Assessment Reflections  
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From the perspective of a certain kind of liberal arts educator—for example, myself, someone steeped in a vision of teaching as helping young minds face a complex world with openness, agility, and, where necessary, creative embrace of irresolution—the current emphasis in higher education on “assessment” can be at first unsettling, especially with its somewhat instrumental vocabulary of “goals,” “evidence utilization,” “implementation,” and the like. So I represent the once skeptical but now appreciative faculty member who has learned, largely through the illuminating experiences in assessment experimentation provided by the Teagle grant, how a proper embrace of assessment can enhance and enlarge the underlying mission of liberal arts education. Centrally, our task is to help our students explore the world critically and cogently, which involves constantly revaluing assumptions and hypotheses by sifting ever-evolving evidence and producing a continuously revised account of one’s understanding. That is precisely what we’re asking departments and professors to do when developing, applying, and recalibrating assessment criteria for student learning in their courses and shared curricula. As the Teagle demonstration projects vividly display, this process not only fulfills an essential responsibility of all educators—to give an intelligible and persuasive account of one’s work—but even more importantly provides a flexible, generative vehicle for that work’s effective evolution. From that vantage, the efforts of individuals and departments accomplished via the Teagle grant contribute to a larger vision: that is, to create a “culture of assessment” that is cognate with the aims of liberal arts education, so that assessment is grasped not as supplemental but as elemental to our fundamental mission.

Toward that end, at Haverford—thanks principally to the leadership and guidance of Cathy Fennell, Cris Fuller, Maris Gillette, and Wendy Sternberg, as well as contributions from several other members of our faculty and staff—we have begun by targeting key features of our educational project as ripe for development of effective, common evaluation criteria: the senior capstone experience, required of all Haverford students; department learning goals (as specific inflections of College-wide learning goals); and general requirements (as touchstones of a liberally educated twenty-first century citizen). Alongside Teagle projects in which a cross-divisional selection of departments have designed studies of their thesis expectations and assessment mechanisms, we have conducted a full survey of departmental capstone criteria and have begun a
quantitative and qualitative analysis sensitive to disciplinary, divisional, and trans-divisional desiderata. Each department has also explored and codified its learning goals, several of which have been intensively revised through the Teagle process, leading them also to construct complete assessment projects launched last year and this that will be aided by the Institutional Effective Committee in coordination with library staff and newly trained administrative assistants. Additionally, we have embedded the requirement of articulating departmental learning goals in our process of application for tenure-track positions and in our procedures for external review. Finally, our Educational Policy Committee has finished the first of a two-year reassessment of general requirements, an undertaking richly informed by research on learning goals made available by our Institutional Effectiveness Committee, an exchange partly facilitated by the formal arrangement of identifying a faculty liaison between EPC and the IEC. To aid such efforts, we have hired an assessment and research analyst in the Provost’s Office; created an Associate Provost for Curriculum; developed the IEC membership so that it cuts across the full landscape of the College; and, of course, implemented specific projects under the sponsorship of the Teagle grant.

Where does Haverford go from here? As Associate Provost Maris Gillette has put the matter, “we need to take advantage of the pressures we face” in order to articulate precisely the core aims of our curriculum at every level of student experience; identify means of measuring the efficacy of that curriculum in realizing those aims; fashion mechanisms for sharing ideas across programs that make visible common intentions; develop specific plans for completing ongoing assessment projects and initiating new ones; and further educate faculty to the philosophical, ethical, and practical value of assessment per se.

Finally, circling back to the transformation of skepticism into engagement, I would suggest that we think of effective assessment as: involving students when possible; aligned with faculty’s essential educational mission; easy to revise and manage; flexible enough to inflect distinctive pedagogies but intelligible enough to contribute to the common enterprise; fitting, not faddish; generative of better education than that which it’s measuring; and rewarding and uplifting to all its participants.