



ASSESSMENT AND ACADEMIC VALUES: A PARTIAL RESPONSE TO DAVID GARFINKLE

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In my esteemed colleague David Garfinkle's *cris de coeur* decrying the lack of "academic values" among Oakland University administrators (Oakland Journal, Fall 2006), he admits that he wants to "stir things up," and it is into that vortex I wish to pitch this modest contribution to the debate. Specifically, I wish to question his linkage of the vital task of assessment of student learning to the grotesque abuse of administrative power of the golf course episode. We are comparing apples and oranges here; the golf course made a mockery of shared governance and permanently blighted a precious piece of the university's inheritance; assessment, properly understood and properly done, is absolutely critical to maintaining "academic values" at the core of the teaching and learning process. To the extent that University administration is committed to assessment, it is truly supporting teaching and learning and therefore exemplifying a commitment to academic values.

I write as current chair of the University Assessment Committee (UAC), the Senate Committee charged with overseeing the overall enterprise of assessing student learning at Oakland University. Like all other faculty members of this committee, I have no special academic training in assessment and so have learned what I have by apprenticeship in this very hard-work-

ing group. UAC is a Senate committee and thus a result of shared governance, not some sort of administrative castor oil jammed down the faculty's throat. In fact the committee's work is greatly facilitated by administrators who do in fact embody academic values of the highest order. Its work would be impossible without the support of the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment (OIRA); but faculty drive the process. Therefore, I would like to say a few words in defense of this particular outpost of "administration."

A university needs information about itself, about its student body, its programs and a host of other things. OIRA produced much of the detailed information on our students and admissions that made possible Brian Connery's thoughtful and incisive article on enrollment in the same issue of the *Oakland Journal*. The Office facilitates the work of the UAC by providing clerical, administrative and organizational support. Its director is a knowledgeable and gifted person who indeed embodies "academic values," commitment to the University, and understanding of assessment and other institutional issues at a very sophisticated level. It's all well and good to rant about administrators as a class (especially when some of them destroy pieces of the University building golf courses to attract plutocrats), but one needs to make meaningful distinctions, and a modern university needs an Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. Effective offices need good administrators and motivated, effective staff. To dismiss their work so lightly bespeaks at the very least a lack of familiarity with what they do.

David's cartoonish depiction of the assessment process will doubtless further perpetuate already rampant misunderstandings. Let's start with first causes. There is a reason we have to do assessment, as a public university in particular. Beyond the particular issue of maintaining our accreditation from the North Central Association (NCA), we are operating in a political environment which is demanding increased accountability of educational institutions at all levels. The "No Child Left Behind" legislation and MEAP testing here in Michigan show that impetus with respect to K-12 education; the same scrutiny is in-

creasingly coming to rest upon universities, supported by the public weal yet forcing millions of students to mortgage their futures with huge loans for . . . what? For a set of educational outcomes which, at the end of the day, we'd damned well better be able to show that we're delivering. Those very newspaper articles questioning how we professors spend our time that David mentions indicate the political environment in which higher education operates; we ignore accountability at our peril. Do we really want a "No College Student Left Behind" wave of scrutiny and legislation? All educational programs eventuating in a degree are making a promise that we must ensure is being kept.

David makes merry with the notion that the NCA mandates no particular approach to assessment among the institutions it accredits; in his cynical view this means that assessment is therefore meaningless. Would he prefer a top-down, you-must-evaluate-this-this-and-this approach to assessment, a Procrustean bed that all will be made to fit? This would be highly invasive to the individual academic unit. Rather, by trusting the unit to come up with its own meaningful criteria, the academic values of the faculty in the discipline become paramount in identifying goals and student learning outcomes. It's analogous to how we handle tenure and promotion, where the unit criteria are the foundation of the process. This seems to me to suit Oakland University's organizational culture well, and keeps assessment where it should be—with the faculty, and not imposed by administrative ukase.

Consider that Oakland University, as an institution, has a mission and identity that it proclaims to the community. The individual academic units create programs of study eventuating in degrees, which should relate to the broader university mission; otherwise, why are we offering this program? In turn, specific student learning outcomes should emanate meaningfully from the unit's primary goals for its program. This derivation of relevance, which determines the assessment plan adopted by a unit, from mission to goal to outcome, is neither trivial nor formulaic; rather, it has everything to do with

whether Oakland University graduates know the things we say they should know, and are able to do the things that their degrees imply they should be able to do. It does seem like a nuisance to actually have to look objectively at things we're totally sure we're already doing perfectly; however, assessment tells us where we're being successful, and where we could do better.

There is a reason why grades cannot in themselves constitute academic program assessment. The very fact that grading functions as a reward for performance freights it with consequence that leads to such phenomena as epidemic grade inflation. The professor and his or her students are entwined in a culture in which both parties have a vested interest in an outcome—the professor good teaching evaluations, the students a better GPA. Whether students have actually learned all of the material necessary may or may not be reflected in the grade. Objective proof that the specific knowledge has been acquired is different from saying, “I am sure my students have learned the material because they all scored 2.5–3.7 in the class, and I flunked two or three of them.”

It is, however, true that graded examinations can be used for assessment purposes; this is a process known as “embedded assessment” and is used by many departments on campus. Certain questions are identified as particularly relevant to specific learning outcomes; the students' performance on these questions across multiple sections is readily measured using scantron software. But obviously an assessment approach that will work for a highly exam-driven discipline will not work for fields in which writing a major research paper, or creating a capstone engineering project, or performing a senior recital is the summative manifestation of learning; and so other methods need to be used for assessment in those disciplines. The contrast in approach between Psychology and Studio Art, the first two programs to receive Oakland University's Assessment Excellence Award, makes clear that each discipline's academic values shaped its approach to the assessment process.

We teach because we want students to learn. Existentially, this is why we choose this profession, why we choose to put our-

selves in the classroom; this is why we do what we do. Ensuring that learning actually takes place requires objective measurement. It is a strength of Oakland University's approach that the academic unit decides which learning outcomes are essential to its discipline, and develops the approach best suited to assessing them. Because the process is flexible does not mean that it is meaningless. To take the time to look critically at whether our students do know the things we claim to be teaching them embodies a fundamental seriousness about the central values of our enterprise. Programs that actively use assessment, who approach it as a heuristic process leading to valuable information, rather than a meaningless chore, are able to make changes that improve their students' learning. Isn't that what we're supposed to be about in the first place?