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Assessment and Diversity

A View From the Border

The field of assessment in higher education has much to learn from very diverse institutions as well as from the diverse student bodies that characterize many urban universities. In order to develop new models of assessment more applicable to metropolitan universities, scholars and researchers may have to rethink their views of excellence to one that takes cognizance of the perspective of the "nontraditional" student.

I write these words from the perspective of one who is standing at the edge. It is not a new perspective for me, but one that I have lived with most of my life. My view of how to deal with diversity—and assessment— is very much shaped by this perspective.

The University of Texas at El Paso, or UTEP as it is known, is a campus that sits on the Mexican border. El Paso, a city of six hundred thousand people, is often called the edge of Texas. Our desert city is in the western-most corner of Texas, due south of Santa Fe, New Mexico. We might just as well be called the edge of Mexico. Across the freeway that runs along one edge of the campus is the Rio Grande river, which is the international border with Mexico. On the opposite bank of the Rio Grande, just one mile from the campus, is Ciudad Juarez, a Mexican city of 1.2 million people. Thus, we are both an urban university that serves a metropolitan population of nearly two million people, and we are also a binational university with at least one door facing a third world country.

Everyday, as I walk to my campus office, I can look across the street and see the edge of a vast third world country just across the road. I cannot escape the reality of all that borders often represent: boundaries between rich and poor, between people that speak different languages, between natives and strangers, between aliens and citizens, between the comforting familiarity of everyday knowledge and the discomforting uneasiness of the unknown.

Given this reality of my everyday experience, the border has become an important metaphor for me in my thinking about diversity. Many of us in the university have, of course, been living on the borders for some time. As ethnic nontraditional students and

faculty, we have lived on the border of the Anglo-European intellectual tradition; we have lived on the border between the inclusive civic culture of the university and its often exclusive operational culture; we have lived between communal and individual identities, between loyalties to communities not yet in the university and newly found loyalties to the academy. For many of us who come from the margins of mainstream society, a great deal of effort has been expended in an attempt to move *us* toward the center and away from the borders. Indeed, *we* have expended great amounts of energy in trying to move *ourselves* to the center.

Yet, standing at the center may not be as important as we thought. There is, after all, some advantage to viewing the contemporary university from its margins. For some things are far more difficult to *see*, I contend, when you stand at the center than when you stand at the edge. This is definitely true with our understanding of diversity in the academy. Like the insightful intellectual work that often takes place at the boundaries of the disciplines, or the brilliance that sometimes occurs in our classrooms when the borders between teaching and learning are blurred, our understanding of culture and diversity can be much greater when we are closer to the edge between two cultures and can look both ways.

Taking this view from the edge, let me raise some questions about diversity in the academy, and how we might go about assessing the excellence of an institution in a context of diversity. Urban and metropolitan universities often have a special and unique mission. They are often committed to the provision of quality education to a wide range of students: well-prepared students and underprepared students, traditional recent high school graduates and returning older students, working and commuting students, and large numbers of first-generation students (both first in their families to go to college and first generation immigrants to this country). How do we go about assessing the effectiveness of these institutions? Are our traditional measures of excellence adequate? Do we need more diverse measures and criteria?

Traditional Measures of Excellence

In his book, *Achieving Educational Excellence*, Alexander Astin helped expand our thinking a few years ago when he suggested that our traditional views of the quality and excellence of colleges and universities were very limited, if not wrongheaded. Astin argued against the predominance of two traditional views of assessment, and he suggested a third and better view. He called it a *value-added approach*.

The limited views that Astin rejected as inadequate were what he calls the *reputational* and the *resources* views of excellence. The reputational view is based on the assumption that prestige is the equivalent of quality or excellence. Reputations of institutions are usually based on surveys—of college presidents, of deans, or of faculty members. Typically, the same small number of institutions almost always show up at the top of the surveys. The second view, the resources view of excellence, is based on the notion that the quality of the educational experience is measured by the *resources* of the institutions. (Astin 1991) Those may be outstanding

student resources (high SAT scores, number of National Merit scholars, etc.), outstanding faculty resources (number of Nobel laureates on the faculty, members of the National Science Academy, etc.), or financial and physical resources (such as the size of library holdings). These two traditional models go hand in hand, of course. Institutions with outstanding resources improve their reputations, and high reputations lead to more resources.

