



Assessment is:

- an educational method recommended by two recent studies on ways to improve American higher education.
- a way of judging student progress.
- a way of helping students learn.

all of the a

When Alverno instituted its ability-based curriculum 12 years ago, it replaced conventional testing procedures with a new system called "assessment." Now two educational groups have recommended that all colleges and universities across the country adopt assessment methods, triggering growing curiosity about what assessment is—and what it isn't.

Mention "tests" in a discussion of education and everyone knows exactly what you mean.

Sitting nervously at a classroom desk, wondering which interpretation is correct for an ambiguous true/false question, trying to remember all the facts and information studied so carefully the night before—the memories are marked indelibly on every mind that has ever been enlightened in an American classroom.

But mention "assessments" and see what happens.

For most, the word generates only a few vague comparisons to concepts such as measurement or evaluation. But for anyone who has attended Alverno College during the past eleven years, where a sophisticated system of progress measurement called assessment has replaced testing, mention of "assessments" evokes memories every bit as strong as those triggered by testing, even if the memories are not quite the same.

Instead of remembering questions answered with a check mark, the Alverno alumnae are likely to recall processes such as group discussions, self-assessments and feedback from external assessors. The worry they recall is more likely to be about incorporating specific criteria in their papers than about ambiguous true/false questions. And instead of a time called "finals" they recall a time called "assessment week."

Are the differences in those memories only a matter of semantics, or has the Alverno graduate experienced a real difference in her education as a result of assessment? The differences between testing and assessment have been more closely examined as a result of two reports on ways to improve higher education made during the past year by the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Education and by the American Association of Colleges. In the reports, both groups urge America's colleges and universities to incorporate assessment procedures in their evaluation processes—raising the possibility that, someday, memories of assessment would be as commonplace as memories of tests are today.

But the very newness of the assessment concept blocks understanding of it. As a result, the reports have set off a growing discussion among educators about just what "assessment" means.

Clifford Adelman, Senior Researcher for the National Institute of Education and co-

author of its report, *Involvement in Learning*, says that "American higher education still has not figured out just what it is that they want students to learn and more seriously, how to assess their learning. Certainly the term 'assessment' is being widely used, though not always as precisely."

Georgine Loacker, Chairperson of Alverno's Assessment Council and author of several books on assessment, agrees that the word "assessment" is being used "too often in a vague, non-discriminatory sense, as an umbrella term that covers all testing and evaluating in relation to learning."

In the search for examples that clarify the assessment concept, Alverno's pioneering experience and continuous research during the past eleven years are becoming a central reference point in the assessment debate. As Ted Marchese, Vice President of the American Association of Higher Education, put it, "When it comes to assessment, all roads lead to Alverno." And, at Alverno, the distinction between testing and assessment goes well beyond the level of semantics.

In order to understand how assessment differs from the kind of testing experienced by students, consider the difference between what a student's grade *is* and what that grade *means*. The difference between these two questions is significant. The grade itself might

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tell the percentage of right answers a student gave, where a student ranked among a group, or how well a student did in relation to a national norm.

The *meaning* of the grade, however, should give some insight into what was expected of the student and how well she met those expectations. Was the student expected to choose correct answers to questions? Was the student expected to recall information? To apply concepts to new situations? To discuss the validity of her conclusions? To collaborate with other students in a decision-making process? To generate possible solutions to a problem?

While it might seem easy to explain such expected outcomes, it is, in fact, very difficult to measure them. As Loacker put it, "Once you identify the outcomes you want students to achieve, the first and most challenging question that arises is how do you know if they have achieved them?"

Alverno created its assessment system eleven years ago when its faculty chose to make eight abilities they considered the hallmark of a liberal arts education the central outcomes of their teaching. Once faculty decided that they needed to ascertain that students were, in fact, achieving abilities such as critical thinking, social interaction, communication, valuing, and a sense of the aesthetic, they realized that normal testing procedures were not up to the task. Instead, they

created a system incorporating elements of the Assessment Center method used by many corporate personnel departments.

