

## **Rituals of Verification: Department Chairs and the Dominant Discourse of Assessment in Higher Education**

**Abe Feuerstein  
Bucknell University**

*In recent years, America's colleges and universities have scrambled to justify increasing costs while simultaneously deflecting claims that students are not learning. Academic assessment has become a primary means of legitimating the educational practices employed by various institutions of higher education. However, there is often a lack of connection between the concept of academic assessment and its on-the-ground implementation by academic departments and individual faculty members. Given the centrality of department chairs in implementing systems of academic assessment, this study examines and contextualize the views of department chairs in a mid-sized liberal arts college with respect to assessment efforts on its campus.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, America's colleges and universities have found themselves in a deeply defensive position, scrambling to justify increasing costs while simultaneously deflecting claims that students are not learning (Archibald & Feldman, 2010; Bok, 2013). No longer able to draw on their legacy of past achievement, these institutions are trying to appease critics by finding new ways to demonstrate their value and effectiveness (Bok, 2013). A common way that schools of have sought to validate their work with students is by articulating their goals more clearly (and more publicly) and by developing ways to evaluate the degree to which those goals are being met (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014). In general, these efforts are referred to as "academic assessment" or "outcomes assessment."

Consistent with calls for greater transparency regarding student learning, a vast array of associations, foundations, and accrediting bodies now promote the benefits of outcomes assessment, provide support to colleges seeking to implement these practices, and demand that colleges demonstrate their value through more rigorous and high quality assessment processes (Pepin, 2014). To meet the expectations articulated by these various accrediting bodies, institutions of higher education have promoted the use of outcomes assessment among faculty and hired specialists in the measurement of student learning.

Despite the public's desire for more data related to student learning, and the increasing focus on accreditation as the primary means to legitimate the educational practices employed by various institutions of higher education, there is often a disconnect between the rhetoric embracing the concept of academic assessment and its on-the-ground implementation by academic departments and individual faculty members. In this regard, the success or failure of academic assessment to demonstrate institutional effectiveness is often directly linked to the ability of department chairs to work with faculty members in their departments to develop shared educational goals, measures, and systems for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and acting on the data generated. Given the centrality of department chairs in implementing

systems of academic assessment, it is important to consider their understandings and perspectives related to this aspect of their work. Toward that end, this study seeks to examine and contextualize the views of department chairs in a mid-sized liberal arts college with respect to assessment efforts on its campus.

Though liberal arts institutions only compose a relatively small proportion of higher education institutions (enrollment in liberal arts institutions represents less than 1 percent of all college students)<sup>1</sup>, these institutions have a strong reputation for high quality teaching. As such, faculty members within these institutions typically view teaching as a central focus of their work (Chopp, Frost, & Weiss, 2013). The value placed on high quality teaching and student learning within the liberal arts context makes these institutions appealing places for examining chairs' perspectives on academic assessment. In addition, the relatively small size of liberal arts colleges means that chairs and faculty ostensibly have more opportunity to work together in developing assessment systems that represent institutional values. Taken together, these attributes create a promising environment where academic assessment should add value in terms of gauging the level of student performance and engagement, informing new curricular directions, and identifying problems. By carrying out in-depth interviews with 17 department chairs (6 men and 11 women) representing disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics, this study provides new insights into department chairs' perspectives regarding whether or not academic assessment is delivering on these promises. It also illustrates some of the ways that chairs work to mediate external demands for accountability with institutional expectations and values.

The following section provide further insight into the current context of higher education with respect to academic assessment. This background serves to situate the assessment challenges faced by department chairs and their college within the broader discourse about the increasingly corporate character of higher education, and the focus on standards and accountability that some believe has slowly shifted the academy away from a reliance on professional autonomy and judgment in favor of what some have describe as a managerial "audit" culture (Power, 1999; Shore & Wright, 2003).

After summarizing this context, I provide a brief description of the growing expectations for department chairs with regard to assessment and the creative mediation that is often required of chairs to do this work successfully. Next, I describe the methodology used to collect and analyze the interview data that informs this investigation. Finally, I provide a summary and analysis of my interviews with the department chairs which reveal a variety of concerns associated with the development of more intensive assessment practices. My findings point toward the efforts of chairs to implement assessment in ways that match with, and/or protect, departmental values. In this implementation, it seems clear that chairs are struggling to make sense of the purposes of assessment, and to create new spaces for discourse and resistance within the institution's broader efforts to strengthen assessment practices.

## **ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT AND ITS CRITICS**

A broad variety of authors have raised questions about the quality of learning in U.S. institutions of higher education (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Bok, 2008, 2013; Keeling & Hersh, 2011; Selingo, 2013). The general theme of this critique is that students are leaving college with considerable debt but without the knowledge, skills, or dispositions necessary for them to succeed in our increasingly competitive information-based economy. In an effort to address these issues, there has been a growing chorus of voices supportive of establishing new accountability measures for colleges and universities that would make assessment data related to student learning available to the broader public.

