Source: Nichols and Nichols (2000: 21-23)

How High Should Intended Educational (Student) Outcomes Be Set?

One of the practical questions departmental administrators will face is posed above. The relatively straightforward answer is to be realistic considering the academic abilities of the students as they enter the program, the level of rigor expected in the classes, and the resources available to support the instructional process.

There is nothing to be gained by setting criteria for intended outcomes (average scores, percentile ranks, etc.) unreasonably high. If an institution operates a virtually open door admissions program, with the result that entering students have diagnostic test scores averaging in the 20-30 percentile range (compared with the national population), there is little chance that its graduates will average in the 80-90 percentile range on most standardized cognitive examinations. What purpose has been served by setting intended outcomes at that level? The department has looked foolish, the students have been driven beyond reason to attain an unrealistic expectation, and all concerned record a frustrating experience from what may have been a considerable accomplishment (graduation of students who clearly meet or exceed professional standards).

On the other hand, there is also little to be gained from setting intended educational outcomes at such a modest level that any "warm, breathing body" even indirectly exposed to the instructional program can meet them. The educational program at any institution should represent a reasonable challenge for both students and faculty.

It has been the authors' experience that most institutions at which "warm breathing body" statements of intended educational (student) outcomes were encountered have been institutions that failed to distinguish these assessment activities from the procedures that exist on all our campuses for evaluation of individual faculty and other employees. It is absolutely imperative that in word, as well as deed, the assessment processes initiated on the campus be held separate from necessary evaluative procedures concerning individuals. Unless this takes place, faculty, being human beings, will insure that they "look good" regarding intended educational outcomes in order to merit increases in rank, salary, or possibly tenure.

In setting criteria for intended educational outcomes, faculty are answering the "ought" question regarding their programming. Having answered the question "What should students be able to think, know, or do?", the "ought" question focuses upon how well should they be able to perform the intended educational or student outcomes identified. The institutions profiled in *Assessment Case Studies* reported almost uniformly that the tendency for the faculty to use assessment results to improve programming was directly linked to the extent to which they identified the criteria for program success (answering the "ought" question) before the actual assessment process took place. When reviewing actual assessment results, if a discrepancy exists between what faculty had previously stated students ought to be able to do (the ideal state) and the actual results reflecting what they can do, faculty will in most cases take the necessary corrective action. However, without such a criterion against which to reflect actual student performance, the tendency to use

the data to improve the program is substantially diminished.

At what point in the process should the department establish these criteria for program success, as part of the intended educational (student) outcome or as part of the means of assessment? If in these early stages of identification of the statements of intended educational outcomes faculty become too involved in identification of the answer to the "ought" question and the specific means of assessment to be utilized for measurement, then the focus of the process shifts naturally from student expectations to measurement or assessment. While expression of criteria for program success is certainly possible in the statement of intended educational or student outcomes, "the majority of graduates will be employed upon graduation," in most cases, the identification of this criteria for program success is best selected in conjunction with identification in the means of assessment to be discussed in the next chapter, "50% or more of the students completing the Graduating Student Questionnaire will indicate that they are currently employed or have accepted a job offer at the close of their program."

Criteria for success are often set at both the *primary* (overall) and *secondary* (detailed) levels as reference points or benchmarks for program performance. *Primary* criteria for success establish overall targets for program performance such as "the average score of graduates on the ETS Major Field Test in Literature will be at or near the 50th percentile." The potential use of results for program improvement can be greatly enhanced by also setting more detailed criteria for success which require *secondary* analysis such as "and no subscale score will be below the 30th percentile." While overall program performance may meet or exceed primary criteria for success, faculty are informed through consideration of this secondary analysis of those more specific areas, scales, or individual items falling short of their expectations. Whenever feasible, faculty should set not only primary, but secondary criteria for success and conduct detailed analysis of assessment information to the level necessary for it to be of use.