

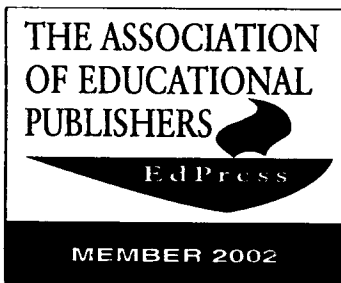
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C. GARLAND DULAN

Another Word on Assessment

By now, everyone has heard about assessment and has had an opportunity to try out various evaluation techniques. But when required to do assessment, we seem to do so only reluctantly. Why is this?

If you invested money in a long-term financial transaction, wouldn't you want to evaluate periodically whether your money was growing, and not wait until the end of the contract period for a report? Of course. Then why not consider education as a long-term project and find ways to evaluate (assess) it on a regular basis?

Consider, for example, the competencies, attitudes, and values we want our students to acquire by the time they complete a course of study. How do we determine whether our curriculum and programming produce the desired results? We set goals, objectives, and outcomes we hope will be achieved by the time our graduates complete their courses of study. Next, we find methods of measuring whether students have achieved the expected outcomes by the target date. For instance, we might establish the following benchmark for a statistics class: Seventy-five percent of those who enroll in the class will earn passing grades. That becomes our criteria for measuring the class's success, with anything less being regarded as falling short of the goal.

We develop the goals and objectives first, connect the outcomes with each goal or objective, then work backward to set in motion a process that will enable us to ensure appropriate linkage between the goals and outcomes. Periodically, we collect information to evaluate how well we are doing. Because the goals are important, so is assessing our progress in achieving them.

Why are we so reluctant to assess our progress? Could it be that this allows us to assume that the outcomes are what we desire when hard data might indicate something else? Why is it that teachers often cringe at the thought of end-of-term evaluations? Don't they want to know how their students perceive the effort they have put into their teaching? Or is there a fear that they might have to change their techniques or practices? Students who sat through the class already know whether the teacher was excellent or mediocre. The evaluation process therefore serves not to inform the students but to assist the teacher.

What about mission statements written for our elementary and secondary schools, and colleges/universities? Such statements generally include lofty ideals. That's good. But how often do educational institutions assess the extent to which these ideals have been achieved?

Considering all the time, money, energy, and talent invested to achieve the mission of our institutions, shouldn't we collect data that assess the extent to which we are achieving the results we feel are so important? Assessment is not an end in itself; rather, it is a tool that can help us determine whether we are on target or whether a mid-course adjustment is necessary.

Think about it—wouldn't it be better to find out early that what you think is happening is not occurring so you can take corrective action rather than wondering whether it is taking place? Knowing where we need to improve need not be intimidating. Assessment provides direction and contributes to greater confidence in goal setting.

If, after the first few years of the early Christian Church, someone had assessed the extent to which the fledgling organization's mission had been achieved, what would such a formative evaluation have shown? What benchmarks (criteria for success) might have been appropriate to use? I believe Paul and the other apostles thought about this during their ministry. Otherwise, why would Paul have written so many letters?

The educational ministry is what we have been called to, and we should think seriously about how our work in changing and shaping lives should be measured. I believe that if we thought of assessment in this way, we would relish the opportunity to find out how well we are doing. We might be surprised to discover that we are even more successful than we imagined! 