These proposed accountability measures generally focus on the need to verify various types of student learning including but not limited to the quality of students' critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing (Arum & Roksa, 2010). Many of the proponents of increased accountability contend that when colleges and universities fail to advance student learning in these areas (and others), individual students suffer because they are disadvantaged in their efforts to compete for rewarding and high paying jobs. More fundamentally, these proponents maintain that poor student preparation constrains the economic competitiveness of the U.S. as whole, and jeopardizes our system of democratic governance. More data on student learning is necessary, they argue, in order to identify areas of weakness that must be addressed.

In the sub-sections that follow, I consider the push for increased accountability in higher education and examine the arguments put forward by both proponents and critics of academic assessment. These conflicting perspectives provide the necessary context for understanding the challenges faced by academic department chairs who must respond to institutional mandates to implement more robust systems of assessment while simultaneously maintaining their legitimacy in the eyes of their faculty colleagues with regard to their support for autonomy and professional authority.

### **An Increasing Focus on Accountability**

As questions about the quality of learning in our colleges and universities have increased over time, there has been a growing focus on higher education's supposed lack of accountability. Outside of the academy, business leaders like Laszlo Bock, Google's Senior Vice President of People Operations, have been vociferous in their critique of higher education. In a recent interview with Thomas Friedman (Friedman, 2014), Bock emphasized that "G.P.A.'s are worthless as a criteria for hiring..." because grades no longer reflect learning and that too many colleges "don't deliver on what they promise" (Bock in Friedman, 2014, ¶1).

Proponents of academic assessment argue that greater transparency is the best way to improve the quality of students' educational experiences. Only by identifying areas where learning is weak, they argue, will professors and administrators be able to make needed changes. Jeffrey Buller (Buller, 2007) who has written about ways to improve the work of academic departments, argues that assessment data should be viewed as providing departments with the data necessary to "modify course content, alter the pedagogical methods used to cover certain materials, alter course prerequisites or the order in which certain types of materials are covered" (p. 102). Buller (2007) stresses that assessment should be a win-win for academic departments. If assessment demonstrates that the department has met its objectives, he notes, "you now have data to demonstrate that you are accomplishing the very things you set out to do" (p.102). If assessment shows that the department has failed to meet its objectives, "you now have the information you need concerning how improvement can be made..." (Buller p.102, 2007). Such statements help strengthen the case for assessment by focusing on the potential improvements which it makes possible.

Such sentiments fit nicely into the broader narrative about the importance of assessment as a source of data for reflection and constant improvement. And though the varied rationales supporting the implementation of systems of academic assessment are persuasive, there is ample room for critique. It is to this critique that I now turn.

### **Voices of Dissent and Other Mitigating Factors**

Despite growth in the use of academic assessment to measure student learning, and the many benefits that are thought to be associated with such practices, some college leaders have resisted the call for more assessment. For example, David Warren, speaking on behalf of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities has shared his concern that assessment efforts will yield "a meaningless outcome at great cost" (Warren, in Arum and Roksa, 2010, p. 23). Warren's contention is based on his belief that current measures of student learning say very little about the kinds of learning that many institutions of higher education say they value the most.

In such situations, the push for greater transparency can result in an emphasis on easy-to-measure outcomes and a concomitant devaluing of more lofty aspirations. Such compromises have led the educational philosopher Gerte Biesta (Biesta, 2009) to question "whether we are indeed measuring what we value, or whether we are just measuring what we can easily measure and thus end up valuing what we (can) measure" (Biesta, 2009, p. 35).

Many faculty members, concerned about the potential negative impact of assessment on the broader learning goals that they are seeking to achieve, avoid engaging with assessment or reject it outright. Writing about the difficulty of engage faculty in assessment, Sherry Linkon (2005), notes that many faculty members believe that assessment oversimplifies the work of professors, reduces faculty autonomy, and creates conformity and standardization with regard to both pedagogy and curriculum. Rather than

reject assessment, she argues that faculty must engage with assessment more deeply in order to avoid its use as a mechanism of faculty critique and control. Too often, she observes, faculty members in academic departments have “responded [to demands for increased assessment] by seeking the fastest, easiest, least demanding solutions” (Linkon, 2005, p.31) for gauging student learning.

Other critics such as Michael Power (Power, 1999), Cris Shore and Susan Wright (Shore & Wright, 2003), Peter Taubman (Taubman, 2009), and Ana Martínez-Alemán (2012), link the current drive for assessment to broader changes in society and ideology. The changes they discuss revolve around a shift from older social democratic values which favored the public provision of services, greater social equality, and professional judgment, to a set of neoliberal values focused on deregulation, competition, and efficiency. While the term “neoliberal” typically refers to the ideological perspective that favors competition and choice within a market system as necessary incentives to improve economic efficiency and human well-being (Harvey, 2007), applied in the current context, it refers to the use of assessment and measurement as tools which promise increased efficiency and provide consumers with the data necessary to compare programs and make informed decisions.

Critiquing the neoliberal push for more assessment, authors such as Shore and Wright (2003) argue that the current focus on assessment and transparency in higher education does not actually provide a full picture of what is occurring in institutions of higher education, but rather, provides only limited insight into selected auditable elements of performance. These selected elements, they point out, are often constructed in ways that obfuscate the complexity of the work that takes place in colleges and universities. For example, quantitative measures of performance are often favored over more qualitative or holistic measures because of their ease of interpretation and their ability to facilitate comparison among students, professors, and institutions in the hopes of identifying weaknesses and improving educational efficiency and quality. According to Shore and Wright (2003), “regulatory mechanisms” such as academic assessment, “act as ‘political technologies’ which seek to bring persons, organizations and objectives into alignment” (p. 61). They argue that such technologies are powerful because they simultaneously impose “external control from above” (p. 61) and facilitate the internalization of new norms such that individuals eventually come to monitor themselves for compliance.

