In an era of increased accountability in higher education, stronger and more compelling evidence of what and how students learn is needed. Ways in which qualitative approaches can be used to assess student learning are described in this chapter.

Using Qualitative Methods to Assess Student Learning in Higher Education

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Student learning assessment has become one of the central issues of public policy and accountability in higher education. The 2006 report of the commission appointed by U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings cited student learning assessment as one of the most important priorities for the future of higher education. Legislatures remain unconvinced that college attendees are being trained to contribute to society and thus are demanding less tentative evidence of the value that higher education adds to those who attend. In other words, are students learning, what are they learning, how do they use what they have learned, and how do we know? External forces have also played a significant role in drawing attention to the need for stronger assessment in the academy. As a result, since the mid-1980s, a number of federal and state commissions and policy organizations have emphasized the importance of assessment for a variety of institutional practices, including student retention, graduation rates, and institutional effectiveness.

Regional accreditation bodies (notably the Western Association of Schools and Colleges and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) have made student outcomes assessment a major priority and held institutions responsible for developing plans for measuring future outcomes in this area. In addition, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education began gathering statewide data on higher education in its annual report, Measuring Up (2002). Five indicators of quality, including student learning, were measured to help policymakers focus their efforts. Each year, however, the student learning indicator has remained blank because states have not
been able to provide data in this area. This report casts national attention on the lack of regularized and institutionalized assessment data related to student learning in higher education.

Most policy efforts have traditionally been grounded in quantitative measurements that emphasize percentages and benchmarks because they are easy to collect, interpret, and distribute. However, leaders in the assessment arena suggest that qualitative approaches such as portfolios are more mature means to assess student learning and best support efforts to improve learning (Banta, 1993; Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblender, 1996; Ewell, 2004). Institutions occasionally use qualitative approaches, but these forms of assessment have not received much attention among policymakers; moreover, most institutions do not use them as part of supposedly comprehensive student assessment efforts. Unfortunately, external groups are pressing for simplistic measures that can be compared across institutions of varying mission, culture, and structure. This is a tall order.

The lack of formal undergraduate student outcomes assessment on a national level does not mean individual institutions have not developed strategies for measuring student learning in sophisticated ways. Some that have institutionalized a range of assessment efforts to meet public concerns for accountability are described in this chapter. Institutional researchers are likely to be drawn to quantitative approaches for meeting federal and state requirements related to student learning and outcomes assessment because they seem more efficient and easy to implement. In this chapter, we argue that qualitative approaches should also be employed to help develop a richer and more meaningful portrait of undergraduate student learning on college and university campuses. We suggest that leaders focus on assessment activities that best support student learning rather than merely developing measures to placate external agents. Like Ewell (2004), we also challenge those in public policy to reconsider their focus on simplistic measures.

Prior to discussing some of the innovative efforts made in assessing undergraduate student learning, we justify the use of qualitative approaches to assessment. Then we review one of the most commonly used qualitative assessment approaches: portfolios. Our focus then shifts to describing a set of promising qualitative assessment practices we hope more institutions will consider using in the future, such as self-assessments, qualitative writing assessments, e-portfolios, and collaborative assessments.

**Reasons to Use Qualitative Methods to Assess Student Learning**

The quantitative nature of our culture and emphasis on testing at all levels of education lead us to question the value and function of qualitative approaches in assessing student learning outcomes. Intuitively, we know that the most commonly used learning measures are insufficient for understanding all of the complex outcomes accrued in a given course, program, school,
or university. Although there are measures of moral judgment, critical thinking, and problem solving, we often have difficulty making sense of some of the learning outcomes associated with various educational experiences. For example, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, and leadership development are not readily captured in quantitative assessments. In addition, because learning is not a one-dimensional process, other ways to measure the scope and depth of students’ experiences are needed. Furthermore, qualitative assessment can inform our understanding of areas where we have quantitative measures, such as moral judgment, that are captured in only limited ways.

