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Assessment and Academic Freedom: In Concert, not Conflict

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Contents

Abstract....3

Assessment and Academic Freedom: In Concert, Not Conflict 4

Background and Principles of Academic Freedom.....5

Shared Governance.....7

Assessment and Accountability....8

Concerns About Assessment and Academic Freedom....9

Wise Use....12

Conclusion.....14

References.....16

NILOA National Advisory Panel.....19

About NILOA.....20

Abstract

Scholars and practitioners of learning outcomes assessment widely recognize the importance of faculty engagement with the planning and implementation of assessment activities. Yet garnering participation by the majority of faculty has remained a significant challenge due in part to faculty concerns over the purposes of assessment, the value that it holds, and the costs of its implementation. In this paper I consider another claim that contributes to faculty resistance: that learning outcomes assessment is a fundamental abridgment of academic freedom. Granted, assessment activities can be imposed in ways that violate faculty rights, but such a consequence is not inevitable. Faculty control of the curriculum and effective shared governance set the stage for assessment that supports and builds on the faculty's ongoing efforts while protecting their historic and essential right to academic freedom.

Assessment and Academic Freedom: In Concert, Not Conflict

Timothy Reese Cain

Introduction

For the past three decades, scholars and stakeholders have called on institutions of higher education to commit to and undertake the assessment of their students' learning. These efforts are bearing fruit to a significant extent as learning outcomes assessment gains traction among accreditors, institutional leaders, and other participants in higher education. As the recent National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) survey of chief academic officers revealed, institutions have increasingly specified learning outcomes goals for their students and are making progress in determining whether students are achieving them. Some of the survey respondents expressed optimism that cultural changes in favor of assessment were underway or forthcoming (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014).

At the same time, learning outcomes assessment remains contested, especially among some of those who are most important to its successful implementation and use: the faculty. As Pat Hutchings wrote in her 2010 NILOA Occasional Paper, faculty involvement is widely recognized as the "gold standard, the key to assessment's impact 'on the ground'" (p. 6). Yet numerous obstacles to authentic faculty engagement with assessment remain including alienation from the language of assessment, lack of training in assessment measures and methods, incongruities between assessment and faculty reward systems, worries about assessment's punitive uses, concerns about its potentially negative effects on standards, and doubts about its pedagogical usefulness (Cain & Hutchings, 2015).

Faculty, who have historically claimed significant influence and even control over the college curriculum and its enactment, have expressed concern over the potential for and reality of assessment's infringement on academic freedom.

Related to but distinct from these issues are more fundamental concerns over the rights and roles of faculty in the contemporary college and university. Faculty, who have historically claimed significant influence and even control over the college curriculum and its enactment, have expressed concern over the potential for and reality of assessment's infringement on academic freedom. They have worried that external mandates drive an assessment agenda that relocates academic authority and affects their abilities to control their work. Some have linked the increase in assessment efforts to a larger restructuring of higher education, claiming that today's corporate neoliberal university undercuts and de-professionalizes faculty to the detriment of students and faculty alike (Powell, 2011).

In this paper, I examine claims regarding the relationship between learning outcomes assessment and academic freedom—along with the linked issues of shared governance, tenure, and the shifting nature of the faculty work force. In so doing, I accept and generally agree with the oft-heard critique that outcomes assessment *can* be undertaken in ways that violate faculty rights and negate their legitimate control of the college curriculum. Assessment

responsibilities, as John Champagne (2011) argues, are an important faculty work issue and have the potential to shift the direction of faculty efforts or to undermine their authority. At the same time, I counter the idea that learning outcomes assessment *inherently* tramples academic freedom or otherwise disenfranchises faculty. When undertaken through faculty initiative and effort, assessment provides faculty with the frameworks and data to understand student learning and improve their own practices. I conclude with suggestions for protecting academic freedom while simultaneously advancing student learning outcomes assessment.