Along similar lines, Power (1999) argues that the language of assessment is important because it plays a central role in shaping the way institutions and individuals define and think about issues such as quality teaching, student learning, and institutional effectiveness. Shore and Wright (2003) observe that in the area of academic assessment, the discourse has focused on terms such as, “‘performance’, ‘quality assurance’, ‘quality control’, ‘discipline’, ‘accreditation’, ‘accountability’, ‘transparency’, ‘efficiency’, ‘effectiveness’, ‘value for money’, ‘responsibility’, ‘benchmarking’, ‘good practice’, ‘peer-review’, ‘external verification’, ‘stakeholder’ and ‘empowerment’” (p. 60). They further explain that these terms have been borrowed from the private sector where they were associated with financial accounting and auditing practices (Shore and Wright, 2003). Thus, by introducing language that was designed to increase business efficiency, productivity, and profit into educational institutions designed to support and sustain a democratic society by creating new ideas, knowledge, and an educated citizenry, the way people think about the nature of those institutions begins to shift (Martínez-Alemán, 2012).

Taubman (2009) notes that the continuous use of business terms in educational institutions “normalize[s] particular discourses on teaching and education” (p. 6) such that terms and practices that were once only used in the corporate world to “reduce complicated phenomena and experiences to quantifiable and thus commensurable data” (p.6) now shape the way we think about education. An example of the emphasis on quantification is the popularity of rankings of institutions of higher education developed by organizations like *U.S. News and World Report* and the *Princeton Review*. These rankings, which have been thoroughly critiqued for favoring particular types of institutional investments such as spending per student, and the reputation of the institution, as well as for the impossibility of comparing so many different types of organizations on a set of fixed (and reductive) criteria, remain popular and are viewed as a non-trivial influence on the use of resources within institutions of higher education (Diver, 2005; Gladwell, 2011).

As calls for reform in higher education have increased, and accrediting agencies have become stronger (with the blessings of their member institutions), the evidence from this study suggests that the increasing emphasis on assessment is also beginning to have a significant impact on institutional thinking and practices.

### **THE CENTRAL ROLE OF DEPARTMENT CHAIRS IN MEDIATING DEMANDS FOR INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY**

Within institutions, assessment work is often governed by faculty and coordinated by the academic administration. However, the success or failure of these efforts is often directly linked to the ability of department chairs to work with faculty members in their departments to develop shared goals, measures, and a system for collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and acting on the data generated. Many chairs are not well prepared for this aspect of their work which, in recent years, has grown to become central to the role. Jeffrey Buller (Buller, 2012) has been documenting changes in the role of department chairs over time. In an interview in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2013, Buller noted that “Chairs are put in this difficult position where they are held accountable for documenting that their programs are succeeding, and that they are staying in budget” (June, 2013). The increase in “accountability culture” Buller argues has meant that “you need people with managerial training to serve as chair” (Buller in June, 2013, ¶10). However, chairs, recruited from among the faculty in most institutions rarely have this type of background.

Moreover, Pepin (2014), writing about the increasing emphasis on assessment in higher education, concludes that many chairs are deeply skeptical about the benefits of assessment to their programs and institutions. He believes that chair’s skepticism regarding assessment revolves around a multi-layered set of concerns that begins at the institutional level where there is suspicion that assessment data could be used for cross-institutional comparisons, such as those published by *U.S. News and World Report*, but encompasses concerns about the surveillance of departmental work and how assessment data will be used by the institution in making decisions about future resource allocations to their departments and programs. Perhaps of even greater concern notes Pepin (2014), is the potential use of assessment data in the evaluation of faculty.

The growing emphasis on assessment creates a broad variety of opportunities and challenges for chairs who, as mentioned above, are positioned at the nexus of upper administration and the faculty. By redefining and framing issues for both upper-level administrators and faculty members, department chairs seek creative solutions to institutional problems. There is some recognition, on the part of both the faculty and the administration, that good chairs are able to successfully mediate the interests of the upper administration and the faculty within their departments. Those who mediate successfully make a positive impact on departmental climate, reputation, and the quality of education the department can provide. By the same token, those who do this work poorly can be harmful to their departments and the institution overall.

By interviewing department chairs about their role in assessment, I have sought to better understand their hopes and concerns about academic assessment as well as the various constraints they feel with regard to the expectations of upper-level administrators, accreditation agencies, and faculty colleagues. As mentioned earlier, the chairs interviewed for this study all work in a mid-sized private eastern college with a focus on liberal arts education. Within this particular institution, academic assessment has become a significant concern, and the upper administration including the President, Provost, and Deans have all focused more directly on the issue of academic assessment in recent years.

