

Does Assessment Work?

Daniel F. Chambliss

Eugene M. Tobin Professor of Sociology, Hamilton College

Does assessment actually work? Does it actually improve higher education? Let's assume you work in a college or university. Ask yourself, based on what you see around you:

- 1) Does your own institution provide noticeably better education now, with an assessment program, than it did before?
- 2) As a group, are colleges with big assessment programs better institutions than those without?
- 3) After 20 years of assessment efforts, is American higher education noticeably better than it was before?

I asked these questions of some attendees at a recent assessment conference – most of us work in the field – and the average answers were, roughly: (1) Maybe, (2) No, and (3) No.

For an approach that itself touts the value of empirical evidence, that's not good.

For twenty years, assessment and accountability programs – mandatory, industry-wide – have been the tool of choice for repairing the defects of higher education. Legislators call for proof that college works; regional accreditors have responded with standards that require comprehensive assessment; and a host of vendors and educational entrepreneurs offer products designed to fill the assessment gap. Education leaders widely seem to buy into the idea that this is a viable way to improve colleges and universities. Associate deans and institutional research offices get to work, and department chairs everywhere grudgingly write up big plans.

But in the end, it's not getting us very far.

Certainly, there are colleges that have embraced assessment and used it well. They often have very clear ideas of where their graduates will work and in what precise trades or fields. And the institutions themselves – their faculty and administrations – believe in assessment. I've spent ten years assessing my own college, and yes, I think in places we've helped it.

But the fact is, mandatory, institution-wide assessment imposes very real costs, often dismissed by its boosters. Faculty are notoriously resistant to it, and not because they're all hidebound traditionalists or uncaring despots in the classroom. It certainly adds to the workload of administrators and typically gets foisted off onto subordinate staff; not many powerful people seem to engage in the nitty-gritty of assessment. Without constant pushing from accreditors (themselves pushed by state and federal legislators) much assessment would die; it doesn't have "legs." Most troubling, conventional assessment has the real potential to divert attention from the proper goals of the institution onto more easily measurable ones. As an industry-wide proposition, it seems misplaced.

After twenty years' effort (getting rather intense in the past ten), we deserve to see some results. In the past, certain other developments really have improved American higher education quite noticeably: the land grant movement of the late 19th century; the immigration of European intellectuals fleeing Nazism in the 1930s; the GI Bill during the late 1940s and 1950s; and the post-Sputnik "national defense" education programs that put so many of us through college and graduate school – all of these produced huge, obvious gains in the quality or accessibility of higher education. Three of the four rested on massive infusions of federal dollars into higher education; the fourth flowed from a world-wide catastrophe we hope never to see again. So money (for instance) seems to get results. And maybe money isn't the only way to do it; I certainly don't object to better "productivity" in the use of funds.

I'm just saying that assessment, on the face of it, doesn't appear to be working.

Daniel F. Chambliss is the Eugene M. Tobin Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. For ten years, with major funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, he has been Director of the Mellon Assessment Project for Liberal Arts Education at Hamilton, a comprehensive, multimethod, longitudinal study of liberal arts learning in a residential setting. Until recently he served on the Executive Committee of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, the regional accreditor for over 500 colleges and universities in the mid-Atlantic states.