

## **Learning Beyond Measure? Assessing the Liberal Arts: A Faculty Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

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“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count;  
Everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.” –Albert Einstein

As most of us know all too well, within the last decade or so, the entire accreditation system has undergone a major paradigm shift, moving from an input-based model of assessment to the current outcomes-based “culture of evidence.” Gone are the days when an administrator sat alone in a cluttered office interpreting survey data, crunching numbers, and writing lengthy reports. (I must admit, as a faculty member, I never appreciated this approach as much as I should have!) Assessment today is no longer a top-down activity but rather depends upon a more decentralized and grassroots model in which faculty become the key players.

So what does assessment look like—and *feel* like—to faculty? Perhaps I should qualify a few things before I begin. First, unlike most of the participants here, I am not passionate about assessment. I do not dream about it at night, and it does not inspire me throughout the day. Second, I am not, by any stretch of the imagination, an expert in this field. In fact, I came to it late and only with a great deal of work. I remember one very long and difficult conversation I had a few years ago with a colleague who patiently tried to explain to me the difference between an input and an outcome. I felt like a stranger in a strange land. Nevertheless, as an “Assessment Coordinator” and member of the Program Review Committee during Westmont’s last Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) review, the concepts and processes eventually became less alien to me and I came to see many of the benefits—quite a few unexpected—of effective assessment. Today I’ll share what I’ve learned from my colleagues over the last two years. I divide my thoughts into three brief sections: (1) faculty concerns with assessment; (2) possible strategies for overcoming these challenges; and (3) rewards and benefits of outcomes-based assessment. I’ll conclude with a couple of recommendations for administration and accreditation agencies.

### **Challenges and Concerns**

Faculty members voice numerous concerns with assessment, ranging from the philosophical to the practical. As the last panelist of the weekend, I realize that most of these have already been touched upon in one way or another. I’m troubled, however, by how often faculty concerns are quickly discounted as “excuses for not doing the work.” Just as we don’t want professors to throw up their hands and dismiss assessment as “unworkable at a liberal arts college” (which, for the most part, is not true), so also should we resist dismissing faculty concerns as mere excuses for laziness or lack of cooperation (which is also, for the most part, not true). Instead, I urge those at the top to invite genuine dialogue on these issues and to assure faculty that they are indeed being heard. In this spirit, here are some challenges and concerns faculty have shared with me.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is a practical one: Given the enormous workload pressures on faculty in general, and in particular at small liberal arts colleges, finding time to do assessment of student learning is a pervasive concern. To do it well—to define goals, determine effective strategies, collect and analyze evidence, collectively reflect upon results with colleagues, and then document our findings in a written report—something else must be sacrificed. Even though we may come to simplify the process and see that the benefits of assessment outweigh the cost, faculty want those in charge to recognize that there is still a *cost* involved.

The second concern is philosophical: Many faculty find the assessment movement to be in tension with the liberal arts project. For example, the opening sentences of our college catalog define Westmont in the following way:

Westmont is a liberal arts college, and classically so. Our single overriding objective is to launch our students into a lifetime of flourishing, so that they might become the people God created them to be. We prepare our students for life—the whole of it—enabling them to follow God’s call into any career, any avenue of service, that is suited to their gifts and abilities.

If our aim is to educate the whole person, how do we assess this? Where do we set the benchmark for a “launch into flourishing”? Faculty recognize that many of the goals of a liberal arts education are not accessible by traditional methods of testing, and that the full measure of a liberal arts education cannot be assessed at graduation but can only be taken over the course of a lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

Additional reluctance stems from the fact that we’re attempting to quantify things that cannot be quantified. The Einstein quote that opens my paper perhaps best encapsulates this sentiment: “Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.” What outcomes should be evaluated, and what should be, in Jim Appelon’s words, “selectively neglected”? Many faculty fear that we will only evaluate that which is *easy to quantify* at the expense of *what matters most* to us. If this happens, we all lose, students most of all.

The third concern is a rhetorical one: The vocabulary of assessment—which requires constant translation and interpretation—is an enormous barrier for many faculty. “It feels like a foreign culture is colonizing our world,” laments one professor in the humanities. The language does not come naturally for most of us and inspires even fewer. We desperately need a language that invites *all* disciplines into the dialogue.

A final challenge might be called psychological: Fear also creates a barrier. There is a fear of failure, of feeling lost or out of our element. While working with one department, the chair remarked embarrassingly, “Oh, we’re the department that failed our self-study.” Although I assure you no “grades” were ever assigned, at some point he had clearly received a message that they had done it wrong. Not surprisingly, this department was delinquent in turning in their subsequent reports. They felt paralyzed (and perhaps unappreciated for the work they had done). After spending years mastering a discipline, it’s frustrating to try to master something new that, for many of us, does not come easily. Finally, a few faculty members might be reluctant to engage in assessment for fear of being exposed or sanctioned. What if they (my colleagues, the

administration) discover that students *aren't* learning in my courses or that the major is *not* successful?

