

Relevant by Design: Assessing the Liberal Arts

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Thank you very much for this opportunity to talk with you. I've been asked to address a set of questions that would be of interest to you, and I am happy to do so. The questions, as you'll see, divide nicely into two groups: those about liberal arts and assessment, and those about the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and assessment. Here they are:

1. How does an assessment program help accomplish the distinct mission of a liberal arts education?
2. Are there assessment methodologies especially well-suited to liberal arts education? Are there some that can undermine it?
3. How do WASC's expectations for assessment at liberal arts colleges differ from their expectations for large comprehensive universities?
4. How does WASC work with its liberal arts colleges to develop assessment appropriate to the specific goals of a liberal arts education?

I'll get to the questions in a moment, but first I'd like to tell you a little about myself. As an undergraduate, I attended Trinity College, a small Catholic women's school in Washington, D.C., where I majored in German, minored in music, was carefully mentored by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, and ultimately had the good fortune to receive a string of grants and fellowships for graduate school, thanks in great measure to the efforts of my professors. I earned my M.A. from Middlebury College in Vermont, studying for a year in Mainz and then in Munich. After earning my Ph.D. in German from Berkeley, I taught for nearly 30 years at the University of Connecticut, where I had the good fortune to participate in a variety of interdisciplinary ventures, ranging from Women's Studies and European Studies to language across the curriculum projects and ultimately, yes, assessment of the University of Connecticut's then-new general education curriculum. I say all this to assure you that I know, appreciate, and have benefited from a liberal arts education at small, nurturing institutions. All my life I have drawn on what I think of as knowledge and skills rooted in the liberal arts, and I consider myself a humanist to the core.

I also believe deeply, passionately, in assessment of student learning. To me assessment is first a logical outgrowth of our responsibility to students as educators; second, when we conduct assessment, it is an enactment of the very values I associate with the liberal arts: values such as a commitment to intellectual curiosity and to intellectual honesty. Assessment of our students' learning represents the willingness to do hard scholarly labor, to look at things that have always been taken for granted, and to dare to question them. Assessment means suspending judgment, keeping an open mind, asking difficult questions, and being candid and courageous as we examine potential answers. Assessment demands knowledge, skills, and dispositions we associate with the liberal arts, and demands them of both us and our students. With that I think we begin to move toward the first question on our list.

Question #1: How does an assessment program help accomplish the distinct mission of a liberal arts education?

Before answering this question of how assessment supports a liberal arts education, I need to share with you my understanding of what assessment is and what it is not. I believe deeply in the value of assessing student learning; the title of this conference, “Learning Beyond Measure?”, however, suggests skepticism about the possibility of assessing the liberal arts, based on two underlying assumptions: namely that assessment equals measurement, and that liberal learning is “beyond” measurement. The title of the conference challenges us to examine those assumptions in good liberal arts fashion. As a humanist, I could never have become passionately convinced of the value of assessment if it were merely about measuring and reporting learning as defined according to some psychometric or social science research protocol. There’s a place for that in assessment, but it’s not the central place.

Let me state at the outset: Assessment is not measurement. Assessment is a *process*, a very human and humanistic process, that includes looking at our students’ learning, determining what strengths and weaknesses are present in their performances relative to what we hoped to see, and then deciding what to do about improving their learning, if that seems necessary. It’s a process in which quantitative data have a role to play, but measurement and data are not the heart of assessment; the very human processes of honest analysis, collegial discussion, and collective judgment about the use of findings are. I’ve often represented this as an assessment cycle or loop with four steps: 1) defining learning goals and then turning the goals into questions; 2) gathering evidence of students’ ability to meet those goals; 3) analyzing and interpreting the evidence to arrive at meaning; and 4) using the findings to improve students’ educational experience and raise their level of learning. I’ll spare you the graphic now, but you can find it, for example, in the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) publication *The Art and Science of Assessing General Education Outcomes*, co-authored by myself and Andrea Leskes (2005). What fascinates me is that the third step, the most important one in the process, as far as I am concerned, and the most *human* one, is also the one most often elided when academics talk about assessment.

