

REPORT TO THE TEAGLE FOUNDATION

Listening on Value Added Assessment

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By

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The Teagle Foundation convened a listening session on the topic of value added assessment, which brought together over 50 participants of divergent views and backgrounds for several days of intensive discussion. What follows is the author's synthesis of the main points of the proceedings.

REASONS TO DO ASSESSMENT

The cost of higher education has increased 20-40% over the CPI annually in the last decade. This puts it in line with health care. Education is a \$700 billion a year enterprise. Even if we spent only 2% of that figure on reflective self-correcting analysis (and we don't spend anywhere near that figure) we would still be well behind the health fields. This is a chronically under-funded area, and one which is coming into prominence due to forces both external and internal to higher education.

Interestingly, at this conference not a single good argument was adduced not to do assessment. Of course, this may simply be a function of the way the conference framed the issue, but my suspicion is that, in a roomful of skeptic and inquisitive academics, had there been any compelling ones, at least one would have come up. It didn't. The arguments for doing assessment are many and compelling. First, we have confidence that higher education has good story to tell. We are able to improve the life outcomes of people in exceedingly valuable ways and produce a public good of the first order. Second, the current lack of data on precisely what happens to students during their years of higher education has created an environment in which the anecdote is allowed to rule. Under the reign of the anecdote, an institution will be vulnerable. (One is reminded of the persistent story--whether reality or fantasy--about students receiving diplomas they can't read.) Finally, and perhaps most compelling on the positive side of the ledger, assessment is a productive engine for improving an institution's overall learning environment.

MAKING ASSESSMENT HAPPEN:

Tools

The two highest profile instruments for measuring outcomes of higher education are NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) and the CLA (Collegiate Learning Assessment). These each have strengths. NSSE measures self-reported views of students on the degree of engagement with the educational process during their years in college. The CLA presents case-based sets of complex problems (modeled on real-world situations) that require students to evaluate evidence, draw conclusions, and argue for them in clear, persuasive writing. Most Listening participants agree that these instruments and the others that are being worked on are promising. However, a few pointed out that the instruments that are available still measure only a small fraction of what we would want them to measure: they do a good job with measuring student satisfaction levels, analytical reasoning, and critical thinking. They do less well measuring the nurturing of curiosity and openness, facility in seeing from another's perspective, the development of a thoughtful ethical perspective, and the "ignition quotient" (or extent to which a student develops a sustained passion and commitment that might make up a fulfilling life's work). If it were possible (and no one was suggesting

that it wasn't) to develop instruments to measure these qualities, it would be a most welcome development.

Implementation within the institutions

In order to gain support for assessment within individual institutions, one needs to persuade administrators and faculty. Many administrators will have an incentive to embrace tools that give them a clearer picture of what goes on at their universities or colleges. Such tools will give them a clearer means to do the basic business of administration: distributing carrots and sticks, and roses and thorns. It was often suggested that high-prestige institutions, especially research universities, will resist. It was interesting, however, to learn that the American Association of Universities, composed of more than sixty of the country's most distinguished research universities, has encouraged the development of new work in value-added assessment, in a project headed by one of the participants at the Listening. (Rachelle Brooks) Also, several participants recognized a tendency of administrators to gather data but not do anything with it. One strategy for reversing this tendency is to recommend that administrators lay out their plans (and even set aside money and other resources to accomplish them) before they find the results of their data. This means that agreements should be reached ahead of time to the effect that, "If we find out 'X' in our study, we should do 'Y.'" The range of possible X's is not infinite, as some might protest, and laying out the action plan before hand ensures that data will actually be used and not to waste, and focuses the purpose of assessment beyond the vague attractions of getting to know oneself better.

Faculty hold the key to successful design and implementation. As is only natural, they will be generally resistant to submitting to a new form of evaluation. They also may be skeptical of the entire project, especially if it seems designed to result in a "ranking" of the kind of life changes they aspire to create in their students. One will find resistance to placing numbers on the human soul among the humanities professors, a concern which turns out to be not as prevalent among their colleagues in math and the sciences. They may be resistant to the entire notion of fixed, "rigid" learning objectives, since the alchemy of a good education seems not to submit to forecastable improvement in discrete categories.

On the other hand, and more important, since faculty are innately curious people, if given the chance to get more information they will take it, and most would be happy if given the opportunity, and the support required, to improve their teaching. Most important, if it is possible to position the project of "assessment" as a pedagogical project and a faculty development initiative (including research support and release time from teaching -- paradoxically -- to have time to think carefully about teaching) one is less likely to find resistance. Carleton's sophomore writing portfolio, where assessment actually was a secondary outgrowth of careful, faculty-driven pedagogical development, could be held up as a model here. Goals are best established in a consensual way, and the development of criteria is best delegated to the departments. This "re-positioning" actually raises issues well beyond the tactical concern of generating enthusiasm through nomenclature. It reveals an important fault-line in the conversation on assessment: one between an internal discussion of intra-institutional improvement (in which one finds discussion of pedagogy) and an external discussion of "accountability" (in which one is

likely to hear discussion of "assessment" per se). This fault-line is discussed in detail in the next section.

