

Briefing Paper

Council of Arts Accrediting Associations April 1990

OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT AND ARTS PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

General Notes

The Council of Arts Accrediting Association is a joint, *ad hoc* effort of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, the National Association of Schools of Dance, the National Association of Schools of Music, and the National Association of Schools of Theatre. The Council works with matters of general concern to the arts community in higher education, with particular focus on the issues and policies affecting instructional quality and accreditation.

From time to time, the Council issues Briefing Papers, each of which covers a specific issue. The objective is to distill major themes, trends, and prospects into a form that encourages and empowers individual and institutional reflection, analysis, and action.

The Council encourages readers to keep Briefing Papers on file for easy reference. The Council particularly encourages the sharing of all Briefing Papers with faculty and other administration at the institution.

By way of definition, the term "unit" as used in this document indicates an entire art/design, dance, music, or theatre educational program of an institution. Thus, in specific cases, "unit" refers to free-standing institutions; in other cases, it refers to departments or schools that are part of larger institutions.

Please note: The purpose of this paper is to organize ideas and encourage thought, not to establish accreditation standards or inflexible positions. The ideas and suggestions presented herein represent the best information and analysis available at the time of completion. Recommendations should be used as the basis for planning only after careful consideration has been given to current and prospective local conditions.

Readers are encouraged to share ideas about subjects or contents for future Briefing Papers by contacting CAAA at the National Office for Arts Accreditation in Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

Educators and legislators, alarmed by declining scores on standardized tests, and concerned about the many unacceptable costs of education failure, have turned to the concept of "outcomes" and made it the current educational equivalent of a financial bottom line. This attempt to cut through educationalist jargon and put emphasis on mathematically verifiable development of knowledge and skills now has a history; successes and failures, acceptances and rejections, sense and nonsense. This history is long enough to have produced a considerable record of debate. The debate shows one thing clearly; simply talking about outcomes will not produce them. It also shows that extreme care must be taken lest various techniques developed to assess and control outcomes become ends rather than means.

The briefing paper explores the outcomes issue from the perspective of arts programs in higher education. The intent is to assist institutions and programs in reviewing the outcomes issue as both an internal and an external force. Internal considerations about outcomes assessments can lead to improved results.

Featured in this paper:

- **Public Questions, Institutional Responses**
- **Outcomes and Arts Assessment Traditions**
- **Components of Outcomes Assessments**
- **Cautions**
- **Common Goals**
- **The Role of Expertise**

External pressures can be positive or negative, depending on the values driving them. Assessing values and the proposals they engender constitutes one of the more important tasks in developing a workable program of outcomes assessment. Some values and proposals will be congruent with the nature of education and training in the arts, and some will not. The Council of Arts Accrediting Associations has developed this document to assist institutions in making these distinctions as well as to encourage continuing attention to improving assessment and measurement of the growth of student knowledge and skills.

The Council recognizes that concepts, issues, and concerns outlined here apply primarily to the various arts disciplines. These ideas may not be applicable for science and humanities disciplines. Each specific discipline has its own specific nature, and this nature must be considered as a starting point for outcomes assessment. Each arts discipline also contains many elements, and institutions exhibit various objectives with respect to those elements—creation, presentation, education, research, scholarship, psychological/therapeutic applications, and so forth. Each of these functions also has a specific nature that must be considered within the context of each discipline.

This set of conditions leads to a fundamental conclusion: the best approach to outcomes assessment is artistic rather than technological. This means that outcomes assessment is best conceived and carried out within a context defined by the nature of the discipline and its sub-disciplinary emphases, the level of instruction, and the specific objectives of the institution. Technological approaches such as standardized testing have utility in determining the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills. While such outcomes are important, they are hardly sufficient as a result of “higher education.” Standardized testing becomes less and less effective the more educational objectives are centered in the ability to use basic knowledge and skills creatively. This fact is of significant import in working with outcomes assessment in the arts disciplines.

PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

Every educational institution in the United States is now confronted with accountability questions to a greater extent than ever before. Available facts indicate that questions about accountability are justified. Large

numbers of students are demonstrably moving from level to level in the American educational system without gaining the kind of basic education required for future productivity either in the workplace or in advanced educational settings.

