

## Assessing the Liberal Arts

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### Introduction

The materials describing this conference assert that “Liberal arts education is distinct from other approaches to higher education in many ways—its goals, its methods, even the context in which it is offered.” I think this is a reasonable premise, and in my remarks today I will start by fleshing out some of what makes small liberal arts institutions distinct and then describe a few practical implications of these distinctive qualities for assessment.

### Liberal Arts Institutions

I propose that small liberal arts institutions are characterized by three overlapping commitments that have important implications for assessment. First, there is a commitment to embodying an institution-specific theory of the liberal arts in the curriculum and co-curriculum that is embedded in that institution’s history, culture, and economic circumstances. Second, there is a commitment to creating a seamless teaching and learning environment that cuts across in- and out-of-class experiences and is rooted in close personal interactions. Third and finally, there is a commitment to a distinct intellectual life that differs in important ways from the intellectual life at other kinds of institutions.

Let me unpack each of these ideas starting with the first. Although we often speak of the liberal arts and liberal arts education as though they point to a single cluster of ideas, liberal arts institutions embody the liberal arts in a wide variety of ways. Indeed, I believe the widely divergent roads that liberal arts institutions construct in understanding and creating liberal arts education are some of the most interesting qualities of these institutions. There are liberal arts institutions that have dyed-in-the-wool Hutchins-core programs, and there are liberal arts institutions that focus solely on interdisciplinary programs with no traditional departments. There are liberal arts institutions that disavow the idea of undergraduate pre-professional training of any sort, and liberal arts colleges that actively help students integrate their upcoming work in the professions with their undergraduate education. The one constant may be the extent to which the majority of faculty and staff at each liberal arts institution is convinced that “they do the liberal arts right.”

I believe that a much more consistent quality across small liberal arts institutions is their commitment to building a strong residential environment. The qualities of this environment are often described in vivid detail in admissions material that highlights “a professor on one end of a log and student on the other,” depicts students immersed in deep discussions with one another inside and outside of the classroom, and assures prospective students that they *will not* be a nameless face in a crowd. Faculty and staff at these institutions value their work at these small colleges, in part because they value this kind of environment and the constant interactions with students it entails.

The final “liberal arts commitment” that I would like to address is the commitment to a certain mode of intellectual life. Living, working, and thriving at a liberal arts institution are based on a commitment to an active intellectual life. Whether that life is found in the background work one does in preparing for the many courses that we teach outside of our specialties, attending lectures, participating in seminars, and reading and discussing books from outside of our disciplines, faculty at small liberal arts institutions lead *and* value an active intellectual life, but this life is in many ways distinct from the

more focused lives that we led in graduate school.

This form of intellectual life is embodied in the way that liberal arts institutions structure faculty interviews. When I interviewed at Wabash College, faculty from inside and outside of my future department were on the search committee. I was told to structure my presentation to appeal to bright faculty from across the college and to anticipate that no one, even faculty in my department, would be an expert in my area of scholarship. My most vivid memory of my presentation is that of a faculty member in the English department, whose scholarship focuses on Jewish-male identity and Melville, following me to my next meeting and peppering me with questions about research on prenatal vocalizations in mallard ducklings. It was at that moment that I knew that I wanted work at Wabash.

The intellectual commitment at liberal arts institutions is not just to leading a broad intellectual life but to *how* faculty and staff lead that life, including how they teach. There are many pedagogies that are an integral part of life at small liberal arts institutions, pedagogies that include seminars, small-group discussions, and taking trips with students; they exist not just because they are effective modes of teaching but because these pedagogies embody the kind of intellectual interactions that we value. Many faculty value this style of teaching and the broader intellectual life in which it flourishes, even though it competes with the scholarly work that sustained them in graduate school. These small liberal arts institutions are an “intellectual lifestyle choice.”

In this sense, despite the deep concern that liberal arts faculty have about promoting student learning, small liberal arts institutions are not paradigmatic examples of Barr and Tagg’s (1995) learning centered institutions. Recall that Barr and Tagg called for us to shift from “instruction” or “teaching” centered institutions to “learning centered institutions.” They argued that adopting a learning centered paradigm leads naturally to frequent assessment. Yet a key idea behind learning centered institutions is that their faculty will fully *submit* to student learning and adopt whatever pedagogies prove to be most effective at promoting student learning. As Barr and Tagg state at the beginning of their article, “We now see that our mission is not instruction but rather that of producing learning with every student by *whatever means work best*” (emphasis added, p. 13). Later, in discussing whether lectures would have a prominent place in a learning centered institution, Barr and Tagg add, “The Learning Paradigm ends the lecture’s privileged position, honoring in its place *whatever approaches* serve best to prompt learning of particular knowledge by particular students” (emphasis added, p. 14).

