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**ASSESSMENT AS TRANSFORMATION**  
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"As we discover, we remember, remembering,  
we discover, and most intensely do we experience  
this when our separate journeys converge."  
Eudora Welty, One Writer's Beginnings

We come, each of us, to the subject of assessment from different vantage points. My own view has been heavily influenced by my graduate training in counseling psychology. Assessment was, for me at that time, a way of understanding my clients more fully; it was a way of listening more carefully, more attentively, to others' stories and experiences and the meanings they made of them. And the value of assessment was very clear to me. Without it, I couldn't shape a counseling environment or "climate" that would fit my clients' needs. "Doing assessment" meant hearing the individual client's voice and being able to act responsibly to support her in her personal and intellectual goals.

During my graduate work I also began teaching, and my experience in the classroom has also deeply influenced the way I think about assessment today. In a sense, the classroom--though it entailed work with groups of students rather than individuals--called on the same kind of assessment I was familiar with and depended on as a counselor. Once again, "doing assessment" meant paying attention, listening carefully, hearing with sensitivity and a sense of responsibility. Assessment might take the form of a class discussion or a writing assignment or an impromptu discussion with students in the hall after class, but what was at stake was, once again, understanding an responsible action. To turn my teaching into learning, I needed to understand individual learners and the conditions under which their learning was inhibited or advanced. Assessment was on-going and interactive; without it, I simply could not do my daily work in the classroom.

Both as a counselor and a teacher (and more recently as an administrator as well) I have come to believe that assessment is first and foremost a linking process--and I think of the model railroads I played with as a child and still delight in. You may know that model-train aficionados fall into two camps--those who swear by American flyer and those who swear by Lionel. American Flyer trains run on two tracks, just like real trains; but Lionel trains run on three tracks, the center rail serving as the power source that connects the parallel outer rails and gives the train the power it needs to move. A well conceived assessment process, I'd like to propose, works like that Lionel third rail: it connects us with each other and moves us forward.

In this way assessment is transformative, and whether or not we're comfortable with it, assessment is about revolution. If we really listen to students and take them seriously, then our teaching and learning methodologies will change, and then our administrative structures will have to change. For American higher education is a place where our traditional organizational structures and roles (especially the divisions between student affairs and academic affairs) have too often put us on parallel, but unconnected tracks. Assessment can help us to reconnect. It can help us understand ourselves and our fellow educators and the community we create together to serve students and promote learning. A campus without assessment is in danger of creating or perpetuating educational settings that are not responsive to the goals and needs of the individuals we seek to serve today.

Following from this view of assessment as linking and transformative are a number of points, all of them in one way or another about purposes.

1. ASSESSMENT HAS AS ITS PURPOSE THE EXPANSION OF OUR NOTIONS OF THE LEARNING CULTURE AND THE WAYS IN WHICH WE STRUCTURE THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY.

For all our complaints about the gap between the real and the ideal, most of us continue to work in higher education because we believe colleges and universities are fundamentally good places where good things happen. Finely tuned assessment efforts help keep us from being self-satisfied or complacent about the workplace we love. Assessment projects that include information about a broad range of individuals and groups can reveal to us where we have failed at meaningful inclusion of diversity (in the broader campus culture as well as in the curriculum), where we have failed to understand the needs and experiences of specific groups within the community (the wide range of student diversity and the notion of the "chilly climate" come to mind), and where we have failed to consider effective and alternative ways of thinking about what it is that we do (new notions of scholarship come to mind...or how we structure the curriculum...or the incentives for true interdisciplinary teaching...or how long we have lived with the seeming inability of student and academic affairs to work more effectively and respectfully with one another).

Assessment, in this sense, represents that most basic academic value of intellectual honesty. Through assessment we challenge ourselves to rethink our ways of teaching, structuring the curriculum, working together, and even knowing itself. It provides a means for self-correcting action and for the continual expansion of our thinking about the idea and purpose of higher education.

2. ASSESSMENT HAS AS ITS PURPOSE THE ADVOCACY OF VOICES THAT HAVE BEEN MARGINALIZED IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMUNITY.

We cannot be self-correcting, evolving institutions if we do not seek to hear and understand the voices of those who have been marginalized in higher education. We live with a profound paradox--seeking on the one hand to admit a wide range of students and hire staff and faculty who reflect the complexity and diversity of our students and of American society...and on the other hand seeking to provide common, shared educational experiences that will allow us to speak meaningfully about an educational "community."

