

## Introduction

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“Although I have been working in the area of evaluation and assessment for some time, I didn’t come to it easily. Indeed, I think I can say I came to it with some resistance.” So writes Daryl Smith in the selection that opens this volume. Mary Docter, in the closing selection, says of her relationship to assessment, “I came to it late, and only with a lot of work.”

So what’s the problem? No one comes to, say, chocolate “late, and only with a lot of work.” Assessment sounds more like soymilk: good for you, but definitely an acquired taste. What is it about assessment that seems to give it the flavor of duty rather than delight?

Well, there are a couple of problems, some endemic to higher education in general, but some more pronounced in the context of liberal arts education. The contributors to this volume are concerned with this latter context. Among the questions they address are:

- How does an assessment program help accomplish the distinct mission of a liberal arts education? We all know accountability is good; how are the goals unique to liberal arts education advanced by assessment programs? And are there any costs to the goals of liberal arts education?
- Are there assessment methodologies especially well-suited to liberal arts education? And are there some that, while effective in other contexts, might actually undermine what is distinctive about liberal arts education?
- How do the expectations of accreditation agencies regarding assessment differ for liberal arts colleges from those for large comprehensive universities?
- How do accreditation agencies work with liberal arts colleges to develop assessment programs appropriate to the specific goals of a liberal arts education?

The idea that there is something distinctive about liberal arts education raises the obvious question, What? Two contributors to this volume, Patricia King, of the University of Michigan, and Charles Blaich, of Wabash College, have been leading a multi-year effort to explore this question in unique ways. King describes in detail the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. Having identified seven liberal arts outcomes, King and her team interviewed hundreds of students in an effort to discover the “developmentally effective experiences” that have contributed to these outcomes. As she puts it: “College students say the darndest things!” Her selection is laced with revealing excerpts from students’ reflections on their development (or lack thereof) toward “wise citizenship.”

Blaich notes the significant diversity among liberal arts colleges. But he does see two important commitments running across these diverse institutions—the commitment to a strong residential community and the commitment to a mode of intellectual life characterized by eagerness to learn beyond one’s specialization and to seek connections between apparently disparate areas of inquiry. The distinct mode of intellectual life in liberal arts contexts carries over into the way faculty teach. Faculty in liberal arts contexts are deeply committed to certain pedagogies, so much so, Blaich provocatively claims, that even if these pedagogies proved less effective than rival pedagogies, faculty would

not give them up. He's probably right, and that challenges a fundamental feature of assessment programs: that information gleaned about the effectiveness of a pedagogical strategy will result in new or modified strategies. If the commitment to, say, small seminars is as deep as Blaich suggests, evidence of their ineffectiveness will more likely result in the assessment instrument being deemed invalid than in dropping seminars from the curriculum.

If we can get our heads around what is often characterized in inspiring but vague ways—the nature of liberal arts education—are their distinct assessment challenges that go with its distinct goals or its distinct institutional context? The issues discussed here group roughly into two categories: philosophical and practical. Barbara Wright, Associate Director of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, challenges one oft-cited philosophical issue—that the nature of liberal arts education is such that its results are not open to measurement. Wright responds that to resist assessment on the grounds that liberal arts education can't be reduced to quantitative measures is to mistake measurement for assessment. She agrees that we must not dumb down our educational goals to match simplistic measurement tools, but insists that this need not mean resisting assessment: sophisticated non-quantitative assessment tools are available that do justice to the complexity of liberal arts education.

Methodology is an important philosophical concern for the assessment of liberal arts education, but it is not the only one. A theme running through several of the contributions here is that the rhetoric of assessment can serve as a major stumbling block for faculty engagement. “Learning standards,” “outcomes,” “benchmarks,” “value-added”—these terms are foreign to many disciplines (and as Blaich points out, even where they are at home, they might mean very different things). Those inviting faculty to engage with assessment need to use vocabulary that is genuinely inviting—vocabulary that makes assessment authentic from the point of view of their discipline. At a minimum, we need to do some work in translation. But it may be more than this; we may need to ask whether there are, for instance, epistemological or methodological assumptions embedded in the received vocabulary of assessment, assumptions that may be suspect to some disciplines. We may need a broader interdisciplinary conversation at a more fundamental level, or the whole project may remain foreign to many.

An important practical question for liberal arts colleges might be roughly characterized as economy of scale. Liberal arts colleges are small and typically very independent. For each to independently develop and manage an assessment program is a comparatively inefficient use of resources. Robert Froh, Associate Director of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, and Jill Reich, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Faculty at Bates College, discuss an initiative in which seven liberal arts colleges within NEASC are collaborating in the design of assessment programs. Among the challenges, of course, are that assessment instruments remain highly sensitive to the unique mission of each college and that sharing work on assessment not tempt participating schools to take advantage of comparative results in their competition with one another for applicants. Nevertheless, these challenges are well worth the benefit of not reinventing the wheel at each institution.

The administrative duplication across institutions that is likely to plague the assessment efforts of liberal arts colleges points to a far wider challenge—work load and compensation. Practically, a small college simply must rely heavily on its faculty to carry out assessment, and philosophically, assessment can't have its hoped-for effects without significant faculty contribution. But this commitment takes time and energy—both in short supply at institutions with heavy teaching loads, high expectations for faculty availability to students, significant faculty governance responsibilities, and demanding scholarship standards. Mary Docter, faculty member at Westmont College raises this challenge. She describes the approach that Westmont has taken to assessment, an approach that has generated significant faculty buy-in. The challenge of the approach is its sustainability, and a principle challenge to sustainability is time. Can faculty members sustain a substantial commitment to assessment without sacrificing other core commitments? As valuable as are efforts to embed assessment in activities already underway, they go only so far. Successful assessment will take more work. Whether through course relief, committee relief, or recognition in tenure and promotion criteria, space and incentive must be made for faculty assessment work, or our efforts will prove unsustainable.

Compensation and reward aren't the final word on incentive. James Appleton, Chancellor of University of Redlands, notes in his contribution that, given the steady stream of demands and opportunities filling our email inboxes, we all simply must practice “selective neglect.” If we're prone to pour ourselves into what we love and neglect what we don't, what can make assessment one of those things we can't wait to get to?

This question brings us back to the opening selection here. Daryl Smith writes of her own shift in attitudes toward assessment from compliance to commitment. Smith has long been concerned with the success of underserved students in our colleges and universities. As she traveled the country asking how these students were doing, she discovered that those who were often rightly proud of their institution's success rarely asked “successful *for whom?*” Often the simplest tasks of disaggregating graduation and retention data by race and ethnicity had not been done. These experiences drove home for Smith the crucial role that assessment can play in students' lives. Assessment may be a necessary element of accountability to the broader society. But it can be much more than that. Assessment can concretely improve the chances for success for our most vulnerable students. Seen this way, the soymilk analogy breaks down. It's not about whether assessment is distasteful to us. Our work is not about ourselves.

The cynical will say that assessment is about getting administrators or boards or accreditation agencies or state assemblies or the federal government off our backs. Well, they're partly right—assessment has an important role to play in accountability to external bodies. But if that's all there is to assessment, it will fail.

If, on the other hand, assessment can genuinely help us serve our students better, then the challenges discussed in the following pages must be taken seriously and solved—not

dismissed and not allowed to serve as roadblocks—and the strategies offered here must be taken up and built upon.