

Taking the True Measure of a Liberal Education

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How should we think about assessment in general education — or what we sometimes call liberal education — in the pluralistic environment of American higher education? “General education” is notoriously vague, but I mean attempts on the part of four-year colleges and research universities to offer undergraduates a broad education outside their majors.

Generalizations about longitudinal collegiate assessment are difficult, not least because of the remarkable range of four-year institutions and the students who attend them. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that we need to try to assess the effectiveness of liberal education. While I refuse to assume that students are consumers, and that the product they purchase can be evaluated by mandatory standardized tests, I also reject the notion that important values goals are not broadly shared across higher education. And if I am not yet convinced that there is any adequate way to assess longitudinally across all of higher education — although my mind is open on the subject — I am fairly sure that we can begin to evaluate the learning outcomes of general education.

My position appears to be at odds with some of the best-known leaders of higher education. Last June, in her commencement address, our president at Princeton University, Shirley Tilghman, noted that assessment of collegiate education had become a political hot potato (not her term, I assure you), particularly with the possibility of federally imposed external measures. Acknowledging that parents in the audience might wonder what was so wrong with that, she said that faculty members already assess their students and provide feedback, that a federal mandate threatens the diversity of higher education, and it would imperil academic freedom. Her basic argument, however, was that the “spirit of learning” does not lend itself to any kind of standardized testing. The university can’t really know whether it has succeeded until the 25th reunion of each class, she said, “because the real measure of a Princeton education is the manifold ways it is used by Princetonians after they leave the university.”

A strikingly similar speech was given by another friend and university president, Drew Gilpin Faust, in her inaugural address last fall as president of Harvard University. “Universities make commitments to the timeless, and these investments have yields we cannot predict and often cannot measure,” she said.

I consider Tilghman and Faust two of the leading intellects and institutional leaders in our profession. But so far as I can determine from their texts, both of them have dismissed serious, systematic, continuing assessment of undergraduate education. To do so, we would need to identify measures to compare over time and, ideally, across institutions. The dilemma is that the more objective the measures, the less subtle and meaningful they may be; the more subjective, the less useful.

Most advocates of liberal education deny that a primarily content-based evaluation of learning assesses the totality of a senior’s educational experience. Most of us are

committed to the notion that liberal learning has more to do with cultivating qualities of mind and the capacity to recognize and analyze significance than with the mastery of any quantum of information.

Many educators rightfully assert that the very attempt to measure learning outcomes is likely to stifle student creativity, creating incentives to mimic what a student assumes the assessors seek. That is not trivial, and it emphasizes the need for culminating demonstrations of knowledge in the senior year. In Princeton's scheme of things, that means the senior thesis, but many alternative demonstrations are possible. Having directed senior theses for half a century, I am very sympathetic to them, but I do not think they serve to assess all of general education.

We must seek more-adequate longitudinal and comparative measures. For the past decade, there have been serious attempts to do just that. The National Survey of Student Engagement and the Collegiate Learning Assessment hold promise. The former is designed to obtain information about student attitudes and participation in programs and activities; the latter is an approach to assessing an institution's contribution to student learning by measuring the outcomes of simulations of complex, ambiguous situations that students may face after graduation. Both projects attempt to produce quantifiable measures.

What can and should be done with those data? Some educators hope that cross-institutional comparisons will provide more-reliable rankings of institutions than the current faux-scientific lists in popular magazines. If one takes a consumerist view of higher education, that makes sense. But many of the institutions participating in the new assessment exercises will not release institutional findings, and even if they did, it is not altogether clear that what is being measured will be informative to prospective students. To the extent that making the findings available can genuinely facilitate informed college selection, I should think all responsible educators should favor it. But we are not there yet.

