Future Directions for Assessing Complex General Education Student Learning Outcomes

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In 1933–34, a few years before the landmark study on student achievement by Learned and Wood (1938), the total enrollment of students in colleges, universities, junior colleges, teachers colleges, and normal schools was around 1.06 million (Committee Y of the American Association of University Professors, 1937) out of a U.S. population of about 126.5 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002), or about 0.8 percent. In 2008, the total projected fall enrollment in postsecondary, degree-granting institutions was over 18 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) out of a U.S. population of 304 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), or about 6 percent. The dramatic change in enrollment and participation in higher education is only one of many transformations that continue to dramatically affect every aspect of postsecondary education. This chapter examines three major trends in postsecondary education, related to faculty members’ roles, students’ changing expectations for postsecondary education, and increasing demand for access, affordability, and accountability. It also discusses how they have an impact on assessment of general education student learning outcomes. The chapter closes by proposing an agenda for future research.

Casualization of Faculty Work

In 1980, 62 percent of full-time faculty members at four-year institutions classified as baccalaureate or higher according to the Carnegie Classification were tenured (IPEDS, 2010). In 1992, this percentage decreased...
slightly to 61 percent, and an additional 25 percent of faculty members were on the tenure track (IPEDS, 2010). However, by 2008 the proportion of full-time tenured faculty members had decreased to 45 percent, and only 20 percent were on the tenure track, leaving a large number of full-time faculty members off it (IPEDS, 2010).

This trend, reflecting a move away from use of tenured and tenure-track faculty members toward increased use of nontenure-track faculty members and part-time, contingent instructors, is part of what has been called the “casualization” of work in higher education (see Berry, 2005; Percy and Beaumont, 2008). Casual jobs are those that “attract an hourly rate of pay but very few of the other rights and benefits, such as the right to notice, the right to severance pay, and most forms of paid leave” (May, Campbell, and Burgess, 2005). The casualization of faculty work reflects changes not only to the granting of tenure and tenure-track status but also to the relationship between institutions and faculty members, substantially affecting faculty members’ roles and responsibilities.

Students’ Changing Approaches to Higher Education and the Rise of the McUniversity

In the late 1960s, a survey found more than 80 percent of college students endorsed “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as an essential or very important reason for attending college, while only 45 percent endorsed “being well off financially.” By the late 1980s, these two goals had switched places, with “being well off financially” the top goal and “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” dropping to sixth place (Astin, 1998). Another important indicator of the striking changes to how students approach higher education is the large percentage who attend more than one institution before graduating. Fifty-nine percent of first-time bachelor’s degree recipients in 1999–2000 attended more than one institution (Peter and Forrest Cataldi, 2005) as students engaged in what has been called “swirling” and “double-dipping” (McCormick, 2003). Higher education is now only one of many things that occupy students’ time during the day, with 68 percent of all college students working for pay during the academic year (Pike, Kuh, and Massa-McKinley, 2008).

These elements taken together have been called the rise of the McUniversity (Ritzer, 1996), which entails viewing students as consumers and responding to their “new means of consumption” (Baudrillard, 1970; cited in Ritzer, 1996, p. 185). Although there are many issues that arise when institutions begin viewing students as consumers (see Olshavsky and Spreng, 1995), many students and parents already take this approach to their education. These students want the McUniversity to provide “simple procedures, good service, quality courses, and low costs” (Levine, 1993), resulting in increasing pressure for “serious reconsideration of our assumptions of how, when, and where instruction (and education
more broadly) can be delivered and learning promoted” (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998, pp. 161–162).

**Increasing Demand for Access, Affordability, and Accountability**

Access, affordability, and accountability have become focal points for reform in higher education (see Webber and Boehmer, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Access to higher education is “unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. 1) and is particularly problematic for low-income groups and some racial and ethnic minorities. Affordability, closely linked with access (Adelman, 2007), is becoming increasingly difficult for many students as the cost of college “has significantly outpaced the growth of family incomes” (Middle Class Task Force, 2009). Accountability is viewed as a mechanism to “ensure that colleges succeed in educating students” and as a way to answer “basic questions” on the cost of college and on “which institutions do a better job than others not only of graduating students but of teaching them what they need to learn” (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, p. x). The drive for increased access, affordability, and accountability has an impact on our institutions’ educational missions and how we seek to carry them out.

