THE CRITICAL ROLE OF ASSESSMENT IN FACULTY GOVERNANCE

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ABSTRACT

Despite increasing demands, faculty members within higher education continue to resist assessment practices as either incompatible with academic freedom or with genuine instruction within their disciplines. This paper suggests that some of this resistance can be attributed to conflicting meanings given to the term assessment by different interest groups. When understood as formative and focused on classroom learning, assessment becomes a powerful tool for faculty governance. When faculty authentically assess student learning from within the specialized knowledge of their fields, they gain an opportunity to exercise a powerful influence over curriculum and university structures. This paper suggests helpful resources and five practical steps that faculty may take to use assessment data in order to maintain control over the content of their disciplines as well as a voice the university governance by showing that students are learning what the faculty as experts have determined is essential to a field of study.

When the Spellings Commission released its report in 2006, *A Test of Leadership*, it was by no means the first the committee to offer a critical assessment of American higher education. However, that document in particular remains powerfully representative of the contemporary climate that is critical of the purpose, quality, and lack of accountability of higher education in the United States today. Of the areas for concern listed in the report's summary, four continue to shape public discourse about the effectiveness of colleges and universities: 1) the high cost of education that results especially from the lack of incentive to reduce inefficiency and improve productivity, 2) the decreasing ability of graduates to think critically, write well, and solve problems within the world of work, 3) the lack of collection and of clear reporting on students' educational performance, and 4) the inability to innovate and pursue "entrepreneurial" methods of growth.

In response, institutions of higher learning are placing greater emphasis than ever on institutional effectiveness through the practice of assessment. What exactly assessment means in this context is ambiguous, especially in relation to student learning and faculty governance. Although it implies an evaluation of the results of instruction, confusion ensues when an institution adopts assessment to measure education against the criteria like those of the Spellings Commission. Assessment threatens to measure institutional effectiveness in ways that outside constituents might find meaningful but does not necessarily correspond with faculty goals for learning or for a university as an institution. It quickly follows the faculty, whose governance within the university is largely based on their expertise to determine and present a curriculum, feel themselves subjected to a system of accountability that has little relation to the practices or content of their disciplines. Responding effectively to this new emphasis on assessment as institutional effectiveness, faculty must first appropriate assessment as that which improves learning and then must use it to maintain their role in determining when a student has achieved the credentials appropriate to the discipline that has been studied.

The ambiguity of the term assessment results from its modern history in education. Ewell describes the late 1980's as the point of origin for two assessment paradigms. The accountability paradigm is rooted in a report by the U.S. Department of Education in 1983 that was highly critical of primary and high school education. As a result, states turned to assessment as a way to account for school effectiveness. This paradigm spilled over into universities so that by 1990 over half of the states had mandated some form of assessment for accountability. Similarly, in 1992, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, brought additional scrutiny of learning goals, this time by the federal government. Thus, for Ewell, the Spellings Commission is further representative of interventions by the states and federal government into higher education over the past 30 years (Ewell, 2008).

Ewell describes a second paradigm, assessment for improving student learning. While assessment for accountability makes judgments about the progress of students, typically based on standardized, quantitative measures, which are derived for the primary purpose of reporting to outside constituents (such as accreditors and policy makers), the emphasis of the student learning paradigm is formative. It does not seek to make a final determination about a student's learning but to gather information that is used to enhance a further instruction. This kind of data can only be gathered from within the learning environment itself and is therefore only partially suited for standardized tests. It instead requires the interaction of the educator with the student using multiple measures acquired over time. The instructor's role is central in matching learning to assessment and assessment to judgments about how to shape the ongoing educational interaction between student and teacher (Ewell, 2008).

While Ewell's description helpfully distinguishes assessment in terms of ideal types, in practice, the assessment paradigms exist on a spectrum. This can readily be seen in statements like those offered by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (2008), or the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (2012), or The Council of Independent Colleges (2012). Policy directives like these seek balance along the spectrum by calling for improvement in both student learning and for better reporting on the summative results of that learning. This is certainly a legitimate goal. Universities educate, and assessment naturally takes on the dual role of attempting to report on how effectively they are doing this and using the information gained to enhance student achievement. Still, a balance in rhetoric does not necessarily lead to a balance in practice. The emphasis on reporting to outside constituents brings national calls for assessment toward the accountability end of the spectrum by expecting learning to take place in a way that lends itself to reporting. It further presumes that what is to be learned is what readers of the report find valuable.

