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A Set of Further Reflections on Improving Teaching, Learning, and Assessment

Editors' Note

Reflecting our openness to critical commentary and reflection, we have invited a set of commentaries on the work from thought leaders in higher education: Peter Ewell (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems); Natasha Jankowski and George Kuh (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment); Carol Geary Schneider (Association of American Colleges & Universities); and Charles Blaich and Kathleen Wise (Center of Inquiry at Wabash College).

A Promising Start and Some Way to Go: Some Reflections on the Measuring College Learning Project

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The SSRC's Measuring College Learning (MCL) project should be recognized as one of the most ambitious assessment efforts currently under way. In these brief reflections, I want to point out some positive features of the project, then outline some important challenges the project faces. In conclusion, I'd like to offer a few suggestions about possible ways forward for this interesting effort.

Noteworthy Features of MCL

Let me begin with three positive features of MCL. First, it is unambiguously centered on faculty. Most of the authors of the white papers in this volume are teaching faculty and understand from direct experience the challenges associated with improving instruction in their disciplines and the kinds of assessment information that will be needed to ground such efforts. Second, MCL is centered on learning in the disciplines, reflecting the insight that starting with disciplines will engage faculty best and that learning in the disciplines is what most academics consider legitimate *collegiate learning*. MCL has also involved disciplinary associations and communities much more actively than have most other assessment efforts. Third, the project's leaders have exhibited considerable openness to receiving input from the research and assessment communities. The fact that colleagues like George Kuh and Carol Geary Schneider who are skeptical of standardized tests are included as reactors in this volume provides strong testimony for the sincerity of this stance. The effort is also quite consciously incremental; few decisions are cast in stone and every step taken is conditioned by experience gained in the last. These are good qualities and I trust they will continue if the project moves forward.

Five Challenges

Despite these positive features, the MCL project faces at least five major challenges. First, one of its long-term objectives is to produce valid and reliable standardized assessment instruments within each of the six chosen disciplines. But decades of experience with free-standing instruments of this kind—including generic skills tests like the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and discipline-specific assessments like those in economics and engineering in the Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) Feasibility Study—is that student effort is, at best, uncertain when these examinations do not count. MCL project leaders are aware

of this challenge and have thought about ways to address it. These include administering these assessments as part of required capstone courses in their respective disciplines and rewarding students with certificates or monetary payments if they perform well. The effectiveness of these remedies, nevertheless, remains untested.

A second challenge is that the central purpose of the enterprise is still not entirely clear. Much of the project's rhetoric admirably emphasizes instructional improvement, but improvement does not necessarily require standardized assessments based on common content or, with the exception of benchmarking, the ability to compare performance across contexts. One claimed potential application is to assess aspiring transfer students, but the central question for most transfers is about their mastery of generic skills like writing or quantitative fluency, not disciplinary content. As Sam Messick of ETS explained some two decades ago, the validity of any assessment rests substantially on the uses to which its results will be put. Yet the MCL project has not yet given sufficient consideration to the practical utility of the kinds of assessments it advocates.

Establishing a central purpose will also help govern decisions about the most important technical features of the instruments envisioned. One of the most important is the balance in coverage between subject-matter content and skills elements that may, in part, cross disciplines. The competencies described in this volume are a mix of these: some are unique to the discipline, while others represent more generic proficiencies, like locating or analyzing information, that are set in the context of the discipline. If one outcome of the MCL project is to support generalizations about the latter across subject areas, as I believe it should be, instruments will have to be designed and administered to ensure this is possible. And the real demand from key stakeholders outside the academy like employers and policymakers is for measures of generic skills.

