

Roger C. Loeb

*In order to assess its expanded role in the process of adult socialization, a college or university must evaluate its impact not only on the traditional cognitive areas, but also on factors such as student values, attitudes, and personality. Beginning with a case study to illustrate the advantages of a multimethod approach to assessment, the article proposes a variety of techniques and uses the findings of the assessment program in a particular metropolitan university to describe the information that can be obtained.*

# Beyond Skills Assessment

## *Examining Nonacademic Changes in Urban College Students*

Yasmin<sup>1</sup> is the first member of her family to attend college. Her parents were born and raised in Iran. Shortly after marrying, they moved to Dearborn, Michigan, in metropolitan Detroit. They opened a small grocery store which, over the years, grew and prospered. Yasmin did well in school, and her high school guidance counselor encouraged her to apply to the University of Michigan in Dearborn. At first her parents opposed this move; she was needed in the store and was also responsible for helping care for her three younger siblings. But when Yasmin was awarded a partial scholarship to attend the university, her parents relented and supported her decision.

College was not easy for Yasmin. She was expected to work at the store for 20 hours a week, to help out at home, and, as required by the regulations of the scholarship, to register for a minimum of 12 credits per term while maintaining good academic standing. Yasmin was accustomed to working diligently. As a result, she was able to maintain a B-average and to graduate with a degree in political science after five years.

Now Yasmin is ready to move on to law school, to a career. Her university experience has provided her with the necessary background and skills. But she is moving on to other less typically delineated roles as well—voter, home purchaser, symphony goer, supporter of causes, and creator of life or of art or of ideas. Has the university prepared her? Does the university have a significant impact upon the nonacademic aspect of its students' lives? Stated

another way, what are the nonacademic functions of the modern university? What has the university done for Yasmin beyond teaching her academic skills and information? Is she better prepared in some nonacademic ways for living in her urban environment?

## Adult Socialization

In their text *Personality in Adulthood*, Robert McCrae and Paul Costa claim that college is near the end of the time when individuals are relatively willing to revise their values and attitudes. This is typically the final stage of development prior to becoming enmeshed in a life structure. McCrae and Costa note: "The executive rising on the corporate ladder has little incentive to embrace Communism; the lawyer who has invested years in learning her profession is understandably reluctant to question it." (p. 157) However, what of the executive who is barely holding her own or is suddenly laid off following corporate restructuring? What of the lawyer frustrated by the legal system or disillusioned with his clients? And what of the housewife whose children have grown up and she sees her future staring at her blankly? Perhaps such personal crises reopen the window of opportunity for growth and change at any age. The university may well provide the fertile soil for nurturing new ideas and perspectives for the returning nontraditionally-aged student as well as for the traditional student.

We are living in an era when traditional socializing agents such as the family and the church are playing less comprehensive roles, particularly in urban settings. Tacitly, our society seems to be shifting much of the responsibility for socialization to its educational institutions. The contemporary college or university is expected to foster adult development, to nurture mature morals and values, to develop social and political attitudes befitting the citizenry of a world community, and to promote aesthetic appreciation and expression. The university's method of social influence differs from both the familial method (i.e., providing a model for imitation) and the ecclesiastical method (i.e., didactic preaching). It functions not to prescribe, proscribe, or inculcate but rather to provoke and to prod. The university's role is to raise questions for its learners, not to provide answers. Ideally, it offers students an array of alternatives without indicating a preferred choice. In this arena of unique freedom, the adult is allowed, perhaps even forced, to explore and to evolve.

If we believe that such developmental changes are important and are occurring while the student is attending the university, can we verify and measure these changes? Let us examine some possibilities.

## Measuring Change: A MultiMethod Approach

Nonacademic change encompasses values, attitudes, personality characteristics, and behaviors. There are numerous methods for measuring such change; several will be described below. Each has unique strengths and weaknesses, and there is no one best method. Rather, it is our contention that the only best method involves incorporating several

approaches simultaneously and comparing the results. This multimethod approach, looking at the same individuals from a variety of perspectives, is called triangulation. It generally provides supportive consistencies as well as provocative paradoxes. Only by understanding both will we truly comprehend the impact that college has on its students' growth and development.

The easiest way to assess change is through *archival records*. This is information that is on file and available, that requires no participation by the subjects being assessed, and that is essentially objective. In a university,

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such records include course selections. For example, does a student elect courses dealing with topics such as ethics, minority groups, women's studies, and international relations? When in the student's career are such courses taken? After three years of traditional courses, Yasmin took the course "Women Authors in the Nineteenth Century." In her fifth and

final year, she took "Urban Social Problems," "The Holocaust," and "African-American History."