Several prominent cognitive scientists, including Howard Gardner (1993) and Robert Sternberg (1985), have suggested expanding our methods of assessment to capture complex learning outcomes. Traditional testing typically measures only mathematical and linguistic knowledge well. Gardner recommended deemphasizing these two areas in the curriculum simply because they are the easiest to test. In his research on multiple intelligences, Gardner promoted assessment techniques like portfolios that are intended to capture spatial, naturalist, existential, intrapersonal, interpersonal, musical, and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences. Of significant importance is that these forms of intelligences serve as the hallmark of a liberal arts education. Many college and university mission statements discuss the importance of self-awareness (intrapersonal intelligence), leadership development (interpersonal intelligence), appreciation and competence in the arts (musical, kinesthetic, and spatial intelligences), and understanding of the world in which we live (naturalist). Yet these same institutions often fail to craft their curricular and assessment efforts around meeting these goals.

Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1993) reinforced the notion that learning goals, curriculum, instruction, and related endeavors should be integrated as part of assessment and accountability systems. The theory specifically states that students need to be able to show their understanding in many different ways and that institutions should develop modes of assessment that “contribute to enlightened educational goals” (1993, p. 163).

In response to the need for new assessment measures that capture student experiences more deeply, we emphasize what Huba and Freed (2000) reminded us is central to learning outcomes: the need for students to feel respected and valued in their learning processes. Beyond the limitations imposed by privileging mathematical and linguistic knowledge, quantitative measurements are not what Gardner refers to as “intelligence-fair,” even to students gifted in these areas. The reason is that often quantitative assessment measures such as tests examine specific domains that may or may not represent the knowledge or abilities of individual students, including those who excel in these areas. One of the arguments in favor of quantitative assessments is their capacity to effectively predict future student performance and outcomes. However, the predictive usefulness of quantitative measurements often extends no more than the next year of course work. Therefore, these measures not only fail to properly assess the ability and
skills of different intelligence types; they also yield time-bound, partial, and arguably weak evidence of student learning. In the next section, we provide an example of a qualitative assessment approach that centers students and their experiences while measuring their skills and abilities in deep and meaningful ways.

The Value of Portfolios

Portfolios are one of the best-known qualitative techniques used to evaluate student learning in higher education. Due to their popularity and effectiveness in measuring student learning, portfolios have been defined and discussed frequently in conversations about assessment (see Banta, 1993; Bunda, 1991; Freeman and Lewis, 1998; Huba and Freed, 2000). Palomba and Banta (1999) characterized qualitative portfolios as a form of performance assessment “in which students’ work is systematically collected and carefully reviewed for evidence of learning and development” (p. 131). Included in their description of portfolios is the goal of collecting evidence that speaks to individual learning outcomes and progress over time. Although portfolios vary, typically they contain a collection of student work that expands and evolves and includes personal reflective statements written by students about their work and progress.

Qualitative portfolios can provide a deeper and broader understanding of student learning in a number of ways. First, portfolios are learner centered; their emphasis is on the student and her or his personal experiences. Black (1993) suggested that a second value of portfolios is their ability to measure multiple types of learning with the same instrument. Some of the skills assessed include writing, organizational and conceptual clarity, comprehension, analysis of critical issues and perspective taking, value clarification, and multicultural awareness. In many cases, instructors are unable to measure certain goals and elements they care about, including basic skills, knowledge, and values (Banta, 1993). However, unlike quantitative measures that tend to be static and limited in what they capture, Ewell (2004) contended that the usefulness of portfolios is their ability to depict longitudinal change processes.

Through the evolution of documents added to portfolios and personal reflections, this approach helps instructors and students chronicle and observe when and how learning occurs. The cumulative nature of portfolios is also useful for instructors because it builds a tangible database of student work that provides them the ability to benchmark student learning objectives and outcomes. Given all this, portfolios create what Banta (1993) called a “mosaic of student learning” that paints a clearer and richer picture of how each individual student has developed in a given course or task. In addition, portfolios stimulate important conversations between students and instructors who might not be otherwise engaged. This element is especially important because as instructors get to know their students, they deepen their awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses that help frame evaluative processes. Finally, portfolios have practical implications since they
can contribute to students’ career plans after college and also assist faculty in determining more effective educational practices for future course designs.