Two related practical challenges round out my list of five. The first is that MCL is bucking the current trend away from test-based

assessment in American higher education. According to the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) survey on the conduct of assessment in academic programs, the modal forms of assessment at the department level are performance assessments and rubric-based ratings of student assignments and other artifacts; only about 30 percent of academic programs use standardized examinations. Admittedly, the current lack of use may be due to a dearth of suitable instruments—a condition that MCL hopes to alleviate. But the fact remains that its stance on assessment technology puts the project out of the mainstream of current assessment practice at the program level. The final related challenge is that the MCL project appears to lack a business plan that ensures its long-term sustainability. Up to now, the project has been generously supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, but this will not continue indefinitely. There are many potential business models from which to choose to make the project sustainable: SSRC could market the instruments directly or work through the appropriate disciplinary associations to do so; alternatively, a major testing organization could offer the instruments. But marketing, pricing, and the ongoing availability of alternate forms of the instruments would be continuing challenges.

The Way Forward

Given this situation, I offer three suggestions to consider if the project is to move forward, none of which will be surprising to the project's leaders. First, continue to take every opportunity to communicate with stakeholders and the academic community. MCL participants' work has necessarily proceeded largely in private to date, but the publication of this volume represents an inescapable coming out. Communicating effectively will require greater clarity about the purpose of the enterprise and full transparency with respect to how assessments will be designed, created, and made available to the academy. Second, roll out assessments and other products when they are ready without waiting to release everything at once. With six suites of instruments to build,

there will undoubtedly be uneven development. Early release of measures that are ready—perhaps in a pilot form—will help build a user community quickly, which is particularly important in a new venture. Similarly, don't hesitate to create intermediate products that add value to the overall strategy well before draft assessments are created. The six competency frameworks, for example, could easily be used to create curriculum maps to determine how and where particular programs address each element and, more importantly, to identify where they do not. They could also inform the development of faculty guides for creating aligned classroom assignments and examinations, in much the same way as the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) has done. Finally, don't stop developing. As soon as actual assessments are created from competency frameworks, experience suggests, there is a tendency to stop looking at the latter. In contrast, as Tuning has demonstrated, such frameworks are living entities, always subject to rethinking because of new knowledge and the evolution of new ways to organize and teach these proficiencies.

The MCL project constitutes a fresh departure on the age-old quest to improve instruction in an important collection of disciplines. I wish it luck and urge its leaders to continue to call on fellow members of the assessment community to advise them on this journey.

MCL and Disciplinary Discourses: A Promising Step toward Assuring Collegiate Quality

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The Measuring College Learning (MCL) project brought together groups of faculty from six disciplines to identify concepts and competencies fundamental to their respective fields and reflect on related assessment practices. Encouraged and supported by disciplinary associations and some specialized accreditors, the goal was

to ensure that today's students are getting from the undergraduate experience what they need to survive and thrive during and after college in an era of dynamic economic and social change. Toward this end, participating faculty devoted considerable time and energy to fleshing out core concepts and competencies, which were then presented in a series of discipline-specific white papers. Although much was accomplished, much remains to be done for MCL to realize its promise. In this essay, we summarize some of the project's salient contributions with an eye toward the challenges that must be addressed to achieve its goal.

Contributions

To its credit, MCL engaged faculty members in meaningful conversations about what is essential for students to know and be able to do as a result of studying a particular field, thereby serving several important purposes. For example, the discussions addressed how to intentionally sequence educational experiences over time to scaffold and deepen student learning. This process is similar to what we observed faculty and staff typically do at institutions using Tuning and the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) to reach agreement about the core concepts, appropriate inquiry approaches, and desired competencies expected of general education as well as different fields of study.

Identifying the necessary concepts and competencies relevant for their respective disciplines brought to light the need for curriculum mapping, alignment, and assignment design as critical steps for assuring disciplinary proficiency and building coherent pathways to student success. These outcomes are consistent with and extend the current work of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (e.g., Hutchings, Jankowski, and Ewell 2014; Jankowski and Marshall 2014).

