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# Documenting the Achievements of Our Students without Compromising Excellence

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JEAN SORENSEN

# Documenting the Achievements of Our Students without Compromising Excellence

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When questions arise about the quality and costs of higher education, honors educators, administrators, and students are best positioned to provide answers. When national groups report data questioning the achievement of our graduates, are we willing to be held accountable? Are we even in a position to provide evidence that our students have not only achieved some minimal level of competency but also excelled by exploring challenging issues central in our society, our disciplines, our nation's workforce, our government, and the international arena?

## **PUBLIC CONCERNS ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION**

In "Graduated but Not Literate," Doug Lederman observes that just 25% of college graduates scored at "proficient" according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL). The highest score of proficiency denotes the ability to do complex comparisons of "viewpoints in two editorials or interpreting a table about blood pressure and physical activity" (Schneider). Surprisingly, an honors administrator Lederman interviewed about the decline in literacy scores from 1992 to 2003 saw honors participation as part of the problem rather than the solution to improved literacy. Doug Hesse, professor of English and head of Illinois State University's honors program, noted that honors students were assigned an average of fewer than fifty pages of reading a week and that two out of five students reported completing less than half of that work (Lederman, "Graduated").

## **LEVELS OF ASSESSMENT AND STANDARDIZATION**

Low expectations of our best students and even lower performance claims from the students themselves have contributed to the call for greater accountability in higher education. Should we believe that the honors experience transcends measurement coming from sources like the NAAL? Linda Frost contrasts pedagogically reductive methods of reading instruction (standardization) with a "dangerous literacy" that Patrick J. Finn reported from Jean Anyon's fifth-grade classrooms in New Jersey. She also reviews her own "self-empowering activities" from elementary school through college in pursuit of "an unmonied degree." Frost cites Steffen Wilson and Rose

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Perrine's introduction to assessment strategies in honors at the point where they rely upon J.O. Nichols's institutional effectiveness handbook with its focus on *ends* rather than *means* (Wilson and Perrine 27). Indeed, institutional effectiveness is concerned with ends, as are many levels of assessment at the student, course, departmental, program, degree, and institutional levels. At what level does Frost want to prevent standardization of the learning experience?

Standardization of students' experiences is undesirable, but at the levels of the course, degree, and institution, standardization is not only desirable but also necessary for integrative learning. For instance, the sequential nature of two semesters of Freshman English illustrates how material learned in one class serves as prerequisite knowledge for success in another. In another example, material learned in a math class is essential for computations in chemistry and physics. If, like Frost's hypothetical honors professor, faculty claim, "I have no idea what we'll learn," then the very notion of graduates earning degrees or demonstrating achievements appropriate to any field of study becomes a suspect proposition. If the faculty assigning credit for undergraduate courses cannot indicate learning outcomes for the courses they taught, how are we to determine which degrees are appropriate to various kinds of graduate study and employment? Would the hypothetical honors professor be willing to describe and catalogue the outcomes after they occurred?

### **HONORS INSTRUCTION THAT DOCUMENTS STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENTS**

Frost asserts that "the pedagogy that most clearly defines honors education is one that spurns such standardization and predictability." If the primary objection to ends-oriented assessment is that predicting outcomes creates expectations of honors students that limit opportunities for them to formulate their own innovative outcomes, then non-proscriptive outcomes could serve as guidelines for students. Given the variety of assessments available to document students' achievements, our concern as honors educators and administrators must surely be focused not on preventing such documentation but on choosing the forms least restrictive to the individual initiative shown by honors students. We may reject standardized testing from outsiders unaware of the variety of outcomes our students have achieved, yet we may embrace locally designed assessment instruments, course-embedded assessments, and portfolios as useful in cataloging the very diversity we celebrate. Faculty-driven assessment documenting learning outcomes unique to our honors programs is at the core of Wilson and Perrine's article (33-34). They recommend comparing pre-test and post-test results for honors students with a control group of non-honors students to determine the extent to which honors students are outperforming their peers, not because they are more talented or motivated than their peers from the start, but because honors instruction is more challenging and gives students the ability to learn more than non-honors instruction (35).

### **OUR ROLE IN PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY**

We already report a variety of institution-level measures allowing the public to examine college costs through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(IPEDS). The reports themselves point to a variety of stakeholders in higher education since students rarely provide for their college expenses exclusively from their own income and savings. Students receive financial assistance in the form of loans, scholarships, and grants to pay for their degrees. IPEDS reports that, during the period from 1988 to 1998, two thirds of public four-year students and 56.8% of two-year students received aid from some source. Four-year private schools were second to four-year public schools in student loans, and two-year institutions received the highest percentage and average amount of federal grant aid (Cunningham et al.). In part, the Commission on the Future of Higher Education seems to be looking at assessment to provide information useful to the many stakeholders invested in higher education—students, their parents, taxpayers, employers, and legislators—so that they can make sense of the costs of higher education as they occur in a free market environment. The Chairman of the Secretary of Education's Commission, Charles Miller, argues that these costs require evidence that students are learning: "We need to assure that the American public understand through access to sufficient information, particularly in the area of student learning, what they are getting for their investment in college education" (Lederman, "No College"). We can direct the form that assurance takes.

Honors educators and administrators can provide assurance about the best and most exciting kinds of learning occurring in higher education. Much of our national conference is dedicated to showcasing the research and artistic achievements of honors students. The State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) argues, "A better system of accountability will rely on pride, rather than fear, aspirations rather than minimum standards as its organizing principles" (National 7). Maybe we should invite these executive officers from our accrediting agencies and governing boards to our national and regional conferences.

Before the invitations are issued, let us take stock of our students' achievements with a view to the larger framework of accountability and assessment. The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) suggests four elements for a comprehensive accountability and assessment framework:

- (1) *Orientation* during students' first year about the institution's expectations for learning outcomes and a diagnostic assessment of each student made in conjunction with outcomes.
- (2) *A plan of study* designed with students' advisors and connected to outcomes tied to students' choices of courses and fields.
- (3) *Milestone assessments* in both general education and the major linked to outcomes with feedback to students and advisors. Portfolios document and align these assessments between two-year and four-year schools.
- (4) *Capstone or culminating experiences* in the field of study document accomplishments in liberal education. (16, presented as summary)

Some of these elements such as orientation, planned advising with feedback, articulation agreements for transfer students, and senior theses are standard fare in honors education. Diagnostic assessment and learning outcomes could become points of contention unless they are integrated into the curriculum and degree plans at the local level. Point four affirms AAC&U's position that "we must hold ourselves accountable for assessing our students' best work, not generic skills and not introductory levels of

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learning” (11). Fully integrated assessment at the highest levels cannot be purchased with standardized products advertising generic testing of critical thinking skills.

I suggest that we take Frost’s warning against reductive conformity to heart and question the value to students and taxpayers of expanding the profits of testing companies and their auxiliary preparatory services. We care deeply about our students and their learning opportunities as well as their success in achieving their educational and employment goals. At our national conference in Philadelphia this 15-19 November, the Teaching and Learning Committee is sponsoring panels in assessing and evaluating honors teaching and learning (Zubizarreta). Let us debate the many ways of helping our students document their achievements through creative assessments that go beyond our current provisions of honors transcripts and diplomas. Honors educators, administrators, and students possess the talent to forge solutions to the public questions about the quality and costs of higher education.

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