Defining disciplinary learning outcomes and principles for assessment (essay)

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A Faculty Stand on Assessment

To do justice to students and as a matter of professional duty, faculty members should be at the center of defining and measuring undergraduate learning outcomes, argue Josipa Roksa and Richard Arum.

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By

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The higher education lore is that faculty members cannot agree on anything. Like other myths, this accepted folk wisdom is far from the truth.

Indeed, over the course of our careers, we have repeatedly observed faculty members coming together collaboratively to address the challenges faced institutionally or in higher education more broadly. More recently, we have been heartened and inspired in particular by those who spent the last several years grappling with a fundamental question: what should students learn in higher education?

Instead of ignoring external pressures to measure and improve college outcomes, faculty members came together under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council's Measuring College Learning Project, which we have helped lead, to address these pedagogical challenges. Faculty members in six disciplines -- biology, business, communication, economics, history and sociology -- engaged in invigorating discussions, lively debates and difficult conversations. Supported by their disciplinary associations and encouraged by their collaborative spirit, they have articulated frameworks for defining learning outcomes in six disciplines and the principles for assessing learning outcomes in the 21st century, as described in the recently released *Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century.*

In our work, we have found that faculty members readily agree that higher education is not about efficient acquisition of surface content knowledge and the simple regurgitation of memorized facts.That does not mean that

content is unimportant. Content is indeed crucial, but primarily as a building block for more complex forms of thinking. Faculty members are eager to get students to apply, analyze and evaluate from their disciplinary perspectives, to acquire a disciplinary mindset and think like a biologist or an economist.

Faculty members across disciplines in the MCL project rather quickly coalesced around “essential concepts and competencies” for their disciplines, which represent ideas and skills that faculty believe are fundamental to the discipline, valuable to students and worth emphasizing given limited time and resources.There are similarities across disciplines including an emphasis on analytical writing and problem-solving, but these generic skills take form, are defined and are honed within specific fields of study. They are not abstract ideas, but concepts and competencies that faculty members engage, develop and deploy in their work and value in their disciplines.

Faculty members are also often seen as resisting assessment. But, in fact, what they resist are simplistic assessments of student learning that focus on recollection of knowledge, rely on blunt instruments and are narrow and reductionist. They resist, as would all other professions, externally imposed mandates that fail to reflect the complexity of their jobs or that misrepresent the purpose of higher education. But they also believe that what they are doing makes a difference -- that they are teaching students how to see the world in a new light -- and they would be eager to have the tools to demonstrate their contributions to the development of student cognitive capacities.

Constructive conversations about learning outcomes and assessments require the proper context and frame.That is rarely offered in a world in which we in higher education are on the defensive, trying to argue against externally proposed accountability measures based on distal labor market outcomes, instead of being proactive and making the case on our own terms.There is no shortage of proposals in the public sphere about what higher education should do. But those conversations often lack the voices of faculty members, who are the professionals with responsibility for defining, enabling and assessing what students learn.

The faculty should be at the forefront of the conversations about the purposes of higher education and thus at the center of defining and measuring undergraduate learning outcomes.That is not only a matter of professional duty but also of doing justice to our students.Students from all backgrounds and institutions should have an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Years of institutionally incentivized grade inflation and proliferation of course titles have all but made transcripts irrelevant. In our research, we found that most employers do not even ask to see them. And while some recent efforts have aimed to add extracurricular activities and other accomplishments to college transcripts, none of those tell us what students actually know or can do.Taking a class is not the same thing as mastering the concepts and competencies presented. Being a member of a club similarly says little about the skills a student has developed.

In addition to placing faculty and student learning at the center of the conversation, the MCL project is committed to recognizing the complexity of what higher education aims to accomplish and ensuring that any measure of learning is part of a larger holistic assessment plan.The project focuses on the disciplines.That does not preclude making sure that students are also civically minded and globally competent. It only means that we need to be clear about which part of the puzzle one hopes to address with a disciplinary focused initiative.

The MCL project is committed to ensuring that institutions use assessment tools on a voluntary basis. We have elaborated elsewhere the pitfalls of externally imposed accountability. Only by willingly looking in the mirror will higher education institutions make progress toward improving student learning outcomes.

While assessment should be voluntary, it need not be a solitary endeavor. Collaborating with other institutions makes us not only realize that we all face challenges and struggle with current circumstances but also offers insight into possible ways forward. Measures of learning outcomes must be of high quality and comparable, so they can allow multiple institutions to use them and share their insights. Governed by the principle of continuous improvement, assessments -- albeit limited and imperfect -- are necessary tools on the road toward reaching our goals.

As we look toward the future, we are excited and energized by the commitment and thoughtfulness of the faculty members who participated in the MCL project.They have put forth a bold and forward-thinking vision for the future of learning and assessment in their disciplines: a set of frameworks that will be subject to ongoing iteration and improvement in the years ahead. Instead of waiting for the storm to subside, these faculty members and their disciplinary associations have tackled the challenge head on. They have paved the way for a more promising future.

Bio

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