Like all other quantitative and qualitative measures, portfolios also have drawbacks and limitations. They are context specific and must be tailored to fit the needs and goals of each course and instructor; thus, they are not readily replicable as surveys or tests are. For portfolios to be effective, they must be used with a clear purpose in mind. Because they are individually oriented, portfolios are difficult to design in ways that suit all students. The process requires an investment by instructors who must spend a good amount of time reviewing content and providing feedback, which can make this assessment technique labor intensive.

In many cases, portfolios are best used in concert with other assessment measures (Banta, 1993). In discussing assessment in science education, Kوردziel and Libarkin (2002) explained the usefulness of using both qualitative and quantitative data to understand student outcomes and assess teaching practices. An example of how this is done is a two-part undergraduate assessment model used at the University of Tennessee that begins with a multiple-choice test of student knowledge, followed by a portfolio project illustrating how students use their knowledge in action (Gingerich, Kaye, and Bailey, 1999). This process is intended to measure what undergraduates know as they enter their programs and determine what they are equipped to do at graduation.

Our goal in this brief review of portfolios was to illustrate their potential in producing deeper and richer student learning assessments that cannot be obtained through traditional quantitative measures alone. In the next section we explore other qualitative assessment practices that can ideally be implemented on college and university campuses.

Trends and Innovations in Qualitative Assessment

In this section are examples and descriptions of imaginative ways in which qualitative methods can be used to assess student learning.

**Qualitative Self-Assessment.** Student self-assessment (also known as self-evaluation) is a qualitative approach that enables students to evaluate their own work (Waluconis, 1993). Guided by questions intended to assist students in describing what they have learned and how they can apply their new knowledge, this technique has been found useful in developing self-awareness and learning autonomy. A common example of self-evaluation is when instructors ask students to write down what they learned at the end of each class and then compile these responses to make sense of student learning over time. The emphasis of this technique is for students to become self-managing, self-monitoring, and self-modifying (Costa and Kallick, 2000). These goals are accomplished in a number of ways that guide students in reflecting honestly on their learning and developmental goals.
Faculty who introduce self-assessment in their courses should explain to students its value and purpose, allow class time for students to select materials they feel represent their abilities and learning using established criteria, and explore with students different ways to display their work. The biggest advantage of this technique is its ability to increase student engagement in the learning processes and have learners accept responsibility for their own educational outcomes. Unlike quantitative learning measures that are often experienced in a passive manner, self-assessments offer increased agency and provide depth and insight into students’ knowledge. Boud (1990) acknowledged how surprisingly well-received self-assessment was as a new practice in the United Kingdom and commended this technique for its ability to move institutions beyond traditional assessment norms.

The institution that serves as the premier example of qualitative student self-assessment in practice is Alverno College, where the campus is grounded in the notion of assessment as learning. On this campus, students do not receive formal grades, and assessment is part of the everyday process that includes long-term ongoing expectations. Alverno students assess and share what they learn in a process of triangulation that involves their peers (and their own self-assessments), their instructors, and even outside professionals in their fields or topic areas (Alverno College Faculty, 1994; Gingerich, Kaye, and Bailey, 1999). In some cases, self-assessments have been captured on video, where shy (but talented) students recorded their first year of college and then recorded themselves as eloquent and confident speakers in their senior year. This example supports Gardner’s call (1993) for alternative assessment techniques to measure advances not quantifiable by tests and surveys, such as the evolutionary improvement in verbal communication skills. As a result of using such assessment practices for over two decades, Alverno has excelled at educating students who might otherwise fall through the cracks of higher education.