The faculty authors made it clear that the essential concepts and competencies they identified are not intended to stand independent one from another, but must be integrated and applied by

students. Especially important to efforts to implement coherent, learning-rich guided pathways to certificate or degree completion is finding ways to help students perceive and acknowledge the connections between their experiences inside and outside of class, the outcomes the educational program is designed to elicit, and the outcomes they have attained. Indeed, the authors of the MCL white papers found that their discernment process helped to generate answers to such questions as why certain elements are foundational to a particular discipline, but not necessarily others. It also shed light on why and how to design assignments and other educational experiences to induce students to practice the essential tasks of reflection and integration that will enable them to transfer their learning to settings beyond the current classroom, laboratory, or studio. Much like what we found with the DQP and Tuning projects, when faculty talk together and reflect on the essential elements of their discipline in combination with what matters in terms of expected student learning outcomes, they more readily reach consensus about the importance of pedagogical approaches, curricular designs, and assessment frameworks that are congenial with an institution's stated desired outcomes of college and the expectations of a variety of stakeholders external to the campus.

Each of the MCL white papers builds on prior work in their field to reach consensus about desired outcomes and how to assess them. They each refer to the importance of engaging students in introductory courses and designing tasks requiring students to demonstrate they have integrated core concepts and competencies across the program of study. They also emphasize the need to use assessment approaches that align with the desired outcomes and yield actionable evidence, ensuring that students actively participate in the process.

For example, the MCL in Business paper focuses on the future of the field, expressing a keen desire to define explicitly the core elements of a strong business program. At the same time, the authors caution that because the field is complex and nuanced,

certain of these elements may be contestable because of a program's particular purposes and local circumstances, including institutional culture and employer needs. Biology faculty emphasized the need to connect this work with instructional enhancement efforts to increase the likelihood that faculty would use pedagogical approaches consistent with desired outcomes. The economics paper underscored the role of classroom assessment to encourage faculty to be more explicit about what they are teaching and why. The communication paper echoed many of these same ideas while pointing to the need for a larger collaborative effort to enhance student success. The history paper argued for more frequent use of assessments of authentic student learning. The sociology presentation emphasized what was implicit in all the papers—that what makes a discipline unique is that the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts (e.g., courses, papers, internships). Helping faculty to recognize, celebrate, and innovate based on acknowledging what makes their discipline distinctive is one of the more promising contributions of the MCL project.

Challenges

Taken together, the MCL white papers are understandably long on fleshing out what constitute core concepts and competencies but short on the kinds of discipline-specific standardized assessments that can point to what is needed to improve student performance. True enough, a field must first agree on what is worth knowing and being able to do along with appropriate pedagogical strategies that will help students attain those outcomes before it can determine how best to document whether students have achieved those outcomes. But assuming the MCL papers have adequately captured these essential elements, the next necessary step is to describe what constitutes a coherent educational experience bolstered by ongoing multiple formative feedback processes for students and programs. Any effort to develop summative tests of discipline-specific knowledge, proficiencies, and dispositions must

assume that students have experienced the educational program in a manner consistent with the program's espoused intended design. Of course, no single test can determine whether the enacted or delivered program and students' actual experiences are aligned with the field's foundational elements and preferred pedagogical approaches, curricular components, and assessments.

Another challenge is appropriately situating the MCL project in the national dialogue about improving and assessing student learning. NILOA's work in this arena shows a recent spike in the use of rubrics, portfolios, and scaffolded learning experiences that build over time. Indeed, when asked which of the sources of information on student learning are most useful to inform decisions, the number one response was classroom-based assessments (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, and Kinzie 2014). Common to these tools and approaches are frequent feedback and reflection experiences. Although the white papers reference the need for measures of authentic student learning, the major goal of the project—identifying what students should know and be able to do after obtaining a baccalaureate degree in a given field—may well evolve into the search for standardized tests that will inevitably be used to compare programs and institutions. Whether such an eventuality can also serve to enhance the quality of student learning and institutional performance remains to be seen. Indeed, experience shows that it is difficult for institutions or programs to use the results from standardized tests to inform curricular improvements; in part, this is because such tools are often designed and employed for the purpose of accountability as contrasted with improvement (Jankowski et al. 2012).