Certain concepts repeatedly come through as Alverno faculty talk about assessment. It is a *process*, they say, not a single event. Students are evaluated on many dimensions, not just on their ability to recall information or perform mental operations. The student is assessed on her *abilities*—the eight outcomes that define the Alverno curriculum, as well as the smaller units that show a student's development of those major abilities. Faculty specify *criteria* for each assessment—the student knows the standards by which she is being judged. The specific *performance* asked of the student is related carefully to the ability for which she is assessed. Faculty strive to make assessments represent real life situations in which the ability is used. Students

receive *individualized feedback* on their performance so that they know not only how well they did, but also what they can build on for the future and what they need to improve. And students develop skills of assessing their own performance—*self-assessment* becomes an integral part of the process.

A look at the way a student goes through the assessment process reveals how all of these elements come together to define her education. For the Alverno student, assessment begins as soon as she makes the commitment to enroll. Before school begins, the student comes for a daylong assessment in a variety of areas: writing, speaking, reading, listening, using media, quantitative thinking, and the meaningful use of computers. Even in this early assessment, elements of the whole process are evident. The situations in which the student performs are



Social interaction assessments rely on trained volunteers drawn from Milwaukee area businesses, governmental agencies and community organizations to judge how well students integrate knowledge and abilities in group processes.



Georgine Loucker

simulated to reflect real life. Students are asked to deal with topics that require a personal position as well as understanding of a situation and are assigned varied audiences to whom they must speak or write.

In these entry-level assessments, students learn by doing. They get a sense of what will be expected of them as they begin their classes, and they experience some of the varied ways they will be evaluated at Alverno. In a larger sense, these entry assessments provide a diagnostic tool, they introduce the student to the concept of self-assessment, and they provide the first detailed feedback of the student's career at Alverno. The diagnostic function of the assessment is in suggesting further learning directions for each student—whether that be regular classes, remedial, or advanced. Perhaps even more significant for the student, however, is her learning to make use of these assessments for her own understanding. As part of her orientation to college, the Alverno

student takes part in a special workshop to learn how to evaluate her own work. She learns to look at criteria and to apply them to her own performance. She learns to begin taking responsibility for her own learning. She has taken a first step toward success as a learner.

In addition to her own self-assessment, the student receives detailed feedback on all the facets of her entry assessment from the staff of the Assessment Center. She can make comparisons of this professional feedback with her own sense of her performance as she begins her college work.

In her regular classes, the student continues to work at assessments that bring together her developing abilities with modes of performance appropriate to them. In an introductory arts and humanities course, for example, the student practices relating what she thinks about art works with what she learns about the artist's methods, materials, and environment. An assessment that measures the integration of that knowledge and ability might be a letter to an associate in which she takes a position about the relative merits of a piece of art. Criteria for judging her statement might include such things as having a clearly stated viewpoint about the art work, including discussion of specific elements of art as they are displayed in the piece, and displaying sensitivity to an audience who might hold a different position from hers. Both

the student and the instructor will assess her performance on the basis of these criteria to decide how well the student has achieved her goal and describe the unique qualities of her work.

Assessments like this, and hundreds more which the student takes throughout her course work, offer samples of her performance. For the instructor, they indicate how well she is integrating her learning. For the student, they provide information that enables her to improve her performance in the future.

When students begin to take courses that are related to their particular academic area of concentration, their assessments become closely related to the professional roles they are preparing for. In an introductory course in professional communications, for example, students are assessed for their ability to understand concepts from general semantics by creating five minute videotapes in a television format of their choice. Joyce Fey, instructor of the course, says that students choose everything from TV news, to soap operas, to commercials, to show that "no word has the same meaning twice," or "context defines meaning," or other semantics concepts. "Two things stand out in this assessment," says Fey. "Students discover that you can't 'fake' it—if you don't understand the concept you can't translate it for another audience. And students find out—sometimes to their surprise—that assessment can be fun."

Assessing Assessment

Every year Alverno hosts a weeklong workshop on assessment for college and university instructors from across the country. Three Alverno students spoke at this year's assessment workshop, held June 10-14 at Alverno. Here are excerpts from what they said about assessment.

Linda Karch

Year: Senior

Major: Art Therapy

Hometown: Stevens Point, WI

Plans after graduation: "There's a possibility as an art therapist in a school. Ideally, I'd like to work as an art therapist in a special education program."