Together, the casualization of faculty work, changes in how students approach higher education, and the push for access, affordability, and accountability challenge our traditional general education assessment processes and highlight four future directions for assessment of general education: (1) innovation in assessment tools, methods, and uses; (2) development of consortia of institutions to collaborate on general education assessment; (3) movement from the institution to the student as the unit of analysis; and (4) using assessment to inform our understanding of the credit hour.

**Future Directions for Assessment of General Education**

**Innovation in Assessment Tools, Methods, and Uses.** General education outcomes are continuing to move away from a grouping of discipline-based, cafeteria-style courses toward an emphasis on transferable, complex, cross-discipline student learning outcomes. As discussed in the earlier chapters in this volume, one result of this development is creation of innovative assessment tools designed to gather evidence of student achievement of these complex outcomes. Methods and processes for using these new assessment tools must also be created to reflect new educational practices and the new ways in which students interact with multiple
institutions. These assessment methods must be simple, straightforward, and efficient to permit use by a diverse, and increasingly nontenure-track, faculty with a mobile student body.

Assessment of general education will be used in a variety of ways and for many purposes. As faculty members’ and students’ roles evolve and change, assessment of general education will be even more critical in establishing expectations for student achievement of the general education outcomes and communicating those outcomes with faculty members, students, external stakeholders, accreditors, and the general public. Data from assessment of general education will continue to be used to improve and revise the general education program while simultaneously serving accountability demands.

Developing Consortia of Institutions to Jointly Assess General Education Learning Outcomes. As a result of the large number of students enrolling at multiple institutions or transferring between institutions, most degree programs and general education programs are now cross-institutional. Assessment of general education programs has traditionally either ignored this reality or focused only on the smaller group of traditional students. Consortia of institutions need to be developed in order to integrate assessment across institutions, so users of assessment results have a more complete picture of the relationship between educational programs and student achievement.

These new consortia would be based on core groups of shared students and would work across Carnegie classification status to achieve both horizontal and vertical integration, ideally growing to also include K–12 schools. Each consortium should work to build a shared set of expectations for student achievement in general education, create cross-institutional curricula that address these expectations, and establish a systematic process for gathering assessment data on students’ achievement of these expectations. The Tuning model from the Bologna process (see Adelman, 2008; Lumina Foundation, 2010) may be one such approach.

Moving from the Institution to the Student as the Unit of Analysis. One primary purpose for implementing assessment of general education is to draw inferences about curricula, co-curricular experiences, and teaching practices so as to develop improvement strategies. A common method being used to draw such inferences, and a widespread component of current accountability initiatives, is to administer a common test or rubric for the purpose of comparing student achievement at the institutional level. This method is appealing because it can be used to rank-order institutions and could reveal successful institutional practices that lead to increased student achievement. However, institutional-level analyses are problematic because they focus on the small portion of the variance in student achievement between institutions, while ignoring the large variance in student achievement within an institution (see Braun, Jenkins, and Grigg, 2006). If the institution is used as the unit of analysis,
a considerable amount of information about differences in student achievement is lost, hampering our ability to draw useful and meaningful inferences about our curricula, co-curricular experiences, and teaching practices.

If we focus on the student as the unit of analysis, our assessment reports read as a multiple case study that carefully examines each student’s skills and abilities relative to our expectations for learning and seeks to understand how the educational opportunities offered to each student could be enhanced to address needed improvements. A student-focused report allows focus on the curricular, teaching, and co-curricular activities that were experienced, and it encourages consideration of what could have been offered that would have better enabled the student to achieve the general education student learning outcomes. Instead of focusing solely on quantitative methodology, assessment practice should also embrace qualitative or mixed-methods research approaches that can better reveal individual students’ experiences in our programs and institutions.

Using Assessment to Inform Our Understanding of the Credit Hour. The debate over the value of a credit hour and whether or not it is a suitable proxy for learning is at least twenty-five years old (see Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984). Learned and Wood (1938) explored how graduating classes would look if degrees were granted on the basis of achievement (for example, the top 20 percent of examinees on a set of comprehensive examinations) instead of on accumulated credit hours. They found 15 percent of students in this new group were freshmen, 19 percent were sophomores, 21 percent were juniors, and 28 percent were seniors—underscoring the differences between credit hours and assessment.

