



# Less Assessment, More Learning

Increasingly, popular "learning assessment" efforts in higher education distract professors from their essential work. It's time to rethink the assumptions behind these measures.

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**M**y university, like many colleges and universities around the country, is in the middle of a crisis. The crisis involves academic freedom, faculty morale, inefficient use of time and resources, and, most crucial, the nature of a liberal arts education. This crisis has emerged thanks to a seemingly innocuous, even valuable, goal: that of finding a way to "assess" how much our students are learning.

What's wrong with this endeavor? A lot, as it has developed in practice. It is beneficial for faculty to consider how they can improve student learning. Although most professors already do so on a regular basis, assessment is supposed to make such considerations more structured and regular. But it fails to improve teaching for two reasons: (1) it duplicates existing efforts while taking time away from activities more advantageous to student learning, and (2) it leaves professors with the unfortunate choice of either fabricating assessment data or teaching things that are easily assessed. Fabricating data is demoralizing at best, and teaching easily assessed subject matter is a direct attack on liberal arts education.

As a result of assessment, instructors spend much time on things like developing course-specific assessment plans, regrading assignments using assessment criteria (and assessment's unique language), and writing assessment reports. Such time could certainly be better spent on research or class preparation. Furthermore, champions of assessment have never indicated what activities faculty should spend less time on now that they are spending additional hours on assessment. Teaching? Research? Their families? Assessment supporters argue that the question is irrelevant, because once assessment is implemented, its time costs are minimal.

Whether or not that is true depends on your definition of

An analogy may help clarify the problem. The Soviet system of economic planning resulted in economic inefficiency, partly because planners at the top needed to get information from factory managers and others below them. In this setting, managers had an incentive to deceive those above them. They said that they needed more raw materials than they really did and that they could produce fewer finished products than they really could. This deception gave factory managers a degree of security about their ability to "fulfill the plan."

Similarly, some professors may feel pressure to deceive academic administrators by generating data to fulfill the assessment plan. Although assessment data will not be used to evaluate whether or not a student should get into graduate school, the information can (and will) be used in decisions about salaries and teaching lines. In today's poor economy, universities are dealing with tight budgets. Pools for salary increases are smaller than in the past, and proposals for new faculty hires face greater scrutiny. In this climate, will professors or departments generate assessment data indicating they are doing a poor job? In many ways, academia already operates like the Soviet planning system—with its five-year plans and large, rigid bureaucracies. Given that the push at the federal level to require assessment has come mainly from conser-

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"minimal." Anything that duplicates existing efforts without achieving the desired goal is an inefficient use of time. In my department, for example, we already have several policies in place to review faculty performance. Students evaluate us, faculty members sit in on each other's courses and suggest ways to improve them, and external reviewers examine the department and its approach to teaching. Most important, professors themselves think about ways to improve their courses.

The even more distressing consequence of these new assessment policies is the choice they offer to professors: produce misleading (or dishonest) assessment data or abandon the core ideals of liberal arts education. We have been told that assessment is being pushed mostly to address grade inflation. If three-quarters of the students at some universities graduate with 4.0 grade point averages, grades are meaningless; if that is so, we cannot rely on grades to judge what students have learned. Grade inflation is a problem. But assessment leaves the traditional grading system in place and adds a new (and even more flawed) system alongside it. Grade inflation will soon be joined by "assessment inflation," as many professors choose to mislead those in charge of reviewing the assessment data. It is distressing that no one who supports assessment understands this consequence.

vatives, it is ironic that one of assessment's consequences is inefficient, Soviet-style planning.

Although assessment may force many professors to generate fraudulent or misleading data to prove that their students have learned something, that is not assessment's most dangerous consequence. Rather, it is that many other professors will not present inaccurate data. Instead, they will "teach to the tests." Taking seriously the seriously flawed process of assessment, these instructors will teach what is most easily measured. By imparting to their students a bunch of facts they may not remember a week after the semester ends, such professors will ensure that the "learning" of this "knowledge" can be demonstrated.