Collaborative Assessments. Just as we suggested the use of multiple assessment techniques to fully understand student learning outcomes, there is also value to including a number of different constituents in the assessment process. Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblander (1996) explained that because student learning is a campuswide responsibility, including a range of representatives from the campus community in assessment activities is useful. In fact they noted, “There is no more important principle in the assessment” and that “successful assessment requires collaborative efforts” (p. 35). Supporting this notion are the American Association of Higher Education’s Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning (1992), which explained that assessment is enriched when campus constituents, including alumni, trustees, and employers, are involved in measuring student learning outcomes. The reason collaboration is so useful is that it facilitates communication between different groups and in some cases results in increased faculty enthusiasm for teaching and learning. Also, increasing the
number of stakeholders in student learning outcomes raises momentum in accomplishing intended goals and outcomes.

A number of institutions have legacies of collaborative student assessment, including the University of Tennessee, Alverno College, and Northeast Missouri State University, to name a few. One of the most innovative is a project at California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) known as the Higher Education Learning Partners (HELP). The purpose of this consortium, consisting of the university and eight community college partners, is twofold: to support and encourage students to transfer to CSUMB and to help students achieve their educational goals and accrue productive learning outcomes. Faculty, administrators, and staff, as well as students from the HELP colleges, work together to develop learning outcomes and assessment practices. They also share information on HELP students with member colleges, have a Web site, and regularly host events and workshops to sustain their efforts. Examples of collaborative assessment also include internal cross-campus efforts such as those found at George Mason University. On this campus, student learning and success are approached through collaboration originating from the academic advising center, which cooperates with faculty and staff in the career center, the office of orientation, and other members of the campus community. By working in concert across campus, such efforts increase accountability for student success.

**Qualitative Writing Assessment.** Reading and writing are two areas where qualitative assessment has traditionally played a more prominent role in determining what students learn. For example, essays and research papers are recognized as the most typical forms of qualitative student assessment. However, as alternative forms of assessment continue to emerge, so do innovations in the way of writing projects. One national trend inspired by the research of James Britton and others (1975) is known as “writing across the curriculum.” This technique develops students’ writing skills by incorporating writing requirements across disciplinary boundaries. Diaries and journals have been used over the years to evaluate student work longitudinally (Wagner, 1999), evaluate student behaviors (Brinkerhoff, Brethower, Hluchyj, and Nowakowski, 1983), explore student experiences with distance education (Parer, 1988), and, more recently, monitor learning outcomes and achievement (Ballantyne and Bain, 1995). The emphasis of qualitative approaches such as writing assessment is to allow students to share their perspectives while emphasizing discovery, subjectivity, and interpretation. Newer notions of qualitative writing assessment include discourse analysis to probe students’ learning by interpreting their writing (Barksdale-Ladd and Rose, 1997).

Since writing is the tool used to “define, deliver, and assess” curriculum (Shapiro, 2002), it is understandably a central learning goal emphasized by most institutions. As such, it is often embedded into curricula in ways that allow it to be iteratively assessed and aligned with writing goals and
expectations across disciplines. One example of qualitative writing assessment that is cross-disciplinary comes from the College of William and Mary, where the assessment of critical thinking occurs through student writing in a cross-section of courses. The goal of this approach is to ensure that all students are competent writers regardless of their field of study. Another example of qualitative writing assessment intended for all students comes from the University of South Florida. There, students work in cross-disciplinary learning communities and are evaluated using a university-established instrument to assess core writing skills, including purpose, tone, audience, unity, coherence, and mechanics (Palomba and Banta, 1999).

**E-Portfolios.** The proliferation of technology in higher education has produced a number of advances related to student assessment. Although many of these have been quantitative in nature, one example of a qualitative approach that capitalizes on technology is the e-portfolio. Although based on the notion of the traditional student assessment portfolio, e-portfolios have the ability to store and share information electronically. One of the practical critiques of paper portfolios is that they often require too much physical space.

An impressive example of how e-portfolios can serve as an effective means of qualitative assessment comes also from Alverno College. Alverno’s diagnostic digital portfolio can be accessed by students from any place at any time to track their learning outcomes and progress. In addition to holding an ongoing record of student work, one of the functions of this digital portfolio is to identify patterns in students’ work, which assists in their development and progress. Also, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) has an impressive electronic student portfolio program (it can be accessed at http://center.iupui.edu/COIL/eport.asp).