As institutions continue to move general education programs toward a learning outcomes approach and away from cafeteria-style credit hour accumulation, assessment of general education must mature so it can inform and enhance our understanding of the credit hour. Although credit hours will still be an important component, institutions may find it more desirable to express general education requirements in terms of expected student achievement than the expected number of earned credit hours. General education programs of this nature could be designed so that most students achieve the desired learning in twenty-five to forty-five credit hours, although it may take fewer or more credits for some students. Credit hours and assessment work together throughout the general education program to inform student progress, certify every student’s achievement of the general education student learning outcomes, and provide information for accountability and improvement of the general education program. Within established consortia of institutions, students’ demonstrations of achievement of the general education outcomes, together with the credit hour, become the general education credential.
Future Research

The authors of the previous chapters in this volume have suggested many avenues for future research. Three additional lines of research should be added to the list. First, as part of an agenda being tackled by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), additional research is needed to enhance our understanding of how to best use assessment data “internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders” (NILOA, 2010, para. 2). Specifically in general education, research is needed to inform policy, curricular, and pedagogical innovations that should be implemented to improve student achievement in particular general education student learning outcomes. Clear guidance on innovations that improve student achievement on the general education learning outcomes would go a long way toward enhancing use of assessment data.

Second, research is needed to better understand the relationship between general education student learning outcomes and the disciplines. Many scholars have recommended approaching general education learning outcomes across disciplines (see Audet and Jordan, 2005, on inquiry across the curriculum; Branche, Mullennix, and Cohn, 2007, on diversity across the curriculum; Behrens and Rosen, 1997, on writing and reading across the curriculum; and the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise, 2007). In this approach, the disciplines are the vehicles through which the general education outcomes are achieved. However, other scholars (see Beyer, Gillmore, and Fisher, 2007; Eljamal and others, 1998) have suggested the transfer of general skills between disciplines is limited and that they are specific to the discipline. More research is needed to better understand the transfer of general education student learning outcomes between disciplines and how the disciplines can best contribute to their achievement.

Finally, most individuals working in assessment in higher education have at one time or another been challenged to produce clear evidence that assessment improves student learning. Without this evidence, as the argument goes, assessment should be avoided because it is nothing more than an administrative demand to “make a pig fatter by weighing it.” Although research in this area may be interesting, it is unnecessary, as argued in Chapter One, because we should be engaging in assessment as part of our responsibility as faculty members to ensure our educational practices are achieving the goals we set for our students.

The research agenda that gets lost in the quest for proof of the value of assessment in improving student learning is the question of how assessment data inform decision-making processes. A central tenet of the assessment philosophy is that including evidence on student achievement as an element in the decision-making process leads to better decisions. This
stance assumes decision makers employ reason as the central decision-making process, using, as Thomas Jefferson put it, “[God-bestowed] reason . . . as the umpire of truth” (1903, p. 197). Use of assessment data is thought to remove the emotional element from the decision-making process and ensure high-quality, well-reasoned decisions. Lehrer (2009) suggested that decisions are not generally made only for rational reasons, and also that without an emotional component to the decision-making process it is “impossible to make decent decisions” (p. 18), the function of emotion being to support reasoned decisions. More research is needed in the assessment field to better understand these decision-making processes—to offer guidance on proper use of assessment evidence, to compare the differences in decision-making processes that are made with and without assessment evidence, and to better understand the balance between presentation of objective assessment data and more personal narratives designed to activate the emotional component of decision makers’ minds. Research on how we get the most out of our investment in assessment is important, but I suspect it will be intimately related to the quality of the decisions we make in our use of assessment data.

Conclusion

In this volume, the authors have made a case for assessment of general education; provided a structure and model called TAIM for developing and improving the assessment process; presented guidance on the current research on definitions, methodology, and practices for assessing a core set of general education student learning outcomes; and suggested directions for future research and exploration. Assessment of complex general education student learning outcomes is our responsibility as faculty members; it offers tremendous potential to inform, transform, and improve our general education programs.

References


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