Through the Looking Glass: Educational Accountability Mirrors Nonprofit Accountability

Emily R. Hoole

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).

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
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.

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 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
Those that have implemented assessment, and funders increasingly call for proof that their contributions are making a difference. 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.

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**References**
