

MANDATED ASSESSMENT?

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The current interest in mandated assessment reflects the belief among citizens and legislators that, in order to guarantee the proper functioning of the University System, consumers (i.e., students) and financial investors (i.e., taxpayers) have the right to evaluate an institution's productivity. While, as the business metaphor suggests, such assumptions may be useful for a Fortune-500 company, they are wholly inappropriate for academia. In fact, the assessment movement itself is producing deleterious effects which ultimately cannot help but countermand the purpose of higher education in Georgia.

In a democracy, colleges and universities perform two distinct though complementary functions. Most obvious to purveyors of assessment, schools were established to train a work force capable of fulfilling society's projected needs, primarily on managerial and professional levels. Equally as important, though, institutions of higher learning are expected to teach students how to fulfill their responsibilities in a free and open society. Citizens must be taught more than facts. They must develop judgment and flexibility, the judgment necessary for discriminating among equally appealing—or, all too often, equally unappealing—alternatives, and the flexibility to compromise for the sake of the greater good. Only in this way will people be able to make the kinds of intelligent choices required of citizens in a thriving society.

These two missions are addressed

through the double curriculum found in most state institutions today. In addition to concentrating in a major field, designed primarily for professional training, students are also required to complete a core curriculum, a series of courses intended to develop the sense of self and society that will enable graduates to assume their adult responsibilities in our democracy. The first function, which is primarily utilitarian, is amenable to objective assessment and, in fact, such assessment already exists. Institutions are periodically reviewed for accreditation; professional schools are licensed; faculty are evaluated by administrators and students, as well as other faculty members; and students are graded, required to complete statewide Regents' examinations and, ultimately, hired by businesses or accepted into graduate and professional schools. Any more of this kind of assessment would be redundant.

The essential question, then, is whether or not we can, or even should, mandate assessment of the second function—the institution's ability to teach students how to think logically and independently, and how to act ethically and responsibly, so they have the ability to make intelligent decisions and the morality to resist harmful temptation, seductive though it may be. These ethical abstractions defy quantitative analysis: much of their concrete application is relative, each generation and each society defining the good in its own context. Paradoxically, while the value of a society may be measured by the morality of its citizens, any attempt to measure how well an institu-

tion teaches judgment and flexibility to encourage individual and social responsibility inevitably nullifies those very qualities in at least ten ways:

1. Mandated assessment abridges academic freedom and jeopardizes tenure. According to the A.A.U.P., "Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good [which] depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition."

By its very nature, externally mandated assessment perforce imposes a predetermined definition of the truth, thereby effectively foreclosing the search and restricting its exposition.

2. Mandated assessment threatens institutional diversity. Any system-wide instrument of assessment imposes a monolithic ideology on all units, effectively ignoring and threatening to eliminate the different missions and academic programs which were specifically designed

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to accommodate the diverse student populations found among the many institutions in the Georgia System.

3. Mandated assessment imperils minority views. When used as the arbiter of truth, externally mandated assessment penalizes heterodoxical opinions which may not conform with those of the majority. Under these conditions, those being assessed—whether students, faculty or institutions—could conceivably be forced to sacrifice honesty and truth for the sake of a positive evaluation.

4. Mandated assessment is faddish. As the latest in a long line of “quick fixes” for American education, mandated assessment has not yet had the opportunity to undergo the kind of comprehensive research and development required for substantiating its value as an intellectually sound academic practice.

5. Mandated assessment is reductionistic. Instruments designed to test universal “values” and “analytical skills” oversimplify those concepts to the point of meaninglessness, making them useless for dealing with actual situations requiring true comprehension and intellectual acumen.

6. Mandated assessment reinforces an erroneous view of higher education. Colleges and universities are not factories designed to turn out a specific quantity of goods, all stamped with the System’s seal of approval. It is pernicious even to entertain the notion that human beings can be quantified like manufactured products.

7. Mandated assessment usurps the prerogative of the faculty. Thus far, the American system of higher education has thrived because academia has been able to restrain those who are uninformed and unqualified—well-meaning though they have been—from interfering with and thereby restricting the free pursuit of knowledge.

8. Mandated assessment undermines the integrity of the professorate. Advanced degrees earned by the faculty attest to the teachers’ professional certification in their fields. It is anti-intel-

lectual to assume that anyone outside the field is competent to dictate curriculum or evaluate the professional conduct of those within; and internal assessment already exists.

9. Mandated assessment deflects attention from the real problems of higher education. All the pressure to make institutions accountable for the way they spend tax dollars camouflages the fact that the amount of money being spent on our System has decreased over the past decade. We already know the System has declined. What we need is a larger budget, not more tests.

10. Mandated assessment diverts funds from where they are most needed. Especially now, with Georgia’s serious financial problems, it is reckless and irresponsible to invest any time or money in an assessment program which, in the final analysis, will tell us what we already know that in higher education, Georgia has slipped from first to among the last of the Southern states. Any available funds should be spent on faculty, staff, equipment, campus maintenance, etc.—on that which truly will improve the quality of education in this state.

The assessment movement seems to be propelled by a series of well-meaning, though uninformed, external forces. In the private sector, citizens and the business community, concerned about economic competitiveness in the state, erroneously believe mandated assessment will guarantee educational accountability. Responding to public opinion, legislators, in turn, have pressured the Board of Regents—a group of non-academics—to mandate assessment for every unit in the University System of Georgia. However, these outside forces in themselves constitute a grave threat to academic freedom, for any external interference with academia, regardless of its intention or guise, by its very presence restricts the open pursuit of knowledge.

We must vehemently reject any attempt to tamper with our intellectual integrity; and above all, we must vigilantly resist being shackled by the barely disguised “mind-forged manacles” of the assessment movement.

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ining our curriculum, our teaching methods, and our content. It must be a collegial exercise in which all faculty are involved, with experimentation and open discussion encouraged.

What then, of those hungry, circling alligators? We should seize the initiative and attack them with a cutting edge or two. If taxpayers really want “quality education,” they have to provide the resources. And assessment methods should provide the data to prove the case. How can we teach critical thinking to classes already holding 50 students, classes which we are told to increase in size?

The alligators had better put their money where their mouths are; there’s only so much they can take out of these old academic hides. So, colleagues, we’d better assess what we are about and clearly articulate why we can’t do it with a few simple exit exams. If we navigate the waters successfully we may even convince legislators and other taxpayers that we need more faculty, better laboratories, and adequate library holdings. We may even convince a few that the most important mission of undergraduate education should be to teach students effectively and that to do so justifies a reduced teaching load as much as doing research. But we can’t do any of this unless we decide what students should learn, how we will know if they have done so, and how we will use this information to improve our major programs.