Assessment does not equal measurement, and I wince every time I hear someone say that we have to “measure” learning, or that our learning goals for students should only be things that are readily measurable. We should be able to *document* achievement of learning goals. We should be able to produce *evidence* of learning. Maybe that documentation or evidence will take the form of measurement, but maybe not. Why get so exercised about this? Because, as Einstein once said, not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted. If we confine ourselves only to the learning that can be readily measured, we really do run the risk of trivializing education, of reducing it to behaviorist terms and losing the very things we most value about higher education, the very things that make it “higher.” When faculty raise this objection to assessment, they have a real point that needs to be taken seriously.

But the appropriate response is not to reject assessment; the appropriate response is to choose or develop more robust, complex, nuanced approaches to assessment that will allow us to understand and improve the all-important but more elusive qualities of higher education. In other words, we must not lower the level of our aspirations for our students to the level of our assessment technologies; instead, we need to hold on to our high aspirations—for students and for our institutions—and strive to raise the level of our assessment technologies to the level of our aspirations. Is this a new and shocking point of view? Hardly. Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Columbia Teachers College, made a similar argument at the very first assessment conference I ever attended in 1988. Grant Wiggins, another assessment expert whom I greatly admire, has been making the same point since at least the early 1990s.

Let's return now to our opening question: How can assessment help support the mission of a liberal arts institution? The whole point of assessment is to examine closely whatever it is we want our students to learn, figure out how well or poorly we, and they, are achieving these goals, and then make the changes in curriculum, pedagogy, co-curricular activities, residential life, or other aspects of the educational experience that promise improvement. There is nothing about this process that is incompatible with liberal arts education because *you* define at the outset what your education is or should be and then design the assessments to support that. Your assessment program is as well-aligned or misaligned, as relevant or irrelevant, as meaningful or meaningless, as you choose to make it.

How does assessment help you accomplish your particular mission? There are many ways, but chief among them is the creation of an occasion for faculty to articulate collectively what it means, for example, to think critically or respond aesthetically or integrate spiritual and ethical concerns into action, or whatever your learning goals are. This in turn makes it easier to articulate those goals clearly for students and makes it possible to trace more precisely where those goals are taught and learned—or not. Assessment gives you the kind of detailed, fine-grained, shared information about who is learning what at what level of proficiency that is essential if you are going to make effective adjustments that reinforce the impact of what you want to accomplish across the board. I don't mean to imply that before assessment no one ever thought about improving their academic program. That would be silly. But let's be honest: We as faculty are very good at talking about inputs; we are not so good at defining outcomes or using *them* as the starting point for thinking about inputs. Our tendency, in other words, has been to focus on solutions before we fully understood the problem. Assessment forces us to make a careful diagnosis of the problem *first*, before we step in with peer tutoring programs, another required course, problem-based learning, a common reading for freshman orientation, or whatever the solution of the moment may be.

Question #2: Are there assessment methodologies especially well-suited to liberal arts education?

The answer is yes and no. There are methods better- or worse-suited to complex learning, and liberal arts education strives for complex learning but has no monopoly on it; any