PROSPECTS

General considerations

The conference also pointed to the future prospects for assessment, in some form or another, actually taking root. One finds two narratives here, both of which are preparing the soil. One is an external discussion about "accountability" -- this is the one we hear among legislators, concerned parents, and others, which is part of a chorus of conversations about accountability taking place across the professions, including in health and in law. The days in which "experts" are simply trusted to regulate themselves without some form of public transparency are over. A different discussion is happening internally about collective responsibility and institutional improvement. This is a conversation by faculty and administrators about how to improve students' learning environment.

That the "accountability" side of the conversation is ongoing and vigorous suggests that assessment will just happen, irrespective of whether we want it to happen, so we had better be prepared. Most participants perceived suspicion among state legislators, alumni, and foundations, who wonder what actually goes on in higher education. The participants had different views of the causes of this perceived suspicion. Reasons adduced included: that we are not doing well; that our organizations just don't look like other institutions in society -- they lack any of the trappings of modern management (irrespective of whether they should) and so breed suspicion. Another factor is a view of education as a credentializing process, which is bound to create resentment. We are complacent to our peril in the face of the credentializing view of higher education, which, after all, has the side-effect of inflating our social importance. However, this view also entails risks for us, since it is a fertile ground from which resentments might spring. Further in this direction, the ominous importance of NCLB (No Child Left Behind) was not lost on any of the participants. While the mechanisms by which NCLB-style intervention would happen beyond K-12 are not immediately apparent, the potentially deleterious effects of a uniform, externally-developed set of criteria being imposed on institutions from the outside has proved a strong incentive to develop and implement internal measures.

Second, we find the view that more systematic assessment offers a real opportunity as a mechanism for improving an institution's pedagogical environment. For the reasons stated above, faculty are and have been part of an ongoing effort to improve the learning environment at their colleges or universities.

While these two conversations are both ongoing, the first seems to be the more vigorous one at the moment. If what one participant said is true, and the assessment issue actually is a race between outside forces and inside forces to develop and implement criteria, it seems clear that he is correct in saying further that it is a race we are losing. Another participant, who has had perhaps the most sustained engagement with the issue in recent decades warned that the criteria proposed from within must be as powerful and direct as NCLB (without duplicating NCLB's narrowness and rigidity) to stave off external imposition of criteria.

Target Points

The group came to a consensus that, in order to enhance the prospects of broader embrace of internally-generated assessments as a systematic part of higher education, the most useful points of intervention are consortia that can bring together like-minded institutions within the universe of higher education. Some existing consortia are already doing good work in this area, and at the conference itself new momentum seemed to be emerging towards the establishment of other collaborations. It might be possible to enhance the visibility and impact of these groups with the visible participation of a few "high-profile" institutions. More work would have to be done to locate and then implement inducements for them. With the collaboration of a critical mass of high-profile members, these groups might initiate any number of projects aiming to produce common assessment tools, best practices of implementation, and mechanisms for following up, such as an external examiner or an academic auditor.

Prospects specifically for Liberal Arts colleges

Liberal Arts colleges (LACs) turn out to be an auspicious place to locate effects towards assessment. They are amenable to assessment in that they aim to produce a uniform education outcome (at least, that is, relative to the research university). The good work on assessment and the instruments out there tend already to be emerging from the environment of the LACs. Further, LACs may have a further incentive to become involved since they (perhaps) feel underappreciated, and they have a good story to tell.

There are difficulties to be watchful for, specifically with respect to the LACs. They tend to be fiercely independent, even libertarian as institutions. It was, however, noteworthy that at our meeting, they seemed altogether eager to collaborate. They resist top-down solutions; they view their peer schools as competitors, which frustrates cooperative efforts at inter-institutional benchmarking; the elites among them feel no special obligation to be collaborative with those that are not in the elite tiers, and tend instead to develop self-measurement that contrast them to the research university. (But the LAC also has a strong interest in finding areas of collaboration with research universities, particularly within the area of the core education of undergraduates. Both are to some extent resisting the pull toward pre-professionalism as the dominant paradigm for understanding undergraduate life.) LACs also traditionally regard the "practical" or "applied" arts (of which assessment is definitely one) as somewhat alien to their pedagogical mission. Though the list of caveats here may be longer than the list of good omens, the participants were nearly uniform in their enthusiasm to move forward and figuring how to capitalize on the openings and to get around the restriction points.

Recommendations to Funders

Based on the observations above, I recommend the following areas of opportunity for funders who are interested in encouraging development in this area:

1. Fund continued development of appropriate instruments of value added assessment.
2. Fund study of whether student engagement as measured by NSSE leads to greater learning as measured by CAE/CLA or others.
3. Support existing consortia.
4. Encourage new collaboratives among like-minded institutions, or between research universities and Liberal Arts colleges.