putting ideas to work

Are there real advantages to developing and implementing student assessment programs and policies? What steps can colleges and universities take to collect and use student assessment data in a way that most benefits students, faculty, and the institution as a whole?

Improving Student Assessment at Doctoral & Research Institutions

Written specifically for administrators, faculty, and staff in doctoral & research institutions who are involved with student assessment on their campuses, *Designing Student Assessment to Strengthen Institutional Performance in Doctoral & Research Institutions* draws upon the results of a national survey of nearly 1,400 colleges and universities to provide institutions with important tools they need to successfully collect and use student assessment data: (1) a self-inventory mechanism that institutions can use to examine and evaluate their own student assessment process and functions, and (2) a national profile of what doctoral & research and other institutions around the country are currently doing to support and promote the use of student assessment. Together, these tools will allow individual institutions to acquire insight into the activities that their own and other institutions are already performing, those which merit greater attention, and those which can make a difference in improving institutional performance.

Inside this brochure you'll find a summary of some of the most important findings and recommendations presented in this report. To download a free copy of the complete report, please visit our website, http://ncpi. stanford.edu. To purchase a bound copy, please send a check or money order for $10.00 to the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Stanford University School of Education, 520 Galvez Mall, 508 CERAS, Stanford, CA 94305-3084. All orders must be prepaid. Price includes shipping.

Designing Student Assessment to Strengthen Institutional Performance in Doctoral & Research Institutions

by Marvin Peterson, Marne Einarson, Catherine Augustine, and Derek Vaughan

NCPI Technical Report #5-10

Designing Student Assessment to Strengthen Institutional Performance in Doctoral & Research Institutions. By Marvin Peterson, Marne Einarson, Catherine Augustine, and Derek Vaughan. NCPI Technical Report #5-10. 1999.

The past decade has witnessed an increased call for student assessment in higher education, driven by accreditation self-studies, state mandates, academic administrators, faculty groups, institutional researchers, and program review officers. Despite this growing demand from both internal and external sources, NCPI research has found that most doctoral & research institutions are not using student assessment data to its full potential—for example, to make academic decisions—and that the student assessment data they collect has only a limited impact.

The tables below present a number of NCPI recommendations that researchers believe will lead to significant increases in doctoral & research institutions' use of and benefit from student assessment information. These findings and recommendations fall into three main areas: The Nature of Assessment, Promoting Assessment, and Supporting Assessment.

THE NATURE OF STUDENT ASSESSMENT

FINDING	RECOMMENDATION	BENEFIT
When collecting student assessment data, doctoral and research institutions tend to use tests and other written instruments, although some units or departments also make use of less traditional assessment methods such as observations of student performance, student portfolios, capstone courses, and interviews with withdrawing students.	Supplement traditional methods of collecting student assessment data with alternative methods.	These alternative methods allow the assessment of higher-order skills such as application of facts, synthesis, and evaluation. They also tend to promote faculty involvement in assessment through their participation in designing and administering assessment methods and in interpreting their results.
Most doctoral and research institutions emphasize the collection of student assessment data that includes basic college-readiness, academic intentions, academic progress, and institutional satisfaction. Doctoral and research institutions collect less extensive information on their students' higher-order skills, vocational and professional skills, and personal growth and affective development.	Review the type and extent of assessment data being collected and, where needed, broaden and deepen collection efforts to include alternative areas of assessment. Consider gathering more higher-order information from formerly enrolled students, particularly concerning their civic and social roles.	Collecting a wider array of data—and at more than one point in time—can provide a richer understanding of students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral development. In addition, the more data institutions collect from formerly enrolled students, the more likely faculty are to be positively affected by assessment information.

PROMOTING STUDENT ASSESSMENT

FINDING	RECOMMENDATION	BENEFIT
Doctoral and research institutions offer professional development on student assessment to their faculty and academic administrators. These policies are more likely to involve activities that do not significantly affect time in the classroom than those that involve greater expenditure of administrative and faculty time.	Increase the use of professional development and offer a greater variety of professional development opportunities. Provide faculty with adequate time to learn about and develop new assessment techniques.	Offering a variety of professional development opportunities can improve the level of faculty and administrative involvement in and support for student assessment. Those doctoral and research institutions that offer more extensive professional development on assessment to their faculty and academic administrators are more likely to use assessment information in educational decisions, and to report that assessment information has had a positive impact on faculty.
Many doctoral and research institutions report that they provide regular workshops on student assessment for academic and student affairs administrators and have a faculty governance committee that addresses assessment issues.	Review the nature and number of institution-wide activities used to promote internal involvement in and support for assessment. Where necessary, expand the type of activities offered.	Not only does offering such activities demonstrate leadership support for assessment, but researchers found that offering a greater number of administrative and governance activities promoting assessment is a significant predictor of extensive data collection efforts and of positive effects on faculty and students.
While most doctoral and research institutions regularly distribute student assessment reports to traditional internal constituents such as faculty, academic administrators, and student affairs professionals, few doctoral and research institutions regularly distribute reports to a broader range of constituents.	Examine institutional patterns of assessment report distribution, and if necessary, widen it to include students, the general public, and employers.	Broader report distribution helps to ensure that internal and external personnel are kept well informed of the institution's assessment efforts, student performance and institutional improvement strategies. Institutions that distribute assessment reports to a wide array of internal and external constituents are more likely to report positive faculty and student impacts from assessment information.
While doctoral and research institutions report moderately high levels of support from all internal constituencies considered, senior administrators—the chief executive officer, academic affairs and student affairs administrators—are perceived as comparatively more supportive of assessment than boards of trustees, faculty, and students.	Periodically measure the degree of internal support for student assessment.	Such measurements may be a useful means to gauge the effectiveness of efforts to promote assessment and to encourage more extensive use of assessment information in institutional decision making. The perceived degree of administrator and faculty support is positively related to the influence of assessment information on educational decisions.

Supporting Student Assessment

Finding	Recommendation	Benefit
More than half of the doctoral and research institutions surveyed have not evaluated their plan or policy for student assessment. One-third indicate having no plans to do so.	Institute mechanisms to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of assessment plans and policies.	Internal monitoring allows institutions to better understand whether assessment plans are meeting their objectives and whether the effort is benefiting the institution.
Doctoral and research institutions report that improving undergraduate education and preparing for institutional accreditation are both important purposes for engaging in assessment, although they accord less importance to meeting external mandates from state officials and regional accreditors than do other types of institutions.	Maintain a commitment to student assessment as a means to foster internal institutional improvement.	Institutions that conduct assessment for the purpose of internal improvement—and not only in response to external demands—are more likely to collect extensive data and to use assessment information to make institutional decisions.
Only half of doctoral and research institutions report that they have a computerized student information system that tracks students from application through graduation. Even fewer have a system that includes student performance indicators or an integrated database.	Examine the capabilities of existing systems, and where necessary and possible, expand and improve the use of computerized student information systems.	The use of databases that link assessment information to other organizational data can facilitate the study of the connections between students' performance and their institutional interactions, and can improve the management of student assessment data.
Only half of the doctoral and research institutions surveyed have some type of planning group for student assessment. Typically, these groups are staffed by faculty, student affairs administrators, academic administrators, and institutional researchers. In general, planning and coordinating student assessment is mainly the responsibility of academic administrators; faculty, student affairs personnel, and students are comparatively less involved.	Review and reconsider internal patterns of structuring and involving various groups in planning and coordinating assessment efforts.	Involving these constituencies in planning assessment activities can increase their understanding of the purposes of assessment and encourage their participation in assessment activities.