The interviews with chairs, analyzed below, provide new insights into the ways that chairs think about the growing demand for assessment data, its perceived usefulness, and how assessment is changing the nature of academic work. In particular, talking directly with these academic leaders gives a clearer sense of the “symbolic mediation” that chairs take part in as they interpret assessment expectations for professors in their departments and the degree to which they sometimes reframe this work to make it more palatable to their colleagues. These interviews also demonstrate that department chairs are not

simply the puppets of the administration and have the capacity to take part in what Anderson (2009) calls “creative mediation” in which department chairs “engage strategically in various forms of compliance and resistance” while calculating the potential threat to their department’s perceived legitimacy (p. 97).

## **METHODS**

The data for this study was gathered through a series of in-depth qualitative interviews with department chairs at a mid-sized liberal arts college over a 6 week period in the spring of 2014. I chose interviews as the appropriate methodology for this exploratory research because I was seeking to characterize the meanings and central themes in the life world of department chairs with respect to assessment (Kvale, 2006). The goal of the interviews was to encourage chairs to provide a full behind-the-scenes understanding of their views of academic assessment, its promises, and potential pitfalls. The interviewing format was semi-structured employing a set of interview questions (included in Appendix A) but also allowing opportunities for follow-up and more in-depth discussion of those issues of most interest to the department chairs. Within the sections that follow, I refer to the institution where I did the research as “the college.”

Prior to the interviews, I provided participating chairs with an informed consent statement related to their participation in the study and also emphasized the confidentiality of their responses. I also requested permission to make audio recordings of our interviews. These recordings were then transcribed and the transcriptions were uploaded into qualitative analysis software (NVIVO)<sup>2</sup>. The original audio-recordings were then destroyed. Within the transcripts of the recordings, participants were referred to using pseudonyms.

The chairs I interviewed represented a broad variety of academic disciplines spanning three divisions of the college: humanities (7), social sciences (7), and the natural sciences and mathematics (2)<sup>3</sup>. The participants included six men and eleven women. Their experience in the role of chair ranged from less than one year to more than ten. I began my analysis by reading the transcribed interviews multiple times. Based on this reading, I was able to develop a set of codes that represented similarities across participants. These codes were then refined through a constant comparative process whereby the original codes were compared with other coded excerpts and were then recoded using further refinements (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Many of these codes clustered together in meaningful categories. I report on the characteristics of these major divisions, and provide examples of quotations from the department chairs in the sections that follow. In order to conceal the identity of the participants, I only refer to their gender and whether they are a “newer” chair, having four or fewer years in the role, or an “experienced” chair, having more than four years in the role.

## **SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS**

My analysis of the interviews with department chairs revealed a number of inter-related issues that have arisen in relation to the implementation of academic assessment practices at the departmental level. Though the chairs discussed a broad variety of issues related to academic assessment, their comments broadly fit within five major categories. These categories included (1) confusion about the best way to carry out the assessment of academic programs; (2) recognition of the ancillary benefits associated with planning and implementing new assessment practices; (3) consideration of faculty member resistance to the implementation of academic assessment in relation to issues such as over-simplification of educational aims, distraction from teaching, and lack of trust in faculty judgment; and (4) the role of the chair in mediating administrative and faculty perspectives with respect to assessment. The sub-sections below examine these themes and provide representative examples from the interview transcripts.

### **Confusion about Doing Assessment**

Concerns about lack of knowledge and experience in designing, implementing, and interpreting assessment measures related to departmental majors was a significant concern for many of the chairs that

I interviewed. Many of the chairs expressed their understanding that meaningful assessment required the application of specialized knowledge in the area of measurement and statistics that they did not possess. Chairs' lack of knowledge regarding technical aspects of assessment left many of them feeling as if they were groping in the dark for answers to their questions about student learning.

These chairs shared their understanding that the direct quantitative measures of student learning were a required aspect of the assessment program at their college, but in most cases felt they did not have the training necessary to do this work well. For example, one chair noted that the experience of designing assessment measures has been "a kind of peripatetic experience where you are constantly being told that you are to use this kind of instrument, no sorry, this one, no forget that" [female, newer chair]. Many of the chairs made similar comments suggesting that assessment was a moving target that they couldn't fully understand. The specialized language (e.g. distinguishing difference between goals, objectives, and outcomes) and seemingly inconsistent directions from the administration about what was required of them made them doubt their ability to meet administrative expectations. In particular, several expressed unease about the process of establishing performance thresholds that would indicate successful attainment of departmental objectives on the part of students. These chairs were also uneasy about the seeming necessity of using quantitative summaries related to the percentage of students meeting particular achievement levels. This uncertainty was amplified in many cases because chairs felt they lacked sufficient training to do assessment correctly.

Beyond lack of training, some chairs suggested that the purposes of assessment had never been made fully clear to them. These chairs had the sense that they were being required to complete a lot of busy work that would have little impact on institutional decision making. One chair lamented this lack of transparency regarding the use of assessment data, stating that, "No one understands where the actual assessment goes. It is the assumption that there is one enormous file cabinet. In it goes. Click" [male, newer chair]. Such statements reveal a lack of understanding concerning the way the administration planned to use assessment data and also reflects an underlying sense that, even though assessment work is understood as a universal requirement, it has little practical relevance for day-to-day decision making.

