

Is Assessment Destroying the Liberal Arts?

by Karin Brown

While higher education has typically included exposure to the values and ethos of the liberal arts, traditional liberal arts education has been in retreat and under threat for a while now. What role has the assessment movement had on this retreat? Is assessment, in fact, part of the deterioration of higher education?

Assessment in academia began in the early 2000's. Now, decades later, in my own department at San José State University, the assessment process is incredibly bureaucratic (to say the least), laborious and time consuming. And we aren't alone. Across the nation faculty at a wide range of institutions similarly scramble to assess, and assess over and over again, their students, majors and entire programs. Meanwhile, students' learning is not improving; on the contrary it is deteriorating.¹ Retention and graduation rates are falling as well. With declining academic standards and college completion rates, it is not logically possible to claim that assessment (or anything else for that matter) is improving higher education.

With those experiences in mind, and also after witnessing the way in which the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—the so-called “No Child Left Behind” law of 2001—and its frequent high-stakes assessments have impacted K–12 education, it is perfectly logical and necessary to ask: Is assessment harming higher education as well?

There are two possible answers. The first, and best-case scenario, is that assessment does not improve the quality of instruction but does not harm it either.

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If this is true, the only damage is a waste of time and resources that could be better invested in students, and clearly any effort we can divert to serving our students better is very much in order. The second possibility is that assessment is one of the reasons the quality of instruction is deteriorating, and in this case it is pernicious.

The answer given below is, simply put: yes, assessment does indeed harm the liberal arts and higher education in general. However, the criticism offered here is of assessment in its current practice and not of the need for evaluation and improvement in college and university teaching.

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THE BUSINESS MODEL IS THE UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY

The idea that universities have been operating on the business or corporate model is not new. But what exactly is the business model and how does it relate to assessment? We can look at the business model in terms of its goals and methods. The main goal for business is to maximize profit. The method whereby one can maximize profit is increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity, or in “doing more for less.” Thomas Auxter, in the 2010 *Thought & Action* article “Radical Transformation in Higher Education: Where do We Go From Here?,” tellingly points out that implementation of the business model is to be carried out through accountability.² Accountability, Auxter explains, means being able to measure outcomes in terms of productivity and numbers: “Outcomes must be quantifiable, measurable, and testable.”³ In academia, measuring effectiveness and accountability are conducted through assessment. We are asked to take our educational goals and set them in the form of student learning outcomes that can be quantified, measured, and tested. What then is the adverse effect?

For the purpose of this discussion, we will examine two categories of educational goals: primary and secondary. Primary educational goals are intellectual and moral. Intellectually, students learn to ask questions, analyze, criticize and think for themselves. We ignite their curiosity. In the liberal arts there is always more than one possible answer to a particular question and, hence, we have an opportunity to teach our students to become open-minded. In the end the liberal arts are not about what the students learned, but about learning how to think about what they learned. But an intellectual grasp of the material is not enough.

By teaching social and political issues, such as race, gender, immigration,

or the status of our prison system, for example, we hope to raise awareness and heighten our students' social consciousness. We also hope they will become engaged citizens and educated voters. In other words, we aim to affect behavior. Education is and should be a transformative experience and the real test of success in the classroom is embedded in the life long skills students acquire. Thus, the most significant learning goals in the liberal arts cannot be quantified. Can I seriously ask my students do you love to read books now? Are you more thoughtful? Have you overcome your prejudices? And yet if my students leave my class the exact same way they came in, I have failed them as an educator.

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Secondary educational goals are competency in a specific subject matter and writing skills, and these goals can be quantified and assessed. Given the mandate to assess educational goals, and because only the secondary goals are assessable, they are now championed as the goals and, thus, provide a reductive approach to education. This is the manner in which standards decline. We already witnessed such a decline in K-12 education with the No Child Left Behind initiative. The goal became the standardized test and the curriculum was reduced accordingly. In academia, assessment reduces education to information delivery.