Unfortunately, these general facts obscure specific facts, particularly about areas of real excellence in American higher education. American higher education in the arts constitutes one such area of excellence. Its worldwide reputation is secure, grounded in fundamental, substantive traditions and practices that have evolved for hundreds of years. Given this stunning success and the challenges that must be met in order to sustain it, arts programs in higher education must find judicious and prudent ways to address the accountability issue.

We suggest that each arts unit begin by looking at what it already does in terms of outcomes assessment. Many of these activities are so traditional to the education and training of artists that they are identified by older, less fashionable names such as entrance audition or portfolio review, annual jury or portfolio examination, senior creative or performance project, competitions internal and external to the institution, and so forth. These procedures are usually in place in addition to regular academic procedures used by all disciplines. Quite often, the procedures in the arts are far more extensive, intensive, comprehensive, and targeted than assessments in other disciplines.

Arts units in higher education are encouraged to make these outcomes assessment procedures known and understood in as many accountability contexts as possible. Each arts unit in higher education should also be working regularly with assessment as related to the development of student competence. Any assessment program, no matter how historically grounded or how effective, can be improved. It is particularly important that change be based on prospects for real improvement, not just on the acquisition of new techniques that meet fashionable notions of accountability. Therefore, each arts unit in higher education has an important responsibility to deal with the issue of outcomes at a level of professionalism and commitment indigenous to each art form itself. This must be done with sufficient rigor and clarity to defend the unit’s outcomes assessment effort against benighted and unwarranted intrusion. It is hard to accomplish the latter without constant attention to the former.

OUTCOMES AND THE TRADITION OF ASSESSMENT IN THE ARTS DISCIPLINES

The accountability debate is peopled with various stakeholders. These stakeholders do not share the same values or viewpoints either about the purposes of education, the meaning of educational achievement, the life of the mind, or the nature and purpose of instruction in the arts. This means that the arts community in higher education must be comprehensively prepared to debate outcomes, assessment, and accountability issues effectively. While each arts unit must prepare to debate from its own perspective, a number of points seem particularly powerful in creating an arts perspective on outcomes assessment.

- Advanced work in the arts disciplines at the postsecondary level demands the acquisition of a significant basic technique. In all disciplines, the acquisition of such technique is a requirement for continuation in educational programs. Often, the basic physical aspects of this technique must be highly developed prior to entrance in the freshman year if work as a professional is to be an expected outcome.
- Acquisition of basic technique and the presence of talent, while interrelated, are not the same thing. Neither can be substituted for the other, but no amount of talent can override the need to acquire technical skills.
- The easiest sort of evaluation in the arts disciplines involves the extent to which students have achieved certain levels of technical competence. Because models of successful technique are so public, pressures of self-assessment, as well as professional assessment, are intense.
- Arts programs in higher education normally have intensive programs that constantly measure the acquisition of technique. Entrance auditions and portfolio reviews, regular juried examinations and presentations of student work in quasi-professional circumstances are standard. In addition, there is much tutorial instruction. Constant assessment is made moment by moment, both in the development of knowledge and skills and in the process of completing a work. Anyone who has witnessed a rehearsal, or a faculty critique in the visual arts, knows that outcomes assessment is continuous, often severe and, in fact, the driving force of the entire enterprise.
- The education and training of the artist is centered on fostering self-assessment skills. The development of various sensory acuities is central to this effort. Students of the arts often are their own harshest critics as they attempt to hone their competencies to meet professional expectations.
- Although work in the arts is centered on the acquisition of technique, technique itself is only one aspect of education and training. The usual objective is concomitant development of technique and creative abilities in the use of technique, the fusion of intellectual, emotional, and physical elements natural to the arts disciplines.
- A kind of universality is indigenous to work in the arts. However, this universality resides in the communicative power of uniquely crafted statements in the various arts media, not in the universality of mathematical or technological replication. This is one reason why the presence of technique alone does not guarantee an artistic outcome. Each successful work of art is a microcosmic universe held together by its own internal logic. The internal logic of one work will not be the same internal logic of another, even if the two works are crafted by the same artist. Different interpretations, transformations, and constructions involve unique interweavings of internal logics at all levels. For example, *Twelfth Night* contains Shakespeare's internal logic in the text of the play, which is then placed in juxtaposition to, and communication with, a variety of other internal logics—costuming, lighting, pacing, timing, gesture, and so forth.