This vision for assessment is already common. In 2010 Ewell and Kuh reported the results of a significant survey of institutions regarding their assessment practice. Of the 2,715 institutions granting four year degrees, (http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/tables/dt10_005.asp) over 1500 were surveyed and 53 percent responded (Ewell & Kuh, 2010, p. 14). The authors report that most have at least some learning outcomes that are applicable to all undergraduates. Additionally, 92 percent attempt to gather a valid sample of their student body for use on at least one assessment measure, and of those, 76 percent used a national survey (p. 15). Nine out of ten also conduct some form of program assessment. Portfolios are the most common instrument, but of the eleven instruments mentioned, nine were surveys or interviews (p.16). Ewell and Kuh also found that when asked, institutions describe themselves as conducting assessment both to report to accreditors as well as to improve student learning (Ewell & Kuh, 2010 p. 19).

This data suggests that despite clear concerns to evaluate and improve learning at the programmatic level, assessment still primarily aims to target an institution's overall effectiveness. The chosen assessment instruments, like surveys, standardized tests, and portfolios, lend themselves to summative evaluations rather than formative. The study reveals that the most common process involves developing leaning outcomes, looking for valid ways to measure a valid sample across the university to against those outcomes, and reporting this data for accreditation purposes. Importantly, although Ewell and Kuh distinguish accreditation from other outside pressures, it is certainly the case that accreditation agencies themselves have become a clearing house for presenting and responding to those outside pressures (Brittingham, 2008; Eaton, 2007). The state of assessment indicated by Ewell and Kuh can thus be described as falling into terms that Gray helpfully calls objectivist and utilitarian, where what is to be learned is "knowable in advance, specifiable, measurable, and related to behaviors that can be directly observed" (Gray, 2002, p. 51). This is the kind of assessment leans toward the accountability end of the spectrum.

To faculty, assessment represents more than the implementation of a system that establishes goals, assesses progress, and produces reports, it seems most certainly to be used as a metric to evaluate faculty in terms of productivity and value. Hinton and McDowell encourage the prominent use of such standardized assessment measures to inform boards and presidents about individual departments. They contend that this information helps to identify weak departments by providing quantifiable data about job performance (Hinton & McDowell, 2012) or program effectiveness (Banta, 2005; Banta 2007). Middaugh provides a more detailed prescription for measuring faculty productivity. He argues that the college program (or major) is the essential level of assessment, but by which he means an evaluation of the cost of faculty relative to their number of general education students and majors served, the earned income from instruction, degrees granted, and the amount spent on research and instruction (Middaugh, 2010). These kinds of calculations are not new, but their inclusion in the language of assessment shows that accountability is the most attractive end of the assessment spectrum when institutional effectiveness is measured in the terms of the Spellings report concern for the high cost, lack of efficiency, and poor entrepreneurialism of universities.

This kind of assessment incorporates measures of finance, productivity, and economic value and indicates that the market is more than a context within which universities operate but has become one of their primary evaluators. Lock and Lorenz (2007) employ the concept of postdemocracy (borrowed from Crouch, 2004) to argue that universities, like other public institutions, have been handed to the regulation of the free market. This empties them of much of their democratic oversight and service. They argue that the demand for education to serve the knowledge economy (one made by the Bologna Process and that the Spellings Commissioned later echoed) might connote the need to educate students for economic performance, but it more directly indicates a desire of the markets to economize the transmission and production of knowledge (p. 412). Evans similarly argues that the management tools of the market economy have been forced upon higher education, particularly in the interaction between the student and teacher. The professor is held accountable for departing knowledge as a measurable commodity to the student (Evans, 2011). Given this drive to use assessment as a measure of institutional effectiveness in economic terms, it is not difficult to see why faculty perceive it as a threat to the university as an institution. Birnbaum, for example, wonders whether this outside pressure on universities will bring about the end of shared governance. It may be that for those within universities, shared governance appears to be working through the coordinated discussions and

efforts by different institutional units. But, for those outside the university, it is precisely these processes that leave higher education unable to respond quickly and creatively to the changing needs of the market environment that education finds itself (Birnbaum 2004). Thus, faculty see a clear implication of this form of assessment to be an effort by the markets to think of education as a commodity and then to divorce it from the professor who thinks of himself or herself as an (expensive) creator and caretaker over a body of knowledge. In this way universities can be entrusted to those who will govern them better, that is, to those who can operate them more economically.

This brief description of the assessment for accountability paradigm shows that it has powerful backers: the state and federal governments, important outside constituents who expect reports, and the economic forces of the market. Can faculty hope to resist such pressures?