### **Benefits of Assessment**

Despite these concerns, some chairs did recognize a variety of benefits associated with the implementation of new assessment practices. For the most part, however, these benefits had little to do with the data itself. Instead, many chairs believe that the biggest benefits of assessment were associated with the conversations and collaborations that had developed as a result of faculty member engagement in assessment work. For example, one chair observed that work on assessment had led the members of her department "to have some more systematic conversation that we might not have otherwise had" [female, experienced chair]. Another chair expressed a similar sentiment, stating that for her, "the process [was] more valuable than the outputs that you have to put in an assessment report and send where ever it is to go" [female, experienced chair]. A third chair noted that while assessment "has made us more self-conscious about how to improve what we do," this benefit was "almost a subsidiary" and "that sort of benefit could have been achieved in different ways that would be a lot far less painful" [male, inexperienced chair].

In general, because the development of assessment plans required colleagues to discuss department learning objectives and hoped for outcomes with each other, chairs believed that many needed and helpful conversations had occurred. These conversations had supported new practices such as listing goals and objectives on course syllabi that many believed would support improved student learning. On the other hand, considerable doubt about the benefits of the data collected through the assessment process remained prominent in the chair's statements and some believed that there might be alternative ways to sponsor the kinds of conversations thought to be beneficial without the added burden of data collection. None of the chairs interviewed for this study expressed much enthusiasm about the usefulness of the data that they had collected in the assessment process, and found it difficult to point to specific improvements that the data had supported.

## **Drawbacks of Assessment**

The chairs interviewed for this study consistently mentioned a variety of concerns related to assessment that made the philosophy and process of assessment difficult for them and their colleagues to embrace. Chairs believed that their colleague's uneasiness with assessment often manifested itself in diverse ways ranging from passive acquiescence to vocal criticism and occasional resistance. Substantively, many chairs believed that the issues driving these responses revolved around three major concerns: the oversimplification of educational aims; the potential for assessment to distract faculty from more important objectives; and the lack of trust for faculty judgments with regard to student learning communicated by the required implementation of assessment systems at the departmental level.

In terms of oversimplification, the chairs discussed the complex nature of teaching and the many divergent outcomes possible when one works with students in the classroom. Importantly, many of the chairs observed that only some of the outcomes of teaching are directly related to the stated goals of the teacher, department, or college. In their view, the simple assessment mechanisms that most departments have developed thus far are unable to capture the richness of the educational experiences provided and their benefits. For example, one chair noted that assessment, "attempts to simplify something that is really not simple" [female, experienced chair]. In the process of creating workable assessments, another observed that

We reduce assessment to what counts. If you can't count it, it doesn't count. The things that we really want to know about, I really can't count. To write an instrument that measures student engagement, or critical thinking, how do you do that in a meaningful manner? So you do get used to counting the things that are easier to count or document or what not [female, experienced chair].

Many chairs shared similar philosophical concerns related to the imposition of a bureaucratically driven mandate for assessment that has not been sufficiently considered in light of the broad goals of a liberal arts education.

Related to concerns about the reductive nature of assessment was the notion that assessment might distract faculty members from more important aspects of their teaching that promote the most important kinds of student learning. Although chairs felt the need to comply with external demands for new measures of student learning, and believed they should be held accountable for student learning, they didn't believe, as mentioned earlier, that current assessment techniques were resulting in data that was helpful for improvement. As such, many of the chairs viewed current assessment efforts as an impediment to their pursuit of more complex outcomes. One chair noted that assessment was "a form of bureaucratization that takes us away from what we do as educators" [male, inexperienced chair]. Other chairs were more concerned that assessment might have a negative impact on the curriculum if the focus on outcomes became too intense. "My concerns," shared one chair

would be that assessment drives curriculum. That we start being so concerned with the outcomes that we start altering that we believe to be pedagogically necessary in order to achieve those outcomes -- which might not be our outcomes anyway. That is the biggest concern I think [female, inexperienced chair].

While these types of concerns were only expressed by a small number of the chairs interviewed for the study, more generally chairs expressed the sentiment that assessment was a "hoop" that they must jump through to comply with administrative expectations.

Given that many chairs believe that the time and energy invested in assessment was outsized in relation to the value of the information that the process was yielding, they had difficulty making sense of why so much institutional effort was being put into the assessment process. Several concluded that the reason must be an underlying lack of trust in the work of the faculty. This perception was strongest for those chairs who either viewed grades as providing a sufficient form of academic assessment or had

faculty members in their departments with these beliefs. Those who viewed grades as an appropriate indicator of the level of student learning questioned the need for more abstracted and formalized systems of assessment. When asked about the importance that faculty place on formalized assessment results, one chair said

I think faculty don't believe it is important. They don't believe it yields anything to them. I think that they think what is more significant is giving assignments and grading them in the traditional way with the student's feedback [female, inexperienced chair].

Thus, systems of assessment that utilized faculty committees to review written student work that had already been graded in the context of a course by individual faculty members was viewed by some as a waste of time.