The exact nature of learning in the arts is a great mystery. Advanced learning often takes place as work in the field engenders connections with what was learned in the classroom, the studio, or in performance situations. Maturity rates and levels vary widely across the spectrum of individuals involved. When trying to relate actual learning to professional experience, a most difficult assessment problem presents itself; no one knows exactly when a specific knowledge or skill will be used in the course of creating a specific internal logic in the development of a specific work of art. Centuries of experience with this phenomenon has led the arts community, for all of its emphasis on outcomes assessment, to be somewhat humble about its ability to create elaborate outcomes structures that perform with mathematical or technological replicability.

Work in the arts in higher education is involved with far more than the education and training of professional artists. The arts disciplines have major enterprises in education, research and scholarship tied to the sciences and the humanities, and the development of practitioners in arts-related fields such as management, engineering, and the arts therapies. Although the goal of basic technique in the arts disciplines remains as part of the foundation for work in all of these areas, each has its own specific nature that creates a set of conditions for outcomes assessment. In general, students entering higher education intending to major in one of these fields will do their initial professional work during the course of their undergraduate education. While most of these students are not beginners in their arts discipline, they are beginners in their field of arts-related practice. Thus, they are engaged in the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills in that field.

This situation lends itself to rather simple standardization assessment methods, at least at first. However, as students advance and become fundamentally competent in their chosen field, effective outcomes assessment becomes more complicated. To be productive it must become more tailored to the nature of particular courses of study. Its methods must become more artistic than technological.

COMPONENTS OF OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES

Each arts unit in higher education will already have a significant number of activities that constitute outcomes assessment. The question is not presence, but rather maximum effectiveness—is each element effective in and of itself; are the elements effective as a whole? Work with assessment usually includes the following:

- *Natures*. It is essential to develop a working definition of the nature of the issues being addressed. While education in every field shares certain commonalities, it is clear that the basic natures of work in various fields are quite different, particularly at the undergraduate level.

The determination of natures also involves looking at the nature of larger departmental, institutional, social, and other goals that may be central to the outcomes assessment issue. For example, it may be difficult to discuss the concept of unique internal logic in making works of art with individuals who understand logic only in a mathematical or technological sense.

- *Goals*. Goals may be broadly or narrowly defined: often, they are considered as being something between mission on one hand and specific objectives on the other. Goals may be applied to the comprehensive work of a multipurpose institution, or to a specific area of study in one of the arts disciplines. There is an obvious relationship between natures and goals. Goals significantly inconsistent with the nature of the content being addressed are unlikely to be realized. Most institutions and arts units have already compiled significant statements regarding their goals. Working systematically with outcomes is facilitated when goals statements:

1. Are clearly defined with logical relationship to the nature of the subject or subjects being considered.
2. Contain explicit boundaries that serve as criteria for accepting and rejecting specific ideas, programs, or activities. Boundaries must be such that they define what outcomes are inappropriate or unwanted as well as those that are desirable.
3. Are clearly understandable and broadly accepted as defining the working context.
4. Are realistic in terms of the tangible and intangible resources available. These include financial support, geographical setting, history and tradition, and shared values.

- *Common Bodies of Essential Knowledge and Skills*. In terms of educational outcomes, interconnections between natures and goals should produce agreement on the common body of essential knowledge and skills appropriate to

each academic activity, whether it be a single course or an entire curriculum. The key word is *essential*. Here we use “essential” to mean those things that must be present if the threshold of acceptability is to be crossed. The distinction between what is essential and what is desirable is critical. Unless this distinction is clear, it is hard to be specific about measuring outcomes effectively. This is particularly the case in the arts, where technique, while essential, is not enough. This statement comes from an understanding of the nature of the arts and has significant implications for the goals of professional education and training. The following two statements are quite different:

1. The goal of our institution is to prepare professional artists.
2. The goal of our institution is to provide a level of technique requisite for practice as a professional artist.

Each of these goals statements has different implications for the common body of essential knowledge and skills required. Both designate ambitious goals, but the nature of each is quite different.

