

THE HAMILTON PLAN FOR ASSESSMENT OF LIBERAL ARTS

Rough Transcript of a Talk Given by Dan Chambliss¹
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I. THE PROBLEM

There is a fundamental problem with the assessment of liberal arts education at selective colleges: liberal arts colleges, in their gut, don't like the *idea* of assessment. By this I refer to the faculty especially, where such a feeling is almost universal, but I think the feeling is shared, to a lesser extent, by administrators and perhaps some trustees as well. For a whole host of sometimes ill-defined reasons, the people who make up the continuing heart of liberal arts colleges just don't like the whole idea of assessment as they see it being practiced around them.

I think there are a number of reasons for this, many of them not clearly defined, but let's take a stab at them:

1. Assessment smacks of outside interference, in which other people are telling us how to do our job. The other people who are doing it, of course, often have no idea how such colleges operate or are actually hostile to our mission, we may believe.

2. Assessment seems to be politically driven. Right-wing legislators in particular, as we see nowadays in various proposals to review the Higher Education Act, often have a pretty generic antipathy to higher education and to the left-wing intellectuals they see as being holed up there. So a lot of the motivation for the assessment movement seems to come from people who have their own agenda.

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3. Assessment work is often intellectually lightweight, a kind of “worst of education research” discipline. Often times, assessment is conducted by people who not only have no training in social science, but are quite actively professors in fields completely unrelated to social science research. Partly as a result, a lot of assessment work really does represent bad social science, and few respectable professors want to be identified with work that is so conspicuously inferior from an academic point of view.

4. The assessment movement smells like business. Indeed, it actually does derive fairly directly from the whole Scientific Management movement of the early 1900s, in which industrial tasks were broken down into their component parts, designed for the highest level of collective efficiency, and then reassembled using a highly elaborated division of labor. To the minds of academics, this is exactly what we *aren't* trying to do; and the whole Scientific Management approach, and indeed the entire culture of business, represents precisely what many academics don't want to be involved in – indeed, they went into academia precisely to avoid this kind of thing, at least in some cases. Any discussion of “productivity,” “costs and benefits,” “getting results for our efforts,” and the like reminds many professors of the world they want nothing to do with.

5. Finally, and related to all the others probably, is the whole thing (that is, the assessment “movement”) seems to *violate* what we're really up to in some ill defined way. For now, I'll leave it open what this means, but that sense clearly underlies much of the almost instinctive negative response that many academics have to assessment.

But: the fact is, assessment is here to stay. Seemingly all state legislators want it, and lots of foundations, and a fair number of trustees, and a decent number of other

people; and in the abstract, it's not altogether a bad idea. That is, there is something common-sensically correct about the notion that we should try and see if we are actually accomplishing anything in our work. How we do this may be very much up for grabs, but the general idea that results do matter at some level does seem reasonable, even if people aren't doing such a good job so far of measuring those results.

The solution, therefore, I would propose, is to try and *do assessment right* – to do it right. At Hamilton, that's what we want to do. Now, doing it right means several things:

- The results should be useful. We ought to be able to find out some things that faculty, students and administrators can use to actually do their work better.
- The research should be fundamentally sound social science. We know how to do research on human behavior, using experiments, surveys, interviews, and the like; there's no reason not to use those best-designed methods for doing what is obviously social science research. And the academic credibility of our work depends on doing high quality research.
- Most importantly, our assessment efforts should be true to the mission of liberal arts.

II. THE MISSION OF LIBERAL ARTS

That last point is a little bit tricky. We need to know, then, what “liberal arts” actually means. At Hamilton, we've approached this somewhat empirically; that is, rather than just make up a definition of “liberal arts”, or draw on the kind of speeches that presidents routinely give at convocations and commencements, we've tried to

figure out how students and former students use the term based on our own preliminary studies of the past few years. It seems that to our students, and perhaps to our faculty as well, “liberal arts” means a number of things:

1. Liberal arts certainly includes certain *basic skills*: critical thinking, writing, speaking, and the like. There are actual techniques and skills that students need to learn that are associated with a liberal arts education.