**Lessons from an Emerging Movement in Institutional Research**

Although the assessment movement is relatively new, policymakers are no longer permitting higher education institutions to tinker slowly in producing measurable evidence of student learning (Ewell, 2004). If we want to improve student learning, faculty teaching, and institutional goal attainment, then institutions must develop multifaceted and intentional approaches to assess student learning. If campuses do not respond, external groups will mandate standardized indicators that may not meaningfully assess student learning. Thus, we are at a critical juncture in the assessment movement.

In this chapter, we have provided an overview of the benefits of qualitative assessments of student learning, key techniques for qualitative assessment, advantages and disadvantages associated with these techniques, and examples that illustrate some of the strengths and possibilities of innovative assessment practices in higher education. We hope this review will help campuses think about plans they can develop for measuring student learning that address the needs of many different types of students with varying learning
styles. Some of the trailblazing campuses described in this chapter provide models for other campuses to consider as they begin to design assessment plans. Qualitative forms of assessment have experienced a great deal of success at American universities and internationally (Boud, 1990). Hence, our hope is that the resources provided here will stimulate a paradigmatic shift in the narrow directions typically undertaken to determine what students learn.

We have also suggested that student learning assessment should be tied to institutional mission and culture. Therefore, it is important for campuses to develop their own approaches based on an understanding of what works well within their environments. Being proactive avoids having standardized measures and processes being forced on campuses. The literature related to qualitative assessment confirms that techniques appear to work better if they reflect campus cultures and institutional priorities. For example, if a large university has a strong commitment to technology, then e-portfolios might be a particularly strong approach. However, if a small liberal arts college is invested in collaborative learning, it should rely on measures aligned with its learning goals, such as the collaborative assessment approach. At a community college with many older students involved in self-paced learning, a qualitative self-assessment might be a better approach than an e-portfolio. Regardless of the context, what matters is that the campus develops approaches to collecting qualitative data that help capture a full picture of student learning. Beginning at the departmental level and throughout a campus or even a state, there are a number of opportunities to implement innovative qualitative student learning assessment strategies. A comprehensive student assessment approach or plan that builds on existing data ultimately lays the foundation for effective outcomes assessment and greater student success.

While qualitative assessment techniques have been used primarily in the liberal arts and innovative colleges and universities, there are no structural reasons they cannot be used on any campus. Size does not make a difference, as some large institutions like CSUMB have used qualitative assessment extensively. The barrier appears to be institutional culture, not size. Thus, leadership is important for shifting campus values and making more meaningful assessment become a reality (Schein, 2004). Leaders have an opportunity to foster environments conducive to innovation that focus on creative assessments of student learning. Much literature is available to guide leaders in the task of changing institutional cultures (see Kezar, 2001; Kezar, Carducci, and Conteras-McGavin, 2006; Eckel and Kezar, 2003; Schein, 2004). In short, leaders need to create cross-campus dialogues about student learning assessment that reflect the institution's mission and goals, form study groups or learning communities of interested faculty and staff to develop recommendations and a campus plan, provide incentives and rewards for faculty and staff to experiment with new assessment techniques, and make multiple forms of assessment an expectation on campus. To bolster support for such efforts and help institutionalize innovative assessment practices, important campus constituents such as institutional researchers,
administrators, and faculty need to be included by leaders in each step of the process. By reimagining campus assessment practices collectively, leaders and their campus networks can develop and implement new and innovative ways to assess student learning that include integrative, multipronged strategies.

We hope this chapter has provided some creative ideas for using qualitative methods in the assessment of student learning. Recognizing the imperative to conduct this work originates mostly from external forces, we endeavored to provide campus leaders and institutional researchers with more information about the advantages of qualitative assessment techniques. We also hope that new methods will be used to foster more meaningful and mission-aligned forms of assessment. We believe concrete examples, techniques, and resources can help leaders develop visions for student learning assessment that extend beyond traditional measures.

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