Background and Principles of Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is a core value of American higher education; Louis Menand (1996) termed it "the key legitimating concept of the entire enterprise" (p. 4). Academic freedom is the underlying principle that scholars and their work must be protected from interference, not for the good of individual faculty members but for the benefit of the society served by institutions of higher education. Contemporary ideas of academic freedom in America date to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when a series of high-profile events riled the country's burgeoning universities. Incidents at the Universities of Chicago and Wisconsin, Stanford University, and Trinity College generated headlines about professorial speech and coalesced faculty opinions around academic freedom. The new understandings drew on German ideals of *Lehrfreiheit* (freedom of inquiry) and *Lernfreiheit* (freedom to learn, referring to students' freedoms in course taking but also implying a lack of administrative restrictions on teaching). Combining these concepts with an expansive notion of free speech outside of the classroom that would have been foreign to the German professoriate, faculty argued for freedom in research, teaching, and public expression (Furner, 1975; Hofstadter & Metzger, 1955). Following a lull in highly publicized cases involving faculty speech, a resurgence in controversies in the early 1910s led professional disciplinary associations to re-engage with the topic. In 1915, established faculty at elite institutions founded the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) to address broad-based problems that cut across disciplines and institutions. At the top of its list was academic freedom.

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Inundated with complaints alleging violations of academic freedom at a number of institutions, an AAUP committee released its "Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure" (AAUP, 2006a) at the end of its first year, articulating a tripartite understanding of faculty freedom: to research and publish the results of such research, to teach, and to speak freely on extramural issues. The committee, and through it the association, identified academic freedom as a public concern, arguing that institutions could not fulfill their

> function without accepting and enforcing to the fullest extent the principle of academic freedom. The responsibility of the university as a whole is to the community at large, and any restriction upon the freedom of the instructor is bound to react injuriously upon the efficiency and the morale of the institution, and therefore ultimately upon the interests of the community. (p. 296)

The declaration contended that faculty held responsibilities equal to those of trustees, "and in relation to purely scientific and educational questions, the primary responsibility" (p. 295). These faculty rights were not without limitations and were joined by "certain correlative obligations" (p. 298) that included pursuing their ends in a scholarly manner and taking special precautions when dealing with immature students. Just as important, the drafters of this foundational document did not assign academic freedom to individuals but to the faculty—both as a whole and in its disciplinary communities. Faculty were not claiming the right to unregulated freedom but, rather, were maintaining that it should be the professionals in their disciplinary contexts who determine and police the limits of their freedom (Haskell, 1996; Metzger, 1988; Post, 2006). As Doug Steward (2008) has argued, "Academic freedom, then, should be understood in terms of the corporate faculty's right and in terms of a professional expertise that is as carefully delineated as possible" (p. 162).

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These claims were at first derided, including by the Association of American Colleges (AAC), the new national organization of liberal arts colleges that in 1917 called for a very different notion of academic freedom—one in which governing boards and college presidents determine the content of the curriculum and forestall faculty work that offends institutional principles (Cain, 2012). But by 1925, the two organizations agreed on a set of guiding principles and policies that served as the stepping stone to the 1940 "Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," endorsed by the two organizations in 1941 and by more than 200 additional groups since. The 1940 statement again argued for freedoms for research, teaching, and extramural utterances. The primary protection offered was tenure awarded after a probationary period not to exceed seven years. With the widespread adoption of these standards, key conditions of faculty work for the ensuing decades were created (AAUP, 2006b; Cain, 2012). And although specific circumstances and events have repeatedly threatened academic freedom in the almost 75 years since the writing of the 1940 statement, the broad acceptance of its core understandings and principles remains intact.

Despite the widespread adoption of the 1940 statement, significant challenges remain in contemporary higher education. Politically charged debates over the Middle East, the war on terror, climate change, and other contentious topics can lead to restrictions and pressures on faculty, students, and external speakers. Rapid technological change and the explosive growth of social media have expanded platforms in which controversial speech can spread, opening faculty who use such media to both new dangers and stifling restrictions. External allegations of bias and calls for political balance in the curriculum have threatened the faculty's collective control of the educational process. Pressure to fund research through external grants and contracts has limited scholars' ability to pose and answer fundamental questions. Judges have required researchers to turn over their in-process data, denying them both property rights and the right to publish their results in the manner they deem appropriate. Interpretations of *Garcetti v. Ceballos* (2006) have stripped the rights of some faculty at public universities in some federal districts to critique their institutions or otherwise engage in speech related

