm, skepticism?
  3. How do you know when a student has learned in your discipline? What are the most important learning outcomes in \_\_\_\_\_?
  4. What have you heard regarding the importance of "assessment" to accrediting agencies (i.e. North Central Association, discipline-specific organizations)?
  
1. Has your department addressed assessment? How so?
2. Will your department be addressing assessment in the future?
3. Is assessment more relevant to majors emphasizing professional preparation (Education, Nursing) rather than education in an "academic discipline (i.e. philosophy, English)?"
5. What is your reaction to the suggestion that "academic departments should measure the outcomes of their program of study?"
  
1. How do you think faculty view the new demands for assessment?
2. Are there concerns you have regarding assessment?
3. Is assessment faculty-driven or administrator driven?
6. In your opinion, has assessment been emphasized in your institution?
  1. In what ways?
  2. Can you describe specific programs, discussions that have focused on assessment?
  3. Can you describe any examples in which you have implemented or modified assessment in your courses?
  7. Do you think that the assessment movement will have an impact on teaching and learning at your institution?
  
1. Why or why not?
2. How so?