In the meantime, the Association of American Colleges and Universities has collaborated with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to issue a report, "New Leadership for Student Learning and Accountability." It does not propose standardized metrics or systematic comparison across institutions. Instead it emphasizes the responsibility of colleges to "develop ambitious, specific, and clearly stated goals for student learning" appropriate to their "mission, resources, tradition, student body and community setting." Evidence should be gathered, the report says, "about how well students in various programs are achieving learning goals across the curriculum and about the ability of its graduates to succeed in a challenging and rapidly changing world."

To the assessment of "learning goals across the curriculum," I say d'accord. To the assessment of helping "graduates to succeed," I plead dubitante. Are we really responsible for the future success of our graduates? Can we assess potential success in ways that do not privilege income and social status? I doubt it, and I oppose such a commitment.

Public institutions will, of course, have additional responsibilities to external stakeholders, not least their state legislatures. I was fascinated by the "Voluntary System of Accountability" announced by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and the American Association of State Colleges

and Universities — a highly objective and potentially cross-institutional database that I take to be a response to the political pressures for accountability on public institutions. Setting aside such a project as unlikely for all of higher education, and acknowledging that the noncompliance of the University of California system does not bode well for the plan, I also believe that American educational pluralism dictates that each institution must think through its own standards of accountability. In doing so, it should involve all stakeholders.

Clearly there is a growing consensus that every institution has a duty to itself to evaluate rigorously the effectiveness of the learning that it facilitates. But I have been in higher education long enough to realize that systematic assessment is not so commonly done. And there's the pity. Conscientious institutions are careful in constructing curricula, devoting time and human resources to designing general-education and concentration curricula, and taking seriously the evaluation of student performance in courses. We increasingly support new types of learning experiences, from freshman seminars and undergraduate research to service learning and study abroad. We are experimenting with the potential of information technology and new media to enhance learning. We are steadily making new fields of knowledge, most of them interdisciplinary, available to our students.

But how successful are we in improving undergraduate liberal learning? In 1923 the American Association of University Professors' Committee on College and University Teaching found, "College teachers have as yet devised no systematic means of having the results of their own work fairly evaluated." Take away the partial reforms under way, can we claim more after 85 years?

The authors of the AAUP document were propagandists for "general education" in the same way that the Association of American Colleges and Universities now propagandizes for "liberal education." But "general education" proved a weak idea, with little unifying or binding power either within or across institutions. Switching from "general" to "liberal" is not going to solve the problem.

If we are to have meaningful assessment, we shall need to assess something more precise than "liberal education" and broader than student performance in courses. The courage and capacity to assess is dependent upon institutions' doing something other than putting the pea under a different shell. Defining what we want to assess as a general, or liberal, education is the real issue, and resolving it will take massive reimagination.

So for the moment I am puzzled as to the extent we are actually enhancing student learning. I am, however, an incrementalist and a pragmatist. For me the present utility of institutional assessment is its potential capacity to enable us to begin to understand what we are doing and to plan for educational change. If we can measure learning with sophistication, then the data should enable us to make informed judgments about what we are doing wrong and what we are doing right. And then we can adjust our learning strategies. Or at least we can have a more meaningful debate about goals and strategies. Right now we too often fail to see beyond tactics.

I am aware that Tilghman, Faust, and many other thoughtful educators reasonably fear that a federal standardized assessment would violate institutional self-determination and promote robotic imitation. That is a terrible prospect, but

remember that the Department of Education has moved away from such an approach, and we need not behave like Chicken Little.

We need to create the norms and benchmarks that will not only help institutions to help themselves improve learning but also enable higher education to move ahead nationally to improve the quality of undergraduate education, and even, with a lot of luck, to reconceive our goals.

Having invoked the names of the presidents of two of our leading institutions of higher education, let me echo what David W. Breneman, the noted economist of education at the University of Virginia, said in an article in *The Chronicle* (February 15), urging the presidents of elite universities to think of themselves as national leaders. I know both Tilghman and Faust well enough to know that they do not intend to be complacent and self-congratulatory, although I think their comments might be taken as such. Let me invite them and the other leaders of elite institutions to advocate assessment-based evaluation and, where necessary, the reform of liberal undergraduate education.