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# THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR ASSESSMENT

## Introduction: The Good Old Days

This book's focus is the inextricable linkage between planning and assessment as characteristics of effective colleges and universities in the twenty-first century. Such a linkage has not always been emphasized or valued within higher education. During the period from immediately following World War II through the early to mid-1980s, higher education in the United States led what can only be referred to as a charmed existence. Veterans returning from the War flooded into colleges and universities in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and were followed by their offspring—the so-called post-war baby boom—in the 1960s and 1970s. Public college and university enrollments increased exponentially, and so did governmental support. Private colleges and universities shared in the growth as the result of governmentally supported student aid programs. The number of degree programs and disciplines at institutions grew rapidly in response to student demand. This did not require a great deal of careful planning—it was essentially a situation of “build it and they will come.” And as long as graduates were produced in those disciplines with knowledge and skills required by business, industry, and government, there were few questions as to how money was being spent. These were halcyon days for higher education.

The environment began to change in the 1980s. The enrollment growth at higher education institutions dwindled as the baby boomers finished cycling through college. Economic recession in the early 1980s forced the federal and state governments to

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reevaluate their level of support for higher education—and parents to question the tuition levels being charged for their children to attend college. And the priorities for federal and state appropriations began to shift. Underperforming public elementary and secondary schools shifted governmental support for education to the K–12 sector. The erosion of federal and state support for higher education was further exacerbated by rising health care costs requiring greater governmental funding of Medicare and Medicaid and state health plans. Deteriorating highway and bridge infrastructure and demand for additional resources to support public safety issues, most notably construction of new incarceration facilities, further cut into public funds available to higher education. As the 1990s arrived, the financial picture for higher education was becoming increasingly bleak. As public funding declined, tuition levels increased. And as tuition increased, so too did scrutiny of higher education, with serious questions being raised about the quality of the product in which tuition dollars were being invested.

### **The Gathering Storm**

One of the first hints that higher education's free pass to resources was evaporating came with a seminal article in *Change* magazine in 1990, in which Robert Zemsky, from the University of Pennsylvania, and William Massy, of Stanford University, articulated their vision of what they refer to as the “ratchet and lattice” within American colleges and universities:

[The academic ratchet] is a term to describe the steady, irreversible shift of faculty allegiance away from the goals of a given institution, toward those of an academic specialty. The ratchet denotes the advance of an entrepreneurial spirit among faculty nationwide, leading to increased emphasis on research and publication, and on teaching one's specialty in favor of general introduction courses, often at the expense of coherence in an academic curriculum. Institutions seeking to enhance their own prestige may contribute

to the ratchet by reducing faculty teaching and advising responsibilities across the board, enabling faculty to pursue their individual research and publication with fewer distractions. The academic ratchet raises an institution's costs, and it results in undergraduates paying more to attend institutions in which they receive less attention than in previous decades. (Zemsky and Massy, 1990, 22)

The authors go on to argue that the “academic ratchet,” which describes a faculty less concerned with teaching than with other more personally rewarding activities, is invariably accompanied by an “administrative lattice,” characterized by burgeoning administrative offices assuming academic functions that were heretofore performed by faculty, such as academic advising, tutoring, and counseling. The administrative lattice further drives up the cost of higher education. Implicit, if not explicit, in the concept of the academic ratchet and administrative lattice in higher education is an enterprise that has lost managerial control over its basic operational functions and is strafed with inefficiencies. In short, the academic ratchet and lattice embody the complete absence of any systematic planning directed at ensuring student learning and enhancing institutional effectiveness. Thus were sown the seeds of discontent that would lead to an outcry in coming years over geometrically escalating tuition costs without an obvious significant return on investment.