It gets worse. With educational goals being simple and impoverished, the door is open to the business model's method of maximizing profits. After all, this is a model geared toward cutting cost and increasing productivity. To maximize profit we need to reduce the price of labor, and the more we do with less, the better. Cheap online education (such as MOOCs) is now welcome because what you cannot quantify and sell does not exist, so goals such as teaching students how to question, think and criticize (which requires coaching and a lot of it) are not on the menu. Indeed, how could eliminating something that does not exist be a problem? In other words, reducing education to information or trying to capture educational goals in a one sentence crude metric facilitates the reduction, even the elimination of the liberal arts.

Academia is not only modeled after business, it is also annexed to it. The functional purpose of higher education these days is to produce workers able to perform and increase wealth. This state of affairs is topsy-turvy. Instead of academic values such as social and environmental responsibility influencing the business world, the business world has not only influenced but is profoundly shaping academia and forcing everyone into a cookie-cutter, number-crunching game, while leaving little room for quality considerations. Needless to say, well-educated

students would provide a better workforce, but this point is beyond the scope of this article.

THE BUSINESS MODEL ENCOURAGES ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM

Furthermore, colleges and universities and the liberal arts in particular are bastions of intellectual life. In his famous 1962 book, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, Richard Hofstadter defines the intellect as “critical, creative, and contempla-

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tive side of the mind.”⁴ He contrasts the intellectual who finds the life of the mind worth having for its own sake, with the zealot who hones in on one idea, becomes obsessed with it, and dedicates his resources to the service of his limited conception. By no means am I calling assessment proponents zealots. But I am arguing that attempting to capture the complexity of a university education in several very general and superficial single-sentence goals is anti-intellectual. That is also not to say that learning goals, in and of themselves, constitute a problem. Quite the contrary, learning goals provide insight into courses and programs, and serve as objectives. The harm is embedded in the attempt to assess them, first in limiting the scope of education to short term goals that can be quantified and then in imposing fixed and rigid learning goals.

Hofstadter argues that the business model and the intellectual model (or the business man and the intellectual, as he puts it), possessing different sets of values, are bound to conflict. The intellectual, he writes, must be free to criticize and to question, and these are values that conflict with the utilitarian values of the business world. Similarly, we are not free to question or criticize the learning goals; quite the contrary, they are set as practical goals that we must achieve and certify in great numbers. One of the ways in which Hofstadter defines anti-intellectualism is as resentment of the life of the mind. Applied to assessment in academia, the issue is not resentment, but only that the qualities, virtues, and values of the life of the mind cannot be reduced to assessable learning goals and should not be limited and fixed. The business model in education becomes an anti-intellectual model, thereby destroying the liberal arts.

A key way we see anti-intellectualism in academia is in the movement toward standardization. As of now, learning goals are somewhat standardized (another common denominator with No Child Left Behind). At San José State University,

for instance, we have general education categories, and despite the fact that there are several disciplines within a category, they all share the same learning goals. How can this be? Learning goals should not only be discipline specific, but they should be course and professor specific. This is a university. We teach out of our expertise, and our expertise varies. If the reader concedes that diversity is an essential feature of intellectualism, then standardization by definition is anti-intellectual. In philosophy we take very seriously the Kantian idea of respect for autonomy. The argument here is that intellectual activity hinges on autonomy. Learning in the liberal arts depends on freedom and creativity, and that approach

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stands in stark contrast to predefined narrow goals. Professors cannot and should not be told what to teach or how. When that happens we can no longer function as university professors.