to their positions (O'Neill, 2008). Furthermore, not all of these or other challenges are external. Almost a century ago, Alexander Meiklejohn (1916), then president of Amherst College, warned that restrictions and decisions made during hiring processes do more to forestall academic freedom than those once a faculty member was employed. It is a dilemma for which a remedy remains elusive. Perhaps the most pressing challenge to academic freedom, though, is the larger restructuring of American higher education and its overwhelming reliance on contingent labor. With two thirds of all faculty and instructors serving off the tenure track (Kezar & Maxey, 2013), we can have little confidence that the vast majority of faculty members' research, teaching, and speech rights are protected.

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Shared Governance

Of course, academic freedom and tenure do not stand on their own. As Cary Nelson (2010), former president of the AAUP, wrote in *No University Is an Island,* along with shared governance, academic freedom and tenure comprise "a three-legged stool" that "supports the higher education system we have had in place for over half a century" (p. 31). Alongside the development of academic freedom and tenure were faculty calls for greater say in governing higher education institutions. Indeed, many of the early threats to academic freedom investigated by AAUP implicated faculty critiques of how their institutions were run (Cain, 2012; Gerber, 2014). Although not addressed directly in the associations' statements, assertions of rights to intramural expression emerged in this time period through the "common law" of AAUP cases and claims for faculty independence (Finkin & Post, 2008). This growth in intramural freedom was needed, not just to protect individual faculty but to allow faculty to participate fully in governance activities. As Larry Gerber (2014) has recently argued, principles of shared governance in higher education did not take hold as quickly as did those of academic freedom, but they were increasingly adopted and adhered to. The culmination of this process, perhaps, was the 1966 "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities," jointly formulated by the American Council on Education, the AAUP, and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.

The 1966 statement identified the key internal stakeholders in higher education and called for their participation in a "joint effort" to successfully and constructively manage institutions, with the acknowledgment that trustees are the final legal authority. Most relevant to this discussion is the statement's assertion that an institution's "general educational policy" is shaped by a variety of factors, including its charter, its history, and its communities' needs. The statement further asserts that while this general educational policy should be developed collaboratively by the institution's internal stakeholders, once established, "it becomes the responsibility primarily of the faculty to determine the appropriate curriculum and procedures of student instruction" (AAUP, 2006c, p. 136). The 1966 statement continues: "The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter, and methods of instruction" along with other aspects of faculty work, and "sets the requirements for the degrees offered in

course, determines when the requirements have been met, and authorizes the president and board to grant the degree thus achieved" (p. 139). In essence, written two decades before the modern assessment movement, this key document outlining shared governance in American higher education can be read as providing faculty with control over assessment activities through their primary responsibility for determining and enacting the curriculum, although not necessarily full control over whether learning outcomes assessment will take place.

When the AAUP's Committee C on College and University Teaching, Research, and Publication (1991) considered the assessment of student learning, it drew on the 1966 statement. While it expressed concern over assessment's drivers and its potential negative effects, including those on academic freedom, its emphasis was on protecting institutions from external mandates, not from internal policies and practices. The AAUP Committee C's report called for faculty control over assessment practices in the context of faculty, administrative, and governing board agreement on educational missions and purposes. The years since have not been especially kind to shared governance, as the increasing administrative control over multiple aspects of higher education have reduced faculty voice in some areas. Moreover, the overwhelming shift to contingent labor has denied tenure protections to the majority of college faculty, thereby limiting their ability to participate authentically in governance procedures (Gerber, 2014). Shared governance is contested in the 21st century leaving the potential for violations of academic freedom including those involving teaching, learning, and assessment.

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Assessment and Accountability

Although issues related to learning outcomes assessment in postsecondary education have long been present in higher education (Resnick & Goulden, 1987; Shavelson, 2007), the modern assessment movement began in the mid-1980s amid concerns over the quality of higher education. National reports from both inside and outside the academy called for more attention to student learning, and observers and stakeholders increasingly demanded greater accountability. State governments quickly adopted requirements that institutions track and report on their students' learning (actions that prompted the AAUP Committee C's 1991 report on mandated assessment). In the 1990s, accreditors overtook states as the external bodies at the forefront of advancing assessment practices and requirements, a role they have continued to play in the context of greater federal demands for accountability, exemplified in the efforts of the U.S. Department of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, commonly called the Spellings Commission (Ewell, 2002, 2009).

