

Chapter XVIII

A Neglected Necessity in Liberal Arts Assessment: The Student as the Unit of Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how the trend favoring assessment initiatives of a system-wide scope such as program review and collegiate learning assessment (CLA) tends to overlook the specific, highly concrete learning experiences of individual students in the liberal arts. These individual cases offer a rich source of data for assessment. The insights that can be derived from a rigorous analysis of such individual experience can tell educators much about learning outcomes, teaching quality, and curricular effectiveness. It is in this regard that this chapter argues for the student as the unit of analysis in assessment initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Educational results for real students matter; the proper goal of educators is to enhance the educational experience and learning of students. But our daily work as college professionals (deans, presidents, administrators, and professors) often pulls us away from understanding the lived experience of real students, so that in formulating policies, we lose sight of the educational results of our

organizational work. In two different dimensions, which I will call the “horizontal” and the “vertical,” we frequently slide away from an understanding of individual student reality. We forget that (a) in the horizontal dimension, students do not see the world as faculty and administrators do—they are in a sense different kinds of people; and (b) in the vertical dimension, the success of individual students doesn’t directly reflect the success of classes, departments, programs, or institutions,

since individual experience cannot automatically be inferred from the behavior of collectivities.

In the language of social science, therefore, outcomes assessment should take the individual student as the *unit of analysis*. Within institutions, data gathering (collected on courses, departments, program initiatives, etc.) often overlooks this methodological requirement, so we don't measure the results we claim to produce. There's been lots of talk recently among accreditation agencies, education leaders, and assessment scholars about the importance of doing "outcomes assessment," but in this sense we often don't do it. Effective administrative action in shaping student outcomes requires (a) understanding the lived experience of students; (b) sampling on the entire student body, using individuals as the unit of analysis; and (c) learning how particular organizational actions (program initiatives, courses, majors, etc.) affect the totality of student outcomes. (Here, by the way, is where I think that individually based aggregate measures such as the NSSE or CLA fall short). Frequently, I will show, this is not what happens.

STUDENT PERSPECTIVE ISN'T FACULTY OR ADMINISTRATION PERSPECTIVE

Along a "horizontal" dimension, imagining people standing side by side, students aren't like professors or administrators. They sleep later in the morning and they stay up half the night. They take tests, while other people write and grade tests. Students follow rules; deans and professors make up rules. Many students live on their parents' money. Most have never read Darwin, Marx, or Freud. They were born in specific years, belong to particular generations, and see the world through the eyes of the era in which they grew up. Each fall, Beloit College issues a "mindset" list, reminding its faculty that contemporary first-year students have always lived in a

world with MTV and AIDS, have never owned (or even seen) a record player, and remember neither Johnny Carson nor the USSR (<http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset>). Students not only hold different opinions and a different view of things than we do; they hold an entirely different place in life. For a teacher, or a college, to be successful in transforming their students, we need to understand and use such knowledge.

Consider a simple example. Academic deans and professors view their colleges as organizations of programs, departments, and faculties, all deployed in such a way as to provide a good education. We believe that courses are fundamental, curricula are important, and professors stand at the center of college life. We "would hope" students take their studies seriously, and sometimes think they "should" work a 40-hour week on academics.

But for a freshman entering college, the immediate challenge is managing an independent life: living on one's own, away from parents, with no one enforcing curfews. Students can stay out late without permission, maybe get a little (or very) drunk, and even have a boyfriend or girlfriend sleep over for an entire night. Drugs! Sex! No adults!

And some classes.

And in the academic realm itself, students and professionals experience things differently:

Foundations, presidents, and deans love to talk about innovation, new programs, exciting new turns in curriculum planning and pedagogy. But for students, it's all new—Western Civilization, Introduction to Anthropology, Geology with Lab, Shakespeare, the whole thing. Picking one's own classes, schedules, and teachers is a novelty; deciding not to attend class is breathtaking; to most freshmen, the daily reality of being in college, with all that entails, is itself astonishingly innovative.

At the same time, many professors are bored teaching their old courses: Calculus, Introduction

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