### Strategies for Success

Given that faculty involvement is essential for effective assessment to occur, how do we address these concerns? To start, I'll suggest that six things are absolutely critical. For assessment to be successful, faculty must:

- *Own* the process.
- See the *relevance* of assessment.
- Feel that it can be incorporated *naturally and with flexibility* into their teaching.
- Be effectively *educated* about the process.
- Feel *encouraged and motivated*, and even, dare I say, periodically inspired.
- See *administrative support* in the form of release time and money.

It's no secret that the long-term success of any assessment model depends upon faculty buy-in. Assessment can't be seen as an add-on, as something imposed by an external body, but must emerge from the faculty itself. One of my best moments as an Assessment Coordinator (AC) came when an initially very skeptical department chair smiled and reported, "The best thing that happened for us is that we moved away from doing assessment for WASC and toward doing it for ourselves." Only when this occurs can faculty make assessment *relevant* to them. They need to see that this process will make them better teachers and their students better learners, that their programs will ultimately improve, that something positive and meaningful will result. In other words, they must recognize the inherent *value* in doing assessment.

Moreover, assessment must occur *naturally*, in ways that respect the integrity of the discipline, course, or methodology. In other words, assessment in the Art Department will look differently than in Chemistry. With this in mind, we must also allow for *greater flexibility* in assessment strategies, understanding that not everyone will be using quantifiable means with averages. Adequate space for creativity and imagination in the process must be given. If we hope to sustain the process, we should reinforce with faculty the importance of embedded assessment, of using those things we're already doing naturally in our courses (e.g., our student portfolios or final papers and exams), and flagging them for evidence at different levels. For example, a paper in English Composition could be used to assess departmental, General Education (GE), and college-wide goals. If we get in the habit of doing this—of using what we're already doing in our classes—not only will it create less work for all involved, it will eventually become a more seamless part of our educational culture.

Of course, before any of this can occur, faculty need to be *educated*. During our last review it became painfully obvious that outcomes-based assessment does not come easily or naturally for most faculty. We need help understanding the endeavor. One strategy Westmont used over the last two years is what I'll call the "AC Model." The Program Review Committee was reconfigured and its four members became "Assessment Coordinators" (ACs). Functioning as liaisons, each AC was assigned six or seven departments to work with individually over the two-year period prior to the WASC review and team visit. The goal was to provide education, resources, regular feedback, and encouragement. Though far from perfect,<sup>3</sup> in general this model worked very well on our campus for a number of reasons.

First, faculty preferred talking to “one of us” rather than having an administrator imposing orders. They were more willing to listen to a fellow faculty member and felt less threatened when expressing doubts or weaknesses. Second, it was helpful to have faculty interpret or translate the language of assessment into the language of our disciplines. Because most of the ACs had first had to make sense of all this for themselves, we proved fairly effective. We could empathize with our colleague’s confusion or frustration, and help demystify the process for them in helpful ways. In a written evaluation of the process, one faculty member reported an increased sense, “finally, of beginning to know what this is all about.” Others mentioned feeling “less resistant to the whole idea of assessment and [to] actually see it as a way to improve our program.”<sup>4</sup>

Third, faculty appreciated the one-on-one attention. Chairs commented that it was “motivating to have direct contact with one person” as well as a “perspective from outside the department.” Most identified the ongoing encouragement—or as one chair called it, “the gentle pushing”—as positive features of the model. Finally, the regular, formative feedback was very helpful for many. ACs could help colleagues brainstorm ideas and were available when questions arose. Moreover, because we were working with multiple departments, we could suggest dialogue between chairs who were doing similar things. The Theater Department, for example, used ideas from Art; Internships borrowed a strategy from Modern Languages. By sharing success stories and effective strategies with others, we could ideally make the process easier and more effective.

### **Benefits & Rewards**

Earlier this weekend Daryl Smith asserted that external agencies *do* get things going. Nothing could be more true at Westmont. Though we almost collapsed from collective exhaustion, many positive things also occurred. First, all departments—some for the first time—were required to articulate discipline-specific goals for their programs and majors. Newer department members in particular commented upon how important it was for them to be part of these discussions and to see a unity of vision expressed.

Once evidence had been collected, analyzed, and discussed, it was affirming for departments to recognize that they were doing many things well. We oftentimes don’t take the time to collectively pat ourselves on the back, so this provided a much-needed opportunity to do so. On the flip side, when evidence exposed weaknesses, departments were motivated to work together to address them. One colleague declared, “We’ve had conversations about curriculum we could *not* have had without this WASC mandate. It provided the additional pressure to reexamine our program goals, create more structure for our major, and eventually overhaul our curriculum.” Indeed, many departments used their results to effect concrete changes and to improve their programs.

