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We need researchers...so let's stop using the term "assessment"

Rishi Sriram

We Need Researchers...So Let's Stop Using the Term Assessment

Rishi Sriram challenges the hierarchical classification of research versus assessment and argues for a research paradigm for both.

By Rishi Sriram

HIGHER EDUCATION CURRENTLY EXISTS IN an age of accountability. Enrollment continues to rise, but the scrutiny placed on higher education has risen with it, and skepticism has grown among the public, the government, and the media regarding its value. Books such as Richard Arum and Josipa Roska's *Academically Adrift* and Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus's *Higher Education?* convey a concerning lack of confidence in our colleges and universities. The natural response to this lack of confidence is to hold higher education accountable for its costs, programs, and outcomes.

But accountability is quickly becoming a derogatory word in higher education, despite the fact that no one should be surprised that stakeholders are concerned about costs and want to know that money is well spent. Tuition prices outpace the cost of inflation, and constituents want colleges and universities to justify their costs. Accountability is supposed to prevent those in higher education from becoming lazy—from going through the motions and not paying close attention to learning and related outcomes. But something is lost in the accountability movement, which

results in higher education missing the original goal—improvement.

In an age of accountability, numbers matter. Therefore, the accountability movement has led to the assessment movement. Higher education should be held accountable, and colleges themselves should take the lead in making sure colleges are meeting goals. Assessment was originally meant to improve higher education. Instead, assessment quickly became about proving that a college or program meets minimum requirements to satisfy those holding the stick (or the carrot). Higher education is missing the point of assessment. Assessment is now about proving, not improving. The curiosity and passion for improving the lives of college students is quickly stifled by assessment. This leads to boring work. More importantly, it leads to costly and time-consuming work that does not help colleges discover better ways to help students learn.

Stop Using the Term Assessment

I AM CALLING FOR HIGHER education administrators to stop using the term *assessment* in favor of *research*

for two reasons. First, I do not think there is a genuine difference between the terms *assessment* and *research* in practice. Second, I think there is an important difference in the implied meaning of the two terms. *Assessment*—at least in practice—concerns proving that programs that do exist should exist. *Research*, by contrast, aims to discover truth that will alter how we see the world.

I used to think that assessment was a catchall for the kinds of evaluative endeavors higher education administrators embarked upon. Research, by contrast, was a higher, more magical endeavor that was conducted by faculty members. When I reflected upon this difference, it did not stand up to even slight scrutiny. Why would an activity be called assessment if performed by a professional but called research if it was conducted by a professor?

I then thought maybe the difference between assessment and research was not about *who* did the activity; the difference was in the activity itself. This is what I now commonly hear. Assessment is about evaluation, while research is about discovery, but this notion does not stand up to scrutiny either. When you evaluate, are you not making a discovery? When researchers evaluate the effects of state funding on higher education, would that not be *just* assessment? These scholars call it research, however, and they publish it in the top journals.

One of my favorite sources related to quantitative research is the *Dictionary of Statistics and Methodology* by Paul Vogt and Burke Johnson. So I decided to look up the term *assessment*. I first noticed that they do not even call it *assessment*. The entry is *assessment research*. Here is their definition:

Often a synonym for evaluation research. When a distinction is drawn between the two, assessment frequently refers to measuring individual outcomes, while evaluation refers to studying the effects of programs. The two are routinely linked, because a common way to evaluate a program is to assess its effects on the individual who participated in it. (p. 15)

It is clear from that definition that Vogt and Johnson have no idea how to differentiate assessment from research. It is clear that they do not even believe there is a distinction, but they feel an obligation to include it as an entry because people continue to use the two terms separately—for no apparent reason.

In comparison to their *assessment research* entry, this is how Vogt and Johnson define *research*:

Systematic investigation of a topic aimed at uncovering new information (discovering data) and/or interpreting relations among the topic's parts (theorizing). Major purposes include exploring, understanding, describing, predicting, explaining, and influencing or controlling. (p. 338)

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I think that's a good definition of research. I think it's also a good definition of assessment. There is no difference in the activities of research and assessment, and the differences between the meanings of the two terms do more harm than good.