So it appears that the MCL project is at a crossroads, given that the set of white papers opine for assessment tools and approaches that could potentially serve formative needs—providing feedback to both instructors and students for how to improve learning outcomes and curriculum design—while also providing summative indicators of quality. Clarifying the assessment ends valued by the

MCL project would help focus the next stage of work. It would also be instructive to determine what role, if any, the work could play in encouraging appropriate levels of transparency (i.e., how to communicate program and student performance to those with a need or interest in knowing, including students). For example, employers today are less interested in transcripts and test scores and more interested in evidence that a student can use what they have learned to deal with complex, unscripted problems in different settings (Hart Research Associates 2013). How the MCL project could better prepare students and assist institutions and employers in meeting this complicated set of challenges warrants further discussion.

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How MCL Can Make a Lasting Difference

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The work initiated through Measuring College Learning (MCL) is an important marker in the ongoing effort to make visible what students are supposed to achieve through their college majors and to help document what, in fact, they have achieved. The reports developed by the several task forces are illuminating, and I suggest in the second part of this essay some ways that they can be put immediately to very important use. But first, a few words on the MCL assessment strategy itself.

MCL was, of course, envisioned as part of a multipronged toolkit for assessing student learning in major fields that would complement other assessments of general education and cross-cutting learning outcomes or proficiencies such as critical thinking or communication skills. As of this writing, it remains unclear whether the intended tests will be developed. Moreover, the papers produced for this volume provide only the most general guidelines for psychometricians. So the test development effort remains something of an unknown, and may not happen.

I do, however, want to echo Peter Ewell's caution, expressed in this volume, that it's extremely challenging to get students to show up and do their best on standardized tests that are voluntary, rather than required. We know this from over a decade of field-testing the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The performance task aspects of the CLA were (and still are) a significant step forward in assessment strategy. For this reason, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) initially was a partner in the CLA effort. But as a former member of the CLA board,

I came to doubt that tests with high stakes for the institution and no stakes for the students taking them are an appropriate index of students' learning gains in college. The same concern would apply to a department's adoption of voluntary tests of learning in the disciplines. Without a stake in the results of an assessment, students have no real incentive to make sure those results embody their best work. This is especially true for seniors, whose attention is usually split in many compelling directions during their final year. We may learn what they can do on the run, but surely what we'd like to know is what students can do when they give their entire effort to a complex problem or set of problems.

It's plausible, of course, to require that all students take a standardized test to complete their major or degree programs. But because that would likely be far more expensive than simply testing a representative sample of students, requiring new disciplinary tests of all students in a department may not be an affordable option.

Believing that assessments of college learning should show what students can do when they know the work counts, AAC&U has recommended a quite different assessment strategy, one that uses validated scoring guides—the VALUE rubrics developed for cross-cutting learning outcomes[1]—to assess samples of work that students originally created as graded course assignments.

With ample funding from federal and private philanthropic sources, AAC&U, nine state systems, and over eighty diverse colleges, universities, and community colleges have demonstrated

[1] Through AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) project, teams of faculty and other educational professionals from over a hundred higher education institutions developed rubrics based on the most frequently identified characteristics or criteria of learning for each of sixteen cross-cutting college learning outcomes. To learn more about the project or to download the VALUE rubrics, visit www.aacu.org/value.

that the VALUE rubrics can be used in an organized way, across multiple disciplines and multiple years of study, to provide evidence on strengths and weaknesses in students' achievement of such essential learning outcomes as critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and communication. In 2016, that demonstration is expanding to include additional learning outcomes such as ethical reasoning, intercultural competence, and integrative learning.

A VALUE Assessment Strategy for the Disciplines

As the opening essay in this volume makes clear, MCL leaders have been generous from the outset in proposing that the MCL disciplinary assessments can and should be viewed as complementary to AAC&U's focus on assessing cross-cutting learning outcomes (a term I prefer, incidentally, to *generic competencies*). But, in fact, the VALUE strategy for assessing students' learning gains in college could be adapted for disciplinary fields as well.