2. Most disciplinary content seems *not* to be a crucial component. That is, it was clear from our alumni interviews that while students may learn a lot in their major, and certainly enjoy studying in one field more than another, in very few cases was the actual disciplinary content they learned useful or relevant to them in their later lives; and indeed, we have little evidence that what they learned in their major proved to be much more important than what they learned in other fields. Obviously, if someone is going to be a chemical engineer, knowledge of chemistry matters; but most of our alumni go into fields only loosely related, if at all, to the fields they studied closely while in college.

3. We are not in the job training business. This by itself makes assessment considerably more difficult. By comparison, a proprietary business school that teaches students secretarial skills, how to use an Excel spreadsheet, or how to do basic accounting has a very clear cut mission; and these schools take to assessment like bees to honey. Similarly, I was talking recently with the Director for Assessment for the U.S. Naval Academy, where they seem to love assessment – but then, their mission is exceptionally clear: to train officers for the U.S. Navy. There is no ambiguity whatsoever about what Naval Academy graduates will do for a living; and I think they wouldn't be particularly happy if a fair number of their alumni wound up writing poetry

and living in a yurt in Alaska, whereas for our schools, that is not so rare an outcome, nor an undesirable one. Our alumni wind up in a wide range of fields, and we seem to believe that, in a sense, the wider the range, the better. Far from training people for a specific job, we take pride in the fact that they engage in a phenomenal range of careers.

4. We are looking for long-term results. I think it's nice if Hamilton graduates get good jobs straight out of college, but if they don't I don't worry about it at all; and I don't think my fellow professors do; nor the administration particularly, except perhaps the Career Center. If after five years, they still don't have good jobs, that may be a cause of concern; and if after ten years they aren't well placed in something they enjoy, then I think we would get worried. But our immediate post graduate placement rate by itself is, I think, of minimal concern for most of the members of our faculty and staff, and even for many of our alumni themselves. We're in the job of helping people in life over the long haul, not just in "finding them a job" right now.

5. Finally, it seems that in fact the "results" we're looking for are uncertain almost by definition. It's true, again, that college presidents frequently write long, windy speeches about "the meaning of the liberal arts," but that genre works precisely because nobody has very good answers. We don't really know for sure what our goals are. We do know that we live and work in these institutions, and so do our students; we know that lots of students want to go to such places (or at least more than we can accept), and we know (I speak for those among us fortunate to be highly selective) that our alumni – ten, 15, even 30 years after graduation – are exceedingly fond of these

institutions, and seem to think we are doing a wonderful job at *something*. But we're not exactly sure what it is, and they aren't either.

Now this flies directly in the face of all the best wisdom of assessment theory. You're supposed to have a clear mission statement; you should have clear goals, and objectives, and without clear goals you can't really get there at all; it's much easier to get where you're going if you know where you want to go, and so on. This is elementary wisdom in most organization thinking. Indeed, I myself have written on organization excellence and have touted the notion that clear goals are one of the fundamental principles of a high-performance organization. And yet we don't have them.

On the other hand, we – by which I mean highly selective, residential liberal arts colleges – are, by common consensus, among the most fabulously successful institutions of higher education in the world. Our alumni for generations love us, believe that we have made their lives immeasurably better, are adamant in argument that we have helped them in their careers, and the like; the finest students in the country are knocking down (some of our) doors; people will pay lots of money to attend our institutions, and will leap all sorts of hurdles to gain admission. It certainly seems that we are doing something right, since very few organizations enjoy the kind of success we have, historically at least, enjoyed. So our self-evident lack of goals, clarity of mission, and the like seems at least not to have been a fatal error, if an error at all. In other words, our “lack of clear goals” is not evidence that we are irresponsible ne'er-do-wells.

