Abstract

This paper explores the wide range of assessment metrics that can be used to measure achievement in teaching, learning and practicing Interior Design. It addresses the role of assessment metrics from the viewpoints of a student, professor, employer, and the public.

Interior Design Assessment: Minimum Competence or Good Design?

In today’s assessment-intensive culture, it is not surprising that talk of assessment practices has reached academia and even the creative disciplines of art and design. There is no doubt that student assessments in the form of standardized tests have changed the curriculum and structure of public primary and secondary schools in America. This focus on assessment has created a whole generation of students (and teachers) who are looking for the assessment metrics before they even begin a course of study. This assessment mentality has also heavily influenced every other aspect of American life from how we purchase groceries to how the government invests federal money in certain social programs at the city, state and country levels.

With interest in assessment practices at an all time high, it is imperative to look at what metrics we can use to describe our programs of study, our student’s performance, and their competence to perform interior design in the ‘real world’.

Assessing Universities

All organizations are accountable to a higher authority and universities are not excluded. Accountability proposals by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education and the U.S. Education Department for tracking and testing university students have colleges across the nation worried. The Education Department wanted to instigate stronger rules on the federally recognized accrediting agencies to assess institutions on how well they teach their students. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education has suggested several methods of measurement be implemented into the accreditation process including the use of the Collegiate
Learning Assessment, which is a standardized test assessing critical thinking, analytic reasoning, and written communication (Basken, 2008). Universities worry about this federal interference on their curriculum and their evaluation of students. Ms. Anne D. Neal, founder and president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, stated that “most people believe that federal accreditation signifies quality. That has been the understanding … that understanding is fundamentally incorrect” (Basken, 2008)

The Commission on the Future of Higher Education wants to create a system that would allow the federal government to track student data to assess a university’s performance. At this time there has not been a mandate to universities to adopt this type of system but there are some colleges that have a student unit-record system already in place. One such system is the State University of New York (SUNY) Assessment Initiative that comprises sixty-four institutions across New York State with a total of over 413,000 students. This assessment process is directed to improvements in teaching and learning, allows faculty governance, and meets appropriate accountability standards. There are a total of thirty specific student learning outcomes from ten knowledge and skill areas (mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, American history, Western civilization, other world civilizations, humanities, the arts, foreign languages, and basic communication) and two competencies (critical thinking and information management). Much of the responsibility for assessment is placed with the individual programs or departments with their faculty developing specific learning objectives, measures, and scoring rubrics as well as deciding when the right time during the semester is appropriate for implementation (Francis, Salins, & Huot, 2006).

One of the problems with standardized testing is that on the college level, there are hundreds of different academic departments and programs. General assessment would be hard to measure as the knowledge and skills accountable and essential to one field may not apply to a more specialized area such as pharmacy. Many feel that standardized tests alone are inadequate and do not provide the advanced learning and accountability necessary in
higher education. Some institutions require a capstone class which students would complete in
their major field, while others require a portfolio of their work as assessment methods("Our
Students' Best Work," 2004). So as universities are being held accountable to their federal
accreditation agencies and the accreditation agencies are being held accountable to the
Education Department, it is inevitable that a trickle-down effect will place increasing pressure on
programs or departments and the faculty to provide assessment methods to effectively measure
student learning.

Assessing Programs and Departments

Many professional degree programs require the participation in an accreditation process
from a specified national accrediting agency. The accreditation process requires some type of
assessment and accountability method upon which these programs will be measured by the
accrediting agency. Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) has clearly and concisely
designed standards that must be met to obtain or retain accreditation. CIDA expects interior
design programs to monitor the placement of their graduates and to use the information
gathered from these graduates as an assessment method for evaluating the teaching and
learning within the program. The programs are also challenged with gathering internal and
external feedback from groups such as students, faculty members, employers, alumni, the
Advisory Board and local design organizations as an assessment method for evaluating their
program goals. Results from these various assessment methods should be reflected in
program improvements to enhance student learning. The assessment area is one of the
sixteen CIDA standards for the Professional Standards 2009. Interior design programs are also
evaluated on the remaining standards within the accreditation document. These standards are
measured based upon student outputs such as tests, projects, and student interviews. Inputs
are also measured by examining instructor lecture notes, handouts, PowerPoint slides, and
information from guest speakers and lecturers. From all of this gathered assessment material,
CIDA determines whether or not the students demonstrate the required level of competency. When university programs and departments participate in an external accrediting agency accreditation process, the university has a defined and clear demonstration of an assessment method for the powers-that-be in academia.