In the same year that Zemsky and Massy published their *Change* magazine article, Ernest Boyer published his *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*, in which he described the changes in American colleges and universities following World War II:

But even as the mission of American higher education was changing, the standards used to measure academic prestige continued to be narrowed. Increasingly, professors were expected to conduct research and publish results. Promotion and tenure depended on such activity, and young professors seeking security and status found it more rewarding—in a quite literal sense—to deliver a paper in New

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York or Chicago than teach undergraduates back home. Lip service still was being paid to maintaining a balance between *collegiate* responsibilities and *university* work, but on most campuses the latter had clearly won the day. (Boyer, 1990, 12)

Boyer goes on to say:

Thus, in just a few decades, priorities in American higher education were significantly realigned. The emphasis on undergraduate education, which throughout the years had drawn its inspiration from the colonial college tradition, was being overshadowed by the European university tradition, with its emphasis on graduate education and research. Specifically, at many of the nation's four-year institutions, the focus had moved from the student to the professoriate, from general to specialized education, and from loyalty to the campus to loyalty to the profession. (12–13)

Boyer was strongly arguing that basic general education was being neglected in favor of niche specialties that coincide with faculty research interests. It was becoming increasingly difficult for undergraduates to engage in meaningful ways with tenured and tenure-eligible faculty, in whom the institution has the greatest investment. As the result of these criticisms of higher education, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching created a National Commission on Educating Undergraduates in 1995. It was initially chaired by Boyer and was subsequently renamed the Boyer Commission following his death. In 1998, the Boyer Commission issued an eagerly anticipated report, titled *Reinventing Undergraduate Education*, which leveled some of the harshest criticism yet on the quality of American postsecondary education. Consider the following assessment of research universities:

To an overwhelming degree, they [research universities] have furnished the cultural, intellectual, economic, and political leadership of the nation. Nevertheless, the research universities have too often

failed, and continue to fail, their undergraduate populations . . . Again and again, universities are guilty of advertising practices they would condemn in the commercial world. Recruitment materials display proudly the world-famous professors, the splendid facilities and ground breaking research that goes on within them, but thousands of students graduate without ever seeing the world-famous professors or tasting genuine research. Some of their instructors are likely to be badly trained or untrained teaching assistants who are groping their way toward a teaching technique; some others may be tenured drones who deliver set lectures from yellowed notes, making no effort to engage the bored minds of the students in front of them. (Boyer Commission, 1998, 5–6)

While indicting research universities for failing to effectively manage their most important human resources—faculty—the Boyer Commission also had much to say about the state of student learning in higher education:

Many students graduate having accumulated whatever number of courses is required, but still lacking a coherent body of knowledge, or any inkling as to how one sort of information might relate to others. And all too often they graduate without knowing how to think logically, write clearly, or speak coherently. The university has given them too little that will be of real value beyond a credential that will help them get their first jobs. And with larger and larger numbers of peers holding the same papers in their hands, even that credential has lost much of its potency. (Boyer Commission, 6)

It was inevitable that this internal criticism within higher education would spill over into popular media. The 1996 issue of *U.S. News and World Report's* annual special issue on “America’s Best Colleges” contained the following scathing commentary:

The trouble is that higher education remains a labor-intensive service industry made up of thousands of stubbornly independent and

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mutually jealous units that support expensive and vastly underused facilities. It is a more than \$200 billion-a-year economic enterprise—many of whose leaders oddly disdain economic enterprise, and often regard efficiency, productivity, and commercial opportunity with the same hauteur with which Victorian aristocrats viewed those “in trade” . . . The net result is a hideously inefficient system that, for all its tax advantages and public and private subsidies, still extracts a larger share of family income than almost anywhere else on the planet . . . (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1996, 91)

The article goes on to hypothesize about the underlying causes of inefficiencies at colleges and universities:

For their part, most colleges blame spiraling tuition on an assortment of off-campus scapegoats—congressional budget cutters, stingy state legislatures, government regulators, and parents who demand ever more costly student health and recreational services. Rarely mentioned are the on-campus causes of the tuition crisis: declining teaching loads, non-productive research, ballooning financial aid programs, bloated administrative hierarchies, “celebrity” salaries for professional stars, and inflated course offerings. If colleges and universities were rated on their overall financial acumen, most would be lucky to escape with a passing grade. (91–92)