Some also believed that assessment systems that focused on previously graded work represented a lack of trust in faculty who were responsible for assigning grades in the first place. While the chairs I interviewed understood the need for accountability and believed that they were doing good work with their students, they were concerned about what poor assessment results might communicate about their efforts. Several chairs expressed concern that the systems of assessment being implemented sometimes seemed more about exposing deficits than promoting excellence. While they were concerned about how the performance of their departments would look, they also recognized that assessment results could be easily manipulated by altering the criteria for evaluation.

### **The Role of the Department Chair in Mediating Assessment**

Though many of the chairs were critical of the way assessment was being implemented on their campus, they also felt a strong responsibility to implement these systems regardless of their personal perspectives. Such conflicts place chairs squarely in the middle of administrative mandates that come from the upper administration and the interests of the faculty that they must work with on a day to day basis. One chair expressed this dual responsibility, stating that she did not find the assessment system currently in place to be productive, but as a chair

you have to put all of that aside, and you still have to be some sort of assessment cheerleader, which you can only imagine goes over very well with your faculty because we can't, I guess you can't come in and say all of this is nonsense. You try to turn it into something that at least had some limited buy in from the faculty [female, experienced chair]

Another said it wasn't so much "cheerleading" as simply telling colleagues, "sorry, this is just something that you have to do" [male, inexperienced chair]. This task was made harder, he said, because there was little evidence that he was aware of that supported the benefits of departmental assessment. Overall, the need to promote and facilitate the implementation of assessment was uncomfortable for many and detracted from the desirability of the role of chair. Several of the chairs mentioned that they were happy that they were approaching retirement age so that they would not have to continue this type of work. In the words of one chair, "[this] is not the job that I signed up for" [female, inexperienced chair].

Dealing with resistant faculty seemed to be a central part of the chair's role. One chair described a faculty member who had "never participated in my assessment process no matter how many times I have pushed and shoved, requested politely, and made it easy by putting materials on the person's desk... it just doesn't get done" (female, x year of experience as chair). A typical strategy for dealing with such situations mentioned by many of the chairs was persistence and the hope that over-time one might simultaneously convince more faculty to participate and potentially wait out the ones who would not. Describing this phenomenon, one chair noted that while her faculty "spent a good two or three years being indignant about this stuff" that she knew, as chair that implementation was unavoidable and would require persistence. "You know the second year of having this same conversation gets old," she said, "but

you have the characters that you have and are not going to budge, so you wait for them to retire” [female, experienced chair].

As a group, the chairs did not discuss efforts to directly challenge assessment mandates coming from above. The only type of resistance that was mentioned, involved a passive aggressive quality, whereby a small minority of the chairs would simply document what they had done, even though it did not conform with the expectations passed down to them by the administration. Such efforts were undertaken in an effort to “protect” the department from intrusive demands that did not always fit with department values or perspectives. So far, the materials these chairs had provided seemed to allow them to avoid closer scrutiny, though the chairs had the sense that a more careful analysis of their work was inevitable and might necessitate future changes.

## **CONCLUSION**

In general, the chairs perspectives on assessment, shared above, reflect many of the issues raised earlier in this article regarding the increasing role of standards and accountability in institutions of higher education. Evident in their comments is their observation that assessment pressures have increased over time, creating confusion about implementation as well as unease about what these changes portend. I also believe that their comments reflect broad discomfort with changing institutional expectations. Specifically, these chairs sense an ongoing shift away from a reliance on professional autonomy and judgment toward more external means of validation and verification of student learning. Rather than reflecting strong support for assessment, the chairs voices largely echo the concerns of the assessment critics reviewed earlier, who view the role of assessment as a means of institutional control that has the potential to narrow the curriculum, decrease the autonomy of professors, and valorize business values such as accountability, efficiency, and transparency.

Given chair’s concerns about assessment and their general dissatisfaction with the resulting data, it seems appropriate to consider what more meaningful alternatives to typical academic assessment practices might look like. More specifically, what alternatives to current assessment practices exist that could provide department chairs and their faculty with useful information about teaching and student learning without relying on the reductive elements that have a tendency to focus on easily measurable but perhaps less meaningful indicators? What kinds of assessments might support improved student learning while also enhancing faculty autonomy?

While there are no simple solutions for addressing the current state of affairs, it may be possible to both challenge the dominant models of assessment at work in our colleges and universities and develop frameworks for more holistic systems of assessment that would strengthen rather than limit faculty autonomy and academic freedom. This type of improved assessment would rely more fully on the self-awareness and self-reflection of faculty members in place of overly reductive-measures that have become prevalent on many college campuses. I will discuss the broad outlines of a more holistic system of assessment below. Before doing so, however, it is important to consider how the dominant discourse of assessment in higher education might be challenged in order to make room for reasonable alternatives. Chairs are important players in departmental assessment efforts; embedded in their role is the potential to advance a more critical perspective on current assessment practices.

### **Challenging the Dominant Discourse of Assessment**

In order to open space for a more balanced discussion of assessment, I believe it is necessary for department chairs and faculty members to challenge the seemingly common sense view that greater efficiency, transparency, and accountability, will improve the quality of education that college students now receive. Calling for such a conversation will require a more activist stance on the part department chairs. Following the direction encouraged by Shore and Wright (2003), this activism should be aimed at shifting the discourse about student academic assessment in a more democratic direction by communicating a faculty-driven vision of the purpose of education rather than the more utilitarian perspective espoused by managers and politicians (Shore and Wright, 2003).