Other pertinent archival information available concerning college student development includes clubs or organizations joined, leadership roles assumed, and volunteer or internship activity. In spite of her busy life, in her fourth year Yasmin tutored at a Detroit middle school and joined the Pre-Law Student Association (PLSA). In her final year, she was elected president of the PLSA.

Archival records are also useful for assessing historical changes in the student body at-large. Such material as the type or number of library books checked out, numbers of students running and voting in campus elections, and the percentage of students joining fraternities and sororities may reflect shifts in college student development.

A second potential source of information is *observation* or behavioral assessment. A trained observer can report behaviors exhibited by students. Brief notes can be recorded (in writing or on tape), which can be expanded into more complete notes shortly after the observation is completed. Alternatively, a pre-established list of behaviors could be used by the observer, who would check off the behavior each time it occurred. For example, the observer might record how frequently a student verbally participates in class or how many students turn in written assignments when they are due. If more complete records of behavior are desired, segments of college activity (for example, meeting with a faculty advisor) might be videotaped at different stages of a student's academic career.

A more subtle approach involves the use of so-called "participant observers." People, such as teachers and fellow students who normally associate with the individual being assessed, can be trained to observe and record that subject's behavior in a variety of settings such as the classroom, dormitory, library, or eating facility. Such participant observers are less likely than a stranger to have an impact on the behaviors being observed and may be in a better position to understand the behaviors. Alternatively, if precise details are not required, student peers can provide general descriptions of each other based solely upon informal observation.

A third option is self-observation, in which participants systematically describe certain actions of their own. As an illustration of this technique, one pair of researchers (Wheeler and Nezlek) asked college freshmen to record all of their social interactions of greater than ten minutes duration for two separate periods of two weeks each. They found that, with training, students' self-observations became highly reliable. Student reports can also be used to determine the frequencies of such activities as studying, doing nonrequired reading, traveling, or visiting museums.

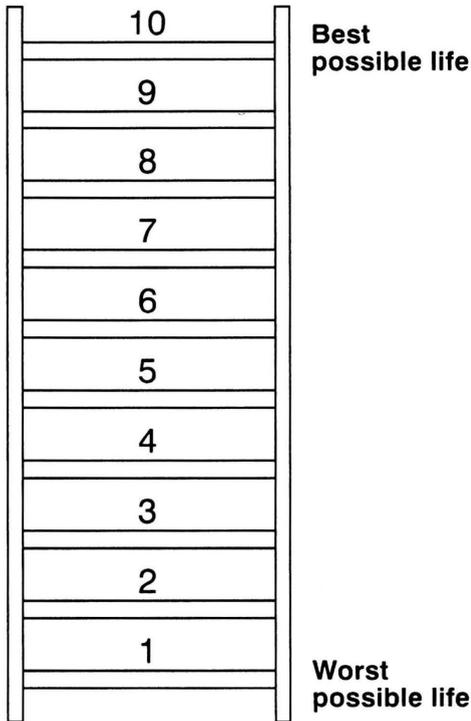
In each of her five years of college, Yasmin was asked to participate in the university evaluation program by logging her behaviors for the two weeks following spring semester finals. From these logs, it was evident that over the five years, Yasmin had increased the amount of time she spent on nonrequired reading and on such activities as attending theatrical productions, concerts, and political events.

Much of what we might like to know about the impact of the university on the student is neither available in archives nor directly observable. To measure opinions, attitudes, values, and self-perceptions, the subjects must be questioned. Conducting *interviews* permits an investigator to present questions directly to students and to clarify, qualify, and rectify their answers. Furthermore, the skillful interviewer encourages thoughtful, complete replies and motivates, empathizes, and probes. The interviewer can explain what information is needed and provide contextual cues to aid in its recall. Interviews conducted with Yasmin added important insights to our understanding of her collegiate development. Topics included: dealing with conflicting cultural mores and norms, learning time management skills, and establishing a sense of self ("Who am I?"). Yasmin reported that she enjoyed the opportunity for conversation provided by the interview and found the process personally illuminating.

Unfortunately, interviews are costly since they are usually conducted with one respondent at a time. A technique known as a "focus group" can ameliorate the expense of individual interviews; a well-trained moderator can interview six to twelve people at a time. In addition, a moderator serves to keep the discussion focused on the topic and to draw out quiet members of the group, while limiting the response time of group members who might dominate the discussion. All interview techniques suffer from certain disadvantages. Interviews require extensive training; and interviews, unless strictly controlled, are susceptible to interviewer bias and to a lack of uniformity. On the other hand, at their best, interviews provide a richness of information no other technique can match.