To sum up the critique of higher education to that point: American colleges and universities were depicted as fundamentally mismanaged, economically inefficient institutions charging dramatically escalating tuition rates for an educational product that was not demonstrably worth the price. Sadly, most colleges and universities lacked the quantitative and qualitative analytical evidence of institutional effectiveness that would enable them to blunt this criticism. Accurate or not, these critical perceptions of higher education went largely unchallenged, suggesting that higher education officials had determined that they were beyond accountability and that transparency in institutional operations was for other enterprises.

## Enter the Federal Government

By the end of the 1990s, the crescendo of criticism of higher education had achieved a volume that the federal government could no longer ignore. Preparatory to reauthorizing the Higher Education Act in 1998, Congress earlier established a National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education to study, among other things, the underlying causes of spiraling tuition rates, administrative costs, and trends in faculty workload. The Commission's report, approved in 1998, and titled *Straight Talk About College Costs and Prices*, contained the following observation that set the stage for extended debate in the years to come:

. . . because academic institutions do not account differently for time spent directly in the classroom and time spent on other teaching and research activities, it is almost impossible to explain to the public how individuals employed in higher education use their time. Consequently, the public and public officials find it hard to be confident that academic leaders allocate resources effectively and well. Questions about costs and their allocation to research, service, and teaching are hard to discuss in simple, straightforward ways and the connection between these activities and student learning is difficult to draw. In responding to this growing concern, academic leaders have been hampered by poor information and sometimes inclined to take issue with those who asked for better data. Academic institutions need much better definitions and measures of how faculty members, administrators, and students use their time. (National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998, 20)

That institutions lacked the basic data to effectively manage their operations is a damning indictment, particularly when viewed by those outside of higher education who are held highly accountable for institutional effectiveness as a precondition for continued infusion of resources. The Commission went on to say:

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The skepticism underlying this concern about where higher education places its priorities is a major consequence of higher education's inability to explain its cost and price structure convincingly to the public. Some cost data are unavailable; much of the information that is provided is hard to understand. College finances are far too opaque. Higher education has a major responsibility to make its cost and price structures much more "transparent" [author's emphasis], i.e., easily understandable to the public and its representatives. (20)

The aforementioned reference to transparency in higher education operations was the most visible call for accountability to date. The National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education issued a series of recommendations in 1998 that are as relevant today as when they were promulgated, and certainly provide a vibrant context for the main substance of this book:

1. Academic institutions will intensify their efforts to control costs and increase institutional productivity.
2. The academic community will provide the leadership required to develop better consumer information about costs and prices and to improve accountability to the public.
3. Governments will develop new approaches to academic regulation, approaches that emphasize performance instead of compliance, and differentiation in place of standardization.
4. The academic community will develop well-coordinated, efficient accrediting processes that relate institutional productivity to effectiveness in improving student learning. (National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, 1998, 15-17)

As this book is being written, there has been, at best, patchy progress in implementation of these decade-old recommendations. Progress has been so slow that, in 2006, U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings commissioned a study of higher education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S.*

*Higher Education*. The Report of the Secretary's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, commonly abbreviated as the Spellings Commission, stated,

We believe that improved accountability is vital to ensuring the success of all of the other reforms we propose. Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families. Student achievement, which is inextricably connected to institutional success, must be measured by institutions on a "value-added" basis that takes into account students' academic baseline when assessing their results. This information should be available to students, and reported publicly in aggregate form to provide consumers and policymakers an accessible, understandable way to measure the relative effectiveness of different colleges and universities. (Spellings Commission, 2006, 4)