**Assessing Faculty**

Faculty are assessed by three primary processes; peer-reviews, student reviews, and self-review. However, the most heavily weighted assessment tool for teaching faculty is often student evaluations of faculty performance. These evaluations are used by administrators to determine faculty promotion, salary, tenure, and retention. Complaints about this assessment process vary from “it is just a popularity contest” to the fact that students have not had training in effectively judging a faculty members’ teaching performance (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin). Some researchers argue that negative consequences such as grade inflation may result from faculty wanting and needing positive student evaluations. This could be the reason for the rise of A’s and B’s that students are receiving today in higher education institutions (Wallace & Wallace, 1998). There is also a concern that faculty are watering down material or requiring less effort from students which is resulting in the reduction of student knowledge as well as causing a rise in overall class grades. Student’s grades have been steadily increasing since the 1960’s. In June 2001, 91 percent of Harvard seniors graduated with honors (Patrick, 2001).

A study was conducted to measure the students’ perceptions of the value of faculty evaluation and their participation. A random sample of approximately 300 students at Hampton University was conducted with 289 responses having usable data. Based on the findings the hypothesis was substantiated that student perception of the value of the faculty evaluation process affects their participation in the program (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin).

Other studies suggest that evaluations can be biased as students consider such things as textbook cost, attendance policy and the amount of homework assigned as they evaluate
faculty. The student’s level in college can also affect the way in which they evaluate faculty and the validity of their evaluation. Students in their first and second year in their college career are typically taking courses that are a part of general education rather than their major area of study. As students mature and their education becomes more focused and they are taking required courses and not electives evaluations the validity of the evaluation can change. Many students do not evaluate the course content but only the instructor. An instructor who is a good actor or performs for students will be evaluated well even though the content of the class may be lacking (Germain & Scandura, 2005).

Student demographics such as age, gender and ethnicity can also be important in the evaluation process. Studies by Koblitz (1993) found that students evaluate younger faculty more favorably. Also male and female students relate differently in their evaluations based on the gender of the instructor. Minority students typically rate minority instructors higher. With all of these factors influencing how faculty are evaluated it is no wonder that faculty are nervous about this type of assessment. There have been many suggestions on ways to improve this assessment process such as midcourse evaluations which would give the instructor an opportunity to make improvements or changes, training students in the evaluation process, and understanding and adapting to different student learning styles in the classroom setting are just a few of the suggestions that might improve evaluations and hopefully student learning. Much more research, work, and study are still needed to bring this evaluation process of evaluating faculty to a level in which true assessment can be reached.

Assessing Students

Student assessment in interior design programs can began early with entrance requirements into the program at the entering freshman level. This process typically is based on GPA and some type of representation of their creative work. Other programs utilize a portfolio review process that is based on work completed in the program as well as GPA. This
portfolio process usually takes place during the sophomore or 2nd year of study in the program. Student assessment in the program also includes tests, papers, and projects in lecture classes. Studio based courses assessment of students can include project, papers, and tests which are usually on the application of knowledge. Projects are normally assessed using a rubric method to reduce the subjectivity. However, no current method of assessment for design projects actually ensures good design. Students many times will follow the rubric to guarantee a certain grade but will not put in the extra effort to make a project good design.

Assessing the Millennial Generation

Most students at undergraduate universities are part of the millennial generation. These students, born after 1982, began participating in assessment practices as early as kindergarten. National standardized tests are the norm for millennials (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). These tests are used to separate students as early as third grade into ‘gifted’, ‘regular’ or ‘at risk’, resulting in specific school/parent intervention strategies.

Parents of millennials started their children on “Baby Einstein” videos, provided access to “Reader Rabbit” computer programs, and are more involved in their children’s education than ever before. Parents often begin planning for college education’s while children are attending elementary school and even daycare. They are vigilant about homework, teacher involvement, and even the methods used to teach subjects in school. Assessment is essential for these parents to understand their child’s achievement in a larger frame of reference. Parents then use these metrics to support, and encourage ‘appropriate’ behaviors, or correct perceived problems in their child’s ability to succeed. Additionally, these parents place a significant emphasis on the need to help children develop a heightened feeling of self esteem. This focus has forced parents to find additional activities at which their child could excel (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). Helping their children develop a high level of self-esteem “even in the face of less than excellent achievement, has become the societal norm” (Taylor, 2006).
A focus on self-esteem, above all else, has led this generation of students to become success junkies. They honestly believe that all of the academic and extracurricular success they have achieved during the first 18 years of their lives, has been their success alone, with no recognition of the significant effort of parents, teachers and other adult mentors. These previous ‘experiences’ have taught them to have equally high expectations for their success in a university setting. They come to believe that their previous achievements in high school and tailored extracurricular activities will lead to success in college with little or no additional effort.

Students (and parents) are often disturbed to find out that their previous ‘successes’ don’t predict the same results in college courses. Instructors often have to overcome the ‘high self esteem’ that many students bring to college, to point out that their work must now evolve to a higher level, requiring more time and effort than they have ever spent before. This can cause many students to become distressed or even hostile toward instructors, programs, or universities. In her book, *The World According to Y*, Rebecca Huntley (2006) notes that as millennials go to college, their pressure to perform doesn’t stop. However, the lack of daily parental support and management quickly leads to a distressing lack of performance. Even though parents of millennials are often referred to as “helicopter parents (Taub, 2008),” they are by far less involved in their college age child’s lives than they have been in the first eighteen years of life.