To increase efficiency and to standardize procedures required for comparability of results, we often rely on *paper and pencil measures*. There are numerous established scales and inventories available. Here it will suffice to present a few less traditional scaling assessment techniques with potential application in metropolitan universities. One is a pictorial format called the "ladder of life," which is used for measuring personal satisfaction. Respondents are asked to place themselves on the ladder according to their degree of satisfaction with respect to life in general or with particular aspects of life, both in the present and as expected at a specified future time (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The "ladder of life" attitude scale**



In her first year, Yasmin reported her current life satisfaction as "6" and her expected life satisfaction in five years as "8." In her fifth year, both current satisfaction and five-year future expectation were rated "9." Apparently Yasmin's expectations for greater satisfaction at the end of college, compared to the beginning, have been met.

"Q-sorts" are a second type of self-rating measure with possible utility for exploring change in university students over time. Respondents are given a set of cards containing brief descriptors such as "successful" and "mature," which they are asked to sort into piles ranging from "most like me" to "least like me." Subjects perform two sorts: a "self-sort" indicates how they perceive themselves and an "ideal sort" indicates how they would like to be. Comparing the two sortings provides a

measure of how well the perceived self approximates the ideal self and indicates the areas in which the individual fails to meet that ideal. This technique has been used to measure self-esteem (defined as self-sort and ideal sort being similar) and to assess progress in therapy (defined as moving toward one's ideal view of self). Over the course of her college career, the difference between Yasmin's self-sort and her ideal sort diminished. Specifically, in later years she rated herself higher on independence and self-confidence. When she began college, these characteristics had been part of her ideal but not part of her actual self rating.

One interesting technique for assessing attitudes toward particular concepts, objects, or experiences is called the Semantic Differential Scale. Participants are presented with a list of adjective pairs that might be used to describe the concept in question and are asked to assign a rating (between 1 and 7) to each pair. For example, a college dean or a campus program might be assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (beneficial) to 7 (harmful). Other potential descriptor pairs include: weak/strong, good/bad, active/passive, fast/slow, and prohibitive/permissive. A study designed by two undergraduates (Levy and Drakeford, cited in Lewin) made use of the Semantic Differential Scale to compare the

attitudes of black, white, and foreign college students toward campus authority figures.

The classic measuring instrument originally designed to assess prejudice towards members of various ethnic groups is the Bogardus Social Distance Scale. This scale can be expanded to measure prejudicial feelings towards other groups such as the handicapped (e.g., the mentally ill, individuals in wheelchairs) or the socially stigmatized (e.g., homosexuals, members of the Ku Klux Klan). Respondents indicate the degree of contact they are willing to have with members of each group by checking off one of the following: "I would marry into the group"; "I would have members of this groups as close friends"; "...as next door neighbors"; "...as speaking acquaintances"; "...as visitors to my nation"; or "I would bar this group from my nation."

If a less highly structured approach is desired, a *projective technique* may be employed. Such a technique requires individuals to project their thoughts and feelings on to relatively ambiguous stimuli. Participants are unlikely to know how their responses will be interpreted, and thus faking is difficult. However, scoring such techniques is likely to be more subjective and time consuming than with other paper and pencil measures. One type of projective technique, sentence completion, uses verbal stimuli to elicit open-ended responses. Students can be presented with a sentence stem such as: "My ambition..." or "College has been..." and asked to complete the sentence. The Incomplete Sentence Task (Lanyon & Lanyon) and the Incomplete Sentences Blank (Rotter & Rafferty) are two versions that are available in forms appropriate for college students.

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) is another projective approach that substitutes a pictorial stimulus for the verbal stimulus presented in sentence completion tasks. Respondents are asked to create a story by describing a somewhat ambiguous picture. The story should be a creative explanation of the current situation represented in the picture, what has led up to this situation, and what the outcome will be. Stories can be scored both objectively (for such characteristics as length, grammar, and vocabulary) and subjectively (for features such as theme, mood, and expectations). For example, students might be asked to tell a story about a picture of a young woman holding an open book while a young man looks over her shoulder.

## An Assessment Example

The University of Michigan–Dearborn (UM-D) is one of two branch campuses of the University of Michigan system. It is a commuter campus serving the metropolitan Detroit area and includes a liberal arts college and schools of engineering, management, and education. Its slightly more than eight thousand students are ethnically diverse and include 13.1 percent designated minorities. The students are about equally divided with respect to gender (51 percent female, 49 percent male), and slightly less than half (48 percent) are traditional college age, eighteen to twenty-two. Eighty-seven percent are undergraduates. Among the degree-seeking undergraduates, a slight majority (58 percent) are full-time students;

28 percent receive some financial aid. Nearly half of UM-D students (47 percent) entered as transfers, and many (24 percent) attend only in the evening. Virtually all of the students are Michigan residents with most (96 percent) living in the Detroit tri-county area.