Even if research showed, for example, that computer-based individual instruction led to greater student learning than a seminar or that one-on-one interactions outside the classroom did not promote learning, many liberal arts faculty would, I believe, continue to commit to these and other pedagogies that embody the kinds of intellectual and personal interactions that are at the heart of small liberal arts institutions.

### **Assessment at Smaller Liberal Arts Institutions**

Let me now move to fleshing out how the implications have distinct significance for assessment.

#### *Commitment 1: Multiple Ways of Understanding and Enacting the Liberal Arts*

The current system in which regional accreditors focus on assessing institutions by their specific missions is very good for liberal arts institutions. (Of course, this very approach is being debated as we

meet.) It allows liberal arts institutions to develop assessment programs that connect with their particular understanding of the liberal arts, with the particular group of students they serve, and in the particular economic context in which they operate. It does, however, mean that those of us who work at liberal arts institutions have to *know* and be explicit about our true missions. What goals does our institution really value? What students do we serve and what ends do we seek for them? Although many liberal arts institutions have active “lived missions,” there are also institutions in which the goals they seek for students are more deeply implicit or even undiscussed. That lack of certainty about outcomes can make assessment very challenging.

The wonderful diversity of approaches and values that liberal arts institutions bring to the liberal arts also mean that these institutions should be very careful of how they employ standardized outcome tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment or ACT CAAP (Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency) tests in their assessment programs. Do faculty and administrators have a clear sense of how these kinds of standardized tests and surveys connect with their institution’s mission and the goals that they value? At Wabash College we want our students to think critically, lead effectively, act humanely, and live responsibly. Is the ACT CAAP critical thinking test or the Collegiate Learning Assessment a good way of measuring the growth of our students’ critical thinking? Do these tests “understand” critical thinking the same way we do?

I believe that the challenge is for liberal arts institutions to use these tests on the institution’s terms. Wabash College will use the ACT CAAP critical thinking test this year. If we use it wisely, we will understand that this test is really getting at a basic form of critical thinking that is foundational for the kinds of thinking we would like our students to be able to do when they graduate. We may use other elements of the CAAP test someday, such as the writing or science reasoning tests, not because they are the outcomes we ultimately seek, but because they may help us benchmark how well our students are developing the foundational skills necessary for the broader outcomes we seek.

The issue here is not the quality of these tests or whether these tests may be useful for liberal arts institutions. Rather, the issue is the extent to which liberal arts institutions may inadvertently define themselves by relying too heavily on generic general education measures for assessment. If liberal arts institutions truly embody the range of our institutional missions and contexts that I claim, imagine the homogenizing implications if all of these institutions began using the same set of standardized outcome tests as their primary means of assessment.

### *Commitment 2: The Importance of the Residential Environment*

Given the importance that many liberal arts institutions place on their residential environments, it is critical to continually monitor those environments to be sure that they are having the kind of impact for which we hope. One of the surprises from our research (Pascarella, Wolniak, Seifert, Cruce, and Blaich, 2005), and this is consistent with data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), is the variation among smaller institutions in the extent to which they actually create the warm, engaging residential environments that many of them assume they have. Based on both quantitative survey and outcome data, it looks like there are small institutions with exceptionally engaging environments, and there are small institutions that have environments that are less engaging than that of some larger institutions. The challenge here is that many faculty and staff assume that being small is a necessary and sufficient condition for creating an engaging residential environment. This simply is not true. I have had the misfortune of visiting a small liberal arts institution that touted its 8 to 1 student-faculty ratio and sitting through a boring, hour-long, teacher’s-back-to-the-class

lecture that was delivered to two hapless students sitting around a seminar table in a small room.

I have one other point about assessing residential environments. Whatever approach a liberal arts institution takes, it is critical to make sure that it collects enough data so that it can break the data down and look carefully at the extent to which different groups of students on campus perceive that they have the access to the high impact programs and experiences that institution offers. Once again, our research indicates that even on highly engaging campuses, students of color and poorer students are not as likely to connect with some of the good practices and supportive conditions that are embedded in rich residential environments.