Comments on assessment: "The expectations are really explicit; they're all laid out for you in the syllabi and they tell you what your responsibility is, so you know on what you're going to be assessed. But what I really like about assessment is the personal approach in the feedback. With those explicit criteria, a teacher or assessor can really spell out for you what you did well and why it was good. Then they give you constructive criticism—pointing out some of your weaknesses and why they are weaknesses. I've got to hand it to the teachers here. They really go out of their way to give you personal attention, and the assessment system brings that out of them."



Elizabeth Pahr

Year: Senior

Major: Psychology

Hometown: Lancaster, WI

Plans after graduation: "Graduate school, studying clinical psychology. Then work as a clinical psychologist."

Comments on assessment: "The best thing about assessment is the way it makes you integrate things. Once I had to give a speech about a science topic I knew perfectly well. But the fact that I had to not just know the information but also explain it to a large group of people made that speech hard for me. I got really nervous about goofing up—not because I didn't know what I was talking about, but because I didn't know if I could explain it to the audience. So I had to put together the knowledge I had about a certain area of psychology with a communication ability. With assessment, you get used to putting things together."



Carrie Baring

Year: Sophomore

Major: Business and Management

Hometown: Milwaukee

Plans after college: "I'm really interested in banking. It's an exciting field right now."

Comments on assessment: "There's a lot of difference between testing and assessment. Testing only shows what knowledge is inside me at a particular point in time. But testing won't show you or me what I can do with that knowledge. It won't give any idea how I can apply that knowledge outside me. Assessment will. Assessment shows what I can do with an idea or a fact or a skill. It shows you and me how I'm likely to put ideas and facts together with situations.

And that gives me confidence. That's the biggest part. When I see that I can use something, that really gives me confidence."



This close link between professional roles and the school environment exists on other levels at Alverno. In the external assessment program, professionals from many Wisconsin businesses, industries, and institutions volunteer their time to interact with students and give them feedback on their performance in abilities like social interaction and responsible citizenship. Marilyn Thanos, Director of External Assessment, explains the value of this interaction between students and professionals: "When the professionals tell the students that what they are learning is valuable, it makes a different kind of impression on them than when they hear it from their teachers. That sense of verification from another profession is important to them."

Alverno faculty have learned that the facet of assessment that most clearly distinguishes it from testing is its effectiveness not just as a measurement of learning but also as a *method* of learning. Austin Doherty, academic vice president and dean of Alverno, explains this dual nature of assessment this way: "Because assessment focuses on the application of abilities, students learn to tie knowledge, theory, motivation, and self-perception to constructive action. They discover early that assessment is not a concluding step to learning; it is a natural part of every learning step we take."

Thus when Alverno educators object to calling their assessment week "finals," the distinction is substantive. Tests may be final, but assessments are not. Each assessment concludes one step in the learning process even as it begins the next step.

Research done by Alverno's Office of Research and Evaluation confirms that students do become independent learners through this process. According to Marcia Mentkowski, Director of the Office of Research and Evaluation, "in-depth, anonymous interviews with students over a time span of several years attribute this independent learning to two critical elements in the assessment process: the feedback from empathetic faculty and professionals, and the opportunity to self-assess against explicit criteria."

From that process, each student learns to infer criteria by which her performance will be judged, at school or on the job. She learns that she not only *can* take action but also that she, in fact, *does* take action many times daily. She learns that these actions are complex integrations of knowledge, skills, and abilities. And from this learning comes the confidence to take on successively greater challenges that are, in effect, opportunities for further learning.

Loacker, recently returned from several months in Europe meeting with educators about assessment, believes that

understanding of assessment as an integral part of the learning process is essential to a full understanding of its differences from testing. "Both here and abroad, talk about assessment deals with the use of assessment for selection, the feedback that assessment provides for the teacher, and the question of quality assurance." All these elements are important, Loacker believes, but all are subordinate to understanding assessment as a tool for students and their learning. "We've discovered that certain elements of the assessment process are so important to learning—namely, multiple sampling, criteria, feedback, and judgment; and we don't want them to be lost in the discussion. John Heywood, British author of *Assessment in Higher Education*, called our assessment method a 'systems model' because of the ways it integrates learning, objectives and progress measurement for the student."

Thus for Loacker and other Alverno educators, the question of assessment and its usefulness comes down to a question of how the process is used. If it is designed to compare groups of students, the difference between it and testing is likely to be minimal. If assessment is designed with the individual student's learning progress in mind, it could very well be a major step toward the sort of improvement in higher education that has been called for in recent reports. ■