III. THE MELLON ASSESSMENT PROJECT

With some of these ideas in mind, we applied for and received, in 2001, a large grant running three to five years from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the assessment of liberal arts education at Hamilton College. We designed our project to be a comprehensive, multi-method social science research project that would be institution-wide and longitudinal, following a group of students over a significant period of years. We wanted to see, fundamentally, how education at Hamilton is experienced by the students who experience it, in all its ramifications. The Project directly employs eight faculty members, between 12-15 student research assistants, several staff members, and a variety of consultants and others at different points. There are a number of components for the research, but the primary ones are these:

1. The Panel Study. This is an interview study tracking 100 randomly sampled students from the Class of 2005 (out of a class of about 440). Every year for their four years at Hamilton, and one after they've graduated, we interview these 100 students (or as many as we can) on a wide variety of issues about their experience at Hamilton College. Our goal is to be able to track the careers of these students over their entire time at the college and one year after they graduate. In addition, we collect writing samples from those students in every year of the study.

2. The Writing Study. We are preparing an archive of several thousand student papers, collected over a five-year period, from a wide variety of classes and students, including those collected from the panel students. Each June, we bring to the college a group of writing experts from similar colleges, train them carefully in some evaluation rubrics, and then have them "blind" read a large number of student papers. The papers

have had all identifiers removed from them, so the readers have no idea if the paper was written by a sophomore or a senior, or is indeed an example of high school writing submitted by the student before they even matriculated. The papers are evaluated on eight different criteria. Our goal here is to understand, through an objective evaluation scheme, the extent to which our students' writing actually improves (or does not) during their time at Hamilton, and on what criteria it improves or not. This study is thus far proving to be quite successful and interesting, I should say.

3. We are analyzing HEDS senior surveys taken over the past ten years, using a range of multivariate techniques including regression analysis, Probit analysis, and the like. The HEDS surveys as provided to member colleges typically use very simple if not perfunctory analyses; we are doing far more elaborate work on them, first by compiling the surveys into a ten year longitudinal database.

4. Finally, we are involved in numerous "projects of opportunity" including a study of student course selection, studies of student networking, of social life, of advising, and the like, using archival data (of student course registrations, for instance), surveys, focus groups and a host of other methods. We have perhaps a half dozen of these projects going at any one time; some are done in direct response to questions from constituencies among the faculty or administration.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED

In the course of all this work we are learning a lot about Hamilton College and a student's experience there, but some lessons are not just about Hamilton. We are learning a variety of interesting things about assessment, for example, some of which I would like to share with you:

1. We have gained faculty support through creating academically credible results, not through trying to get “buy in” or pushing involvement. Rather than have lots of faculty involved in the whole project from the outset, or from having endless committee meetings or holding workshops, we waited for several years before releasing any real results or bringing in other people. By that point we had actually done some fairly serious research and had some interesting findings to share with the faculty, administration, and staff. Then we gave a number of short presentations highlighting interesting findings – and the response was not just positive, it was surprisingly positive. We’ve had great response, and now have a fair number of projects going that draw directly from that response. We are trying to establish something of a consultant/client kind of relationship with our institution, in which constituencies pose important questions and we try to answer them.

2. You can do this work pretty cheaply using student assistants, existing data, and a few other fairly cheap methods such as focus groups. We are doing a very expensive project, but our goal is not to create expensive models – instead, we want to find in our work some good “proxy” measures that can stand in for large scale projects. Or: how do you get reasonably good answers quickly and cheaply? We rely heavily on student research assistants, who, with a little bit of training, can do quite a bit of good work. At the same time, they are learning valuable social science skills, participating in ongoing faculty research projects, learning about their fellow students, and helping their own institution. We find that a good number of good students are very interested in doing this kind of work once they see what it involves. It certainly isn’t for everyone; and it may be hard to predict who will be good at it. But overall, students at our institutions

provide a very high quality, very cheap work force, who are in it for the education and the experience.