One of the most powerful resources that university faculties have available to them is the practice of assessment for student learning and ensuring an effective role for faculty governance within the process of higher education will mean appropriating it. This paradigm predates the contemporary focus on accountability and is generally dated to the publication of *Involvement in Learning* in 1984 as a clear, national call for the role of assessment within university education (Ewell, 2002). But, answering the assessment mantra common to workshops and faculty meetings that ask faculty members to decide on what they would like students "to know and do" is insufficient for this appropriation. Assessment that improves student learning requires the evidence needed for ongoing decisions that respond to the relationship between the curriculum and student performance. Walvoord is right when she says that we are going to make these decisions in one way or another, but it makes sense to have as much data as possible when doing so (2010, p. 11). Professors naturally gather at least some data about their students within a course, but assessment attempts to systematically collect and analyze enough data to reinforce the educational process itself. Furthermore, some change of perspective is required because assessment for learning examines not only courses—where the faculty are most comfortable—but the programs to which those courses contribute.

The assessment for learning paradigm focuses on the learning outcomes that are rooted in the academic disciplines. The outcomes are dynamic, doing much more than setting goals for the purpose of reporting achievement. They set goals for students and programs that are also representative of inquiry itself in that they are open-ended. Proper outcomes are open-ended and "grow" as the skills of the students do in that universities view education as the acquisition of content as well as the ability to apply methods that generate that content. This paradigm does not fear to examine the skills and knowledge that students actually demonstrate but does so for both formative and summative purposes. Most, and the most meaningful, assessment is formative in that it is done throughout a period of instruction as a way of knowing what the student is learning and what the instructor might do to maintain or improve that learning. Thus, formative assessment concerns itself with learning styles, teaching strategies, meaningful and creative assignments, ways of providing teacher feedback, and the structuring and presenting of learning material. Its foundational conviction is that increasing teaching effectiveness through formative assessment leads to greater student learning. In addition to being formative, assessment also makes summative evaluations. In this case, students are asked to produce definitive evidence of what they have learned, which is then compared to expectations for competence in a field of study. In courses, this often takes the form of examinations or term papers. At the program level, students may take a nationally normed test, present the results of research paper or project, or present a portfolio of representative work.

Although learning outcomes are essential, assessment does not rely on outcomes for their own sake but for their role in helping move students toward proficiency of the knowledge and practices within a field of study that entitles them to a credential. The language of program goals and outcomes easily obscures the necessary and always present relation between the professor and student that impacts whatever data might be collected. Academic disciplines are not independently exiting bodies of objective knowledge that establish their own indicators of competency and standards of value. Instead, they are various methods of inquiry and the insights that result from them. When done well, assessment recognizes that disciplines are the products of investigators, often university professors, who continually make explicit or implicit judgments of value that guide them in their research and in their decisions about what is to be presented, in what way, and through what assignments. This dynamic is embodied in various ways that range from the topics of the courses that a department might offer to the texts and theories that individual professors choose to teach or ignore. This value-laden interaction between professors and students ensures that assessments cannot interpret themselves and that the changes that might improve student learning are best made by educators who investigate, understand, and present their discipline.

Still, assessment for learning cannot be said to be complete until identifiable changes have been made to improve what and how students learn. Once formative and summative assessments have been conducted, the data is used to determine how effectively students are reaching the necessary standards for this goal and how this might be improved.

These same insights about formative assessment, summative assessment, and the complex nature of the investigation and teaching of academic disciplines are already embedded within the teaching profession. At the same, developing these insights provide the faculty with their best response to assessment as accountability. How?

Faculty, by embracing assessment on their own terms, can strengthen their role of university governance, a format that is traditional to the institution of higher education. Describing governance is surprisingly difficult and a variety of frameworks have been employed to try and do so (Kezzar & Eckel, 2004). In perhaps the classic formulation, it describes the functional relationships between the faculty departments, administrators, and external constituents (Richardson & Smalling, 2005). Faculty particularly value the more precise notion of shared governance that prescribes the rights and responsibilities that belong to these different units serving the university. It creates a balance of power that allows different groups to exert influence where they are most concerned but not without being checked by other university departments. This form finds its traditional expression in the American Association of University Professor's statement on shared governance (1966).

