

State Mandated Accountability and Assessment of Student Learning at the University of Washington: Background and Rationale

*Jessica S. Korn, Ph.D.
November, 1998*

INTRODUCTION

Current assessment and accountability efforts of the University of Washington (UW) and its Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) center around evaluating student learning. There are two equally important aims: 1) generating information to improve the quality of education at the UW, and 2) providing measures of student success in compliance with the Washington State Accountability Mandate.

It is important to distinguish the explicit differences between assessment and accountability, ([Gillmore, 1997](#)). Assessment is for internal purposes to be used by the institution to improve the quality of college education and the college experience. Accountability is more externally oriented, using evaluation for informing constituents that colleges are providing quality education in a cost-effective manner (Zumeta, 1998; Burke, 1997; Ewell, 1994).

The overall approach designed and adopted by the University of Washington (UW) is complex and multi-dimensional. Primarily, it is an extension of the long-standing tradition of self-evaluation at the UW in order to improve the education the UW offers. The Washington State Accountability Mandate adds a second dimension to assessment at UW: to provide specific numerical information to the external community and to the public regarding the success of the educational process at the UW.

Before detailing the methodological approaches adopted for this work, it is necessary to provide a rationale for how the overall project plan was conceptualized and designed. A variety of sources were used to help hone the specific research questions guiding the project design. Both practical and theoretical sources were utilized.

SOURCES

In order to create specific questions and specific methods to address these accountability issues, the requirements articulated by Washington State's legislature for the accountability mandate and the University of Washington (UW) mission statement were reviewed extensively and compared. The State Legislature is seeking data along two distinct dimensions: the cost-effective nature of running a college and how well are students developing their academic and cognitive abilities. At a more specific level, the legislature is interested in particular, explicitly-stated areas: graduation rates and efficiency (for non-transfers and transfer students), retention rates, faculty productivity, and student learning. Measures for all of these are currently in place except for a measure of student learning.

Over eighteen states currently require public institutions of education to provide measures of student success and another eighteen states are moving toward this accounting system (Burke, 1997). Because the Washington State Mandate mirrors mandates in other states, examining the approaches of other public institutions of higher education in response to these state requirements generated practical ideas to help inform development of the UW response to the Washington State Mandate.

The [University of Washington Role and Mission Statement](#) is more explicit about the purpose of the UW in relation to students. According to the Statement, the University of Washington attempts to create a campus climate where students' growth develops and matures not only in a general manner, but in specific areas as well. These include: independent judgement, appreciation for diversity, critical thinking, effective communication skills, and participation in the community.

Another component that helped hone the scope of the project is the research and scholarship out of the fields of psychology and education regarding human development and student development. Student development examines the systematic, successive growth towards maturity or the potential for it during, and possibly because of college (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). There is an overwhelming amount of literature on student development theories and research utilizing those theories. Student development may focus on a number of specialized areas: cognitive, intellectual, social, emotional, psychological, and behavioral change during college.

There are two primary schools of theorists in student development. The theories that comprise the developmental perspective on student development attempt to apply various concepts of identity formation (see Erikson, 1963 and 1968) in general to identity formation and growth in college students. Primarily, these theorists posit that growth may be equivalent to maturation and needs no specific catalyst (see Chickering, 1969; Perry, 1970; and Kohlberg, 1969 and 1971). On the other hand, the college impact theorists posit that because of the college experience and the unique experiences related to college, those who attend change in specific ways as a result of exposure. In other words, this branch of student development links change and growth to college specifically. The college impact theorists (see Feldman and Newcomb, 1969; Tinto, 1975 and 1984; Bowen, 1977; Boyer, 1987; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Astin 1977, 1990, 1993; Dey and Hurtado, 1997) also attempt to account for and address the diversity of the student population, the institutional types and circumstances, and the self-selected opportunities of college. The commonality among student development theorists is that they all place an importance on evaluating the students' cognitive and academic growth.

The final sources that helped sculpt this project were surveys regarding student learning and development previously conducted at the University of Washington by the Office of Educational Assessment and by organizations with a national scope. The specific external sources referenced were: the [Cooperative Institutional Research Program's \(CIRP\) Annual Freshmen Survey](#); Robert Pace's [College Student Experiences Questionnaire \(CSEQ\)](#) now administered by George Kuh and Lupe Anaya at the University of Indiana's College of Education; the [American College Testing and Evaluation/Survey Services \(ACT/ESS\)](#) surveys; and the [Educational Testing Services \(ETS\)](#) surveys.