HONESTY IS STILL A VIRTUE

As mentioned above, only assessment of secondary educational goals (testing for competence in a particular subject, or evaluating writing skills) is possible. In essence, these goals are already assessed during the countless hours we read, edit and grade our students' papers. The grades are an indication of success or failure in mastery of these goals. And yet we are told that grades are not assessment, hence the need for assessment. The truth is that anything over and above evaluating papers and exams is at best superfluous and at worse fake. Professors are forced to write all kinds of reports that amount to a sham and a charade. Moreover, the "assessment" is not actually assessment; it is a euphemism for supervision. We need to distinguish between assessment, which is a procedure that takes place between faculty and students, and reports about assessment that take place between faculty and the various levels of review. In other words, having to report what my students learned to administrators who then report to the accreditation committee is not an assessment of students' learning goals, it is a report on my assessment of students' learning goals. Let's be honest about it - this is pure monitoring and supervising of university professors. For such an elaborate process to be implemented what does it tell you about the value and respect of the professoriate?

The extensive supervision (in the form of assessment) in its current practice amounts to a disrespect of the professoriate. In fact, it is insulting and demeaning. It robs professors of their autonomy and reduces them to employees who have to

report to a supervisor. We professors consider ourselves professionals. We were hired for our good teaching skills and the expertise we possess. We now find ourselves being supervised and monitored by administrators and people from other disciplines, lacking the qualifications to evaluate material in our disciplines. We are not trusted to do our job, and we are forced to prove that we are trustworthy. It's depressing to say the least. And it's an unfortunate approach that kills morale and thereby undermines our commitment to teaching. People are more productive when they are respected and trusted. People do more, they volunteer more, and they go above and beyond the call of duty when they are happy and appreciated.

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A MORE FRUITFUL APPROACH

The need for faculty to evaluate what works in our classrooms, and implement changes accordingly, certainly exists. But the shift needs to be a cultural one. When any given practice is voluntary, it has much more meaning and is more successful. Inspiration and motivation bear more fruit than draconian methods of supervising and monitoring.

Discussions regarding teaching ought to take place within disciplines in department meetings, curriculum committees, or retreats. In addition, the emphasis in academia needs to shift from articles written by faculty to ideas taught by faculty, or from publishing to teaching. While research is often what defines us as professors, the pressure to produce articles in peer-reviewed journals has been implemented at the expense of teaching. The result is a surplus of journals and articles with a smaller and smaller circle of readership. Might it be suggested that here, too, we see the influence of the business model? To be considered “productive,” we need to see product. The student who tells you they were deeply affected by your class has no room in the business model, but the number of articles you authored certainly does.

Is assessment destroying the liberal arts and thereby academia? The answer, once again, is unequivocally yes. Current assessment processes and the vested interests of assessment partisans destroy academia through inherent anti-intellectualism and a totalitarian approach that is contrary to the spirit of freedom essential for a university to thrive.

The culprits are not college administrators; they are just trying to make sure their institutions are accredited. Faculty—myself included—have been criminally silent. The enforcing bodies are the accreditation agencies. Accreditation agencies that once guarded quality in higher education are now, consciously or not, spear-

heading a corporate-influenced movement that compromises that very quality. We must speak up. We must seek to abolish harmful assessment systems and replace them with a culture that restores quality, honor, and respect. Departments must be given responsibility for the education of their students. Allow me to close with a question that was actually posed to me: But how do you know that what you do is working? In fact, I evaluate and assess my work and my students' work after every class. But that does not answer the question. The answer is in the alternative: Trust professors to possess expertise, integrity, and a work ethic. Imagine that!. 

ENDNOTES

1. Disconcerting studies regarding the decline in critical and analytic skills among college students are cited in: *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roska. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
2. In an illuminating and interesting manner, Auxter traces the application of the business model to academia to a plan initiated by Ronald Reagan's administration for changing the priorities in higher education. Auxter, "Radical Transformation in Higher Education: Where Do We Go From Here?," pp. 59-69.
3. *Ibid*, p. 61.
4. Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, p. 25.

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- Auxter, Thomas. 2010. "Radical Transformation in Higher Education: Where Do We Go From Here?" *Thought & Action*, Volume 26, (Fall).
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