To this day, meeting accreditation requirements remains the strongest driver of assessment efforts in American higher education, and in some ways these requirements have been effective. More institutions are undertaking learning outcomes assessment than even a few years ago, and more are using multiple methods of assessment including rubrics, classroom-based performance assessments, and other authentic measures. Much more important,

institutions are beginning to use these results in efforts on their campuses to make improvements—especially improvements in student learning (Kuh et al., 2014). That is and should be the ultimate goal of assessment, and yet a great deal of tension remains between assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement (Ewell, 2009). Indeed, as much as accountability pressures have helped spread the assessment of student learning, they have also lead to a great deal of resistance. This is especially true of the pivotal constituency in effective assessment practices: the faculty.

Concerns About Assessment and Academic Freedom

Concerns about assessment's potential encroachment on academic freedom have existed since the early days of the modern assessment movement. As the aforementioned Committee C report demonstrates, it was the mandated nature of assessment initiatives (in conjunction with concerns over the measures themselves) that were most troubling for some faculty. As accreditors grew in importance and the federal government increasingly saw them as protectors of quality, the concerns grew as well. Particularly worrisome was that standardized measures allowing for cross-institutional comparisons would threaten institutional autonomy (Elman, 1994). The relationship between institutional autonomy and academic freedom is of some concern to scholars of academic freedom, especially as the courts have begun to blur the terms, using the justification of academic freedom to defend institutional decision making on issues such as admissions strategies. Indeed, in certain circumstances, protecting institutional autonomy can negatively affect academic freedom (O'Neill, 2008; Rabban, 2014). Yet, in the case of assessment and accountability, threats to institutional autonomy can also affect academic freedom. If external pressures and requirements are too strict and intrusive, they can influence institutional reward structures, limit the roles of faculty in defining their students' intended learning outcomes, and otherwise impinge on academic freedom. The potential for restriction exists, although it remains more a potential than a reality. Regional accreditors, for example, require that institutions have identified learning outcomes and plans to ensure that students are achieving them. They increasingly hold institutions accountable and offer models for meeting assessment demands. Yet, despite concerns that such models might press institutions to adopt similar measures in an attempt to address accreditation demands, the accreditors do not mandate specific outcomes or specific approaches, just that institutions are identify and assessing outcomes.

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Closely tied to these concerns have been fears over standardization that has occurred in K–12 education, fears that were especially pronounced due to the work of the Spellings Commission. In "No Undergraduate Left Behind?" Ernst Benjamin (2008), the general secretary of the AAUP, lauded higher education associations for forestalling efforts to require assessments similar to those imposed on K–12 education. At the same time, Benjamin cautioned that the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), established by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in 2007 as a proactive response to the Spellings Commission (Ikenberry & Kuh, 2015), was itself dangerous as it required standardized measures that could impinge on institutional

flexibility and decision making. Yet, this concern has not proven warranted. The VSA was a useful policy response to the calls for greater accountability, but gained little traction with prospective students. More important to this discussion, "Hundreds of campuses administered the standardized tests and posted the results, but precious few found the test scores meaningful for decision making, problem solving, or curricular reform" (Ikenberry & Kuh, 2015). As of 2011, 55% of the institutions that had signed on to the VSA had not posted results of standardized measures. Moreover, the very inclusion of standardized measures had both prevented institutions from joining and also had caused institutions to withdraw (Jankowski et al., 2012). Benjamin's concerns about the effects of standardized measures were understandable, but these concerns were shared by institutions, and the worst of the potentially untoward effects were mitigated.

