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# Honors Assessment and Evaluation

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CHERYL ACHTERBERG

# Honors Assessment and Evaluation

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I am currently leading a college where our vision is simply “Expanding Human Potential.” That vision perfectly encapsulates my personal value set for education as well. I believe that expanding human potential is also the business of honors education. And because I believe so firmly in this concept, I shall go on record supporting assessment and evaluation in honors education as well as general education.

As an administrative leader I need to make daily decisions about what will serve my college, my students, and my faculty well. Some of those decisions are internally motivated, internally addressed, and relatively unknown beyond the college. Some of those decisions are externally driven, and the public wants to see the answers. Assessment and evaluation are important to both internal and external audiences, so there are several reasons to engage in them. Among these are:

- Expectations of accountability regarding quality from students, families, and taxpayers;
- Demands for accountability from the college advisory board (consisting primarily of alumni) and donors;
- Concerns about accountability from the central administration (because university funds are invested to support honors); and
- Needs for honors administrators to evaluate and improve the honors experience for honors students.

I am a pragmatist. Concerns, questions, and demands surrounding accountability will only increase in the future. A good leader will prepare in advance, but not only to meet the requirements of the public or central administration. More importantly, the honors administrator should be continuously careful to monitor and improve the learning experiences of honors students; that can’t be done without some form of assessment and evaluation.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, it is important to define terms. I regard *data* as simply counts, dumps of information that do not contain much meaning. They may yield meaning with analysis, especially if the analysis identifies trends across time. *Assessment*, however, is much more specific; assessment looks to collect the specific kinds of data and analyses that tell us “how to get better,” i.e., how to improve the process, practices, and, yes, even learning outcomes on a regular basis. *Evaluation* goes a step further. Evaluation is judgmental. It provides the kind of data and analysis that gives us a thumbs up or thumbs down, tells us to continue as is or not, to grow or not, to increase funding or not. Assessment and evaluation require

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tools designed to do the job. These tools typically yield numerical data, but raw (random) data alone are never a substitute for assessment and evaluation.

To illustrate a case in point, I shall refer to honors course evaluation in the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State University. Concerns were expressed about honors course quality for all the reasons listed above, but the only information available about teaching performance or course evaluations on campus was unavailable to the Honors College as it was tied to promotion and tenure. Data that go into dossiers are kept confidential. So, the SHC had to develop its own course evaluation instrument. That was a serious undertaking. As of October 2005, the SHC had invested 18 months in the process engaging a team of no fewer than ten people. They began by asking the question, "What is an Honors Course?" A statement was devised and reworked upon review by the Faculty Advisory Committee to the SHC, student focus groups, and numerous other reviewers. From that document, a course evaluation instrument was drafted in consultation with the university's Center for Excellence for Learning and Teaching (CELT) and modified by an M.S. student in Student Affairs/Higher Education. Nine separate versions were produced and assessed by focus groups and expert review for face validity, content criterion analysis, and clarity. A pilot test was run on five honors courses. When that test yielded insufficient data, a second pilot was conducted with forty courses. Based on those data, a final version was produced for general dissemination.

All of that effort was simply to arrive at square one: having a tool in hand that could begin to speak about the quality of honors instruction. There were (and are) a number of other barriers to clear including faculty acceptance, implementation procedures, and institutionalization. Additionally, the course evaluation instrument is only the first of many such tools that will need to be developed to fully assess and evaluate honors education at this one institution. The next tool in line is an evaluation of honors advising. There will be several more initiatives that target efforts and experiences in service learning, international study, and undergraduate research/thesis experiences. What students learn will be a piece of that assessment. Only when a full suite of tried and true instruments and a body of evidence are collected will anyone be able to stand up and verify, in an "accountable" way, what impact honors education has.

Linda Frost seems to dwell on "learning outcomes," and these appear in her piece to be equated with learning objectives. If these are one's only focus, she may be right. Such evaluation will lead to nothing but meaningless standardization. Yet, assessment and evaluation offer educators much more. I believe that people have two concerns: quality and whether that quality is worthy of their monetary investment. Honors educators can develop measures of innovative pedagogies and individual initiatives; they can establish the feasibility of implementation and interpretation of such measures; and they can become the leaders on campuses, and perhaps throughout higher education, in developing meaningful assessments and evaluations of both processes and outcomes. Indeed, they can define what those outcomes should be!

Without doubt, developing assessments and evaluations that are constructive and meaningful is a serious enterprise, and it will take a long-term commitment to make it happen. We teach our honors students to question; we should not shirk when

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questions are also asked of us. We need to take these questions about our value and outcomes seriously. Indeed, we need to recognize that assessment and evaluation are essential in honors education. At present, there is little understanding of honors issues in higher education and few studies that show its worth one way or the other. Honors cannot survive the future on anecdotal evidence. If we do not act, and if we do not lead, there will be nothing in honors to save at all.

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