The assessment process thus discourages benefits for students that are less easily measured, such as the ability to think. Liberal arts education means different things to different people. Most would agree, however, that it does not mean memorizing facts or even mastering vocational skills. Rather, it means developing students' ability to recognize, evaluate, synthesize, and understand observations and arguments they encounter now and in the future. Assessment discourages teaching such skills because they are difficult to measure, at least under the kind of assessment program developed at my university and apparently at others as well.

The assumption by assessment advocates that a single set of “learning objectives” exists regardless of teaching style or discipline is curious. Really disconcerting, however, is the idea that standardization of assessment criteria should take precedence over faculty judgment about how to teach courses. At my university, the push is under way to standardize assessment across sections of a course, across courses in a discipline, and across the disciplines taught at the university. In my department, we have been encouraged to standardize our courses and tests, because using similar test questions would facilitate comparison of assessment-generated data. If assessment were really about improving teaching, instructors would not be encouraged to change their courses to make assessing them easier.

Why would anyone support assessment? First, some supporters do not understand its pestilent repercussions. These people often come from disciplines of a practical nature, in which learning how to think is less important than learning how to perform tasks. In nursing or dentistry, for example, it may be relatively easy to determine a set of capabilities for students to master. After a student cleans someone’s teeth, they ought to look whiter. If not, students have not mastered their craft. But assessing how a student’s understanding of society has been enhanced or how well he or she has learned to evaluate and respond to unfamiliar matters is not so easy. It is already challenging for us to design and grade tests. To design and administer (intellectually honest) assessment plans that will measure such capabilities with a dozen or more standardized “learning objectives” is next to impossible. Yet enhancing understanding of society and improving critical reasoning skills are at the heart of a liberal arts education.

Other supporters of assessment understand the problems associated with it but do not care enough to do anything about them. Either they do not value liberal arts education, or they feel that Congress, the U.S. Department of Education, and the accreditation agencies have given colleges and universities no choice. These defenders of assessment minimize its problems through denial (they say, for example, “the only time costs involved are start-up costs”) or, if necessary, misinformation.

At my university, we have been told that assessment represents an “emerging trend” in education, one that challenges the “traditional” pattern of instruction. This traditional pattern—let’s call it teaching—is portrayed as one in which information is delivered by instructors and acquired by students. The focus is on “content.” Assessment-compatible approaches, however, supposedly focus on the

learner and allow student achievement to be measured in ways that are “more holistic and more discipline-specific.” These approaches also encourage learning that is more “active” and that promotes student “self-awareness.” Traditional methods of instruction are seen as “serving policy makers” and “facilitating comparison to norms,” whereas assessment “serves students and teachers first, then others.”

In other words, this new approach to measuring student achievement, imposed on us by the federal government, accreditation agencies, and university administrators is purportedly for us and our students, while the approach based on our own ideas about, and experiences with, how to judge student performance supposedly serves policy makers. Assessment, which forces us to evaluate student performance using predetermined (and standardized) learning objectives

allegedly makes students “self-aware.” The traditional approach, in which professors evaluate how well a particular student has developed critical thinking skills, is deemed to be “passive learning.” Those who care about liberal arts education should be frightened that supporters of assessment either do not realize or do not care how Orwellian their reasoning sounds.

My critique of assessment should not be interpreted as a blanket condemnation of administrators or bureaucrats. I do not share the view of some opponents of assessment who argue that this new threat to liberal arts education simply reflects the kind of thing bureaucracies naturally do. Administrators and bureaucrats are not inherently evil, nor are they inherently inefficient. A system without administrators would be even less efficient than one with them in that it would lack any structure at all.

At the same time, academic freedom (that is, *some* lack of standardization and bureaucratically imposed structure) is essential to teach students to think. Professors must be trusted to know what their strengths and weaknesses are and how best to examine what students have learned.

There is nothing natural or logical about the plunge into assessment in American higher education. It is neither an imperative resulting from educational bureaucracies nor is it a rational response to problems such as grade inflation. It is a choice, as other countries that have begun to discard assessment approaches well understand. And for institutions that purportedly support the ideals of liberal arts education, it is a poor choice. In the Soviet Union, workers often joked, “We pretend to work; they pretend to pay us.” Universities already pretend to pay professors; thanks to assessment, professors are also being encouraged to pretend to work—or at least pretend to do what they do best: help students learn to think. ❧