- *Means of Evaluating Achievement in Acquisition of the Common Body of Essential Knowledge and Skills Developed for Each Academic Entity.* Each element or combination of elements will have different appropriate means of evaluation. Consideration of natures and goals must be referenced in the development process to produce a logical and comprehensive result. Some measurements will be mathematical and technological. There will be clear yes and no answers. Other elements will require subjective judgment. Some elements cannot be easily assessed in short time frames. It is important not to fall into the trap of defining quality solely in terms of those areas that are relatively easy to assess. Constant reflection on natures, goals, and common bodies of essential knowledge and skills will help to prevent error in this regard.

- *Systematic Overviews.* Outcomes assessment in higher education is necessarily a multifaceted process. Proponents of improved outcomes assessment and accountability demand codification and rationalization of the outcomes assessment process beyond that which has been standard in American higher education. Addressing these demands without taking inordinate time from the achievement of fundamental goals is a perennial management challenge. An original investment in a program of systematic overview can accomplish two objectives:

1. The development of a comprehensive picture of outcomes assessment can be used as the basis for evaluation and improvement.
2. Existence of a comprehensive picture and evidence of will to improve go a long way in answering accountability questions.

- *Follow-up of Graduates.* Effective outcomes assessment involves the follow-up of graduates. This is difficult in all professions, but especially in the arts. Part of the reason is that individuals with postsecondary degrees in the arts disciplines often craft unique careers for themselves. Many combine professional work in their art form with teaching. Many are self-employed, free-lance workers. The profession is not codified to the same extent as other disciplines. This is not an insurmountable problem; however, it is part of the nature of work in the arts. It must be considered in the development of outcomes assessment systems.

As suggested previously, the use of the six interconnected elements just presented represents an intellectual problem of an artistic nature. Since each institution and program is different, no universal model is applicable to every case. No system of outcomes assessment has intrinsic value in and of itself. Any system is only as good as the vision, will, commitment, and intellect of those who operate it. The aggregate result of excellent individualized assessment programs will produce the rise in quality of education that is rightly being sought.

CAUTIONS

At its best, outcomes assessment can demand creative approaches to evaluating the acquisition of advanced knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, it can also be just another methodological juggernaut making imperious demands that square pegs be placed in round holes. At worst, outcomes assessment can be little more than a ploy in political machinations. Power redistribution, not quality, is the name of this game.

Fortunately, the rise of outcomes assessment as a national academic issue has encouraged the expanded evaluation of outcomes assessment technique. Before accepting any techniques, however, it is important to engage in outcomes projection: how is the technique related to the natures and goals inherent in a specific arts discipline and the curricula that teach it. One of the greatest dangers is manic focus on single measures of effectiveness such as standardized test scores, national opinion polls, and the like. Single measures of effectiveness are often more tied to public relations concerns than educational quality.

Arts units should also be wary of outcomes assessment methods that focus on assessment of capabilities in the various elements of the discipline to the exclusion of assessment of the student's ability to integrate knowledge and skills comprehensively in professional work. Multiple-choice testing in the arts disciplines is particularly amenable to this sort of abuse because the nature of most such testing explores knowledge in a fragmented way; assessment of integration is neither an objective nor an outcome.

Assessment and accountability must be kept in appropriate proportion to the comprehensive educational task. It is possible to have so much evaluation and assessment required by so many entities that assessment and evaluation become the subject of cynicism and games-playing. It is possible to be so busy being accountable that there is insufficient time to do work on matters of basic substance, much less to make advancements. Accountability overkill can pose as much danger to educational outcomes as any other negative force in the institution.

It is important not to allow a focus on outcomes to diminish the importance of resources and processes in education. To take the outcomes argument to an extreme, there would be no need for educational institutions at all, just libraries, lab-like facilities, and a series of examinations for students. Obviously, resources and processes are of significant concern. These can be overemphasized, but they can also be underemphasized. Balance is the key.