For faculty, governance means applying their competency in areas of curriculum, tenure, and promotion (Richardson & Smalling 2005). In an attempt to confirm this expectation, the Center for Higher Education Policy Analysis conducted a survey of higher education faculty and administrators and the results are revealing for assessment. It found that 70 percent perceived the greatest faculty influence in these traditional areas. However, the reported concluded that a significantly low number of faculty (64% at four year institutions, and less than 60 percent at Master's and Doctoral granting universities) believe they have little influence over the evaluation of academic programs (CHEPA, 2003). Yet, as has been seen, it is precisely at the level of the program where assessment for accountability is most threatening. Thus, a clear strategy for faculty to maintain and even increase their role in governance is to tie their control of the curriculum and of standards for faculty competence with their teaching activity. Faculty already

work within this implicit relationship, but the practice of learning how to assess makes it explicit and provides evidence of its importance. In other words, by maintaining control over the method, measures, and interpretation of assessment results, faculty will be vitally involved in what is reported to university constituents who value assessment for what they believe it says about efficiency and effectiveness. Following through on this strategy will mean employing the following practical activities, some of which are extensions of current ones while others call for new investments in time and energy.

First, it is essential that faculty *understand the purpose of learning outcomes and the importance of an educational taxonomy when writing them.* Learning outcomes are already common elements on course syllabi and program evaluation reports, but it is critical that these outcomes be properly written (Suskie, 2009 is an excellent introductory resource). Otherwise faculty will face difficulties in developing and evaluating assignments that seek to move students toward these outcomes. Such outcomes will describe in broad terms the activities students perform and not the material instructors present. Employing an educational taxonomy (such as Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Marzano, 2001) can help instructors conceive the kinds of operations students must engage in to reach learning goals and are therefore helpful for both writing outcomes and designing instruction in ways that are align with one another.

Next, faculty must em*ploy classroom techniques that have been shown to improve learning*. While there will always be a place for the traditional college lecture, it is also important to engage students in additional active forms of learning. There are many texts that provide university professors with practical and appropriate techniques for active learning (Barkley, 2009; Claxton, 1987; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006) effective collaboration (Barkely, Cross, Howell, 2003; Fink 2003), and critical thinking (Walsh & Sattes, 2011; Brookfield, 2011). Strategies for active learning help instructors teach, which in turn, leads students to achieve more successfully the learning outcomes that assessment will measure.

Using assessment as a tool for faculty governance also requires that faculty *conduct formative classroom assessment with documentation in mind*. To do this, faculty must first understand the structure of learning outcomes within a program. That is, how do the outcomes of individual courses contribute to the learning outcomes of a program? When faculty can design classroom assignments that lead students to employ the knowledge, skills, and thinking of a particular discipline, the evaluation of those assignments become evidence for how effectively students are moving toward the desired credentials a program will eventually bestow. At the same time, and of equally importance, those same evaluations can be used to enhance further instruction. Faculty already develop and grade assignments as a matter of course. Doing so with an eye toward using this activity as a way of documenting teaching and learning ensures that faculty themselves establish their teaching effectiveness using the methods and measures they deem most appropriate. When faculty establish the outcomes for student learning, and provide evidence that student learning is moving toward these outcomes within classrooms, they reduce the risk of outside stakeholders imposing external measures of productivity or success. Angelo and Cross (1993) and Diamond (2008) are excellent starting points.

In addition to classroom assessment, faculty must *plan the placement of summative assessments at key points in a program and document the results.* Faculty governance relies on the expertise of the faculty to determine when students have met qualifications that credential them as practitioners of the disciplines they have studied, so it is in the interest of the faculty that students be able to perform what the credentials suggest that they can. Since many courses are required to initiate a student into a field of study, it is important that programs design summative

assessments that are outside particular courses and that ask students to demonstrate that they have achieved program learning outcomes. The results of these assessments must be documented for the same reasons that classroom assessments are: to improve student learning and to demonstrate the effectiveness of faculty relative to the program of study. General examinations, national credentialing examinations, thesis papers, and portfolios are all examples of summative assessment. While summative assessments may mean surrendering some control of the assessment instruments in disciplines that have relevant national benchmarks, faculty need not rely solely on these external measures. Assessing at additional points in the program, such as at the end of the junior year or midway through the sophomore year, provides additional information that help to contextualize the efforts of both students and the faculty throughout the program. An introduction to the bibliography of program assessment and of the concerns it must address may be found in Astin (1993), Banta and Jones (2009), Dunn, Baker, Halonen, & McCarthy (2011), and Middaugh (2010). At the same time, Diamond (2008) provides strategies for faculty to conceive of program assessment on their own terms.