In the past, we have sought to admit for diversity and to socialize for homogeneity. Now we seek a different principle for different work: one in which we build a kind of community that recognizes both our commonalities and our differences. Those assessment projects that help us to understand how various educational environments are experienced by different students will result in significant challenges to our notions of effective teaching, our assumptions about the "accessibility" of the campus, our theories of learning, and our theories of human development.

The advocacy function of this kind of assessment may well raise disquieting issues, but they are issues I believe we can understand and to which we can respond.

3. ASSESSMENT HAS AS ITS PURPOSE THE STUDY OF THE PERSON IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ENVIRONMENT.

We have often done partial assessment. That is, we have studied the characteristics of a group of students, or maybe the outcomes they have achieved, but we have not often studied the characteristics of the environments in which they live and study. And we have frequently reversed the equation, as well, studying certain characteristics of the larger campus environment, but not the effects of those characteristics on the students. What we need now is assessment that gives us a more complex understanding of the interrelationships between the student and the environment.

Such assessment would be revolutionary. It would assume what most campuses do not yet recognize in any deep way--that there are indeed many campus sub-cultures of students, faculty, staff, departments and other environments and that we must seek to understand each of these in their particularity and uniqueness and in their special interrelatedness. This is not, let it be said, the way higher education has traditionally thought about its "business." It is a basis for powerful assessment.

#### 4. ASSESSMENT IMPLIES CLOSER LINKS BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL DIVISIONS OF ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS.

American higher education has long extolled as one of its major raisons d'etre the development of the "whole person." You can read it in many a college catalog: the graduate as critical thinker, good citizen, fulfilled individual....healthy, wealthy, and wise. And yet we have rarely worked together toward this end. Student-affairs faculty are off in one building doing their thing, classroom faculty in another doing theirs. Our academic prejudices and structures have gotten in our way and in the way of our students' learning. Assessment, as I'm envisioning it, is a process that calls us back together to raise questions about the "whole" student and to address those questions from the broadest possible, across-the-institution perspective.

Assessment projects that involve teams of academic and student affairs faculty can lead us toward more comprehensive understanding of students and campus environments. Moreover, better linkages between student and academic affairs mean more cohesive and seamless learning for students, in which there's an integration of the in- and out-of-class learning, theory and experience, the curriculum and the larger campus, the individual student and society.

#### 5. ASSESSMENT HAS AS ITS PURPOSE THE FACILITATION OF ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES.

Good assessment begins with and is based upon the values and beliefs of a particular campus community. It is not a neutral, disconnected project in measurement but an expression of what we care most about and what we hope for in the future. Assessment means looking closely at ourselves and holding what we see up against our own most basic and cherished notions of what an educational environment should be.

One of those for me is community. Good assessment projects include and focus on a wide variety of constituencies; I see diverse groups--faculty, students, staff members, alums...carrying on a continuous, self-reflective conversation about "how we're doing," "where we're going." Good assessment projects utilize a variety of ways to collect data and thus illuminate the complexity of the community being studied--its sources of commonality and its sources of difference. And good assessment projects result in action--action which seeks to support the values and goals of a campus community and to change those things that inhibit or contradict its values and goals.

Good assessment projects are "community development projects" that result in connections among individuals and groups, linkages between academic and student affairs programs, and recognition of worth between one individual and another.

During my senior year at Macalester College I sat for a final exam in humanities. It had been prepared for me by Ray Livingston, my academic advisor, and it consisted of three questions: What have you heard? What have you seen? And what will you do now? Those three questions sum up my view of what is most important in assessment on college and university campuses today.

Ray assumed that I had been listening--not only to his lectures but to the broader world around me; he wanted me to integrate what I had heard from my peers, my family, the world outside Macalester, with what I had heard in class. He assumed that my education was wider than what I had seen on the pages of my textbooks; that I was a participant-observer in the world around me, a world full of social concerns and crises, of art and music, poetry and joy, a world of challenges and questions, a world of diversity far beyond my individual experience and background, a world I was responsible for integrating with my college education.

His expectations about seeing and hearing more fully were not new to me. I welcomed them. But the last question--the "what will you do now?" question...that was the stunner. I was responsible, he was telling me, not only for expanding my assessment of myself and my world; I was also responsible for acting on the knowledge of that expanded assessment. That's the most significant challenge of assessment in my mind: how we will act on the knowledge we have? Will we find ways to put our knowledge into the active building of educational environments that are places where no one is marginal, where we all have meaningful access to learning, and where we seek to be self-reforming and self-renewing on the basis of knowledge we have about one another and what we really need? I believe we must.