

VIEWPOINTS

Process Without Purpose

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Faculty members and administrators alike often discuss perceived threats to modern day education. Certainly many of these issues often reflect the signs of our times, ranging from cultural competency to tenure.^{1,2} Most recently, much discussion has centered on the potential erosion of academia related to the rapid and ever-evolving influx of instructional technology and students growing attitudes of entitlement.^{3,4} Perhaps one less discussed yet abundantly impactful issue centers on the growing bureaucracy of education. Federal mandates related to assessment have increasingly “trickled down” to academic units and are now prominent components of regional and professional accreditation standards.⁵⁻⁸ The academy has introduced a national award that recognizes excellence in assessment practices. These aforementioned directives are certainly not limited to pharmacy but span across most health professions. Embracing assessment and doing so quickly has become a high priority for most colleges and schools. A tangible sense of urgency has developed within the academy with regard to issues centered on assessment. In many instances, colleges and schools have quickly developed aggressive and reactionary assessment plans and systems. The academy and its associated colleges and schools should be vigilant to guard against over-assessment or “hollow” assessment, where process trumps purpose.

Universities, colleges, and schools continue to grapple with the immense implications of developing and sustaining “cultures of assessment.”⁹ Vast amounts of data are collected, compiled, summarized, and ideally analyzed to effect purposeful change in various components of institutional missions. Certainly, as academicians and scholars, most faculty members recognize the need to continually question the status quo, to collect real and sound data, to formulate hypotheses, and to implement change that contributes to generalizable knowledge. Caution must be exercised, however, in terms of

collecting data for the sheer purposes of collecting data. In efforts to meet and sometimes exceed accreditation standards, educational institutions may find themselves needlessly amassing information that is then further classified, collated, and described. Particular vigilance should be devoted to avoiding the collection of superfluous data or in collecting data that are not considered in a thoughtful and critical manner.

As educational institutions and units struggle to “assess,” many companies continue to profit. Colleges and schools are often engaged in searches for sophisticated databases and systems which aid in reducing the effort involved in data collection and analysis. Institutions are often “wooned” by various companies promising fitted and tailored systems which will reduce assessment-associated workloads. These systems and databases often come with substantial associated one-time and renewal fees. The current emphasis on assessment and its overall importance in terms of accreditation has also impacted other resource areas for educational institutions. Many colleges and schools have devoted extensive staff, faculty, and administrative time towards this area. In many instances, what was once a component of a singular administrators position has now been extracted and new administrative and staff positions created for the sole purposes of assessment and accreditation. Most of us are familiar with the now common administrative titles related to assessment and accreditation ranging from assistant and associate deans to assistant and associate provosts and chancellors. These administrators in turn often work with and rely on associated assessment committees and working groups.

Individual faculty members and students alike are certainly not insulated from the downstream effects of the increased emphasis on assessment. Surveys of all kinds have now become commonplace across all aspects of collegiate constituents, from faculty members and students to preceptors and alumni. Potentially as a result of “over-surveying,” the phenomenon of survey fatigue has become well recognized and documented.¹⁰ Faculty members and students may also be required to serve on assessment-related committees and working groups. These

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ever-increasing commitments may eventually impact classroom teaching as faculty members find themselves with less and less time to devote to actual learning. Morale across an entire institution may be effected when opinion-based data is collected in a repetitive fashion and where constituents perceive the data are not impacting change, much less being read or reviewed. Assessment might also drive faculty members toward more scripted and less liberalized classrooms that are devoid of the ability for faculty members to improvise teaching, spark imagination, and truly control learning. In turn, some have postulated that the increased emphasis on student opinion and student-derived data brought about by efforts to assess may actually be contributing to academic entitlement.⁴

Certainly hierarchal mandates that have driven the emphasis towards assessment must be assumed to be rooted in authentic attempts to improve and justify the educational process across the United States. But perhaps the pendulum has swung too far towards a paradigm that might be encouraging process without purpose. As colleges and schools struggle to meet ever-increasing shortages of resources, tuition dollars, and funding, “process without purpose” can be especially expensive, sapping resources that would otherwise be devoted to other critical areas. Colleges and schools as well as accreditation bodies (at all levels) must be careful to keep assessment from becoming a long list of check-boxes and formalities. Colleges and schools should genuinely approach assessment as a means of self-improvement and not simply as a demonstration project.

The academy’s purpose must remain focused on stretching the minds of learners, moving the profession

into new frontiers, and contributing to generalizable knowledge that improves the health and well-being of all humans. Assessment plays a role in measuring and achieving this mission, but we must be cautious of losing the sight of our goals by wrapping ourselves in bureaucratic processes that serve no true purpose.

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