

Four Models of the Relationship between Assessment and Accountability¹

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment and accountability are uneasy bedfellows. In a sense, the legislature has paid us to do assessment but will deduct payment if we fail to meet certain accountability goals. Our constituencies demand both, as well they should. We should be good and be able to demonstrate it, while at the same time we should be striving to get better. Do we not expect the same from U. S. West, TCI, and General Motors? Yet, the doing is much more difficult than the saying. Below, I have briefly sketched four models relating accountability and assessment, with what I view to be the underlying assumption and the major problem(s) with each.

I. Accountability First

Underlying Assumption: *If you make institutions accountable, they will become better.*

Institutions will have to do good work in order to prove that they are doing good work. What is missing is motivation which accountability can supply. This point of view is not much different in principle to a major reason for tests in many courses. If students have to demonstrate that they have learned, they will learn.

Major Problem: *Depends heavily on having consequentially valid measures of accountability.*

If one tests students only on recall of facts, one is apt to get very superficial learning and unsatisfactory studying behavior. So too can superficial or poorly-considered accountability measures lead to unsatisfactory institutional behavior. For example, if an accountability measure were number of student instructional hours per faculty, an institution could improve on that measure simply by increasing class size. The apparent result would be improved institutional quality. The real result might be lowered student learning. Putting accountability first and assuming assessment will follow implicitly makes the dubious assumption that "macro" measures will motivate appropriate "micro" behavior.

II. Assessment First

Underlying assumption: If there are continuous efforts toward assessing our programs for the improvement of their quality, the institution will be accountable.

The true goal of accountability is to have high quality institutions. The best way to assure this is for each institution to strive to improve itself. Assessment is critical for guiding these improvement efforts.

Major Problems: *Depends on improving the right things and on good will efforts.*

How an institution prioritizes its assessment efforts may not match what various constituencies view as proper priorities. For example, an institution may try to increase the number of grants received and thus reward that activity over teaching quality, which parents will see as a lack of accountability. In addition, assessment efforts can be hard work and take one away for activities that are more interesting or more rewarding. Putting assessment first and assuming that accountability will follow requires a basic trust that personnel will do the right thing.

III. Parallel Play

Underlying Assumption: *Accountability and assessment can interfere with each other -- it is best to keep them separate.*

In the Oxford model of education, faculty who grade a given student are different from faculty who teach that student. It is felt that the specter of summative evaluation can detract for the proper teacher-student relationship. So too can accountability get in the way of the genuine efforts toward improvement that are guided by assessment. Similarly, those whose purpose is to evaluate institutional performance should avoid the co-optation that can come about by being involved in improvement activities.

Major Problems: *Can get meaningless accountability measures and unmotivated improvement efforts.*

If accountability measures have no relationship with those aspects that the institution strives to improve, they are unlikely to lead to "good" institutional behavior. If doing "deep" assessment does not lead to rewards from external constituencies, genuine assessment activities may be hard to sustain.

IV. Integration

Major Problems: *Can get meaningless accountability measures and unmotivated improvement efforts.*

Accountability measures can communicate the values of external constituents to institutions and provide motivation to improve quality in these regards. The assessment orientation can help assure that improving an institution's standing on a given measure does indeed improve quality.

Major Problems: *Requires patience and tolerance of complexity by government and may result in competing goals.*

The results of assessment activities are typically complex, tentative, and incomplete and therefore difficult to translate into useful accountability measures for state-level policy making. Viewing this issue across disparate institutions further highlights accountability's need for simple, comparable measures and assessment's requirement of complex, heterogeneous measures. Across institutions, assessment favors cooperation while accountability favors competition. Furthermore, the orientation of assessment naturally leads one to look for that which needs to be improved or at least complete openness to the possibility. Accountability, on the other hand, naturally leads to a defensive posture that looks mainly for the good.

CONCLUSIONS

None of the four models above appears to be without serious problems. It would be good and proper at this point to propose a fifth model that solves all of these problems and raises the discussion to a higher level. Alas, that inspiration has not yet struck this feeble mind. I invite your help and comments.

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