Many of these concerns about assessment, standardization, and academic freedom emanate from the humanities. As Lowell Barrington (2003), an associate professor at Marquette University, wrote, "My university, like colleges and universities around the country, is in the middle of a crisis. The crisis involves academic freedom, faculty morale, inefficient use of time and resources, and, most crucial, the nature of a liberal arts education" (p. 29). The crisis was, of course, learning outcomes assessment, which Barrington faulted for several reasons, including that it would necessitate standardizing measures and, therefore, would require standardized approaches to teaching—neither of which is inherent to learning outcomes assessment. When Gerald Graff, then incoming president of the Modern Language Association, defended assessment as a valuable part of serving students' needs in a 2007 conference presentation and then in his inaugural column in the MLA newsletter, he was met with a great deal of criticism (Graff, 2008). Michael Bennett, both at the conference and in a later article with Jacqueline Brady (Bennett & Brady, 2010), argued that "the radical take" on learning outcomes assessment "can be summarized in one word: RESIST!" (p. 35). For Bennett and Brady along with other critics, assessment was an "onerous disciplinary mechanism" (p. 38) and an external imposition of the political right that threatened the values of the academy. Citing exchanges on the MLA's Radical Caucus discussion list, the authors warned of homogenization of the curriculum and intrusions into classrooms.

In an article in a special section of the *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom*, Champagne (2011) defended Bennett and, likewise, attacked Graff's view, arguing that assessment was an outgrowth of the corporate university and was indelibly tainted by business and foundation support: "The obligation to develop outcomes assessments is an attack on academic freedom—both the teacher's and the student's—and a clear attempt to further discipline faculty members who resist the model of the corporate university" (p. 2). Champagne pointed to the limits of resources and faculty time, arguing that assessment activities were often uncompensated and that assessment could be best done with small classes and existing measures. As such, although Champagne decried assessment itself as a violation of academic freedom and workplace rights, he was actually arguing against a specific type of administratively controlled, top down, externally driven assessment being undertaken by

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already overworked faculty. Indeed, many who support assessment would be critical of the same manifestations. Two years after Champagne's article was published, in the same journal, Michael Stein, Christopher Scribner, and David Brown (2013) attacked assessment as a violation of academic freedom specifically because their institution required that they identify learning outcomes on their syllabi due to accreditation requirements. At the same time, they conceded that "nothing was suggested as to the style or content of the classes" (p. 12). Requiring that faculty identify intended outcomes, though, does not appear to violate common understandings of academic freedom.

Elsewhere, Scott Carnicom and Christopher Snyder (2010; Snyder & Carnicom, 2011), likewise argued that assessment was inherently a violation of academic freedom. They claimed that its ties to accountability necessarily impinge on faculty rights—an argument that ignores that many assessment advocates emphasize that assessment's primary purpose should be for use and improvement, with meeting accountability requirements being a positive side effect. They further argued that faculty as individuals must hold all rights to course-level decision making, a stance that appears to be more extreme than the AAUP's emphasis on the faculty as a whole and its allowance for some shared decision making. At the same time, the authors warn that disciplinary norms are important and must be considered, a view that is consistent with rather than in opposition to good practice in assessment.

A final concern is mentioned above but does not appear in the literature to the degree that it should. Adriana Kezar and Daniel Maxey (2014) have recently highlighted how the changing staffing pattern can negatively affect efforts to assess outcomes, including because non-tenure-line faculty are frequently left out of conversations, are not provided resources to participate, and are not compensated for their efforts. Just as pressing, though, is the reality that even if non-tenure-line faculty are included, they are fundamentally inhibited from full participation due to their lack of job protections. Without protections, their efforts can be compromised and their ability to critique plans, offer suggestions, and undertake good, rigorous work in assessment, and in teaching and learning more broadly, can be forestalled.

The concerns that assessment efforts can impinge on academic freedom are real. If external requirements are too narrow and prescriptive, institutional autonomy and academic freedom are in danger. If institutional requirements are outside of faculty control and don't allow flexibility for disciplinary differences, faculty rights can be abrogated. Yet this need not be the case. Indeed, among the most important organizations staking claims for faculty rights, including academic freedom, are the AAUP, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and the National Education Association (NEA). In a recent NILOA Occasional Paper (Gold, Rhoades, Smith, & Kuh, 2011), leaders of all three organizations argued that assessment in and of itself is consistent with their organizations' values when undertaken appropriately. Gary Rhoades, then AAUP general secretary, called the idea that the AAUP might object "a fundamental misreading and a misapplication of the association's basic principles and policies." He continued, "There is

