

Chapter 12

Beyond High–Stakes Assessment

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ABSTRACT

High-stakes assessments in higher education serve a gate-keeping function for institutional and programmatic accreditation and determine outcomes for students on state boards and professional licensing and certification examinations. The assessments are defined by specific characteristics such as: a single, summative examination, a clear measure of success and failure, and significant consequences for candidates. Controversial aspects are related to whether they actually measure individual achievement or meaningful skills, the current mismatch between education and workplace needs, and the increased use of technology in instruction. Can high-stakes testing evolve and move with the times?

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is in a radical phase of reinventing itself in response to the impact of the global pandemic on campus life and the concurrent increase in students choosing online courses and programs. Universities have transformed their offerings to online modalities for the short term and are moving more quickly towards long-term hybrid and online options. The rapid development of technology is prompting the inevitable and thanks to the pandemic, most universities now have remote support systems for students and faculty, digital learning management platforms, and new dialogues about instructional design. What does that mean for high stakes assessment and the connection between universities and the workplace? For many, the pandemic magnified a disconnection between academe and the world of work and confirmed the need for new connections and innovative approaches to training. The challenges

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facing employers during the pandemic were extraordinary - pivoting to remote or digital platforms in quarantined conditions caused massive disruptions. Consumer behaviors, supply and demand chains, and economic conditions changed drastically. Ignoring the impact of this time would be a failure for every discipline and field that requires training. The upward trend in online programming was serendipitous with the pandemic, but the situation is far from the transformation that is needed.

High stakes assessments signal that graduates are ready for work - that they have achieved the competencies identified as necessary for successful participation in the workplace. However, the link between training programs, assessments, and actual workplace needs is tenuous. Universities have not changed along with the technologization of society. They have not broadened their view on whom to serve and how differently they must serve learners at various stages of their lives (Weise, 2020). Most high stakes assessments still reflect the traditional models of teaching and learning, and the pandemic illustrated the need for the models to change. Relevant, sustainable colleges will be those that 1) help learner/workers see the connection between learning and a better career, 2) enable robust partnerships between colleges and employers, 3) design flexible pathways that enable learner/workers to transfer their knowledge to a job or apply what they are learning elsewhere; and 4) achieve equitable outcomes and sustainable wages for their learner/workers (Zanville, 2020). High stakes assessments often drive teaching models, and they need to be updated to require tools that prepare learners for current jobs or the careers of the future. They will need to be relevant to the new workplace and the jobs that have not yet been created. The rapid development and increased sophistication of virtual and augmented reality tools, simulation applications, machine learning, and artificial intelligence calls for immediate integration of these elements into education, training, assessment, across all fields.

This chapter will focus on the reality of assessment in the space between training and the workplace. The discussion integrates foundational concepts of assessment with important questions about higher education in the context of the global pandemic and the future of work. We will explore the positive and negative aspects of high-stakes assessments in higher education, including their persistent use in the face of changes in the higher education landscape such as online education, developments in professional training methods, diversity considerations and the increased use of technology in instruction. Can high-stakes testing evolve and move with the times?

BACKGROUND

From a conceptual standpoint, assessment is driven by the performance criteria associated with skills and sub-skills that students master to pass the course. High-stakes assessment provides programs with essential data about student learning needed to prepare them for the future of work. High stakes assessments are defined by specific characteristics - a single, summative examination with a clear measure of success and failure, and clear consequences for those who pass and fail. Examples include graduation or exit exams, and licensure exams for practice in a professional field. Controversial aspects of the exams are related to whether they actually measure individual achievement, reliance on a single exam or data point for an important decision, the risk or cost of failure, and the inequality that many students experience in preparation. The relationship between the various types of assessment and student learning outcomes could be more dynamic and variable than the structure of current systems indicates, paving the way for new approaches and algorithms in the learning infrastructure. Online options and new technology tools such as AR/VR, simulations, and AI now provide systems that can make assessment more accurate and

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