Based on the evidence from this study, it seems that assessment has not been able to fully deliver on the promise of improved student learning. Despite this failure, I do believe that some forms of assessment can be useful, given the university's goal to help all of its students develop the capacity to engage in the public discourse which serves as the basis of our democracy. Such assessments, however, must ultimately focus on broadly conceived learning aims rather than narrow objectives. Here I use the term "aims" in the sense conveyed by Dewey (Dewey, 2013) in *Democracy and Education* where he discusses three criteria necessary for the development of good aims. First, Dewey (1916/2013) recommends that good aims must take into consideration the present realities of the given teaching and learning situation. Second, he emphasizes that aims should be "constantly in view" and yet remain tentative so that they can be modified as situations develop (Aims in Education, The Nature of an Aim, ¶8). Finally, he suggests that good aims must emerge from the learning situation itself and cannot be externally imposed. To separate ends from means with respect to education, observed Dewey (1916/2013), would "reduce it to a drudgery" (Aims in Education, The Nature of an Aim, ¶10). Dewey's (1916/2013) flexible and provisional view of educational aims contrasts sharply with the demands for clearly defined learning objectives embedded in the current discourse on academic assessment. Examining progress towards aims would likely require institutions to step away from their reliance on reductive quantitative measures and seek evidence of learning through more holistic means.

Though the seeds of resistance to assessment are certainly evident within the responses of the department chairs interviewed for this study, a radical reversal of institutional trends seems unlikely. Thus, while I acknowledge the importance of activism in creating change, it seems that the resources necessary to re-appropriate the language and emphasis of assessment is most possible at the classroom and departmental level with the work of individual faculty members and department chairs. Here, my suggestion is that faculty members, with the active support of their chairs, reinvigorate the view that teaching is more than the technical application of learning strategies resulting in student behaviors that reflect what students "know and are able to do."

Rather than simply focusing on student mastery of knowledge, teaching and assessment should be designed to support future learning by helping students to develop their own powers of judgment and discrimination (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). As mediators between external demands and internal expectations, chairs have the resources necessary to buffer their faculty and create space for this more engaged and provocative form of teaching. What counts for valid evidence of learning under this conception is much broader than that typically conceived of in the systems of accountability developed for accreditation purposes.

### **Assessment as Inquiry**

In this broader conception of assessment, faculty members could be encouraged to reclaim the notion that assessment is always central to reflective practice. As Bazerman (2002) notes in the context of writing instruction, "Every time I write, revise, just choose words, I assess the effectiveness of my emerging text. And every time I put comments on a student's paper, or give writing advice, or even discuss a student's possible choices in writing, I engage in assessment." (Personal Preface, ¶ 6.). In this type of *in-situ* reflective form of evaluation, the specific task, the student's own intentions, and his or her level of understanding become part of the assessment (Bazerman, 2002). Though more labor intensive, inquiry into student learning from this more interactive perspective would mean raising additional questions about whether the means of data gathering (for example, various assessment measures) are commensurate with the desired ends (for example, assessing the way a student's understanding may have changes as a result of the experience of taking a particular course). Furthermore, the results of such assessments are recognized as being partial and subject to revision as institutions and the people within them change over time.

Such inquiry, rather than being driven by what is easy to measure, could focus on determining both the aims of educators and the experiences of students as they work together to meet these shared goals. For example, by following groups of students across time, and collecting more rich qualitative data about their learning, it might be possible to better understand how they have constructed meaning from their

college experience and the various interactions with professors, peers, and administrators that have shaped that experience. “At the departmental level,” suggests Martínez-Alemán (2012), “we could ‘follow’ the evolution of one foundational course through the critical ethnographic methods and quantitative means to get a deeper, broader, layered, and more contextualized and idiosyncratic view of the relationship between instruction, learning and content” (p. 111). Such a suggestion emphasizes the richness of the student-teacher interaction and highlights the kinds of data necessary to render judgments about the quality of the interaction and its benefit for students.

The elements of this type of inquiry, unlike what is currently taking place on most campuses, preserves the fidelity of the interaction between student and professors while simultaneously deflecting the critique that colleges are avoiding assessment or accountability. In this regard, the model recommended by Martínez-Aleman (2012) provides an important alternative vision of academic assessment. Such a vision moves the discussion of academic assessment beyond reductive measures developed to create compliance and uniformity to more meaningful practices which seek to take into account the complex interactions between students and professors in the classroom and the extended timeframe within which benefits of the experience can be more accurately realized.

In order to promote this more holistic inquiry based form of assessment, department chairs must work productively with their faculty members to make space for alternative forms of assessment. Such alternatives should prove attractive because they offer a way to develop data that can be used to improve student learning while simultaneously honoring the professional judgment of professors and department chairs. Based on the findings of this study, which suggests that department chairs find current assessment practices to be of little value, there is some hope that more nuanced alternatives that focus on broad educational aims might one day be embraced. Unfortunately, at the present time, the momentum driving assessment does not favor such changes and it seems that the pressure placed on department chairs to develop more commensurable forms of data will continue for the foreseeable future.