By reviewing all these practical, theoretical, and/or empirical sources, primary questions revolving around college and students emerged that are central to all sources and relevant not just to the Washington State Accountability Mandate but to general assessment as well. They include: How are college students doing in their learning? What are they learning? What does a college degree mean in the labor market? Within those questions, five common areas of focus emerged from all these sources. These include: the characteristics of students/alumni; the skills of the students/alumni (self-ratings, necessity and importance, the role of college in developing the skills, and satisfaction); the quantity of specified educational experiences while attending college (e.g., service-learning courses, internships, volunteer work); the contribution of the students/alumni back to the community; and the goals and aspirations of these students/alumni. These areas of focus emerged from the exhaustive review of these various sources in combination with recognizing the needs of the various constituents vested in higher education and college students (state legislature, tax-payers and public at large, administrators, faculty, students, parents, researchers and scholars).

DEVELOPMENT

Initial Planning Ideas

Prior to December 1997, many intense conversations occurred regarding the intersection between assessment and the new state accountability mandate. However, because of the thorough examination of the aforementioned sources, these conversations became more systematically directed towards shaping a plan that continues the institution's evaluation of students for improvement as well as creating a response for external needs based on the tradition of assessment on campus. The constituents involved in these conversations include: 1) internal members of the UW community (assessment professional, accountability task force, provosts and deans, faculty, staff researchers); and 2) external stakeholders who are related to the UW community (assessment coordinators from other public four-year institutions of higher education in Washington State, members of the HEC Board and State Legislature, employers). By identifying the needs in relation to the goals of the project, a multi-stage and multi-dimensional approach began to emerge. Methods draw upon both quantitative and qualitative practices, direct and indirect approaches.

The multiple techniques include: quantitative surveys of (incoming, present, outgoing and past) UW students; qualitative content analysis of writing samples (modified portfolios); and qualitative content analysis of course syllabi. The multi-tasking is a conscious choice in order to control for some limitations in the overall design and time constraints imposed by the external pressures of the accountability mandate. Limitations of the overall design are specifically addressed below.

Surveys

The first, indirect approach utilized is surveys collecting student self-reported data. We surveyed entering students (first-time freshmen and transfer students), seniors, alumni who graduated a year ago, alumni who graduated five and ten years ago. At a future time point, in order to validate students' self-evaluation of their skills, the UW may survey employers of the alumni regarding the caliber of UW graduates in terms of skills and preparedness.

Development of surveys for five discrete cohorts of students past or present occurred from December 1997 through April 1998. In all instances, when a previously existing survey was used in the Office of Educational Assessment, it was incorporated into the new questionnaires and served as the foundation for further development of the instrument. Insofar as possible, specific items remained unchanged to preserve their integrity in order to allow for the possibility of trends analyses. For details regarding the methodology of each survey, please refer to:

- [Entering Student Survey](#)
- [Senior Survey and College Student Survey](#)
- [Alumni Survey \(One year after Graduation\)](#)
- [Alumni Survey \(5 and 10 years after Graduation\)](#)

Statewide Senior Writing Study

The survey approach lacks a direct examination and analysis of students' skills and abilities. Therefore, Gerald M. Gillmore with the help of other assessment coordinators from other state public four-year institutions created, organized and implemented the [Statewide Senior Writing Study](#). This entails the rating of actual student writing performance at all state four-year public institutions. The measures of quality for writing are based on papers that a sample of senior-level students at all the public four-year institutions wrote as regular course assignment. This is a variation of the portfolio approach to assessment (Banta et al, 1996; Banta, 1993). Unlike other portfolio models, this project uses one paper per student (who is randomly selected) instead of a set of papers that show development over time. The pilot of this writing portfolio project was successful, and it is a possibility that a longitudinal component will be added in the future.

Syllabi

This study also approaches examining student learning in a more objective fashion than self-reported survey data. A preliminary analysis of course syllabi was begun in order to discern the types of learning opportunities and tools students are seeking and being exposed to within the classroom as well as the frequency of contact with these types of opportunities and tools. For example, these learning opportunities may include working on a professors research project, participating in volunteer work or service learning classes, writing opportunities, working in a group or independently, presenting work before the class. It is hoped to link this exposure rate to students' grades and test scores in order to determine the impact of these experiences on their success (traditionally defined) as a student.

LIMITATIONS

Because this study meets two equally important goals (internal and external priorities), deliberate choices about the project's approach were necessary. In order to examine the change college students undergo during their exposure to college and the overall impact of the college experience on those changes, collecting data about students over time is essential.

