

What Counts as Assessment in the 21st Century?

by Ken Buckman

In recent years, there has been an ocean of ink poured over page upon page concerning the topic of assessment. I'm a philosophy professor in Texas where assessment seems to have its epicenter, so I think I have a unique perspective on the topic. Not only is assessment on the march due to misguided Texas legislative initiatives, not only is the Governor of Texas, Rick Perry, pushing an agenda of assessment and standardization, but the man who chaired U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, Charles Miller, is in the vanguard of the advocates of assessment and is himself from Texas.

Assessment is one of those wonderful buzzwords that receive traction every few years, accumulating a bandwagon of popular sentiment, but which remains so vapid and ill defined that it really has no meaning at all—except that it does have consequences. One serious consequence is that assessment often equates with standardized testing, and standardized testing is among the worst things one can inflict on education, let alone higher education. So, what counts as assessment as it emerges here in the dawn of the 21st century?

The motivation behind this assessment talk is unclear. University professors spend years of training becoming experts in specialized academic fields. They are in fact *the* experts in an area of study. Academic training, ideally at any rate, is directed toward being able to judge the degree to which those who follow also engage scholarly behaviors and standards. Professors are constantly assessing the

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extent to which students in their classes meet the standards created by the professors themselves, and this is accomplished in a number of ways. This traditional and time-tested method of assessment is challenged by those who maintain professors aren't doing their jobs and those who do not like the outcomes of university education.

The Spellings Commission engaged Miller to lead the charge on getting education back on track. One of the stated commission objectives was to develop a consensus about standardized testing, but it seemed that the need for standardized testing had been settled on before the investigation began. Never mind that this is

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poor science. The objective then really was to get enough people on board to agree with the consensus of the members of the commission. Miller maintained that he did not want to impose a model, but that standardized tests are “almost an inevitability.” The commission appeared populated by those who were “big business” friendly, so that the aims of the commission looked to be formulated by the needs of business (A grave warning about the ability of the U.S. to compete in global markets was an often-touted buzz phrase). Conclusions used as evidence beg the question. Yet despite this effort, if consensus is the desired outcome, a consensus does not seem to be coming from either faculty or students.

People both inside and outside the academy are concerned for the health of higher education in the United States. Everyone is interested in writing, critical thinking, and problem solving. Philosophers have been at the core of such an effort for over 2500 years. But how does standardization fit in? Embedded in the question of standardization, but not explicitly stated, is the larger question: What is the nature of the Academy? Two primary assumptions implied by the Spellings Commission are that the university supplies business and that all outcomes in the university are quantitative. A further assumption is that the nature of the university can be molded to a business model of “education as product.” For example, the commission chair assumes that students are consumers. An additional assumption is that the university should be for profit. One might wonder if the debate has been broad enough to determine whether these assumptions correctly address the question of the nature of the academy.

Enjoining the debate, my assertion is that none of these are the most important aspect of the university. When we view education merely as an outcome (implicit in the assumptions outlined above), the real, transformative character of

education as process toward intellectual independence is lost. A good way of illustrating the complexity of this issue can be addressed by the discipline in which I teach: philosophy.

Philosophy is a hard sell in the university—to students, to the public generally, and even to faculty from other disciplines within the academy. The public's perception and the perception of students entering universities is that one educates oneself to get a job. Certainly, we cannot diminish this as an important goal, despite the myopia that ignores the larger social dimension of an education. But viewing education in this manner illustrates a problem in conception that people

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have about education and an ignorance about what is important. I have been asked my whole life, by friends, family, and acquaintances, "What the hell can you do with philosophy?" Most people see education as a product that one buys at the end of the check-out counter. I characterize this mentality as Wal-Mart outcomes. One brings one's shopping cart to the check-out line, slaps money down for the cashier, and takes the "bag full 'o stuff" to the car and drives away. But philosophy does not have an outcome such as a product at the end of a conveyor belt. One must wrestle authentically with the difficult questions of life's issues. So, has philosophy no value? Philosopher or not, few educated people would answer that it does not.

Philosophical questions are those big questions that, because they do not entail easily quantifiable and marketable answers, make one question one's own values and beliefs and thereby bring value to one's life. An important philosopher once declaimed, "It is not what you get out of philosophy that is important; it is what it does to you." These philosophical questions—What is the nature of truth? What is the relation between appearance and reality? What are the conditions that make life meaningful? What constitutes our identity? What is the relation between humans and a deity? What is the meaning of being?—certainly are questions which defy quantitative measures, but more importantly they are questions that remain with people in one form or another and motivate one to powerful answers, even if the answers are not ultimate. Aristotle claims that all thinking begins with a sense of wonder. Knowledge of facts, such as to correctly claim that Plato is the author of the *Republic*, is the lowest wrung of an educated answer. This reductionistic practice is anathema to most disciplines when one gets to the level of critical thinking and problem solving.

From a practical—and measurable—standpoint, outcome proponents should note that philosophy majors score in the 98 percentile on GRE and LSAT exams. To my mind, this is an authentic quantitative accountability measurement. That's what you can do with philosophy, yet I would venture to say that there are very few standardized tests given in philosophy courses throughout the nation. So there must be a deeper, yet non-quantifiable, factor that contributes to the success of philosophy majors. Philosophy students got these outcomes without their professors engaging in standardized tests for assessment.

