Through the Looking Glass: Educational Accountability Mirrors Nonprofit Accountability

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The field of education has been shaken by announcements from prominent foundations (Annenberg Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, and Atlantic Philanthropies) that higher education will no longer be a high-priority funding area, due, in part, to a lack of measurable results (Marcy, 2003). Similarly, the nonprofit sector has been taken aback by an article in the *Harvard Business Review* in which authors Bill Bradley, Paul Jansen, and Les Silverman (2003) contend that adopting specific management practices from the business world and creating best practices could save nonprofits $100 billion or more per year. While areas such as reducing fundraising costs, making faster disbursements from foundations, reducing program costs, and trimming administrative costs received intense focus, the most important area identified by these authors may be the concept of improving sector effectiveness, not efficiency:

"While efficiency improvements increase the dollars available for social investment, effectiveness improvements increase the social benefit delivered for each dollar spent. Effectiveness is the hardest gap to measure. . . . There are no standard techniques for quantifying the amount of social benefit delivered by NSPs (nonprofit service providers). The absence of a metric, however, doesn't mean there is no opportunity. In fact, this may be the largest of the five opportunities our study identified" (Bradley, Jansen, and Silverman, 2003, p. 102).

Nonprofits now face the challenge of demonstrating effectiveness in meeting social needs, while funders face the equivalent challenge of ensuring that scarce dollars are invested in the most effective programs. Higher education faces similar challenges, as revealed in the incomplete grade given to states in the area of student learning in the report *Measuring Up 2004* (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education). Both sectors share analogous tribulations when trying to measure effectiveness. In the following section, I use nine principles of good practice for assessing student learning, as described by Hutchings, and Erwin's characteristics of successful assessment programs as a framework (Hutchings, 1993; Erwin, 1991) to highlight the similarities between outcomes assessment by nonprofit service providers and assessment of student learning by institutions of higher education. Each of the nine principles is explored in relation to the nonprofit sector, integrating Erwin's characteristics of successful assessment programs.

1. *The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.* A recent trend in the nonprofit sector is the development of community-wide goals and intended outcomes. Groups of citizens help define a community vision for families and children. This provides a starting point for rallying the sector around focused efforts, increased collaboration, and measurement of intended program outcomes as indicators of progress. Community values are established through broad-based inclusion and are supported by top administrators. This support from the administration is critical to the success of an outcomes assessment program (Erwin, 1991).

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2. *Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.* The United Way movement has been in the forefront of the outcomes assessment field for nonprofit organizations, gathering lessons learned from around the country and sharing them with the nonprofit sector. Some of the lessons include the following:

- *Outcomes assessment is complex.* A social service intervention may be aimed at reducing the incidence of drug abuse in children and teens through parent education classes. Given the range of children's ages when the parents participate in classes, establishing a link between the program and the ultimate intended outcome would be nearly impossible. Additional steps, including establishing initial and intermediate intended outcomes, would be needed in order to gather evidence of effectiveness. Multiple indicators and multiple data collection procedures are often needed, increasing the complexity and the time required.

- *Results take time to measure.* In many cases, the desired outcome takes time to develop, and in other cases, it takes time to develop data collection methods. A self-sufficiency program that provides training to adults in skilled trades may take several years to demonstrate results due to the job market, the demand for skilled trades, or individuals' need for health care or other additional support services before self-sufficiency can be achieved. When results are hoped for down the road, it may take time to develop longitudinal tracking systems that are capable of capturing the required data.
- *Context is important.* Outcomes data need to be understood within the context of the program and the community. Program results must be interpreted for the community. A 2 percent decrease in the number of teenagers who use tobacco may be considered a significant change in a community with a smoking rate of 12 percent, but a 2 percent increase in the number of teens who talk about drugs with their parents may not be considered significant if over 70 percent of teens report that they do not talk to their parents about the dangers of alcohol or drugs. Programs should specify in advance what results they hope to achieve while being realistic about the population they serve and the complex issues that individuals are dealing with in their lives. Setting specific goals helps the agency and the public to determine the success of the program.