However, given the time limitations of the external goals of the project, the project was unable to collect longitudinal data. All data, regardless of cohort, are collected at one point in time. All analyses, regardless of cohort, are therefore cross-sectional. Until longitudinal data are collected, interpretations of findings of change over time will be tentative because of the inability to conclusively separate the effects of cohort differences from the effects of the effects of experience and exposure. Conclusions regarding change and impact, at best, should be considered speculative until longitudinal data provide confirmation of findings based on current data.

Moreover, again due to the pressures of the external goals for the project, academic and cognitive outcomes (characteristics of students after exposure to college) were the primary focus of these surveys. These include:

- defining and solving problems
- locating information to make decisions or solve problems
- speaking effectively
- working and/or learning independently
- working effectively with technology
- working cooperatively; writing effectively
- critically analyzing written information
- using information/knowledge gained from major
- using a broad range of knowledge gained from outside of the major
- understanding and applying quantitative principles
- understanding and appreciating diverse philosophies and cultures
- understanding the interaction of society and the environment
- understanding and applying scientific principles
- understanding and appreciating art
- using a foreign language.

Currently, limited data exist on demographic and background information and almost no data directly measuring the college process. In other words, the approach for the surveys (as well as the overall study) focuses on outcomes only (characteristics of students after exposure to college).

Once the initial demands for the State Accountability Mandate are met (establishing baseline for students' current success), time will allow the collection of longitudinal data and information relating to demographics and the college process. The longitudinal component will provide data regarding students': background and demographic characteristics, characteristics prior to exposure to college, and information regarding students' self-selected activities during college. These factors may influence the students' development and in order to examine their importance in students' change and development over their exposure to the college experience, they must be measured.

Specifically in regards to the surveys, the samples used in the analyses are problematic. The voluntary nature of the survey data and the conclusions based on the self-reported information from student and alumni is a serious limitation. It becomes problematic in regards to low response rates and being unable to draw broader, more generalizable conclusions about the students who attend the UW. Also, although we will conduct analyses to attempt to compare the samples with the overall populations, we can not know with certainty how respondents differ from non-respondents.

In order to adopt a more complete design where information regarding background characteristics and information regarding the process of college are collected, time is necessary. The Office of Educational Assessment has the commitment to conduct more rigorous data collection as time allows, thereby addressing the two central limitations of the study (lack of longitudinal data; outcomes-only focus).

REFERENCES

- Astin, A. W. (1997). *Four Critical Years: Effects of College on Beliefs, Attitudes, and Knowledge*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Astin, A. W. (1990). *Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Astin, A. W. (1993). *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Banta, T. (1993). *Making a Difference: Outcomes of a Decade of Assessment in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Banta, T. , Lund, J., Black, K., Oblander, F. (1996). *Assessment in Practice: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bowen, H. (1977). *Investment in Learning: The Individual and Social Value of American Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Boyer, E. (1987). *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Burke, Joseph C. (1997). *Performance-Funding Indicators: Concerns, Values, and Models for Two- and Four-Year Colleges and Universities*. Report from the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government.
- Chickering, A. (1969). *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dey, E. and Hurtado, S. (1997). "College Impact, Student Impact: A Reconsideration of the Role of Students within American Higher Education." *The Journal of Higher Education*, Volume 30, Number 2, September.
- Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and Society*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Ewell, Peter E. (1994). "A Matter of Integrity: Accountability and the Future of Self-Regulation." *Change Magazine*, November/December.
- Feldman, K. and Newcomb, T. (1969). *The Impact of College on Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Gerald M. Gillmore (1997). "Four Models of Relationship between Assessment and Accountability." OEA Notes, N-97-4.
- Kohlberg, L. (1969). "Stage and Sequence: The Cognitive-Development Approach to Socialization." In D. Goslin (ed.), *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Kohlberg, L. (1971). "Stages of Moral Development." In C. Beck, B. Crittenden, and E. Sullivan (eds.), *Moral Education*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Pascarella, E. and Terenzini, P. (1991). *How College Affects Students*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Perry, W. (1970). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Tinto, V. (1975). "Dropout from Higher Education: a Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research." **Review of Higher Education**, Volume 45.

Tinto, V. (1984). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zumeta, William (1998). "Public University Accountability to the States in the Late Twentieth Century Time for a Rethinking?" Working Papers in Public Policy Analysis and Management monograph. University of Washington, Graduate School of Public Affairs.