Strong reputations and excellent resources are important to all institutions. But if these are the sole criteria for the assessment of excellence, only a few universities can compete. Little is possible for the other three thousand institutions of higher education. It is quite likely that they will never be able to compete adequately. They need to reconcile themselves with the fact that they will never reach the top thirty or even the top fifty or one hundred institutions in reputation- or resource-based surveys. They can pursue an endless and often depressing and fruitless quest to become a Harvard or Stanford or Berkeley. Clark Kerr's cover story in the June 1991 issue of *Change* magazine, called "The New Race to Be Harvard, or Berkeley, or Stanford," raises this issue.

In Astin's value-added approach, which he calls the talent development view of excellence, true excellence "lies in the institution's ability to affect the students and faculty favorably, to enhance their intellectual and scholarly development, and to make a positive difference in their lives." (p. 60.) Although this view is becoming more common, in 1985 it was truly novel. In this model, what one assesses is the positive change in students from the time they enter the institution to the time that they leave it. The significant question is: what is the value added to their lives? This new criterion gives the successful metropolitan university a chance to shine in its own excellence. For many first generation and working people in the United States, it is the public urban university that has made a difference. It has been accessible, affordable, and has changed thousands of lives on a grand scale. There has been great value added to countless individual lives, and also value added to the well-being of the entire country.

By applying the criterion of talent development, all institutions can strive toward excellence in terms of the degree to which their student achievement outcomes consistently show positive improvement. It liberates institutions with very different missions to pursue quality and set outcome goals in accordance with their own mission, without having to mimic resource-intensive private liberal arts colleges or large research universities. All institutions can be free to be the best that they can be.

We must be careful, of course, not to replace one set of inadequate criteria with another inadequate set. Talent development is not the sole criterion. Rather, it is an important additional measure in the overall criteria of excellence. Urban universities with diverse student bodies need to strive for the highest quality educational experience for their students across a wide range of measures, including the traditional measures. We must push Astin's value-added notion further. Value added is *necessary*, but not sufficient.

Here, Richard Richardson's insights are useful. He points out how excellence and diversity often conflict in two types of organizational

cultures. A "selectivity culture" has low concern for diversity and high concern for achievement, and an "open-access culture" has high concern for diversity and low concern for achievement. The trick, of course, is to produce both excellence and diversity, and Richardson provides some powerfully suggestive measures to help an institution assess how well it is doing in getting there.

The Experience at UTEP

Let me digress with an illustration from my own institution. When I first visited the campus about fifteen years ago, there was some talk about the University of Texas at El Paso becoming the "Harvard on the border." I'm told that there was even a bumper sticker to that effect. I'm not sure of the source of this talk; perhaps it came from faculty who wished that they had ended up somewhere else. Whatever the source, it was a truly absurd notion, and I have not heard anyone recently suggest that we try to do what Harvard does. UTEP is an institution of seventeen thousand students. As part of the public University of Texas system, we are a campus that serves the western-most corner of Texas on the Mexico/New Mexico/Texas border. The great majority of our students are from working-class backgrounds, and more than 80 percent are first in their families to go to college. Almost all of our students—over 90 percent—commute to school and live in the community with their families. Sixty percent of our students are Mexican-American. Another one thousand (6 percent) are Mexican nationals who cross the border daily to come to school. Most UTEP students work part time; many work full time. What does assessment mean in the context of institutions like this one? What would excellence be like? How can we expand our view of excellence to address a diversity of institutions serving a diversity of populations? Can and should urban institutions like UTEP play the excellence game? You bet we *can* and we *must*.

Like many regional public institutions across the country that serve many less-privileged students, we may be our students' only chance for higher education. In the case of UTEP, for example, the next nearest comprehensive four-year institution within Texas is more than two hundred miles away. We have a very special responsibility to be the very best we can be.