program that cares about more than mere memorization and regurgitation is concerned about complex learning, in whatever disciplinary or professional context that learning may occur. Again, let's talk about this one element at a time. First, we defined assessment as that four-part process of asking questions about students' learning, gathering evidence, interpreting it, and then using the findings for improvement at the student, program, or institutional level. Now let's define method. Method is the *kind* of evidence you choose to collect and *how* you will collect it. The most important thing about methodology is that it needs to be *aligned* with your educational goals. If your goals are complex, as liberal arts learning goals are, then you need to choose a method of assessment that is adequate to complex learning. What is the definition of "complex learning"? There are many ways to look at it, including the ubiquitous Bloom's taxonomy, the Perry Scheme of Intellectual Development and its offspring, and Biggs' and Entwistle's definition of "deep" learning versus "surface" learning. My personal favorite is Lauren Resnick's definition of "higher-order thinking skills," which she developed in the late 1980s for K-12 educators. She says higher-order thinking has certain characteristics: For example, it is non-algorithmic, meaning that the path of action is not fully specified in advance and much about the problem or task remains unknown. Higher-order thinking is complex in the sense that the totality of the problem is not visible from any single vantage point. It involves application of multiple criteria, which may conflict with one another, and it requires nuanced judgment and interpretation, which often yield multiple solutions, each with costs and benefits that must be weighed against context. Higher-order thinking requires meaning-making, or the ability to discern patterns in apparent disorder. Not least of all, it requires self-regulation: The individual must have the discipline, initiative, and courage to persist without receiving directions from someone else. Finally, higher-order thinking is effortful; that is, the queries and judgments required entail considerable mental work and are likely to take time.

Now, what do I mean by alignment? You want your evidence to be capable of providing insight into what students can do in the way of higher-order thinking. If I care, for example, about the ability to construct arguments and express them effectively in an essay, then that is what the evidence must be capable of demonstrating. The score from a multiple-choice test that asks students to make decisions on the level of copy editing will not give me that insight; rather, I need to look directly at their written work. If I care about complex information literacy skills, I do not want to administer a survey that asks students how much they think they learned from their one-hour introduction to the library's electronic databases; I want to look at an authentic research assignment that required the use of electronic resources and see how wisely they chose among databases or among reputable and bogus web pages. If I care about how well my students have learned to think like a historian or a geologist or a literary critic, I'm better off looking at their capstone projects than administering an Educational Testing Service (ETS) Major Field Test. Think about it. How well do those characteristics of higher-order or complex thinking align with the traditional commercially available, multiple-choice, timed test completed under pressure? Such tests require students to recognize and select the "correct" answer; there is no room for multiple right answers, for arguing that some are better than others, or for open-endedness. There is a premium on recall and speed over creativity, questioning, or persistence. There is no opportunity for self-expression,

whether in verbal, mathematical, graphic, or any other form, and certainly no room for a unique voice expressing an individual sensibility.

So, my message, whenever I give an assessment workshop, is that traditional commercial tests have serious drawbacks, and while they may play a role in a multiple-method approach to assessment, they should never be the sole or even the main pillar of an assessment effort. What methods *do* align with high ambitions for students' learning? They are those that capture and allow us to examine complex, cumulative, integrated learning: capstones, portfolios, live performances of all kinds, journals, research papers and projects, and discussions captured by course management programs. The list is basically identical with the assignments you give and with many of the other things students may do, for example, in internships, in their clubs or in student government, or in service learning projects. More recently, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) has overcome some of the drawbacks of traditional multiple-choice testing, but it still provides a very limited field for demonstration of student abilities compared with the richness of students' own work products.

Why do alignment and choice of method matter? Because just as with testing, we'll get more of what we assess for and less of what we don't. Testing and assessing send messages about what we value, and most students will respond by putting effort into what they think we want. This is a common enough phenomenon; students are always asking, "Will this be on the test?" Equally important but less well-known is that *how* we test matters as much as *what* we test; research has shown that students study differently, depending on whether they are preparing for a multiple-choice or essay test. If we expect students to stretch for and practice more complex thinking, we need to test them and assess them in ways that both promote and capture complex thinking. If we only talk a good line but don't act in alignment with the talk, students will see right through it and behave accordingly. The result will be that higher-order thinking skills fall right off the radar screen, and the criticism that assessment is reductionist and trivializes higher education will be exactly right.

So, the short answer to the question of whether there are methods especially suited to liberal arts learning and methods that undermine it is yes. Nevertheless those methods (capstones, research projects, portfolios, and so on) are useful to a whole range of complex learning in the professions as well as in the liberal arts. They're relevant to any program that aspires to more than rote memorization of factoids. You can also find information on methods and examples of institutions that have successfully used them in *The Art and Science of Assessing General Education Outcomes*.

