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They Graduated

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JOAN DIGBY

They Graduated

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LONG ISLAND UNIVERSITY—C. W. POST CAMPUS

Linda Frost's essay, "Saving Honors in the Age of Standardization," has many saving graces of its own. It is direct, honest and about as optimistic as we have any right to be. Even her title acknowledges that there is at least some chance of saving honors from the number crunchers and their lingo. I'd be right there with the woman who rolled her eyes and exclaimed "We're just sick of it" if I hadn't managed to steer clear of the measurement folk and their instruments of inquisition all these years.

I can remember the moment that I staged my first resistance. I was assigned to a Task Force on attrition. For months we interviewed students who were planning to leave the university and reviewed surveys written by students who had already left. None of it was either interesting or helpful. When I thought about all the time and human energy that we wasted, it all added up to just a single sentence, "They're dropping like flies," so I handed that sentence in as my completed report. I'm happy to say that it kept me off similar committees for many years. More than a decade later when, for my sins, I was asked to serve on an Outcomes Assessment Committee, I found another summary sentence that helped me gain my freedom once again—"They graduated!"

Isn't that the outcome we are hoping for? What else do we really need to know? Every bone in my body resists statistical assessments of what we do in honors and in the university more generally. We provide, most simply, doors into the future. We get the students to open some of the doors, and eventually they choose the ones that satisfy their curiosity. What we teach them sometimes informs their choice. That's probably as much as we can know. The process of teaching and learning has ineffable—often unspoken—dimensions; so it is largely impossible to say what any one student got out of a particular class or whether the course itself helped that student take even one step toward a particular door into the future. Even the student might not fully sense the influence of a lesson, a professor, a field trip or a course until reflections years later make the connection clear. Nevertheless unspoken dimensions often make the greatest impact and build the strongest bonds. Think of how much you treasure the letters and e-mails from former students who are finally able to let you know how much you touched their lives. This can't be represented by flow charts, graphs, data output or surveys. So why bother with all the numbers?

At my institution the answer is that we are a tuition-driven business in competition with others just like us, and we will go under if we don't have quantifiable students and their very tangible dollars. Yes, I know, it's a business. And one of the least savory outcomes of that reality is that the university is open to the litigious nature and corruption of business. We bend our own admissions standards to take in the

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numbers we need to stay afloat. Then we threaten students with financial loss if they don't maintain their GPAs. So, they cheat and plagiarize to satisfy requirements, or if that doesn't work, they threaten us with law suits if we don't give them grades high enough to maintain their scholarships.

When I see these grotesque paradigms filtering into—yes—my honors program, I know how hard I really have to work in order to contribute to the rescue mission that Linda Frost put forward in her fine article. The more the university is standardized and reduced to measurements, the more cheating there will be on every level to satisfy the insistence on reportable figures.

One could believe in the figures—perhaps—if they were reliable. In my experience the Outcomes Assessment folk have enough problems with “Incomes Assessment.” The Byzantine spread sheets representing honors student profiles that I receive from the Data Center (wherever that Dickensian office may be) using such poetic programs as *Oracle* and *People Soft* never gibe with the information students write down for us on a single sheet of paper that we store in our good old manila folders. The names and numbers, alas, are never exactly the same. Students at my institution are mysteriously coded and un-coded as “honors” (for some reason with a y-chromosome designation) as they pass through Admissions, Financial Aid and Academic Counseling. It is no wonder that dazed students drift into the office begging to know what the Honors Program is and how they have become indentured! I wish I could capture the tone of Yul Brenner in *The King and I* exclaiming, “It’s a puzzlement”!

The truth is that the only data I have found really useful are transcripts. They give me an accurate count of students in my honors program, and they allow me to see, student by student, whether or not they are progressing toward a degree with honors and thus whether they need to be congratulated or dropped from the program. It might be primitive, but transcript review is what I use to assess outcomes and hold students accountable.

As honors directors, I believe, our own accountability lies not in any statistical results but in our moral directive. We must be accountable in holding to ideals and fostering models of social justice. We must do what we can to counteract the business model by making exceptions and using intuition as often as statistics in communicating to our administration the work we do. In our practice, we must be accountable in rejecting poorly written papers, plagiarized ideas, and inflated grades as well as demands for larger class size and half-baked schemes put forward to attract more student bodies. If we don't do this, our outcomes will all be tragic, and there will be no American university system, much less honors programs and colleges, to assess.

Do you remember “busy work”? If you Google “Outcomes Assessment” you will discover how scores of universities have set departments to such thankless tasks. What I found were documents in doubletalk, enough unreadable drivel to get anyone through retirement. Hey—there are jobs out there in “measurement and evaluation”! They pay people to create this garble. My advice is take up knitting, the banjo, bridge, boogie boarding, or camel riding—my personal favorite. Don't let them suck you in to spinning your wheels over outcomes assessment—lower case, not worth the

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caps! For self-preservation, I urge you to adopt the coy strategy of Alan Arkin in *The In-Laws*, dodging the dictator's bullets. "Weave, weave, weave."

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