What is absolutely critical to a value-added approach to assessment at any institution is good base line and outcome data on students. What do we know about where students are when they enter the university and where they are when they leave? How else can we measure excellence? In the context of diverse institutions and the increasingly diverse populations that they serve, here is where the problems begin. High school GPAs and SAT scores are far from *sufficient* to constitute our base-line data. Likewise, four-year graduation rates are hardly adequate outcome measures.

At urban universities like UTEP, for example, the average age of undergraduates may be mid- to late twenties, and many students return to college after years away. Many will gradually complete their studies as they continue working, never intending to complete their studies in four

or five years. A measure of their *determination* to complete college may be as important an indicator as an SAT score earned after a prolonged absence from any form of schooling.

Here, we are all going to begin crossing some borders into new territories. As the diversity of our students increases across several parameters—class, ethnicity, age, generation in college, cultural background, lifestyle—we are going to need to know a great deal more about our students if we are going to maximize their potential to learn. For example, how do we interpret high school GPAs in the context of little or no knowledge about the quality of the high schools in which they were earned? How do we interpret the significance of a high GPA earned by a student who worked 30 hours a week while attending school, compared to an identical GPA earned by another and more privileged student who did not work at all? What is the significance of a test score or a GPA earned by a student who is entering college ten years after leaving high school? Are there other nontraditional measures which might be useful to us?

As we cross the borders into a new territory of diverse student populations, we need to know more about what these students are bringing to our classrooms. While our central goal is to maximize student achievement through the creation of an environment of support, that environment may need to look quite different to meet the needs of diverse student populations. One of the merits of a value-added approach to assessment is that it not only focuses our attention directly on positive change in student learning or outcomes, but it also suggests that one can take a value-added approach to changing the institution itself.

Using Diversity to Add Value to an Institution

Viewing an institution from its borders rather than from its center, we can ask what is the value added to the institution as a result of what we learn about the diversity of our students? How has the institution improved its teaching, its organization, its environment of support, its fulfillment of its mission? Is the public university's mission congruent with the needs of its students? How do the questions asked about how our students learn bring about positive change in the institution? Once again, Richardson's model of assessing the interplay between quality and diversity is useful here. According to his model, excellent institutions with diverse student bodies are those that have moved through reactive and strategic phases of dealing with diversity, and have reached an adaptive phase in which the institution is structurally adapting itself to better fit its diverse student body. (Richardson 1991)

Let me illustrate once again, from the perspective of my own institution, one of many urban universities that is retrofitting the institution to better fit its students and increase student achievement. At UTEP, as we begin to ask probing questions about our students and learn more about what they bring to the institution upon entering, we are changing our institution and making it much more effective in serving them. While academic success remains *absolutely* primary, we are conscious that we serve many first-generation college students, and we know that both

academic and *social* integration of students into university life is absolutely critical to their retention in the university as well as to their academic achievement. At commuter campuses with working students, the integration of students into university life is much harder than at residential campuses, where much seems to happen by osmosis. We are bolstering student organizations and preprofessional groups, of which we now have more than one hundred; we are turning hundreds of campus work/study jobs into student development opportunities; and we are expanding our leadership programs, mentorship opportunities, and internship experiences.

We are making changes and there will be many more. We are also changing ourselves. We have an orientation for new faculty and staff that takes them out into the surrounding communities where our students live, and all new faculty and staff are strongly encouraged to learn Spanish through special courses developed for them. We are increasingly scheduling late afternoon and evening classes for students who work during the day, and keeping essential student services open late to serve evening students. We have a child-care center on campus that not only offers all-day and evening care for children of students at low weekly and monthly rates, but also drop-in care with very low by-the-hour rates for those who have sporadic work and study schedules. A student can drop off his or her child at the day-care center to get in a few hours of evening work at the library, just a short walk away.

Almost all cultural and artistic events, as well as athletic events—from concerts to football games—are free of charge to all of our students. Students who participate in campus cultural, musical, and artistic groups also receive financial stipend awards to offset lost part-time employment. We are developing a semester-long orientation course for entering students as a catalyst to speed up the academic integration of first generation students into university life and as a vehicle to gather assessment data on entering students. This base-line data will lead to better advising and course placement, more information for selecting appropriate majors, and connections for students to university resources that they may not know about. At urban universities with large numbers of working and commuting students, we have to create new support mechanisms to replace those found at traditional and more residential universities.