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no reason that a faculty cannot collectively take on the task of identifying student learning outcomes, conducting those assessments, and revising curriculum accordingly" (p. 7). Lawrence N. Gold, director of the AFT's Higher Education Department, highlighted the value of assessment when it is done at the local level, driven by faculty efforts, and built upon the work faculty are already doing. Mark Smith, NEA policy analyst, addressed the issue of academic freedom in assessment activity more directly:

> Throughout this discussion, all three organizations have emphasized the importance of meaningful faculty and staff involvement in the design and implementation of any system of student learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning and achieve real accountability. This requires a strengthening of shared governance structures and practices, a renewed commitment to academic freedom in all its aspects, and a willingness on the part of administrations to work with faculty and staff unions. (p. 15)

These and similar views are shared beyond the unions, including by Barbara Woolvard (2004), who has pointed to the collective control of the curriculum to argue, "Assessment rightly conducted does not ask faculty to repress their knowledge or judgments. Rather, it asks faculty to work together as colleagues to assess student work fairly by criteria respected in the field and to share their knowledge of student strengths and weaknesses, in order to improve curriculum, pedagogy, and other factors affecting learning" (p. 8).

Wisdom is needed throughout the entire process of assessment for all levels of students—from the articulation of outcomes statements to the selection and application of assessment measures to the ever-difficult loop-closing activities for improving student learning.

Wise Use

Almost 20 years ago, Anne E. Bilder and Clifton F. Conrad (1996) argued for the "wise use" of assessment results in graduate and professional education to protect "such cherished institutional traditions as academic freedom" (p. 12). Indeed, wisdom is needed throughout the entire process of assessment for all levels of students—from the articulation of outcomes statements to the selection and application of assessment measures to the ever-difficult loop-closing activities for improving student learning. How, then, might institutions pursue wise use in assessment to protect academic freedom? This pursuit will look different in the varying contexts and cultures of different campuses, but the key principles are the same for all institutions:

Protect and enhance shared governance more broadly. Academic freedom and shared governance are "inextricably linked" (Gerber, 2001). Without the latter, the former is substantially threatened. Faculty must be free to weigh in on plans, critique measures, discuss uses, and otherwise voice their opinions in both formal and informal ways. A culture of shared governance and full faculty participation—not just in assessment but more broadly—can only contribute to authentically documenting student accomplishment in ways that do not threaten academic freedom.

Educate all stakeholders about academic freedom. Academic freedom is an essential value in, and a defining characteristic of, American higher education. Yet notions of it are often fuzzy and there is concern about complacency

among the faculty and disdain by administrators. Making academic freedom an explicit and robust part of campus conversations about assessment but, again, also much more broadly—including the socialization of faculty and administrators in graduate education—is important if academic freedom is to be understood and enacted. Educating stakeholders about this should include not only the rights of faculty but also the negotiated limits of academic freedom—because academic freedom has never meant "anything goes." Moreover, in shared curricular decisions, the rights of the faculty as a group can in some circumstances take precedence over the rights of individual faculty (AAUP, 2013).

Put assessment fully under faculty purview. Assessment experts, whether from the faculty or not, are important. They can bring knowledge, help educate faculty, coordinate institution-wide efforts, and help provide the context and framing that make data useful. At the same time, to protect the faculty's academic freedom, the outcomes defined, plans designed, and practices enacted must be under faculty control. As the former leaders of the three largest faculty unions have all argued, learning outcomes assessment itself is not a threat to academic freedom but in practice, when removed from faculty control, it surely can be (Gold et al., 2011).

Have flexible plans that embrace disciplinary differences. Much of the recent concern over academic freedom in assessment has centered in the humanities, in which faculty fear highly standardized approaches that would miss the various types of learning they are trying to foster. Their concerns highlight the need to rely on disciplinary knowledge and faculty expertise to design and implement the most appropriate learning outcomes and assessment measures in different fields. Broader institutional goals, while certainly needed, should not be narrowly defined. Likewise, the assessment measures chosen need to attend to and emanate from the disciplines. As Laura Rosenthal (2010) wrote in discussing her work on assessment in the arts and humanities at the University of Maryland, College Park, "What most instructors I have talked to who are engaged in assessment projects will agree on is that there can be no one-size-fits-all model. Projects need to be specific to the institution, the department, and the discipline" (p. 155).