Additionally, with a consumer orientation to education, millennials view the college experience less like a place to just “broaden your mind”. It has become a place to “get qualified for a job that pays off the education debts as soon as possible” (Huntley, 2006). This leads to dissatisfaction with assignments or assessments that don’t seem directly relevant to getting a job in a chosen field.

**Looking to the Business World**
A significant number of assessments currently exist for every stakeholder within a university setting. There are literally hundreds of metrics universities already use in analyses. How can we as educators sort through the miasma and put together a metrics program that will satisfy everyone involved in the process of providing a design education? One way to approach this requirement is to look toward existing organizational assessment models developed for the business world.

James Evans notes that the discipline required to develop and maintain a measurement process is viewed as an “arduous task” by many organizations (Evans, 2004). However, organizations agree that by making their purpose tangible through the use of assessment practices it keeps people “focused and pulling in the same direction” (Melnyk, Stewart, & Swink, 2004). Models such as the Balanced Score Card (BSC), developed by Kaplan and Norton (Kaplan & Norton, 1992) have been applied to large and small organizations throughout the United States. The use of which provides benefits such as modifying organizational culture, leading to improvements in operational efficiency and profitability (Andra Gumbus, 2006).

Primarily, the BSC provides a framework for capturing ‘relevant’ metrics and analyzing them to determine trends and possible causality. There are four main areas addressed by the typical balanced scorecard—1) financial, 2) customer perspective, 3) internal perspective, and 4) learning, innovation and growth. Implementation of any measurement strategy is based on developing specific, relevant, and easily collectible measures and setting targets that support the mission and goals of the organization. Gumbus and Luster (Andra Gumbus, 2006) note that the BSC helps organizations in the following ways:

1. Promotes growth: focus on long-term strategic outcomes, not short-term operational results.
2. Tracks performance: individual and groups can be measured against targets in order to correct and improve.
3. Provides focus: measures are aligned to a few critical strategies, BSC provides focus on what is important to the company.
4. **Alignment to goals**: When you measure what is truly important to success, measures become linked and become more important.

5. **Goal clarity**: Helps answer the question – “How does what I do daily contribute to the goals of the enterprise?”

6. **Accountability**: individuals are assigned as owners of metrics in order to provide clear accountability for results.

All of these benefits apply to needs in academia as well organizations. On a college campus, there may be even more confusion about stakeholders and lines of responsibility and accountability. Since the early 1990’s, institutions of higher learning have been required to provide performance indicators to state alumni, prospective students and other internal and external stakeholders(Carpenter-Hubin, 2000-2001). The Balanced Scorecard approach offers a tested framework for planning and analysis. However, at this point Stewart and Carpenter-Hubin note that there has not been dramatic change in the operational performance of universities, despite the creation of university ‘report cards’. They also point out that the real test for universities is to “create meaningful systems for assessment” and then use that information in “policy and resource allocation decisions.”(Carpenter-Hubin, 2000-2001)

**An Overall Assessment Strategy – Minimum Competency or Good Design**

The assessment process includes those as broad as university-wide metrics to those as narrow as individual student project metrics and everything in-between. So what are educators to do with this breadth of possible assessment measures? Do any of these processes, existing assessment methods and metrics and/or student characteristics help us to create good design? If we look to organizational assessment as a model, first and foremost, we must determine the mission and goals of our departments, programs, courses and projects. Any metrics captured or developed for each of these levels should inform and depend the other. Although we may not have a direct influence on university wide metrics, we should look to those as critical insight into what is important to the university. As we look specifically at metrics aimed at the program
level the accreditation body is often the place to begin searching for an adoptable framework. CIDA has a specific set of standards and indicators for design programs. Measurement and demonstration of these indictors is required to become or remain an accredited program. CIDA does not rank programs, but only determines that the standards are met – not determining at what level. As such, it primarily measures minimum program competency.

The National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ), has another set of criteria that is equally important as we prepare our students for the world of work and hope to create successful professional designers. Both our accreditation body and the NCIDQ measure minimum competency as any regulating body must. Your program is either accredited or it is not. You either pass the NCIDQ or you don’t.

Conclusion

Currently there are no metrics available to measure “good design”. In even trying to define a specific metric, the following questions arise:

- Is it possible to create a metric that measures good design?
- If it is, who would create it? How would you measure it?
- What about the complexity of design?
- How would each stakeholder express his view of good design?

At this point in our relatively recent introduction into metrics, the thought of creating an objective measure of good design seems almost insurmountable. Further development of an overall framework that integrates program level, student level and certification requirements into one assessment strategy may be a model that can begin to ensure good design as well as minimum competency.

Bibliography (APA Format)