Question #3: How do WASC's expectations for assessment at liberal arts colleges differ from their expectations for large comprehensive universities?

The answer is they don't. We expect you to do assessment. That is, we expect you to engage in the basic four-step process of asking questions about the achievement of learning goals; gathering evidence that will show the level of attainment of those goals; interpreting the evidence and deciding whether what you're getting is good enough or can

and should be improved; and finally taking steps to improve that learning. Then you revisit that goal in a year or so and determine whether the changes you made had the desired effect. That is the basic expectation. In addition, WASC expects you to set standards for what is college-level achievement of your outcomes and show through assessment that your students consistently reach those levels of achievement before graduation. Finally, WASC expects the assessment process and assessment-generated findings about student learning to be central elements in formal program review, along with the more traditional attention to resources or inputs and processes.

WASC respects and admires what you do; we would never presume to tell you what your learning goals should be, what your methods should be, what you should glean from samples of your students' work, or what your standard for the level of knowledge and skills of graduating seniors should be. All WASC says is that you need to do assessment, you need to be able to show WASC (and visiting teams) that you are doing it in a meaningful and systematic way, and that it is making a difference. You need to be able to demonstrate that the effort is both supported by institutional resources and rewarded, so that it does not become an add-on and a burden for faculty or others. After all, education is our core function. What higher priority can there be?

Yes, WASC also asks for data. This is a requirement of the federal government, and we believe that it is a valuable exercise because data on such things as enrollment, percentage of non-traditional students, graduation rates, and success rates of various student and staff subpopulations can be useful to an institution in understanding its own strengths and weaknesses. But collecting and reporting data is not the same thing as assessment. The data can, however, be used in the assessment process if they become part of the cycle of interpretation and use for improvement. Data are not evidence or information until human beings make meaning of them. Remember, the signature phrase at WASC is "a culture of evidence," not "a culture of data."

Question #4: How does WASC work with its liberal arts colleges to develop assessment appropriate to the specific goals of a liberal arts education?

WASC has worked with *all* its member institutions to provide workshops and opportunities to learn about assessment from other institutions. The upcoming annual meeting will provide another such opportunity (see www.wasc.org/wasc/), and there are plans for more offerings in coming years, including workshops on assessment in specific disciplines for faculty and department chairs. We would also like to help you establish study groups with institutional representatives from across the region to learn more about the CLA and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE); and we are considering ways to encourage inter-institutional work on rubrics and standards for writing, capstones, and portfolios. But WASC does not presume to know how California State Universities or graduate schools of psychology or faith-based institutions should approach assessment, any more than it would presume to know how liberal arts colleges should do it. This is truly your choice. We offer the workshops, but we strongly encourage you to adapt what you hear to your own situation.

It's also your responsibility. Since the very beginning of the assessment movement, there has admittedly been a psychometric wing, but there has also been a deeply humanistic, qualitative wing with roots that go back to the mother of all assessing institutions, Alverno College. An immense amount of good work has been done over the last 20 years, work that is fully compatible with the liberal arts. You have a responsibility to keep up with that work. You have a responsibility to keep in touch with the significant ways in which assessment is evolving—in more qualitative and humanistic directions, among other things—largely through pressure from faculty like you who were concerned that assessment would lead to a mechanistic or reductionist understanding of education. You have an opportunity to show Margaret Spellings and the Commission on the Future of Higher Education that there are better, more responsible ways to improve the quality of college education than through standardized testing. If you don't like the assessment options currently available, you have an opportunity to develop your own. This is a young field, and there is virtually unlimited room for creativity and original contributions. Feel free to make them. Assessment is the means, not the end. However, it's the most powerful means we have at present to achieve some very worthy, urgently needed ends: better education, stronger institutions, and ultimately a healthier, more just society.

Works Cited

Leskes, A., and B. Wright. (2005). *The Art and Science of Assessing General Education Outcomes*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.