

Alverno and the assessment center movement

Later this Spring, when the Eleventh International Congress on the Assessment Center Method convenes in Williamsburg, VA, faculty from Alverno College will make two major presentations: a report on our longitudinal study of Alverno graduates (Marcia Mentkowski) and a session on "Assessment for Diagnosis and Development of Career Direction" (Celestine Schall and Georgine Loacker).

As in most of the previous ten congresses, Alverno College will be the principle representative of higher education at a meeting where the name tags tend to sport letters like AT&T and IBM rather than MIT and UCLA. Indeed the planning for this congress took place on the Alverno campus last Fall.

Chance Encounter

The confluence of the business and educational "streams" of the assessment center movement occurred through a bit of serendipity. When the First International Congress, also in Williamsburg, met in 1973, Alverno faculty were busy developing their own assessment methods for the new curriculum. We had

developed our own idea of the "Assessment Center" we were then establishing. Later that year President Joel Read happened to be speaking to a Wisconsin Telephone executive who had to cut the conversation off in order to attend a meeting in their Assessment Center. "You have an Assessment Center?" was President Read's reply. "We're planning one, too. Can we exchange some ideas on it?"

At the invitation of our newly-discovered colleagues, particularly Dr. Joel Moses of AT&T, Professors Austin Doherty (Psychology) and Georgine Loacker (English) participated in the Second Congress, where they made a presentation on "Applications of the Assessment Center in Education."

This presentation led, in quick succession, to other invitations. Later that year Loacker presented the Alverno approach to assessment at a conference sponsored by the Ontario Council for Leadership in Educational Administration. Then Doherty and Loacker were invited to become members of the prestigious Assessment Center Research Group, joining representatives from fourteen business and industrial corpor-

ations and three testing and research firms. This busy year was capped off with a return presentation by Loacker at the Third International Congress in Quebec.

Since that time Alverno has been a regular participant in the Congress, with presentations of our ongoing work by Loacker, Marcia Mentkowski (Psychology) and William McEachern (Business & Management) at the Sixth, Eighth, and Tenth Congresses.

Support From Business

"Our relationship with the Assessment Center movement has been extremely valuable to us," says Georgine Loacker, Chair of the Assessment Council. "As we were grappling with our early experience of defining and measuring outcomes, it was reassuring to know that we were contributing to a tradition that reached back to the 1930s." (See box.)

Corporate practitioners of assessment center methodology were more than willing to share their experience with Alverno. Wisconsin Telephone provided us with two "loaned executives," Les Weinberger and Donna Dollase. We learned of and adapted techniques such as the in-basket, which had been developed in the early 1950s for corporate and military assessment programs. Our partners also convinced us that the idea of drawing on a pool of external assessors from the business community would work.

"But most important," according to Loacker, "was the encouragement we received from people like Joel Moses and Douglas Bray of AT&T to rely on our own experience. Research and testing firms could suggest techniques, but they couldn't provide ready-made instruments that would meet the unique requirements of our program and the unique learning needs of our students. We've never forgotten this advice, and we pass it along every time another college comes to us and says, 'tell us how to do it.'"

A New Perspective

On the other hand, the presence of Alverno in the assessment center movement has had an impact on corporate practitioners as well. As an educational



Pioneers of the assessment center method posing at the 1982 International Congress include (right) Bill Byham of Development Dimensions International, Douglas Bray of AT&T, (left) Joel Moses of AT&T, (front center) Georgine Loacker of Alverno, and (row 2 center) Lois Crooks of Educational Testing Service.

institution, Alverno has a slightly different perspective on the assessment process.

The assessment center method was originally developed to predict future performance on the basis of observed characteristics of personality. The primary application of corporate and military assessment data was, and for the most part still is, to inform the personnel selection process. Corporate training departments and assessment centers tend to be separate rather than integrated systems.

"As educators, we come out of a different tradition," says Georgine Loacker. "One of our primary concerns is the promotion of growth and change in our students. We use assessment not just to predict, but to diagnose and prescribe developmental measures. Instead of being primarily a capstone experience which measures acquired ability, assessment is a formative part of the learning process from beginning to end."

There is evidence that the educational perspective is being taken seriously in the assessment center movement. In recent years, more and more corporate assessment centers have incorporated peer assessment and self-evaluation within their procedures. At the Tenth International Congress, an entire session was devoted to the relationship between assessment centers and personnel development programs.

The application of assessment center methods by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) over the past eight years offers a graphic illustration of this broadening of perspective. Initially the NASSP worked with corporate assessment center practitioners to develop a personnel selection procedure. But today it is soliciting proposals for the design of training programs. Both McBer and Company and AT&T are submitting proposals, and both have retained Alverno College as project consultants.

"This linkage between assessment and development," Georgine Loacker says, "seems to be indicative of a growing awareness that human beings are never totally formed and that lifelong learning is a reality."

Alverno helps ISU develop assessment

Georgine Loacker (English) and Patricia Jensen (Business & Management) visited Illinois State University at Normal three times this past winter to assist the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations of the College of Education in the development of its Assessment Center.

The visit to ISU resulted from a contact with Professors Ned Lovell and Dale Jackson, who attended a Visitation Day last year. Their department was in the process of developing a one-day assessment center for its doctoral students. They came to Alverno to arrange for some consultation time with Alverno assessment experts.

As a followup, in February Loacker and Jensen led a group of about fifty ISU faculty from Administration and Foundations and two other departments in an exploration of performance based assessment.

The next week they returned for three days to train twenty-five faculty

to observe and record behavior and to assess various types of exercises. Several weeks later, Loacker returned to observe and evaluate their assessment center in action.

Both Loacker and Jensen think that Illinois State's commitment to implement assessment across an entire program is very significant.

The growing number of "assessment" colleagues in higher education increases every year through our annual Assessment Workshops for College Teachers. Often, they are individuals who are committed to the improvement of their own teaching through assessment of student performance.

But our recent work with Illinois State, as with Mary College, Clayton Junior College, the Kamehameha Schools in Hawaii, and Inter-American University in Puerto Rico, shows potential for commitment to a broader incorporation of systematic assessment into the educational process.

Forty years of assessment

A brief history of the assessment center movement

It is rather ironic that the first significant application of assessment center methodology focused on assessee's ability to remain incommunicative.

In 1943 the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) engaged psychologists Henry Murray and Donald MacKinnon to select intelligence personnel. After the war, Murray and MacKinnon published the results of their work in *Assessment of Men* (1948), a classic of assessment literature.

Actually, the first practical and theoretical foundations for assessment were laid a decade earlier. British and German psychologists used assessment techniques in evaluating army officer candidates. Later, at Harvard, Henry Murray examined the observable characteristics of personality in his *Explorations in Personality* (1938).

Early in the post-war period, academic studies and military appli-

cations of assessment methodology continued to prevail. But in 1956, AT&T set the direction for the future by beginning its personnel assessment program under the direction of Douglas Bray. AT&T published the results of their work in *Formative Years in Business* (1974).

During the 1970s the application of assessment center methods mushroomed. By the end of the decade, the number of corporately-owned assessment centers increased from a little over 100 to over 2,000. And applications spread from the corporate world to higher education. Alverno College became the first American college or university to integrate a formal assessment program throughout its entire curriculum.

Thirty years after the OSS had used assessment to find men who could keep quiet, Alverno College found women who could speak out.