

MANAGING LEARNING THROUGH ASSESSMENT for AFFIRMATION of RESULTS

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ABSTRACT

Some higher education institutes or degree granting programs use some form of a comprehensive exam to validate learning outcomes. In the realm of academe, assessment is necessary to provide maximum assurance that courses/programs meet accreditation requirements, that student performance meets established course learning outcomes, and to pinpoint any instructional deficiencies in meeting course content objectives. A key question is whether proficiency in the subject matter taught to students is being adequately examined prior to graduation through traditional exams or whether comprehensive exams as a requirement for graduation should be standard for degree granting.

THE ISSUE

Higher education is big business driven by demand and necessity. Generally speaking, higher education is readily accepted as a stepping stone to further advancement in chosen careers and academic programs. What is often glossed over when addressing education is whether graduates have merely acquired sufficient knowledge judged in the short term or are imbued with a knowledge foundation that could support lifelong recall and synthesis of future knowledge. A critical component of education administration is assessment. The intent of this discussion is to stress the need for a valid form of student assessment that does not merely judge what a student should have learned along the path to an earned degree but how much was retained.

Admittedly there is a “drop off” to any learning without reinforcement through application or refresher studying. Whether undergraduate or graduate level degree program, what is learned in the early courses of a program is often diminished by the time of program completion. Instructors across all disciplines are frustrated when students are unable to draw on (or apply) what was previously learned and needed in their current course(s). Instructors find they must provide refresher instruction or witness grade degradation due to lack of essential knowledge.

The question is whether assessment of learning is falling short of its intended purpose. Are the methods of assessing seemingly sound in theory but fraught with shortcomings when implemented? Do the methods in use have adequate substance and scope?

BENEFITS OF ASSESSMENT

To offset the above-noted shortcomings, some higher education institutes or degree granting programs use comprehensive exams or some form of comprehensive exam to validate learning outcomes. For instance, some professions (e.g., legal, medical, and accounting) require “certification” (and continued updating) of proficiency in the myriad components of the final degree awarded before permitting an

individual to practice in the profession. The basis for an acknowledged depth and retention of course material is not that far removed from other professions. Thus, one might question if most higher education programs are going far enough in “certifying” the acquisition of knowledge by students in their course work.

In the realm of academe, assessment is necessary to provide maximum assurance that courses/programs meet accreditation requirements, that student performance meets established course learning outcomes, and to pinpoint any instructional deficiencies in meeting course content objectives. Ancillary to the aforementioned are the obligations to prepare program graduates who perform well in the workforce, reflect favorably on the degree granting institution, and retain and build on the instruction received. Although the bureaucracy of accreditation is somewhat dictatorial and engrossed in minutia, it nevertheless helps guarantee the existence and survival of quality national education endeavors. Without a mantle of required timely assessment of learning that strives for continuous improvement, students might lack an ingredient that encourages self-evaluation and self-improvement. The quest for knowledge and the effort that goes into it are drawn by more than self-fulfillment advocated in motivation theory.

Given that those who develop curriculum and the accompanying pedagogy conscientiously plan the end goals for instruction, there are constant accompanying iterations in discipline content and updating course content that sometimes falls victim to stagnancy rather than innovation and currency. Assessment can evaluate the inclusion of modernization/updating of techniques and findings in otherwise antiquated instruction, practices and content such as through a centralized, national educational testing service.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

The use of comprehensive exams (as a requirement for graduation) has tangible merits and bolsters the assurance of retained learning outcome beyond perhaps just a semester of exposure to specific course material. Nevertheless, such standardized comprehensive exams are not a common form of assessing the extent of acquired knowledge for degree granting. The reasons against such exams are many and interrelated as outlined below.

- 1) Incurment of costs (e.g., faculty time to develop and score exams would necessitate either release time or supplemental compensation)
- 2) Disagreement regarding which courses to include (e.g., core courses versus all courses in a major)
- 3) Disagreement about how or whether assessment scores should be tied to graduation criteria
- 4) Disagreement as to extent of stated learning objectives used in developing assessment questions
- 5) Assessment format and/or focus (e.g., assess only specific facts, expository writing reflecting comprehension, and/or oral exams in conjunction with written)

OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

- 1) Take a tough stand on assessment regardless of its potential affect on enrollment retention and graduation rates
- 2) Set a pre-determined assessment (or cut) score a requirement for graduation
- 3) Gather input from areas of employment that identify essential areas for assessment
- 4) Expand Learning Outcomes at course levels beyond a few broad areas
- 5) Initiate written and oral reviews of program and course-content in all courses
- 6) Review policies of other countries regarding assessment practices and requirements for graduation
- 7) Communicate attempts for and results of continuous improvement