

NEASC Panel on Assessment and Accountability in the Humanities

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Whether we are true believers in the power of the assessment of student learning outcomes or whether we are interested in better understanding and satisfying NEASC's voracious appetite for assessment, we can all agree that our most resistant group of faculty members are in the humanities. You can't measure what we teach! The results aren't known for at least 10 years; what can be measured is trivial, what is important can't be measured. You are just going to use this (invalid) data to evaluate us! We already know how our students are doing! We have all heard variants of these expressions. I'd like to start by anchoring the importance of assessment in a broader humanistic context and then suggest some general ways administrators can facilitate progress.

Assessment of student learning outcomes is, of course, only one kind of assessment, but of the four levels or types of assessment--institutional effectiveness; program review; faculty and staff evaluation; and student learning outcomes—it is perhaps most directly linked to what students will take away from their education to become productive citizens. If done well, it is perhaps most directly linked to the kind of assessment that creates continuous improvement in the quality of instruction and in student learning. But it cannot be totally separated from the broader aspects of accountability, often grouped under institutional effectiveness.

There is no doubt that our higher educational system is under much closer scrutiny than ever before. The public, and not just prospective students and their

families, want to know what is going on—what are students learning and how do we know they are learning ?it. Are we being responsible stewards? We see this pressure coming from many quarters—from the right, it is often about the content of the courses or the political persuasion of the faculty; from the left it often focuses on concerns about cost and access. From all, it is the critical question of whether our graduates are prepared for the 21st century. Professors in the humanities sometimes say the public should simply trust the faculty, and administrators should keep them—parents, legislatures—at arms length, and *in extremis* invoke the doctrine of academic freedom.

Professors enjoy academic freedom as a public trust. As the great statements on academic freedom from the AAUP make clear, academic freedom does not confer the right to be left alone, nor is it a form of protection from scrutiny. Quite the contrary. It is ultimately an agreement between the public and the teaching profession. Academic freedom recognizes the professional competence of the faculty within his or her field and allows her to seek the truth within that field without interference and impart those methods of seeking the truth to students. The public must be convinced that it is getting something for entrusting the profession with such freedom, and it deserves confidence that the enterprise is working in the public interest. When the public is uncertain, it asks questions; often naïve, but not necessarily foolish, about that educational quality and it asks them through the legislatures of the various states; through Congress, or, as parents, directly to the schools themselves. Rather than provide protection from public scrutiny, academic freedom demands that the profession responds adequately to these concerns—what are our students learning; how do we know; how can we improve?

The good news is that for now this relationship is within our control. As we set up our many committees to address the 11 NEASC standards, and ponder over what we are going to say to respond to the excellent, if penetrating standards, it is easy to forget that we have a self-regulating system of accountability in education. Accreditation in the US is not done by the government, or by some external body to education—it is done by us, through our own regional accreditation organizations and it is in that context that we need to understand both accountability and assessment. NEASC was created by us, and works for us. NEASC is one of the main ways we demonstrate our commitment to these central questions to the public. . If accountability to institutional mission is expressed by data and evidence that allows the public to judge whether the institution is living up to its mission, then assessment of teaching and learning refers to the various methodologies that allow professors to think through the learning outcomes they expect; to make these outcomes explicit to students, and to find ways to measure and improve both the student's mastery of learning outcomes and the professor's teaching effectiveness. We must understand assessment both as our opportunity to demonstrate competence to the public as well as create a method of continuous improvement in teaching and learning.

If grounding the need for the assessment of student learning outcomes in the defense of academic freedom does not convince humanities professors, it might be helpful to remind them that they are engaged in the assessment of student learning in some form every time they grade. But the problem is that they are following the habits of previous generations. We humanities professors tend to teach as we were taught. Student X gets a B; Student Y gets a B+. Why? Professors are rarely asked to define the difference with precision and to link the difference to something that is explainable, if not

measurable. I would suggest their reluctance is less a matter of principle than precision. Humanities professors are simply not used to asking basic questions about what they want students to learn and how they will know if they learned them.

As a Vice President, I see my role primarily to set out the big picture—emphasizing the importance of assessment and student learning outcomes to the educational enterprise and embedding the discussion of assessment into institutional mission; also clearly separating the various types of assessment, from institutional effectiveness to individual performance review—and then to create a structure that allows the faculty to discuss the issue in a safe environment. I recommend some version of the following:

- Make sure your Dean of A&S is committed to learning outcomes and the assessment of student learning. Make sure progress in this area is a goal by which he or she will be evaluated.
- Embed student centered learning outcomes in your own priorities and goals. Commit some part of your limited resources to its improvement. Bring outside experts to jumpstart the process.
- Provide whatever funds you can to establishing an ongoing series of activities that will live on beyond the upcoming accreditation visit. If you have a Center for pedagogical development, make learning outcomes a fundamental part of its mission. If you must start a process without such a Center, try to find and empower a trusted faculty member to lead the effort. Someone besides you needs to go to sleep worrying about this issue.

- Separate student learning outcomes assessment from any kind of individual evaluation. There should be no exchange of information from a pedagogical center or a team of faculty/administrators working on this issue that influences personnel decisions.

Finally, I think it is critically important to keep alive and under discussion the broad rationales for why we do assessment. Otherwise we risk assessment of student learning outcomes becoming an imposed burden or a series of jargon-riddled exercises. Properly understood, assessment of student learning outcomes can and should be a critical part of our ways to improve our educational program and our demonstration of effectiveness to the public.