Adopting these recommendations will mean that faculty will have documentation about student performances at both the course and program level. This data is meaningless unless faculty *schedule formal meetings to interpret assessment results and then to make recommendations for maintenance and change.* Of the practices being suggested, this is perhaps the most novel and time-consuming. It requires the faculty to take an honest look at their program in order to find where it is helping students to succeed and where it can be improved. This means looking for patterns about student performance in coursework relative to summative assessments. It also means asking questions about the validity of assignments, the helpfulness of instructor feedback, and the need for changes in curriculum or in its presentation. Any self assessment is difficult, but this one is the more challenging because faculty are rarely formally trained in program evaluation. While it may not be necessary to conduct statistical analysis, it will be important to develop a systematic and valid way to look at the formative and summative data that had been collected. Although difficult, this step is critical because it demonstrates that the faculty who teach courses and administer programs take seriously their essential role in interpreting assessment results. By taking active control of this process, faculty deny the attempt of others to do so. At the same time, they furnish themselves with data and make decisions that demonstrate their active engagement in effectiveness in the institution in terms of their own disciplines and through their own agency.

Long term trends are important for establishing the effectiveness of any large institution. Faculty who r*eport and monitor on the progress of assessment over time* strengthen not only their teaching but their claims for governance. Monitoring assessment results with the express intention of improving learning will lead programs to educate more successfully. This, in itself, provides faculty with a strong position to maintain their role in university governance. However, it also provides them with important documentation useful for responding to outside stakeholders when questions are raised about the productivity of the faculty, their concern for institutional effectiveness, and most importantly their role in helping students achieve demonstrable learning outcomes.

Up this point, it has been suggested that faculty make use assessment to improve their role in the university as an institution guiding higher education. Such a strategy involves concrete activities. First, understand the purpose of learning goals and the importance of an educational taxonomy when writing them. Then, employ classroom techniques that have been shown to improve learning. Afterwards, the faculty must conduct formative classroom

assessment with documentation in mind as well as Plan the placement of summative assessments at key points in a program and document the results. This must be followed by formal meetings to interpret assessment results and then to make recommendations for maintenance and change. Finally, assessment cannot be said to be complete without reporting and monitor the progress of assessment over time.

What are the consequences for faculty if they refuse to appropriate the assessment for learning paradigm? Since assessment will continue to be the primary instrument of measuring institutional effectiveness, faculty will most certainly be responsible for meeting the assessment as accountability structures that university administrators and outside constituents believe will give them feedback on student performance. Perhaps more damaging, however, will be the various strategies of resistance faculty may take up in response to the increasing culture of accountability. When threatened by loss of governance or of curricular intrusion, faculty will either intentionally or indirectly employ their expertise and critical training to resist. The result easily leads to what Heifitz (2009, as cited in Crellin, 2010), terms adaptive failure—a resistance to change by "diversion of attention and displacement of responsibility" (Crellin, 2010, p.79). In terms of assessment, this might mean focusing on time or logistics, the symbolic nature of authority structures, and the impact on already heavy workloads. Or, faculty may single out only one dimension of its practice. Like all complex processes, assessment when critiqued along its natural fault lines loses its integrity and efficacy. Thus, faculty may focus only on the time needed to analyze results or produce reports or may argue against the value of assessing students in the humanities when what is desired is a change of values or vision about the world or on the authority of outsiders to determine how to measure the faculty's areas of expertise. Additionally, they may refuse to learn new information, contribute to ongoing change, or may sit in meetings and refuse to be engaged.

The diffusion of authority to departments and sub-units that characterize many colleges and universities easily spreads adaptive failure. If assessment is implemented along lines of vertical authority form administrative offices down, it will need to be done effectively many times, once for each department and subgroup. The resistance of even a small minority or sufficiently sized groups is enough at the very least to reduce morale and, more problematically, to impair the validity of the assessment instruments adapted by the university—a reality of which faculty are quite conscious and employ in a feedback loop of adaptive failure.

Ironically, these strategies of resistance are likely to be self-defeating. By impairing the ability of an institution to respond effectively to the current climate of accountability, faculty endanger their most valuable resource—trust. State and federal governments fund universities, employers rely on their credentials, and parents invest in them, because they are trusted to transmit effectively the knowledge and values of a society. When this trust is placed at risk by the perception that faculty are unwilling to be accountable, their resources and ability to attract students are put at risk. But perhaps of most important, in their attempts to subvert systems of assessment that they feel may damage their role as experts and guardians of credentials, faculty ironically ignore the useful insights that formative and summative assessment may provide educators. Assessment, first and foremost, seeks to improve teaching, but the documented evidence that assessments for learning produces cannot help but lead faculty into strong positions from which they can make powerful contributions to the contemporary conversation about higher education today.

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