It has become clear to me that most professors in Texas judge standardized tests imposed on high schools as ineffective. Higher education faculty are as horrified as politicians by the lack of preparation of the students who enter the academy and bemoan the fact that in introductory courses they are often teaching the skills—writing, critical thinking, basic mathematics—that they expected students to have acquired prior to coming to college. This lack of preparation erodes the depth and quality of the education that students should be receiving in basic college courses, so students and professors both feel mired in catch-up. To my mind the students are intelligent and capable, but often lack the skills that help them compete successfully at the post-high school level. Why? The problems are legion.

At a recent statewide meeting of the Texas State Teachers Association in El Paso, it was evident to me that, because of federal, state, and other requirements, the overwhelming majority of high school teachers feel compelled to teach to the test (after all, salaries, incentives, merit, and promotions get tied to them—even if covertly). Teaching to the standardized test causes problems on the ground, in the classroom, and in the learning environment. One major problem is that standard-



ization has the negative consequence of shaping students into passive learners. Students do not feel absorbed in a learning process. Rather, they are compelled to engage in rote memorization which gives them no sense of attachment to or reward for the material they are being taught. More devastating still is that students become detached as self-learners and seek their stimulation elsewhere. The classroom becomes a sterile wasteland of ennui and torture. This focus on faculty and the need for assessment ignores the issue of students' responsibility for their own education.

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measurable outcomes. Consequently, students are directed to giving a "right" answer rather than thinking for themselves and becoming creative learners. This problem is manifested at the university level, too. A colleague illustrated this difficulty to me recently describing a test that was being created for a social studies component at our university. A test question concerned the Renaissance and was focused on Leonardo da Vinci. Students' minds are directed to this figure of the Renaissance, an important one to be sure. Unfortunately, students preparing for the test ignore Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian, Giorgione, and Brunelleschi.

Where assessment is being imposed, there is a genuine perversion of the educational process. There is a presumptive distrust that faculty are doing their jobs. So there is a call for a standardized measurement that needs to be constructed by someone outside the classroom. Who constructs them? The answer is problematic. Let's say the faculty at universities construct the tests because they are the specialists in their fields of learning and research. The faculties construct the tests, but which faculty? In philosophy, as in all disciplines, what is the *correct* philosophy and which approach to philosophy is the *standard*? Who should decide? This is problematic because of the specializations in each field. Faculty members teach to their strengths and are particularly attached to the problems and the figures of their areas and promote these foci. So the right philosophy or philosopher will always remain and should always remain an open-ended question.

Even supposing that this difficulty is successfully negotiated, who then does the assessment of the standardized test? The tests need to be assessed by the experts. Who are the experts? Once again, the faculty who teach the classes in the first place are the experts. Professors spend years becoming experts, establishing and maintaining the standards in their fields. They are regularly scrutinized in

terms of being assessed with regard to their teaching, their research, and their commitments to community service, only to be distrusted and required to engage in artificially constructed methods of assessments. In this scenario, we get different faculty within our department to grade the test. But I already trust that, for the most part, fellow faculty accurately assess the classes they teach and give responsible grades, because our annual reviews assess each of us on teaching, research, and community service. A level of needless work is added which detracts from faculty effectiveness in the other areas in which faculty must work.

These are not the only issues. Some professors construct tests that are so vac-

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uous that they assess nothing. A standardized question: Plato was a) a cook, b) an electrician, c) a brilliant thinker who informs, either positively or negatively, nearly all thinking within western civilization up to and including the 21st century. Which answer do you think will be chosen? A question posed in this way is not a philosophical question, nor does it produce a philosophical answer, but it is quantifiable. One faculty member, prior to giving an assessment test in his discipline, gave a PowerPoint presentation with the answers in red. He then turned off the PowerPoint and administered the assessment test. Faculty, forced to produce “numbers,” spend hours and hours constructing these kinds of “assessments,” which assess nothing, detract from genuine education, and intrude upon and take away from productive time in teaching, in research, and in community service. Why is it that faculty engage in such subversive behavior? They do it so that they can get to the real business of teaching and research.

The irony is that faculty who spend years becoming experts in their fields and honing their capacity for judgment are regarded with distrust by external reviewers and are reduced to such pabulum. People who pander to the buzzwords of accountability and standardization peer into their toolbox, and the only tool they see is a hammer. Every problem is a nail. If there are faculty who are causing problems by not meeting their responsibilities as teachers or researchers, they should be disciplined (Mechanisms to do this are in place at most, if not all, colleges and universities). Rather than identifying problem faculty and responsibly correcting the problem, too often, administrative-driven assessment is imposed on all. Make no mistake, accountability and standardization miss important reasons for a perceived loss of educational effectiveness and, in the end, lower rather than raise standards.