Given that outcome assessment is a complex process and that results take time to achieve, United Way organizations are cautious when using outcomes in funding decisions. This does not mean allowing agencies to postpone their efforts because the perfect outcome measurement system has not been developed. Reticent organizations will find themselves in danger of losing funding if they do not make good faith efforts to assess outcomes.

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3. *Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.* This is probably the greatest challenge for nonprofits, followed closely by the design of data collection plans. Many programs and agencies are established to meet a need, but little thought is given to what intended outcome is truly desired. Providers of emergency services find it challenging to define their long-term intended outcomes when they may serve an individual only once or provide sporadic services over time. Programs that provide indirect services, such as information and referral, or ancillary services, such as transportation, face similar difficulties. The movement toward community-level outcomes may provide a starting point for nonprofits in developing program-level intended outcomes. "Agreement on desired results helps to minimize investment in activities that don't contribute to improved results" (Schorr, Farrow, Hornbeck, and Watson, 1994, p. 3). Such agreement is critical for both the program and its funders.

4. *Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.* The United Way of America Logic Model encourages agencies to specify their inputs, activities, and outputs, along with immediate, short-term, and long-term intended outcomes for each program so that the link between these elements can be understood and improvements made. Assessment of program processes, not just measurement of intended outcomes, is important in understanding the link between program activities and outcomes. Since a primary purpose of assessment is programmatic improvement, having results without an understanding of how the program achieved those results can prove frustrating, especially when changes need to be made. Mapping out all of the activities and inputs that lead to the intended outcomes provides vital information for making programmatic changes.

5. *Assessment works best when it is ongoing rather than episodic.* While United Way organizations try to focus agencies on developing and using outcome information for ongoing program improvement, too often agencies undertake outcome assessment to fulfill funding requirements and do not continue the efforts or translate the results into program improvement. Many times, organizations receive foundation or government funding to undertake a short-term (one- to five-year) program with outcome assessment requirements. Often, an organization has several such programs and diligently assesses them, but the assessment process does not become part of the mainstream of the organization's culture.

6. *Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.* Agencies are encouraged to involve a wide variety of stakeholders in determining intended outcomes and measurement systems. Consumers, volunteers, board members, and community members may

point out some important intended outcomes that are not readily apparent to program staff (Plantz, Greenway, and Hendricks, 1997).

7. *Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.* A key component of Erwin's description of a successful program is the analysis and use of assessment data. This is also a challenge in the nonprofit field. Time and again, program staff will conduct outcomes assessment for grant requirements but not use the information for program improvement, contrary to what funders were attempting to achieve by requiring outcomes assessment. Staff and administration need to ask the questions *they* would like the answers to, the questions that will help them in their work to improve conditions for individuals and the community.

8. *Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.* Just as accreditation has not mainstreamed student learning assessment in higher education, outcomes assessment requirements have not become part of mainstream practice in nonprofit organizations. Institutionalization of assessment requirements is not enough to ensure ongoing use of assessment results, nor is it successful in increasing the value of evaluation to the organization (Sanders, 2002). Organizations that value and learn from outcomes assessment will be positioned to succeed as the public and funders increasingly call for proof that their contributions are making a difference. Those that have implemented assessment, such as the Boys and Girls Clubs, realize that it is a matter of survival. Organizations that have not embraced outcomes assessment may recognize this fact only when it is too late.

9. *Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.* Nonprofit organizations are pressured by increasingly scarce resources and a never-ending supply of high-profile scandals that cause the public, government, and funders to call for greater accountability. With over one million charitable tax-exempt, social welfare, and religious organizations in the United States and over half of organizational revenues coming from governmental sources (31.3 percent) and private giving (19.9 percent) (Independent Sector, 2001), it is no wonder that accountability pressures are mounting. Donors want proof of efficiency and results. Outcomes assessment is an effective and compelling way to communicate to consumers, donors, and the public that organizational programs are making a difference. Improving lives and communities are what nonprofits are all about; outcomes assessment is a key method in helping organizations determine whether they are achieving their mission.

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Many within higher education feel singled out by requests from accrediting bodies, funders, and government to demonstrate that students are learning. A quick look outside the ivy-covered walls to the world of nonprofits illustrates that the accountability movement is a driving force throughout our society. ■

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