## ENDNOTES

1. On this point, DelBanco (2013) quotes Michael S. McPherson and Morton O. Schapiro who suggest that “the nation’s liberal arts college students would almost certainly fit easily inside a Big Ten football stadium: fewer than one hundred thousand students out of more than fourteen million.”
2. One of the respondents did not grant me permission to make an audio-recording of our interview so in that case I relied on careful notes taken during the interview.
3. The department chairs interviewed came from the following departments: Anthropology, Art History, East Asian Studies, Economics, Education, English, French, History, International Relations, Math, Music, Physics, Political Science, Psychology, Spanish, and Theater.

## APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

1. How have you developed your understanding of academic assessment and its requirements? What sources of information have been most helpful? Least helpful?
2. What do you find to be the most challenging aspect of academic assessment for your department? Please explain.
3. How have you sought to frame the issue of assessment for faculty members in your department? In other words how have you explained to them what it is that needs to be done and why?
4. As a department chair you sometimes act as an intermediary between the faculty and the administration. Can you provide any examples of assessment related issues where you were aware of your position in between the faculty and the administration?

5. To what degree has your department worked together on academic assessment and what has that work looked like? Please describe a typical meeting where assessment conversations might take place? Are there any recurring issues that have come up at these meetings?
6. In what ways has academic assessment facilitated changes to your academic program? Have these changes been perceived positively or negatively. Please explain.
7. What are your biggest hopes for academic assessment with respect to your department or program? Please explain.
8. What are your biggest concerns or frustrations about academic assessment with respect to your department or program? Please explain.
9. If there was anything you could change about academic assessment what would it be? Why?
10. What do you anticipate will occur in the future with respect to academic assessment?
11. If expectations for academic assessment continue to increase, will it influence your interest in being a department chair?

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, G. L. (2009). *Advocacy leadership : toward a post-reform agenda in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Archibald, R. B., & Feldman, D. H. (2010). *Why Does College Cost So Much?*. Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199744503.001.0001/acprof-9780199744503>
- Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2010). *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (1 edition). University Of Chicago Press.
- Bazerman, C. (2002). What Is Not Institutionally Visible Does Not Count. In C. Bazerman & D. Russell (Eds.), *Writing Selves/Writing Societies: Research from Activity Perspectives*. Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse and Mind, Culture and Activity. Retrieved from [http://wac.colostate.edu/books/selves\\_societies/bazerman/](http://wac.colostate.edu/books/selves_societies/bazerman/)
- Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 21(1), 33–46. <http://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9>
- Bok, D. (2008). *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (New edition). Princeton University Press.
- Bok, D. (2013). *Higher Education in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Boud, D., & Falchikov, N. (2007). *Rethinking Assessment in Higher Education: Learning for the Longer Term*. Routledge.
- Buller, J. L. (2007). *The essential academic dean: a practical guide to college leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Buller, J. L. (2012). *The Essential Department Chair: A Comprehensive Desk Reference* (2 edition). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Chopp, R., Frost, S., & Weiss, D. H. (2013). *Remaking College: Innovation and the Liberal Arts*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Delbanco, A. (2013). *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Princeton University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916/2013). *Democracy and Education*. Project Gutenberg.

- Diver, C. (2005). Is There Life After Rankings? *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2005/11/is-there-life-after-rankings/304308/>
- Friedman, T. L. (2014). How to Get a Job at Google. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/23/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-to-get-a-job-at-google.html>
- Gladwell, M. (2011). The Order of Things. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/02/14/110214fa\\_fact\\_gladwell?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/02/14/110214fa_fact_gladwell?currentPage=all)
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine Transaction.
- Harvey, D. (2007). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (1st, First Edition). Oxford University Press, USA.
- June, A. W. (2013). For Chairs, the Seat's Gotten Hotter. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Department-Chairs-Find/143309/?cid=at>
- Keeling, R. P., & Hersh, R. H. (2011). *We're Losing Our Minds: Rethinking American Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kuh, G., Jankowski, N., Ikenberry, S., & Kinzie, J. (2014). *Knowing What Students Know and Can Do: The Current State of Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in U.S. Colleges and Universities*. National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment.
- Kvale, S. (2006). Dominance Through Interviews and Dialogues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(3), 480–500. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1077800406286235>
- Linkon, S. L. (2005). How Can Assessment Work for Us? *Academe*, 91(4), 28–32.
- Martinez-Alemán, A. (2012). *Accountability, Pragmatic Aims, and the American University*. Routledge.
- Pepin, C. (2014). The Dilemma of Assessment in the US. In *Survival of the Fittest - The Shifting Contours of Higher Education in China and the United States* (pp. 73–83). New York: Springer. Retrieved from <http://www.springer.com/education+%26+language/higher+education/book/978-3-642-39812-4>
- Power, M. (1999). *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (2 Sub edition). Oxford University Press, USA.
- Selingo, J. J. (2013). *College Unbound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students*. Boston: New Harvest.
- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2003). Coercive accountability: the rise of audit culture in higher education. In M. Strathern (Ed.), *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*. Routledge.
- Taubman, P. M. (2009). *Teaching By Numbers: Deconstructing the Discourse of Standards and Accountability in Education (Studies in Curriculum Theory Series)* (1 edition). Routledge.