There are metrics for assessing cost containment and institutional productivity in higher education, but they are not as widely used as they could be. These metrics will be fully discussed in this volume. With respect to transparency in the cost of a college education, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has developed a website, College Navigator (<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>), a search tool that provides consumers with very basic information on tuition, financial aid, and institutional characteristics for all colleges and universities in the United States receiving Pell Grants. The jury is very definitely out on whether the federal and state governments have moved toward regulation that emphasizes performance over compliance and that celebrates the differentiation of institutional missions rather than applying a one-size-fits-all view of higher education institutions. Accrediting bodies have come closest to fully implementing the recommendation, directed at them by the National Commission on the Cost of Higher Education, that they tie institutional productivity to increased student learning, though they have done so in such a

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subdued and quiet fashion that most constituencies outside of higher education are unaware of that progress.

A brief word on institutional accreditation in the United States: unlike most industrialized countries with a complex higher education system, the United States does not have a centralized Federal Ministry of Education to regulate that higher education system. Rather, since the beginning of the twentieth century that regulatory responsibility has fallen to regional accrediting bodies. These are membership organizations comprising colleges and universities within a given geographic region who voluntarily engage in a process of peer review, wherein evaluation teams of experts from institutions in the region regularly evaluate other member institutions, determining the extent to which they are in compliance with accreditation standards articulated by each of the regional accrediting bodies to ensure academic quality within those member institutions. This process of peer review and self-regulation has long been the envy of other international colleges and universities, which are bound in a maze of governmental regulations that too often are overly prescriptive and have little to do with enhancing student learning and other institutional outcomes.

Each of the six regional accrediting bodies in the United States has its own discrete set of standards against which it evaluates member institutions for accrediting purposes. In ensuring that those member institutions are more accountable and transparent in their operations, each of the accrediting bodies has emphasized, in its standards, the three critical functions that are the focus of this book: assessment of student learning outcomes, assessment of overall institutional effectiveness, and ongoing strategic planning activity that is informed by those assessments. There is a great deal of commonality in intention, if not in exact wording, in the standards across regions. Consider the comparisons in Table 1.1.

The consistent emphasis by accrediting bodies on demonstrable evidence of assessment of student learning and overall institutional effectiveness, and the use of those assessments in institutional strategic planning, is quite important. All institutions receiving

**Table 1-1 Commonality of Standards Across Regional Accrediting Agencies in the United States.**

<i>Assessment of Student Learning</i>	<i>Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness</i>	<i>Systematic Strategic Planning</i>
<p><b>Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Higher Education</b></p> <p>Assessment of student learning demonstrates that an institution's students have knowledge, skills, and competencies consistent with institutional goals, and that students at graduation have achieved appropriate higher education goals.</p>	<p>The institution has developed and implemented an assessment process that evaluates its overall effectiveness in achieving its mission and goals, and its compliance with accreditation standards.</p>	<p>An institution conducts ongoing planning and resource allocation based on its mission and goals, develops objectives to achieve them, and utilizes the results of its assessment activities for institutional renewal. Implementation and subsequent evaluation of the success of the strategic plan and resource allocation support the development and change necessary to improve and maintain institutional quality.</p>
<p><b>New England Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Institutions of Higher Education</b></p> <p>The institution implements and supports a systematic and broad-based approach to the assessment of student learning focused on educational improvement through understanding what and how students are learning through their academic program and, as appropriate,</p>	<p>The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and goals, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide relevant and trustworthy information to support institutional</p>	<p>The institution undertakes planning and evaluation appropriate to its needs to accomplish and improve achievement of its mission and purposes. . . . The institution allocates sufficient resources for its planning and evaluation efforts . . . The institution</p>