If developed, discipline-specific scoring guides or rubrics ("Major VALUE") could enable faculty to assess the intellectual skills or competencies that the disciplinary task forces have articulated for the six disciplines included in the initial MCL analysis of learning goals. Scoring guides also could address the concepts the task forces consider essential. I believe it would be highly useful to the relevant fields to develop discipline-specific scoring rubrics for the concepts outlined in the opening chapter and in the various task force white papers.

As a historian looking at the historians' recommended concepts, for example, I know it would be challenging but well worth the effort to articulate scoring guides for history as an interpretive account, the relationship of past and present, historical evidence, complex causality, and significance. But if I were a student—and this is my core point—I am quite certain that I would be far better able to demonstrate my understanding of such concepts in the context of a well-researched paper completed for a course grade than in the context of an optional test I took on the run, with only a few

minutes to think through the questions asked, to analyze the documentary artifacts provided, and to consider the argument I wanted to make. Moreover, if ETS or another testing agency moves to develop standardized tests for such concepts, psychometricians and historians are going to have to work together anyway to translate the past into actual testable concepts. It would be far better, in my judgment, for them to work together instead on the development of scoring guides or rubrics for such concepts that faculty can apply to samples of students' course-related writing and research. The rubrics could then be used both by departmental faculty in assessing their students' progress toward degree-level mastery and also in national studies of learning in the discipline, organized along the lines of AAC&U and SHEEO's current VALUE demonstration project.

Discipline-related scoring guides would enable evidence of students' learning to be drawn from the required curriculum and from work students have already completed for a grade. This approach would build confidence that the student work being assessed represents, at least for most students, what they can do when they are actively trying to get the assignment right because the assignment actually counts, for the course and for their progress toward a degree.

It really is time to break that reflexive connection educators developed over the past century between the concept of assessing students' learning and the assumption that we absolutely must use standardized tests to produce accurate results. I am mindful that the VALUE strategy AAC&U is advancing marks only the beginning of that longer term shift. But we could make huge progress if MCL and the disciplinary societies were to band together to insist that the use of student work and validated rubrics is a preferable approach to demonstrating the value and worth of college study.

But Before We Assess, Let's Attend to the Curriculum!

With all that said, however, I want to point toward a complementary, yet different, use of the significant intellectual work that the MCL project has elicited.

This volume begins with the argument that we need new measures to show that college really is worth it. But as Arum and Roksa know very well, there is broad agreement across many forms of assessment that our colleges, universities, and community colleges are significantly *underperforming* when it comes to the development of the cross-cutting capacities currently being assessed. Students' highly uneven achievement on key cross-cutting learning outcomes has already been documented through the VALUE national demonstration projects, through studies by the Wabash Center for Inquiry in the Liberal Arts, and by Arum and Roksa themselves.

Moreover, as the abundant research on novice–expert thinking demonstrates, students achieve their highest levels of critical inquiry and other cross-cutting skills in their disciplines, not in foundational general education studies. Critical inquiry is always about something, and the major, when well organized, provides guided practice in applying particular analytical and inquiry strategies to the content areas that field explores. Optimally, as AAC&U has recommended repeatedly for a quarter century, the major also provides guided practice in connecting its own interpretations with those of other communities—other disciplinary communities and real-world communities in which students hope to take their place (AAC 1991; AAC&U 2008, 2015). One of the great strengths of the MCL disciplinary papers is that their authors see the value of connecting learning in a discipline with the larger society and with other fields of inquiry.

If the major is the context in which students are developing their most advanced cross-cutting capacities, and if large numbers of students are demonstrably underperforming on many different measures of those capacities, then—to my mind—the needed next step is to redesign students' pathways through their majors in ways that make it more likely that students will both achieve the goals of the major and develop the cross-cutting capacities that faculty have identified and that students will need to participate effectively in the economy and in our democracy (Hart Research Associates 2006, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2015; National Task Force 2012).

As educators, everyone involved in MCL and related initiatives, such as Tuning or VALUE, needs to focus on helping far more students successfully achieve the specific goals for the liberal and liberating education that the MCL and Tuning studies have articulated.