For example, in response to student and faculty perceptions that students were not as prepared as possible for their senior show, the Art Department initiated a sophomore show. Not only are students currently better prepared for the challenges involved in mounting a show, the ethos in the department has improved greatly. Student have exhibited increased “passion and commitment” for their learning and manifest a “much greater sense of solidarity” than department members had witnessed in the past. The Biology Department, upon noting

deficiencies in students' scientific communication in research papers and posters, committed to developing a Biology Style Guide for all majors (with formalized guidelines for citations, descriptions of format for scientific posters and lab reports, and tips on using PowerPoint or similar programs for oral presentations). This will not only help to standardize instruction of these concepts across sections, but should hopefully improve students' scientific writing.

In my own department of Modern Languages, we decided to assess how well we were meeting our goals for language fluency, especially in light of Westmont's new foreign language GE requirement. The process was quite illuminating in many ways. (I elaborate a bit more here not because we did anything extraordinary—which we did not—but simply because I'm most familiar with this story.) First, sitting down together and determining benchmarks for each language level was something we had never done before, and it helped us both see the curriculum in context and standardize our goals. Second, the strategy we used—a “mini-final” given in the first week of classes compared to the same questions on the final exam—allowed us to measure student learning in *specific* grammatical areas, something we had previously been unable to do. An additional unexpected benefit of this instrument was that it revealed if students were in fact *placed* in the correct language level at the beginning of the course. For example, if a student's scores revealed proficiency in the grammar pre-test, we would have information to move her to a higher level. (Students placing themselves in classes below their language ability had been a consistent problem for us, so we were very excited about this feature.) When we examined the results, it was affirming to see that we were in fact doing many things well. In French, for example, we discovered that students enter the course unexposed to the material, but by the end of the semester most not only achieve competency but proficiency in all grammar areas. For one level of Spanish, however, the results were far less encouraging. Although every student improved significantly and more than half the class achieved proficiency in all but one grammar area, we failed to meet our competency goal (90% of the class) in five of the six grammar areas tested. Nevertheless, far from discouraging us, these results—as well as the initial discussions setting benchmarks for each level—helped expose holes or gaps in our curriculum and motivated us to redesign the entire lower-division Spanish curriculum in order to more equitably distribute the material. We are excited to see that preliminary assessment results reveal greater student learning at all levels as a result of these changes.

More than anything, however, what we appreciated most about this process was the resulting dialogue with our colleagues. Most departments meet regularly to discuss business; sadly, we rarely meet specifically to discuss what is happening in our classrooms and to share stories and ideas. Indeed, these focused conversations with colleagues have perhaps been the most universally reported benefit of this process. One faculty member admits, “Although we initially resisted this process, we've had *great* conversations. Spending time together has also reminded us that we really like each other, and that's a good thing.” Moreover, the interdepartmental dialogue has also been a rich source of inspiration for many, as we learn what others are doing and share ideas across disciplines.

### **My Two Cents**

I'd like to conclude with two recommendations. The first is directed to college administrators: If the institution truly values assessment, it will have to explore ways to provide additional time and support for faculty engaged in this activity. This might take the form of a reduced teaching

load, compensation for summer work, or excusal from committee work or other college activities. Monies will also need to be made available to allow departments to purchase appropriate assessment tools or for faculty to attend workshops or apply for faculty development grants to work in the area of assessment. Finally, as our WASC report indicates, we need to “to build assessment activities more explicitly into the institutional reward structure—specifically articulating assessment as one valued form of institutional service under the criteria for promotion and tenure.”<sup>5</sup>

I address my second recommendation to the accreditation agencies: To motivate and inspire faculty to engage in meaningful assessment, attempt to speak our language or at least help us understand and interpret yours with greater ease. Many faculty resist assessment because they simply don’t get it, and they don’t get it because the vocabulary alienates them. In other words, part of the problem for faculty is feeling blocked by the language itself. It would be extremely helpful to have people on accreditation agencies from different worlds—including the humanities—involved in making policy, creating the infrastructure, and communicating the vision. This greater diversity may not only help demystify assessment, but might even provide new metaphors and models to assess student learning. Perhaps when this happens more faculty will truly be inspired to make the move “from compliance to commitment.” And when this happens, those who benefit most will be our student learners.

#### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to the numerous faculty colleagues who shared their concerns, strategies, and stories with me over the last two years. In particular I would like to thank Professors Marianne Robins, Andrew Mullen, Brenda Smith, and Eileen McMahon for their ideas and feedback on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> See the “Introduction to Westmont College’s Student Learning Outcomes” (May 2002).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the level of satisfaction with this model and individual ACs varied among faculty for a variety of reasons as well. To improve the model, the following two suggestions should be considered: (1) Invest in educating the ACs, perhaps through summer workshops, before they begin their appointments. Some of us felt a little thrust into the endeavor and were forced to learn while doing. More extensive prior training would have helped the process run more smoothly on every level. (2) Consider having ACs work with chairs within their own division in order to provide better discipline-specific help and support.

<sup>4</sup> “Westmont College Educational Effectiveness Report” submitted to WASC, November 2006, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> “Westmont College Educational Effectiveness Report” submitted to WASC, November 2006, p. 48.