*(continued)*

**Table 1-1 (Continued)**

<i>Assessment of Student Learning</i>	<i>Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness</i>	<i>Systematic Strategic Planning</i>
<p>through experiences outside the classroom.</p>	<p>improvement, with an emphasis on the academic program.</p>	<p>systematically collects and uses data necessary to support its planning efforts and to enhance institutional effectiveness.</p>
<p><b>North Central Association of Colleges and Schools Higher Learning Commission</b></p>		
<p>The organization provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission.</p>	<p>The organization's ongoing evaluation and assessment processes provide reliable evidence of institutional effectiveness that clearly informs strategies for continuous improvement.</p>	<p>The organization's allocation of resources and its processes for evaluation and planning demonstrate its capacity to fulfill its mission, improve the quality of education, and respond to future challenges and opportunities.</p>
<p><b>Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities</b></p>		
<p>The institution offers collegiate level programs that culminate in identified student competencies and lead to degrees or certificates in recognized fields of study. The achievement and maintenance of high quality programs is the primary responsibility of an accredited institution; hence the evaluation of educational programs and their continuous improvement is an ongoing responsibility.</p>	<p>The institution uses the results of its systematic evaluation activities and ongoing planning processes to influence resource allocation and to improve its instructional programs, institutional services, and activities . . . The institution uses information from its planning and evaluation processes to communicate evidence of institutional effectiveness to its public.</p>	<p>The institution engages in ongoing planning to achieve its mission and goals. It also evaluates how well, and in what ways, it is accomplishing its mission and goals, and uses the results for broad-based, continuous planning and evaluation. Through its planning process, the institution asks questions, seeks answers, analyzes itself, and revises its goals, policies, procedures, and resource allocation.</p>

**Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges**

The institution identifies college-level general education competencies and the extent to which graduates have attained them.

The institution identifies expected outcomes, and assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of the results in each of the following areas: educational programs, to include student learning outcomes; administrative support services; educational support services; research within its educational mission, if appropriate; community/public service within its educational mission, if appropriate.

The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation processes that (1) incorporate a systematic review of institutional mission, goals, and outcomes; (2) result in continuing improvement in institutional quality; and (3) demonstrate the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission.

**Western Association of Colleges and Schools Accrediting Commission of Senior Colleges and Universities**

The institution's student learning outcomes and expectations for student attainment are clearly stated at the course, program, and as appropriate, institutional level. These outcomes and expectations are reflected in academic programs and policies; curriculum; advisement; library and information resources; and the wider learning

The institution employs a deliberate set of quality assurance processes at each level of institutional functioning, including new curriculum and program approval processes, periodic program review, ongoing evaluation, and data collection. These processes include assessing effectiveness, tracking results over time, using comparative data from

The institution periodically engages its multiple constituencies, including faculty, in institutional reflection and planning processes which assess its strategic position; articulate priorities; examine the alignment of its purposes, core functions and resources; and define the future direction of the

(continued)

**Table 1-1 (Continued)**

<i>Assessment of Student Learning</i>	<i>Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness</i>	<i>Systematic Strategic Planning</i>
<p>environment . . . The institution demonstrates that its graduates consistently achieve its stated levels of attainment and ensures that its expectations for student learning are embedded in the standards faculty use to evaluate student work.</p>	<p>external sources, and improving structures, processes, curricula, and pedagogy.</p>	<p>institution. The Institution monitors the effectiveness of its plans and planning processes, and revises them as appropriate.</p>

*Sources:* Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2006; New England Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, 2005; North Central Higher Learning Commission, 2007; Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, 2003; Southern Commission on Colleges, 2007; Western Association of Colleges and Schools, 2001.

