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Reflections on the Assessment Conference, February 8 and 9, 1996

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REFLECTIONS ON THE ASSESSMENT CONFERENCE, FEBRUARY 8 AND 9, 1996:

Wendy Wenner

As part of our reaccreditation for North Central, academic and service units have articulated goals, developed measures, and begun to collect data that will measure the effectiveness of their programs. Assessment is not the same as evaluation. Evaluation most often measures individual performance; assessment focuses not on individual performance, but on how effectively a program meets its stated goals. Assessment answers such questions as these: "Are we doing what we say we do?" "Are students getting from our programs what we hope they will?" "Have we set our goals high enough?" "Are there ways we can improve our programs to meet our goals?" In assessment we collect data and use that data to improve.

The recent Assessment Conference was more challenging and useful to me than I expected it to be. I expected to learn something; I even expected to learn a lot; but I didn't expect to have my ideas about assessment shifted as much as they were. The conference jogged my imagination and encouraged me to think harder about ways to make assessment meaningful to our department and division. Conversations with folks from other divisions, schools, and service units provided a collegiality and the opportunity to share what is happening here that we haven't had since we started the assessment project. I came away from the conference with new energy and a new perspective on what we might do to make assessment really work for us.

The purpose of the conference was to broaden dialogue on campus about why and how we are doing assessment and how we can do it better. Provost Niemeyer opened the conference with remarks about our commitment to the North Central Accreditation body to create a process to measure our performance across the campus. President Lubbers closed the conference with remarks on the critical issues that face Grand Valley as we move into the future. The speakers at the sessions and workshops were Karl and Karen Schilling, from the University of Miami of Ohio. Both Karl and Karen have an impressive list of published articles on assessment and consulting engagements with universities around the country. They had studied what we have done with assessment at GVSU, and they came prepared to challenge us.

The Schillings convinced me that assessment is not going to go away and that, although assessment can be a hoop-jumping exercise, it can also be a way to generate meaningful information to improve our programs. What the Schillings suggested, though they never used the term, is that GVSU become a "learning organization"—one in which everyone on all levels is asking questions about how we are doing the job we are trying to do and looking for ways to do it better. Assessment is not just a quantitative measurement for an outside accrediting body.

Karen and Karl worked as a “tag team.” Karen provided us with background information on the latest conceptual and methodological advances in assessment, and Karl “worked the crowd,” as he said, challenging us to think about the metaphors we use to describe education, the roles we play in it, and the mind sets we might have that keep us from thinking about assessment as more than just statistics. Assessment, according to Karen, needs to be tied to the life of the faculty and service units and to the things we value. The fear is that assessment is reductionist and won’t tell us much about what is important to us. But good assessment can both lead to conversations about what we hold to be most important and bring us closer to being what we want to be as a university.

Karen outlined a series of conceptual and methodological advances that have made assessment more meaningful:

1. A shift from assessing only the end product of a program to assessing the value the program adds to what students bring to the institution.
2. A shift away from testing minimal competency to assessment that leads to real quality improvement.
3. The recognition of differences in the epistemological methods of different disciplines which make different kinds of assessment appropriate.
4. A redirection of the focus of assessment from disembodied outcomes to students and the learning process.
5. A broadening of assessment to include larger institutional goals which encourage diversity, internationalization, and service learning.

Karen also suggested six methodological advances that can help us rethink institutional assessment:

1. A recognition of the limits of large scale standardized testing.
2. A move away from narrow control over measurement by psychologists.
3. A general dissatisfaction with measurements that are not meaningful.
4. A focus on the learner and learning and not just the teacher and teaching.
5. A move toward multiple measures and multiple interpretations of the data that we do collect.
6. A new interest in generating information that is truly of interest to faculty and service personnel.

Karl asked the audience to think about the metaphors we use to describe the educational experience. He suggested that we might be using the “pornography” method of grading: e.g., “we know an A paper when we see it!” Instead, we might consider using a baseball metaphor for trading students: e.g., “I’ll give you three quiet ones for three talkative ones.” Or we might think of the university as an orchestra: Are we, as oboes and violins, playing the same piece together, or are some of us playing Haydn while the others play Cage. We need to begin creating conversations that will make our curriculum visible, allow us to see our collective work, and help us

appreciate what we are doing well. For instance, we might think of ourselves as a posse rather than as John Waynes or Annie Oakleys. Can we stop referring to our students as “my students” and think of them as “our students?” Can we acknowledge the collective performance of a unit and not simply the performances of individuals?

The Schillings offered practical ideas for kinds of assessment which I hadn't thought about: one-on-one exit interviews with seniors, focus groups with current students and alumni, and course portfolios containing a syllabus, assignments, and sample student work. They stressed the importance of creating a climate in which students, faculty, and service personnel believe that their input counts, that others really want to hear what they have to say. For instance, student groups can be included in assessment planning in such of its aspects as advising, the promotion of diversity, and the access to technology.

Two days with Karl and Karen convinced me that we need to make more effective use of existing data, to shape assessment into a more interpretive enterprise, and to be sensitive to local culture and the way we make meaning at GVSU and Western Michigan. They helped me shift my thinking from one question—How will we generate data to use in the assessment?—to several, broader ones: e.g., What questions do we really want to ask? What will we do with the information we get? Will this information be useful and valuable? Do we already have data that we can use? How can I get help from other units and divisions? I'm planning to ask the folks in Sociology for some help creating a senior questionnaire and those in Marketing for some ideas about focus groups. I'm going to take a trip over to Engineering to look at their course portfolios. Since assessment is definitely not going away, I want to take part in a joint venture.