Make use of what faculty are already doing. Early assessment efforts frequently were external to classes, partly to avoid intruding on classroom decisions that were the responsibility of individual faculty. Yet as the movement has matured, the importance of course-based evidence of learning has become more widely appreciated. Faculty are already constructing assignments that require students to think critically, to communicate effectively, and to demonstrate their learning. Student work for these assignments, when thoughtfully captured and considered, can form a basis for the larger assessment of student learning. Such an approach is not only efficient, it respects faculty and protects them from being required to do something additional or different when they are already providing evidence of learning (Hutchings, Jankowski, & Ewell, 2014).

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Frame assessment in terms of improvement—and mean it. Assessment has too often been driven by the need to meet accreditors' standards rather than by an internal desire to improve. That has resulted in rushed efforts to create outcomes statements and gather evidence. Such an approach inhibits thoughtful discussions fully involving faculty and may lead to adopting other institutions' models and methods without sufficiently considering their local applicability and appropriateness—creating conditions that minimize faculty participation and threaten their control over the curriculum and its enactment. Authentically framing assessment around improvement, as Jeremiah Ryan (1993) argued two decades ago, is not only important for making it useful but also for creating the context for inclusive conversations and faculty ownership.

Use the results wisely. The use of assessment results to improve student learning continues to be a key challenge. Far too often, outcomes are identified, measures and procedures are chosen and implemented, data is generated, reports are written—and little more comes of the work. Improvement of learning outcomes must be the primary purpose of assessment but, as Bilder and Conrad (1996) argued, that use must be wise and the inclination to force faculty to adopt new pedagogies that appear successful must be avoided. The results of assessment can help educate faculty and administrators, suggest new practices, and inform curricular revisions. They should be used to generate thoughtful discussion and encourage improvement but not to force the adoption of new styles or techniques and not to mandate changes in the classroom.

Like all tools, assessment can be misused—in this case, it can be undertaken in ways that intrude upon rather than support the prerogatives of faculty—but avoiding misuse is crucial not only to protect faculty rights but because academic freedom is itself important for assessment to work.

Conclusion

Academic freedom is a vital element of American higher education and a core value of the faculty. It must be preserved for American colleges and universities to maintain their high standing and, more important, to achieve their missions of creating and applying knowledge, educating students, and serving society. The current divisive political environment, recent restrictive legal decisions, the ubiquity and influence of social media, the emphasis on funded research, shifts in staffing, and other present conditions in higher education and society pose risks for scholars and those they serve. These and other threats are real and pressing, and some of them can interact with assessment efforts to violate the academic freedom of college faculty. Yet these dangers are not inherent in learning outcomes assessment. When undertaken appropriately and under the direction and oversight of the faculty, assessment is a potentially useful activity that can help the faculty carry out and improve on their work. It can help provide insights into what students are learning and where, and can help suggest areas and avenues for change. It is a tool, an important one. Like all tools, assessment can be misused—in this case, it can be undertaken in ways that intrude upon rather than support the prerogatives of faculty—but avoiding misuse is crucial not only to protect faculty rights but because academic freedom is itself important for assessment to work. When properly undertaken—that is, undertaken in concert rather than conflict with academic freedom—learning

outcomes assessment relies upon faculty enacting their rights and upholding their responsibilities, including assuring that students, individually and in the aggregate, are meeting their intended goals and those of the institution and its constituent parts. It can only be done when all faculty are free to engage fully, use their disciplinary expertise, critique and adjust plans, and assert their authority over the educational process.

Learning outcomes assessment relies on faculty enacting their rights and upholding their responsibilities.

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NILOA Mission

NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

NILOA Occasional Paper Series

NILOA Occasional Papers are commissioned to examine contemporary issues that will inform the academic community of the current state-of-the art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education. The authors are asked to write for a general audience in order to provide comprehensive, accurate information about how institutions and other organizations can become more proficient at assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for the purposes of improving student learning and responsibly fulfilling expectations for transparency and accountability to policy makers and other external audiences.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to njankow2@illinois.edu.

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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