federal Title IV financial aid—that is, Pell Grants—must be accredited by a governmentally approved accrediting body. In the vast majority of instances within higher education, that body is one of the six regional accrediting agencies just examined. And although all institutions under the jurisdiction of those six regional accrediting bodies must comply with the requirements related to assessment and learning outlined earlier, the question becomes one of institutional transparency in communicating the results of those assessments, both internally and externally, and the extent to which those assessments are actually used for institutional improvement and quality enhancement. To illustrate the importance of planning and assessment as cornerstones of institutional effectiveness, consider the following statistics from the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Each year since 2001, about fifty-five to sixty colleges and universities within the Middle States region go through their decennial institutional self study. Within each cohort, about 60 percent of those institutions have been placed by the Commission on some form of follow-up activity—a progress letter or report, monitoring report, and the like. And of those institutions requiring follow-up activity, for about 80 percent the follow-up relates to absence of full compliance with standards for assessment of student learning outcomes, assessment of institutional effectiveness, and the consistent use of assessment information to inform the institutional planning process. Often it is a question not of providing evidence that assessment is occurring, but rather of demonstrating in real, tangible ways that the assessments are actually being *used* to inform planning, decision making, and resource allocation at the institution. Comparable enforcement of related standards is found within the other five regional accrediting bodies in the United States.

### **Institutional Responses to Calls for Greater Transparency**

After twenty years of steady criticism concerning the lack of transparency at colleges and universities with regard to information

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on student progress and general institutional operations, there has been movement recently among groups of colleges and universities to provide better information to external constituencies. Most notably, three higher education organizations—the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)—have collaborated to create a Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA). VSA is precisely what its name implies—a *voluntary* consortium of institutions providing a consistent set of prescribed data elements to meet external demands for greater institutional accountability and transparency. At this writing, private, independently chartered colleges and universities are in the process of developing a comparable reporting process. VSA provides participating institutions with a data template that requires them to provide current data on the following:

- Undergraduate profile (total headcount; breakdown by gender, ethnicity, age, and the like)
- Undergraduate success and progress rate (retention and graduation rates for specific cohorts of first-time freshmen and transfer students)
- Financial aid awarded to undergraduates, broken out by type or category of aid, such as grants, loans, scholarships
- Admissions profile, such as median test scores on the ACT or SAT, average high school grade point average
- Degrees awarded by level, and identification of top five fields of study at the institution
- Classroom environment—student/faculty ratio, data on class size
- Full-time faculty, by gender, ethnicity, and percentage with terminal degree
- Student housing—percentage of students living on campus

- Campus safety information
- Future plans of most recent cohort of baccalaureate recipients—employment, graduate school, volunteer service, military service, and so on

The template for reporting data, referred to as *The College Profile*, can be viewed at <http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm>. Although the foregoing data elements are interesting and instructive, they are hardly groundbreaking or innovative. Most higher education institutions with any sort of institutional research capability typically report these and other types of data on the institutional Common Data Set (CDS), a data template designed to enable institutions across the country to provide common information in response to seemingly endless requests for institutional information from college guidebooks, academic organizations, and other data consumers. And although VSA embeds the term *accountability* in its name, it is quite arguable that the data just outlined are not accountability data at all, but rather performance measures over which the institution has little control or that do not relate to student learning or institutional effectiveness in any meaningful or measurable way.

That said, VSA still brings greater transparency with respect to the measures it employs. It requires institutions to prominently indicate their participation in VSA and to provide a link to the VSA template on their institutional home page. The Common Data Set is frequently buried in the institutional research or other subpage on the institution's website, and it is up to the data consumer to find it. In contrast, if transparency regarding what is reported on the VSA template is a priority, VSA has ensured that its member institutions will make finding that template a fairly easy task.

To its credit, VSA is attempting to move institutions beyond simply providing descriptive data of the sort typically found in the Common Data Set. The VSA template allows institutions to describe how they evaluate the educational and social experiences

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of their students, and it encourages institutions participating in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a broadly used standardized data collection instrument developed at Indiana University–Bloomington, to report results from selected items in that instrument, including but not limited to the percent of seniors who:

- Worked on class assignments and projects with other students
- Spent at least six hours per week outside of class on academic activities
- Used a learning lab or center to improve skills
- Would attend the same university again if they started over
- Had discussions with students whose race or ethnic background was different from their own
- Worked harder after receiving feedback from an instructor