Today, I would argue, there is a well-established consensus on the core components of a quality college education. This well-established consensus reaffirms the importance of a strong liberal education that combines broad and specialized learning. But it also adds new components to our contemporary conception of liberal learning. These components include specific intellectual skills or cross-cutting capacities that need to be practiced in general education and in majors. They also include opportunities for students to integrate and apply their learning in the context of both disciplinary problems and real-world problems of the kind they will face in the workplace and in civil society (AAC&U 2007; Hart Research Associates 2016; Lumina Foundation 2014).

Along with reports from disciplinary Tuning efforts across multiple states, the MCL reports provide contemporary maps and markers for ensuring that students' learning in specialized fields contributes robustly to their preparation for a complex world. But there is a yawning chasm between reading a report on intended learning goals for a discipline and mobilizing to ensure that a program of study is well designed to help all students actually work toward those goals.

My hope, therefore, and my strong recommendation, is that MCL leaders will band together with leaders from Tuning efforts and from the relevant disciplinary communities in order to advance far-reaching curricular redesign in their fields. Higher education will never successfully fulfill its most ambitious goals for student accomplishment until faculty agree they have a communal responsibility to design programs and courses that ensure students reliably encounter the intended core concepts and frequently practice the necessary cross-cutting capacities.

AAC&U already is moving in exactly this direction with its contemporary LEAP Challenge, which argues that all students should be well prepared to produce significant projects—what we call *signature work*—in the final phase of college.[2] These projects optimally connect students' learning in their majors with their learning from other fields of inquiry related to their interests. Over fifty institutions already are working on LEAP Challenge projects, and we expect others to join this effort soon. This recommended addition of meaningful culminating work to the expected curriculum is a reform already demonstrably in the making. Today, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement, 47 percent of graduating seniors say they are doing (or have done) culminating projects (NSSE 2014, 41). The vast majority of these are completed in majors.

But why only 47 percent? Why not all students?

A senior project could—and should—be assessed to see whether it demonstrates mastery of the concepts important to the student's major as well as development of cross-cutting capacities needed for the world beyond college. It could further be assessed for evidence of the student's ability to employ approaches from more than one field—that is, to see whether the student can combine general and disciplinary studies effectively.

Before we can assess culminating work, however, we need to ensure that senior projects are well designed to help students take their conceptual learning and their cross-cutting inquiry capacities to a high level of achievement. And, crucially, we need to ensure that students have had ample preparation and practice in their prior

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[2] Part of AAC&U's ongoing Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) initiative, the LEAP Challenge calls on colleges and universities to engage students in signature work that will prepare them to integrate and apply their learning to a significant project with meaning to the student and to society. For more information, see http://www.aacu.org/leap-challenge.

studies to tackle a senior project successfully. If the Major VALUE rubrics recommended above are developed, faculty in departments could use those rubrics in setting criteria for senior projects and back-mapping the curriculum so students are well prepared.

The MCL reports provide a strong point of departure to create those high-quality learning pathways through the multiyear college curriculum—and across two-year and four-year transfer. What we need next, and what I warmly encourage MCL leaders and partners to move rapidly to help create, are curricular maps that our students and faculty can follow.

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Don't Let the Promise of Better Measures Tomorrow Excuse Inaction Today

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We are grateful to the seventy faculty from six disciplines who worked hard over the last two years to identify a concise set of core concepts and competencies for their disciplines. Faculty who have struggled to identify learning outcomes for their own departments will appreciate how difficult it would be to identify a succinct set of learning outcomes that would be relevant for an entire field as it is represented across hundreds of colleges and universities. Whatever happens next in the Measuring College Learning Project (MCL), the papers in this volume provide faculty in these six disciplines across the country with relevant background information about measures and outcomes that they can use to kick-start the development or refinement of their departmental assessment plans.