An assessment study was conducted on the campus from September 1989 to April 1991. Our goal was to employ measures sensitive to issues and personality patterns judged to be particularly susceptible to university influences. The focus here was on traditional-aged students due to their availability as participants in this project. Extending the assessment to the returning student is a critical missing piece, which could be accomplished with only minor modifications to the measuring scales. A longitudinal, multimethod approach was used to explore changes in attitudes and self-perceptions during students' first two years of college. Participants reported on: (a) the extent of their concern about, or their interest in, numerous socio-political issues; (b) their personal characteristics; (c) how they thought their friends would rate their personal characteristics; (d) their perceived current and future quality of life (the "ladder of life"); (e) their social attitudes toward various groups (Bogardus Social Distance Scale); and (f) how they interpreted a TAT-type picture taken from the campus newspaper.

During the first two days of classes, 160 beginning college students completed this six-part survey. Near the end of that semester, 141 of these students completed a similar survey. A third survey was conducted near the end of the following academic year and included 95 of the original participants. No significant differences were found between the group that participated in all three surveys and the group who only completed the first.

Results clearly indicate changes in student attitudes and self-perceptions over the two-year course of the study. By itself, this result is not surprising. More intriguing is that the varied research methodologies revealed different patterns of change. The Social Distance Scale indicated that prejudice towards a wide range of ethnic and handicapped groups declined rapidly during the first semester of college. According to the attitude scales, changes in socio-political views did not tend to appear until the second year, and even then the changes were less widespread than changes concerning prejudice. On many issues (particularly those involving politics and the environment), results showed slightly diminished student interest at the end of the first semester, followed by a significant increase in concern in the spring of the second year. Self-reports of personal characteristics revealed yet another pattern of change. Overall changes in personal characteristics were less often described than were changes in attitude. In addition, students tended to describe themselves more negatively after one semester of college (less energetic, less friendly, less important, less reliable, and less trusting). However, by late in the second year, these negative perceptions showed a marked reversal with all characteristics except "trusting" returning to their original values.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusions

What has the assessment process revealed about Yasmin and her classmates? It appears that the college experiences are contributing to shifts in their attitudes and perceptions that are likely to have great impact on their ability to function in an urban environment. Diminution of social prejudices, which occurred rapidly and broadly, may require only minimal stimulation for change. Positive exposure to people different from those to which one has been accustomed may influence not only attitudes toward that particular group of people, but may encourage the individual to question his or her social attitudes more generally. Perhaps greater effort is needed to include special needs or non-native students within the university population, if such changes are deemed worthwhile.

Increased concern over socio-political issues may also be a legitimate and desirable social effect of attending a metropolitan university. These attitudes appear to be more resistant to change than the interpersonal ones. Specific courses or special programs may be needed to foster the higher level of moral development that ensues from questioning one's values and attitudes. Nontraditional educational modes, such as role-playing activities and simulated society exercises, may be even more effective.

The modest changes in personal characteristics described in this study probably reflect specific adjustment challenges and their consequent adaptations inherent to the college environment. The students' temporary loss of self-esteem and social confidence suggests that the need for programs of academic and social support is especially acute during the first semester in college. These students had recently left high schools where they may typically have felt comfortable, successful, and valued. Suddenly, they are confronted with a metropolitan university which may be perceived as relatively large, cold, demanding, and unsupportive. Orientation programs, freshmen seminars, and strong advising/counseling services may be needed to help in this transition. While the adjustment problems for returning students are likely to be somewhat different, they may be even more substantial. Preliminary analyses indicate that such demographic characteristics as gender, race, and social class are also critical variables to be examined in any metropolitan university assessment program.

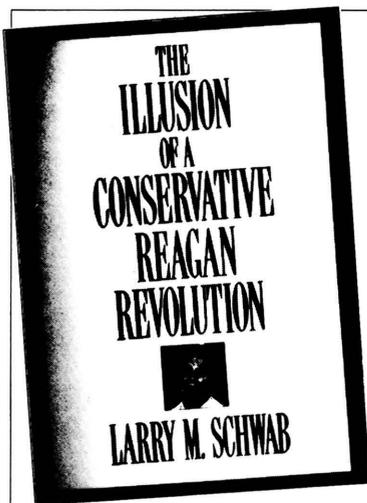
Finally, it is important in evaluating the results of these assessments that we capture the uniqueness, and then foster the development, of each individual student—of the Yasmins who might otherwise be lost in our group results. The adoption of a flexible, longitudinal, multimethod assessment program is an essential first step toward the realization of this goal. The results must then be reviewed and discussed by students, faculty, and staff, particularly student affairs personnel, for what they tell us about our institution and the changes they suggest. For assessment is a continuing process. We gather information, we analyze it, we respond to it, and then we begin the assessment process again. In this way, the university serves as a model for the change and development it purports to foster in its students.

### Endnotes

1. Yasmin is a fictional amalgam of many students attending today's metropolitan universities.
2. This study was published in the July 1992 edition of the *Journal of College Student Development*.

### Suggested Readings

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