The pattern evident in these items persists in the other NSSE items in the VSA template. They are interesting responses and may very well provide useful data to academic managers in shaping a better student experience at the institution. But they do not measure learning, and as such they do not address the transparency issue in that regard. To the extent that institutions have explicitly stated expected outcomes from encouraging students to (1) participate in group learning, (2) use out-of-classroom academic resources, or (3) understand and appreciate cultural diversity, NSSE is a useful tool in assessing the extent to which students are actually doing those things. But without knowledge of the institution’s strategic goals and objectives in the area of student life and experiences, although the NSSE responses may be viewed as informative and instructive, they are self-reported and can hardly be categorized as “accountability data.” Later in this volume, strategies will be presented for using data on student experiences to assess student life and student engagement as a component of overall institutional effectiveness and improvement.

VSA does give participating institutions an opportunity to describe strategies for assessing student learning outcomes at the course, discipline, and institutional level. But because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to measuring learning across the disciplines, descriptions of such assessment strategies can be cumbersome. Disciplines use various combinations of course-embedded test items, others capstone experiences, electronic portfolios, senior theses, and so on to describe learning, and the methodologies and qualifiers can appear outright confusing to those outside of higher education. These various approaches to measuring student learning, including their strengths and limitations, will also be discussed later in this volume.

To arrive at measures of core learning, VSA requires students at participating institutions to complete one of three standardized tests—the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP). The use of standardized tests to measure general education skills does not currently enjoy widespread support in the higher education community, from either a conceptual or a methodological standpoint. Several instruments on the market purport to measure “critical thinking”—but what, precisely, constitutes critical thinking, and are the rubrics used to measure it across different instruments consistently measuring the same skills set? And assuming that all technical issues are addressed, there is still the human factor. Can we be sure that a group of several hundred students who are compelled to take a standardized test of several hours’ duration, with no consequences in terms of either a grade or progress to a degree, will put forth their best effort in completing the instrument? Is this a legitimate measure of basic skills?

Although VSA has taken a commendable approach to providing institutional information to those outside of higher education, care should be taken in interpreting that information. Performance measures such as retention and graduation rates are not direct accountability measures. Many institutions—particularly two-year

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colleges—enroll students who are interested in specific courses but have no intention of obtaining a certificate or degree. Data on student engagement are self-reported by students and do not measure learning. Standardized test scores may measure learning, but with limitations on accuracy of the sort just noted. If an institution reports an average freshman score of 45 on the critical thinking portion of the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency, where scores can range from 40 to 80, what is that “45” really saying about freshmen at that institution? Or if seniors achieve an average analytic writing score of 1250 on the Collegiate Learning Assessment, compared with 1150 for freshmen, how does one interpret the score differential?

The core premise of this book is that, whether measuring learning or measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of human and fiscal resource deployment in support of teaching and learning, multiple measures are required, as well as multiple strategies for interpreting and communicating the results of those measurements. The book will focus on how institutions might best conceptualize what must be measured to frame a credible discussion of institutional effectiveness, what data collection tools are most effective in gathering those measures, and which analytical strategies are most effective in translating data into information that can be effectively communicated to both internal and external constituencies. And although a by-product of that credible discussion of institutional effectiveness may be a blunting of the sort of criticism directed at higher education that was described in this chapter, the primary intent in writing this book is to deliver a tool box to provosts, deans, department chairs, and administrative directors that will help them more effectively and efficiently manage their institutions. Specifically, the book will propose a broad cross-section of strategies and methodologies for assessing the full range of institutional operations at a college or university. And beyond that, the book will address the issue of how assessment data can best be translated into usable and useful information that informs the institutional planning process and provides the basis for making better decisions,

particularly about the allocation of human and fiscal resources in support of activity related to student learning. In so doing, those institutions will indeed create a culture of evidence for institutional effectiveness that allows for greater transparency to external constituencies concerning the ways in which colleges and universities conduct their business.