Faculty are not opposed to qualitative assessment. There are, in fact, a whole

multitude of assessments that have been used again and again over the centuries: in-class tests, observation, student responses in class, portfolios assembled over a semester, research papers, short essays, field trips, class presentations, and office conferences—the general agon of the education process itself. The primary emphasis of this kind of learning is on the transformative character of the persons experiencing it, the students, and the engagement they have with their professors. Being educated in this way means the student is connected with and transformed by the process itself. This kind of education is not reducible to the mere accumulation of material and an outcome.

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Conceiving of education merely as an outcome distorts the ethos of learning, understanding, and teaching. Viewing education as an engagement between a student and a professor in the transformative process of learning is never reducible to an outcome, but rather is a continual process of self-realization and self-remaking for both student and the professor. Education is not reducible to an item for consumption, but is a capacity for self-responsibility for continually making anew of the self. To look at education as just a measurable outcome loses sight of the educational process as an art that is cultivated in an atmosphere of free inquiry where the outcome is often not predictable and often unanticipated. The difficulty with assessments that concentrate on the educational process as transformation and free inquiry is that they are time and labor intensive and depend on the capacity of the professors to make responsible and ethical judgments when giving a grade.

We might reasonably question if there's a problem with higher education at all. The Commission for the Future of Higher Education perceives there is. Yet, the United States remains the number one educational system in the world. Historically, what led to the premier station of higher education in the United States was its uniqueness and intellectual independence, despite pressures from the church and state. Historically, the university has been guided by a search for truth: not product, not quantitative outcome, and certainly not profit. In fact, this openness and uncontrolled nature of higher education makes it more likely to develop responses to difficult and unanticipated problems by conceiving of novel solutions. Standardizations tend to ossify. More than specific data or a quantitative measure, critical thinking is the outcome we anticipate from education. There are studies enough that claim that the current generation of students are expected to change jobs five to seven times in their work lives. Critical thinking and becoming life-

long learners should be the decisive factor in education. To insist that everything is measurable promotes only one, and perhaps a false, sense of accountability.

Teachers get blamed for unacceptable results of students in their classrooms. It is convenient for politicians and others to characterize extraordinarily complicated social issues as deriving from a single source. They oversimplify the cause and reduce the needed solutions to a call for standardized testing. But there are many reasons for the poor educational outcomes we have been seeing in classrooms over the past couple of decades. These reasons include the lessening of rigor

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in the classroom due to external pressures. Under pressure, faculty loosen their standards and deliver quantitative measures that dilute the overall quality of the educational system. An additional element contributing to watered down educational outcomes in higher education is the imbalance between student-professor ratios. In the past 10 years at my university in Texas, the class size average has risen from an average of 15-20 to the current cap of 55 (these caps are routinely violated in legislative funding years). Multiply this by the three or four classes a faculty member teaches each semester and one begins to see the problem.

Most agree that personalized attention from a professor is a most effective piece of the learning process, but this does not come cheaply. Driven by administrative needs for maximizing student contact hours, a legislature demanding accountability, without knowing what this might mean or entail, classes become larger and the intellectual impact of the classroom becomes eviscerated. In a recent essay I noted,

... in the public fervor to make the “faculty” of universities accountable to ensure a quality education, the primary focus of the public has moved dialectically into its opposite. Rather than ensure the kind of education that is supposed to ensure the health of the university, the rush to accountability has an ossifying impact on the processes of free thinking. Free inquiry, which is the vigor of the university community, becomes arrested in the demands for a particular kind of curricula. The university community is no longer driven by the paths evoked by questioning, but rather the measurable demands of bureaucrats. Fields of study are the rage. Thus the cure becomes the disease itself.

In the process, student outcomes go down and someone needs to be blamed: “those lazy teachers aren’t doing their jobs” becomes the all-too-convenient

charge. The same motivation that imposed standardized test in high schools drives this move for standardized assessment at the university, and I anticipate it will meet with equal success.

We need to return to the problem. The larger question in fact does not concern whether we need assessment or standardization. The question becomes what it always has been, “What is the role of the academy?” Perhaps in looking at the nature of the academy we might be served by going back to the creator of the academy: Plato. In that ancient model of the university, Plato and the

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Greeks generally regarded the educated person as a thinker and not as a tool. The master craftsman, in their view, was not subject to the contingency of opinion in the articulation of her trade, but rather concerns herself with the demands of her profession.

In fact, the expression of excellence and education to the ancient Greeks meant a distancing from everything profitable and useful. Education, for Plato, must be oriented toward beguiling the mind to grasp reality rather than to be satisfied with mere belief and opinion. Education must “lead forth” the mind from an imprisonment in ignorance (*E-duco* in Latin means to “lead forth.”). Thus, Plato claims that genuine education is not putting what we would call “facts” into people’s heads. It is enticing them to look in the correct place, in the right direction. Since genuine knowledge cannot be coerced, education (*paideia*) must begin with playfulness. Drilling students to perform to standardized outcomes is anything but playful. Real education will involve an investment of our material treasure in a more valuable treasure still: the youth of our nation and the future they inhabit. I will end this perhaps too prolix polemic—the non-data driven musings of a philosophy professor in Texas with an oft-used cliché that still contains valuable currency: If you think education is expensive, try ignorance. 