One consistent thread through the papers is the need for better measures of the core concepts and competencies that the committees identified for their disciplines. Indeed, one of the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) goals for this project is to "develop a new faculty-informed field-specific instrument and field test it alongside existing instruments of generic collegiate skills and measures of instructional practices."[3] Unfortunately, if experience is a guide, even with hard and well-funded work, it will take five to ten years before new and better tools are available for the disciplines represented in this project. The question for us, then, is beyond the guidance that this excellent collection of reviews may give to faculty who are working on their departmental learning goals, what should we do now to prepare for the time when better measures are available? This is an important question because measures on their own do not promote student learning, and the lack of better measures is not the main obstacle that currently prevents faculty from using evidence to improve student learning.

Fulcher and his colleagues (2014) nicely summed up the problem of seeing better measures as the path to improving student learning:

> A pig never fattened up only because it was weighed. A racehorse never ran faster because a stopwatch was clicked. A fevered dog's temperature never dropped as a result of reading a thermometer. . . . Nevertheless, some infer that student learning will automatically improve as a result of assessment. Indeed, test vendors often convince administrators that new instruments X and Y will bring about student learning. Such tools have not, do not, and will not by themselves improve learning.

We have been here before. In the early 2000s, the lack of modern critical thinking tests led to the development of the

[3] http://www.ssrc.org/programs/measuring-college-learning/

performance-based Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA). The increased popularity of this measure along with the advocacy of higher education associations that supported the Voluntary System of Accountability led to revisions in the ACT CAAP Critical Thinking Test and the ETS Proficiency Profile so that they could be administered using roughly the same value-added method that the CLA used to assess institutional contributions to improved critical thinking. Subsequently, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) developed and promoted the use of its VALUE rubrics as an advance over these standardized measures that would permit faculty to use students' own work to measure how much they were developing on a range of learning goals, including critical thinking. Although none of these measures is perfect, we think they provide useful information about student learning, and that the evolutions of these and other measures shows that our ability to measure critical thinking continues to improve. But to what extent has the development, refinement, and expanded use of these measures at colleges and universities across the country resulted in demonstrable improvements in students' critical thinking? The evidence suggests not very much (Kuh et al. 2015).

We are not arguing that better measures would not help faculty develop a more precise sense of how much their students are learning. Of course they will. However, it is also true that evidence from students' performance on papers, exams, presentations, and departmental and institutional surveys, as well as information from student transcripts and faculty evaluations, among other things, already provide information that is more than good enough to help faculty identify, develop, and test changes in their majors that might improve student learning. The evidence we currently have could be better, but it's not useless. The fact that many departments, if they are using this information at all, are using it to write obligatory annual assessment reports rather than developing and testing changes to their majors means that there are other obstacles we need to address in the time before better standardized

measures arrive so that these measures have a chance of helping us improve student learning.

In our experience, an important step that many departments could take *now* is to approach assessment as something more than a bureaucratic exercise to be completed with as little effort, interruption, or pain as possible. Effective, faculty-led assessment is grounded in ongoing conversations among faculty about the collective and developmental impact their work has on their students. It focuses on conversations that foster agreement on the concepts and competencies that faculty in the department hope to develop; reflections on whether the structure of the department's curriculum is consistent with these goals and research findings on student learning; questions about patterns that faculty notice in student work on assignments and considerations about whether these assignments really test, and foster, the departments' learning goals; and experiments in pedagogy that are aimed at improving students' in- and out-of-class experiences. In essence, assessment is an ongoing conversation about faculty development informed by evidence from students that promotes experiments in curricula, pedagogy, and experiences aimed at improving student learning. These conversations, experiments, and reviews of the impact of these experiments can only happen if the faculty in a department are willing to talk with one another, change what they are doing in response to these conversations, and communicate what they learn from these changes to their colleagues. Quality measurements are important, but the willingness of faculty to work together, including the willingness of individual faculty to give up things they want to do in their particular courses to improve how well students learn shared departmental goals, is even more important. Improving education is more about collective action than measurement.

We are encouraged by the careful work of the MCL panels. But we are also both mindful of and impatient with the fact that after so many years of working on assessment, we are still focusing on the first stage of the multistage assessment loop—defining learning

outcomes. We can do much better for our students with what we have in hand.

References

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