3. The multi-method approach we find to be crucial. Surveys alone suffer from major weaknesses, both as self-report instruments and as conceptually rigid apparatuses. Interviews, too, have their weaknesses. Richard Light used interviews almost exclusively for his pioneering book, and the result is I think some very significant errors in interpretation. The various tests proposed by testing agencies and entrepreneurs have weaknesses which are probably obvious to you.

4. This is a big lesson that we've learned that I would especially emphasize to you: you must use student experience as your unit of analysis or a crucial dependent variable. *Don't rely on program or course-based assessment exclusively.* There are fundamental problems with using the kind of program or course-based assessment that many institutions use almost exclusively. They include:

- Students at our institutions enroll in a college, not a major. Most of them aren't attending our school for the particular major or concentration that they will take; many of them change majors, often more than once. They're attending a liberal arts college, and that's what they're looking for. Evaluation of a single major doesn't tell us much about their entire experience.
- A single program or department can be quite good, but irrelevant. At Hamilton, for instance, our Information Technology program is absolutely excellent; everyone raves about the quality of the service, how helpful the staff people are, how much they've learned, and the like; but it really

doesn't matter much in their overall experience. Alumni never say to us "Wow, that IT program sure was great and it made the whole thing worthwhile." The exceptional quality of the program, which would be quickly picked up in a course or a program-based assessment, is marvelous without a doubt; but it really doesn't matter much in the big picture, by itself.

- If evaluated by program-based assessment, programs can shift their costs out. This is elementary to any economist; the programs can create "negative externalities." What I mean is they can make their own programs better, but at the (unmeasured) expense of someone else. For instance, everyone thinks that "small classes" are a great thing, and in the abstract they are; but whenever there is a small class created somewhere, there must be a larger class being created somewhere else. Basically, the people who teach the small classes may get all sorts of credit for it, while someone else looks bad. Similarly, the whole move to "research-based science" programs means that science programs, which are already capital intensive, become tremendously labor intensive as well; and, yes, by many measures they are quite successful – so long as you ignore *all of the students who aren't in them*. The costs have been shifted out of the program, and aren't measured; therefore, the whole thing looks very successful. (Remember: good assessment starts with good accounting.)

V. LIBERAL ARTS ASSESSMENT IS DIFFERENT

Throughout the five years we have been working on Mellon-related assessment projects, we have been struck repeatedly by the ways in which liberal arts assessment is quite different from assessment as usually practiced – for instance, at large state universities, community colleges, proprietary institutions, and the like. Stating exactly *how* good assessment should be done at a liberal arts college is not easy, but I might venture here one reading of how it should be different. Liberal arts education isn't industrial engineering; it's agriculture. Our students, that is, are not inert raw material to be taken in, processed through and then turned out with a clearly defined change or result. That model works for teaching some things, no doubt. If you want to teach someone how to field, strip and clean an M-16, as the U.S. Army does, a rather simple step-by-step learning procedure works quite well, and you can process millions of people through your system in short order. But liberal arts education – not to be sentimental about it – is much more like agriculture. We're dealing with living beings here and they don't respond the same way as does inert material; in addition, as I said earlier, we're dealing with uncertain results that reveal themselves over many years. In a way, what we do is much more like growing flowers: we have these delicate little buds that we plant in the ground, water gently, shine some friendly sunshine on, and wait to see what happens. You can't force the damn thing to grow; but if you regularly and fairly continuously, treat it reasonably well in the proper environment, it usually grows, and sometimes quietly beautifully. I am certain, after many years of teaching and about five years of assessing, that we are dealing not with a manufacturing operation here at all; instead, we work in quite human organizations with lives of their

own, uncertain directions and goals, but human relationships throughout. That's not at all a bad thing, but it is quite different from "assessment" as it's usually done.

Personally, I think our way is better.

Thank you very much.