In this continuing process of adapting the university to our students, we are learning that they are truly outstanding. Having already overcome many economic and educational barriers, they have the strength, will, and determination of survivors. We have a great deal of faith in them, and very high aspirations for their success. Our institution is among the top five in the country in the production of Hispanic engineers and scientists as well as in the production of Hispanic students who go on to earn the Ph.D. degree. We are visited by recruiters from all over the country who frequently tell us that they come not only to recruit outstanding Hispanic graduates, but that *all* of our students, with their well-developed survival skills, work ethic, and work experiences, do very well as they move into the professional world.

Assessing the Terrain Beyond the Borders of the Institution

The "low quality" or "underpreparedness" of entering students is often perceived as one of the most powerful factors limiting the overall excellence of any university. This perception is often internalized by faculty members at urban institutions, and the perception can lead to low expectations of students and little demand for excellence in the university. An identical phenomenon is found in inner-city public schools and has led generations of young students and their teachers away from the pursuit of excellence and toward complacency and an attitude of being satisfied with less. High drop-out rates, courses that are watered down, and goals of minimum competency are accepted as "good enough." After all, what else could be expected from inner-city young people who are victims of all the ills of urban poverty?

Most university faculty have observed this phenomenon from the comfort and distance of academia and have pointed fingers of blame at the public schools for producing increasingly inferior "college material." Few faculty members have been willing to involve themselves in a process of assessing the quality of their teaching or to recognize their own complacency, watered-down curricula, or low expectations for the college students they have "inherited" from the public schools. Even fewer have ventured beyond the border of the campus to see what they or the university can do to help the public schools.

However, this is all beginning to change. The educational reform movement of the 1980s is finally reaching the university. There is beginning to be a recognition of the common tasks that belong to both the public schools and the public universities—the education of all the nation's young people. Public schools and universities are entering into partnerships and collaborative relationships, sitting down at common tables as equal partners, with the knowledge that we are *all* accountable to provide the very best educational experiences for *all* children.

At UTEP, we have recently entered into an intensive collaborative partnership with the major school districts and the community college to systematically improve the teaching and learning of youngsters so as to prepare them better for college. This responsibility is as much ours in the university as it is for those in the public schools. The mayor of the city, the county government, and the Chamber of Commerce have signed a compact to work toward this common good. No one is wasting time blaming each other about the quality of today's students, and everyone is beginning to work together to raise expectations, standards, and the overall quality of what we offer our youngsters.

A Broader Quest for Excellence

Ultimately, we are raising questions about the assessment of institutional effectiveness across the range of institutions that are responsible for education. Students should experience education as a continuous flow of guidance and support, and not as a disruptive series

of disjointed experiences with little connection to one another. As educational institutions work with one another, they reaffirm their common purpose, and they learn how to smooth the transitions from one level to another. By sharing knowledge about the same students and their needs, we are better able to assess how our institutions need to change.

Returning to my opening metaphor of what you see when you stand at the border, the university is beginning to see and understand better what is on the other side. In a sometimes fumbling and difficult way, we are trying as best we can to see through the eyes of those who have been standing at the edge for so long. The traditional force feeding of the student to fit the institution, rather the reshaping the institution to fit the student, has been most often disastrous. A powerful example of the failure of this approach is the American Indian experience with higher education. Our notions of a good university ought to be based, in good measure, on how much it does respond to the needs of students.

Borders as *boundaries* save us from the discomfort of the unfamiliar. They keep us within the circles of the familiar, within the paradigm of that which we know for sure. But when we stand at the edge, we can also see borders not only as *boundaries* that separates us, but as *openings* to new worlds, to multiplicities of visions, to possibilities of better understanding. As we think about the difficult questions of assessment in a context of diversity, we need not only to understand the diverse attributes of our nontraditional students, but also to envision the diversity of university environments and a diversity of assessment measures.

Suggested Readings

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