A COMMONALITY OF GOALS

Institutions providing education in the arts disciplines share certain educational goals, based primarily on the nature of the disciplines and the traditions that have evolved from that nature. Agreements on natures, goals, and common bodies of essential knowledge and skills are sufficient for the development of national standards used in accreditation and other contexts. In fact, higher education in the United States represents a system built on a common framework constructed to allow and encourage institutional variation. Each institution has many written documents and operational procedures that serve the same functions as similar documents in other institutions, even though the specific content is not the same. It is important to preserve this diversity. By and large, the outcomes assessment movement is now recognized for its potential to encourage an unwanted homogeneity. However, institutions, accrediting bodies, and others concerned with educational quality must remain vigilant to ensure that the existence of common goals does not become an excuse to avoid the responsibilities of developing specific, clear institutional and programmatic goals and of assessing the realization of those goals.

THE ROLE OF EXPERTISE

One of the most perplexing questions is the extent to which validity of any outcomes assessment process is measured in terms of the ability of experts in the discipline to convince those with little in-depth knowledge of the discipline that a given outcomes assessment process is effective. At elementary levels

where right and wrong answers are appropriate, demonstrations of effectiveness by experts to non-experts are fairly easy. However, as one advances in a discipline, the non-professional either increasingly takes the word of the professional on faith, or increasingly demands accountability in terms that non-professionals can understand. Here is the Achilles heel of outcomes assessment. While millions of people are capable of making valid judgments about student outcomes in addition and subtraction, a microscopic minority is capable of valid assessments about Ph.D. programs in mathematics. This condition demands that at some point there be trust in the expertise that only professionals have. Professionals, on the other hand, hold their expertise in trust for the good of the entire community. They have a responsibility to maintain such trust by actions that reinforce their credibility. If the outcomes assessment movement can succeed in restoring improved competence in basic skills while encouraging trust in professional expertise in advanced matters of quality professional education, it will have accomplished a great deal. If, on the other hand, the outcomes assessment movement erodes trust in professional expertise, it will represent a tragic and perhaps irretrievable disservice to American higher education.

CONCLUSION

Arts units in higher education have a long and proud history of success. Clearly, an important factor in the continuation of that success is their future effectiveness in managing the multifaceted issue of outcomes assessment. Whether fad or trend, the outcomes assessment movement can be a catalyst to deepen the traditions of evaluation already present in arts curricula.

Leaders of arts programs in higher education must take the best feature of outcomes aspirations—a focus on results—and avoid the worst feature—a focus on mathematically based technique. They must make technique serve results and not the reverse. They must take leadership in promulgating the values of artistic assessment for its possible application to other disciplines and curricular objectives. And, while remaining open to consider various possibilities, they must keep the arts free of assessment philosophies and techniques that go against the nature of the arts disciplines themselves.

APPENDIX: AN EXAMPLE OF GOALS—INDICATORS / EVIDENCE ANALYSIS

Student Achievement Goals

Indicators/Evidence

Competence in basic arts techniques	Entrance, continuation, and graduation requirements Achievement tests Course evaluations Class or laboratory examinations
Basic understanding of the history of the art form in Western and other civilizations	Course requirements Syllabus content Class examinations
Basic general education at the college level, including the ability to understand distinctions and commonalities regarding work in artistic, scientific, and humanistic domains	Transcript analysis Curricular requirements Syllabus review Achievement tests Class and laboratory examinations
Entry-level competence in the major field of study	Juried examinations Placement records
Ability to enter graduate study in the major field	Graduate school acceptances Records of completion of graduate work
Ability to form and defend value judgments	Project assessments Master class evaluations
Ability to communicate in spoken and written language	Syllabus review Project assessments
Ability to communicate ideas in a specific art form in professional circumstances	Internship reports Employee ratings of performance Employment records
A coherent set of artistic/intellectual goals evident in each student's work and the ability to achieve these goals as an independent professional	Assessment of student projects Content of final projects Faculty and peer assessment of final projects

This Briefing Paper was a product of the Council of Arts Accrediting Associations: NASAD - Roger Gilmore, *President*, William Barrett, *Vice President*; NASD - John Wilson, *President*, Enid Lynn, *Vice President*; NASM - Robert Werner, *President*, Frederick Miller, *Vice President*; NAST - Paul A. Distler, *President*, Firman Brown, *Vice President*. Samuel Hope served as chief staff officer for the Council and was principal compiler of this text.

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