
LARGE-SCALE PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT IN THE RESEARCH UNIVERSITY: STORIES OF PROBLEMS AND SUCCESS

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We reported on the three-year progress of an institutionally-mandated assessment program at Minnesota. The first two years of the program seemed unremittingly positive. In response to the university administration's call for a mandatory admissions testing program—as a means to cull and limit the student population—the Composition Program had effectively redirected efforts into a principled portfolio assessment for entrance and graduation. More significant than the program itself was the change in faculty attitudes brought about by a massive reeducation effort on the part of composition professionals acting as change agents. But major financial, administrative, and programmatic confusion in the University in 1988-89 virtually canceled the portfolio project.

That these changes were simply announced without consulting the Composition Program indicated that the ideological forces initiating the original regressive testing mandate remain undiminished. We detailed the ethnographically oriented process through which we reexamined the place of writing and assessment in their institutions. Working by a collaborative series of stories and analyses, we showed the complex of beliefs about writing which characterize many research universities and which must be well understood by program designers. Using theoretical systems from ethnography and credit-cycle economics, we suggested that faculty members' interests drive educational and curricular policy. To succeed, writing policy must not conflict with those interests. Since a major university is a conglomerate of small working units, policy makers must proceed locally and specifically—from the bottom up. The labor- and time-intensive program of portfolio assessment directly threatened the reward system of the university at large. But at more local levels,

fewer conflicts emerged. Recent history of the Minnesota program suggests that assessment and writing across the curriculum projects with a local focus have an excellent chance, where massive programs mandated from the top down are deeply problematic.