The idea that assessment is evaluation and research is more ambiguous or theoretical is difficult to defend. Some research is practical and directly informative. Some research is more theoretical without immediate, direct implications. All research is drawn from theory but not always to the same extent. Different research endeavors serve different purposes, but this is no reason to call some of it *research* and some of it something else. If you are trying to discover truth based on other people's search for truth, you are conducting research. I cannot imagine any assessment project worth doing in which you are not trying to discover truth. I cannot imagine any assessment project that does not draw from theory and inform theory. Therefore, I think it is time to do away with the term *assessment* altogether.

We use two different terms in order to put some activities (and the people who do them) up on a pedestal

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while keeping other activities (and the people who do them) down. We mean something inferior when we use the term assessment. We mean something sophisticated, difficult, and loftier when we use the term research. So let's lead higher education—as administrators and professors—with a research paradigm.

Improve Higher Education with a Research Paradigm

A PARADIGM IS A MENTAL model that guides our thinking (and eventually our behaviors). When scholars conduct research, they purposefully attempt to limit their biases so that they can discover truth. It might be the truth they hope for or it might be the opposite of what they hoped to discover, but there is a basic assumption that truth is how you get better. Higher education administrators need a mental model that includes using research to guide their thinking and behaviors. Research is challenging. Research is engaging. Research is a way to make a contribution to your campus in a meaningful way. A research paradigm allows a professional to ask questions that others are afraid to ask or are not reflective enough to ask. It then propels you to go and discover truth regarding your questions. The truth will be conditional; it will be incomplete. But it will be truth nonetheless. And truth is how you improve.

In an assessment paradigm, administrators cannot help but think that a lack of desired results is a failure. In a research paradigm, a lack of desired results is still valuable information that is needed to eventually reach positive outcomes. Critical thinking—thinking that is based on evidence and/or sound reasoning—is at the heart of a research paradigm. When you use a research paradigm, you engage in the type of thinking advocated by Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman in his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. You form your theories—your ways of explaining things—from evidence that you gather. And when the evidence does not align with your current mental model, you refine

your mental model. Quantitative research and statistics are wonderful tools for gathering and analyzing data. They are not the only tools that can be used for this purpose, but when used correctly, statistics are powerful—not just for the numbers you get but for the way in which analyzing the numbers shapes your mental models and your behaviors (your paradigm).

This does not mean that all research is created equal. There is a spectrum of rigor with research. However, this does not make one side of the spectrum *better* than the other. It is simply more rigorous. Rigor is often good, but it is sometimes unnecessary as well. You do not need every research endeavor to be the most rigorous possible. Some research you may

want to generalize across the nation or beyond. Some research you want to generalize to only a subpopulation on a single campus. The scope of what you want to know should determine the scope and rigor of your research, but less rigor or a smaller scope does not make it something other than research.

If those of us who work in higher education want to improve college students' learning, we must become better learners ourselves. Therefore, let's stop assessing and start researching.

A research paradigm means becoming an explorer in your work, not just an email responder. It means being proactive about understanding current processes in relation to desired goals.

It also means discovering knowledge that can lead to new, innovative goals.

Most jobs in higher education require master's degrees or doctoral degrees because the work is meant to require high-level thinking, but the logistical and organizational requirements of the job can overshadow the parts that require hard thinking. The fast-paced work will push a reactive rather than proactive approach. Reactive work means spending time on urgent large and small crises. It means constantly worrying about what the person with the carrot or the stick will think of your findings.

A research paradigm requires protecting your time so that you can be curious. It means finding the

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space for important work that is not urgent at all. It takes courage to spend time doing work that no one is directly asking you to do. It takes courage to gather evidence that may reveal that current processes are not meeting desired goals, but such work will lead to a better experience for college students. Working with a research paradigm is not only more enjoyable, it is also the type of work that will lead to improved colleges. So let's do research, and as we conduct our research, let's discuss the rigor, the scope, the merit, our hopes and dreams, the truth we discovered, and—most importantly of all—what it can mean for others.

NOTES

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