### *Commitment 3: The Life of the Mind in the Liberal Arts Environment*

As I argued earlier, my sense of liberal arts institutions is that while they are deeply invested in facilitating student learning, they are not learning centered institutions in Barr and Tagg's sense. Faculty and administrators at these institutions value their intellectual life. This means that any assessment program that focuses *solely* on understanding student learning can be perceived as work that ignores or even competes with this intellectual life. Moreover, one way that faculty will evaluate an assessment program is the extent to which the time and effort they spend on assessment yields results that benefits their teaching and intellectual life. I have worked with institutions that have elaborate assessment systems in which faculty, department chairs, and programs directors write all manner of interesting reports for deans, provosts, and assessment committees, carefully documenting their assessment efforts. In many cases, these reports end up being bound together in a thick notebook for assessment committees, administrators, and site visit teams. Unfortunately, whereas such reports are chock full of interesting information, they often have little formative impact on faculty. They are “after the fact” reports written solely to meet accreditation demands or an administrative requirement, and often faculty outside of the assessment committee never see or in any way benefit from one another's hard work.

In circumstances like these, faculty and staff will learn quickly that assessment pulls them away from the very thing the things they value—working with students, developing their classes, listening to visiting lecturers, and participating in reading groups. The challenge then is to create assessment programs that connect with the passion that liberal arts faculty have for inquiry, for their students, and at the same time respects the intellectual life to which they committed when they decided to live and work at a liberal arts institution. This is a tough set of requirements, but there are a number of ways to structure assessment programs that may help meet some of these challenges.

1. In addition to assessing student learning, make sure to include assessing the quality of faculty and staff intellectual life as a visible part of an institution's assessment program.
2. Following a suggestion from Peter Ewell,<sup>1</sup> one way of engaging the interest and curiosity of faculty and staff is to make sure that assessment programs create opportunities to listen for and incorporate key questions that they have about the institution and their students. Faculty and staff will become more deeply engaged if they play a formative role in the kinds of assessment data that we collect.
3. Continually evaluate whether the time that faculty and staff spend on any given assessment project is resulting in palpable formative benefits for them and their students. Find out about the “true costs” of assessment methods before you adopt them. Portfolios can be rich and rewarding, but there are ways of implementing portfolios that create an enormous amount of work. Similarly, tests like the Collegiate Learning Assessment have many hidden costs, such as the time it takes to generate usable student samples. It is critical to make realistic evaluations of the time and energy

that different assessment approaches require and use those estimates to create a “balanced assessment portfolio” that mixes some in-depth but time consuming forms of assessment with other forms of assessment that are informative and less time consuming. Many faculty would prefer to look at rich student narratives about their lives in our residential community over the kind of survey questions that they might respond to in NSSE, but collecting NSSE requires almost no faculty and staff time whereas conducting, transcribing, and reviewing interviews of a large group of students can take an enormous amount of time. A mixed approach which integrates surveys and a small number of interviews may help balance the ratio of information gained versus the time expended. The goal is to create a process that generates usable information, is sustainable, and prompts action.

4. Design assessment in a way that respects the disciplinary practices of arts and sciences faculty. Smaller liberal arts institutions without big institutional research shops will inevitably employ faculty in assessment programs. This is to the good, but it does represent a challenge because of the different modes of inquiry in the arts and sciences disciplines. Economists, chemists, physicists, psychologists, and political scientists may feel very comfortable working with quantitative data. However, economists will want to make parameter estimates on functional forms whereas psychologists will want to focus on statistical significance. Chemists and physicists will understand and use confidence intervals differently than political scientists. Even though sociologists and faculty who teach literature will appreciate student interviews, sociologists may want to code interviews while literature faculty may feel more comfortable reading them as a texts. The challenge is to learn the language and mode of inquiry in the different disciplines so that you can both work with and understand the way that faculty from these disciplines see and act on evidence.

Finally, as Peter Ewell<sup>2</sup> urges, make sure that assessment is consequential. Many papers and talks have been given on the importance and difficulty of “closing the loop” and using assessment data to improve student learning. The best way to kill an assessment program is to create a process that either has no palpable impact on the institution or ends up in an institution’s marketing materials. Nothing will do more to breed faculty and staff cynicism. Carrying out consequential assessment means that an important part of developing an assessment program is not only to identify the right instruments and approaches but to be ready with the resources and structures necessary to respond constructively to the results. Plan and develop resources for action from the start, not after you have gathered information.

### **Works Cited**

- Barr, R.B., and J. Tagg. (1995). “From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education.” *Change* November/December: 13-25.
- Pascarella, E.T., G.C. Wolniak, T.A.D. Seifert, T.M. Cruce, and C.F. Blaich. (2005). *Liberal Arts Colleges and Liberal Arts Education: New Evidence on Impacts*, p. 31. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

### **Footnotes**

1. From a talk that Peter Ewell delivered at a Teagle Foundation meeting in Little Switzerland, North Carolina, September 2006.
2. From a talk that Peter Ewell delivered at a Teagle Foundation meeting in Little Switzerland, North Carolina, September 2006.