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## Institutional Goals Clarified Through Qualitative Narrative Assessment

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## Chapter 7. Assumption College

### INSTITUTIONAL GOALS CLARIFIED THROUGH QUALITATIVE NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT

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#### INSTITUTIONAL CHOICES:

##### Introduction:

Convinced that current models of assessment obscure much student learning, threaten to undervalue liberal education, and are often out of line with the professional expertise of those most experienced and concerned with student learning, we seek new models to determine how and how well students learn liberally in multidisciplinary programs that prioritize student engagement with excellent texts. We note five observations, based on our experience as students and teachers, about learning and teaching in the liberal arts tradition. These have guided the development of our assessment model and explain why assessment for a text-based, liberal arts core program should differ from the standard model:

- (1) Principle: Some important learning that students achieve in liberal arts courses is not easily or directly quantifiable; this learning is susceptible to being obscured by assessment models that aim for results that are easy to quantify.

Directive: For this reason, assessment prompts should allow students to display benefits of liberal learning—such as depth, insight, thoughtfulness, curiosity, and self-knowledge—that are obscured by quant-heavy or more “objective” assessment tools.

- (2) Principle: Because learning is an activity catalyzed by teaching rather than controlled by it, some important learning students achieve in liberal arts courses is unplanned rather than the fulfillment of specific objectives and strategies of teachers; such learning is susceptible to being overlooked by goals-focused assessment models.

Directive: For this reason, assessment tools should allow students to display learning that was not preconceived by teachers.

- (3) Principle: Much important learning college students achieve is aided by broad curricular programs that are not identified as a major and not the special purview of any department or departments; this learning is susceptible to being ignored by major- and department-centered assessment models.

Directive: For this reason, as long as assessment expresses an institution’s educational focus and commitment, it is possible that we should seek ways to assess student learning outside of majors and departments.

- (4) Principle: Many of the learning goals of core programs are achieved through students applying what they learn in one course to the material in other courses, often in other disciplines, or through students studying related material in multiples courses, often in several disciplines; in such programs, the disciplines and courses are not isolated from one another but are meant to interact and to multiply each other’s contributions to the whole of the person’s education.

Directive: For this reason, assessment tools should allow students to display how the program *qua* program, by weaving many courses and disciplines together, aids student learning.

- (5) Principle: A major learning goal of a text-based liberal education program—beyond that students become familiar with a text’s content or with the text as content (e.g., as historical

artifact) and beyond that they acquire skills such as critical reading—is that students, both sympathetically and critically, use these texts to illuminate the world, themselves, and other people’s beliefs; this learning is easily overlooked by assessment models that focus on measuring mastery of content and skills.

Directive: For this reason, assessment tools should seek out how well students can deploy excellent texts as lights on the world, themselves, and other people.

In short, if assessment informs or even dictates curricular adjustments, then we must not be misled by assessment models that might systematically overlook or undervalue the benefits of text-based, interdisciplinary, liberal education.

#### Brief History:

The Fortin and Gonthier Foundations of Western Civilization Program has grown gradually since its beginnings in 1979. The Foundation Program’s overall goal is to help students understand the heritage of Western Civilization, especially through reflection on primary texts. The initial intention of the first course (Religion and Philosophy) and subsequent courses (most especially Art and Politics) was to recover for students the connections that had been lost by both the aggressive departmentalization of the academy and the compartmentalization of knowledge. Guided by the convictions that higher education is propaedeutic to wisdom and that preparing the ground for wisdom requires many academic domains, each course in itself as well as the interaction among the courses is intended to prepare the students for learning disassociated from formal coursework. Co-curricular cultural events and travel to Europe reinforce this understanding.

The program includes four year-long sequences, including the two interdisciplinary courses already mentioned: “Art and Politics,” which is team-taught by art history and political science professors, and “Religion and Philosophy,” taught by a philosophy or theology professor. Two are not interdisciplinary: “History of Western Civilization” and “Literary Foundations of the West.” The program also sponsors a special topics course (for example, team taught in history and art history), often including a trip abroad. In each of the four sequences, students are led through developments of Western Civilization from ancient Greece to the twentieth century. The sequences are intended to overlap enough so as to show students several key developments in multiple, deepening iterations.

The problem that formal assessment presents to the goals of the Foundations Program is that course- or discipline-specific assessment will miss and, indeed, obscure its interactive and long-term educational goals. Wassily Kandinsky presents an instructive example. How might one adequately assess in a single art history course, with its specialized Student Learning Outcomes and Goals, how a given student or group of students has achieved broader and integrative insights into the artist’s work? Consider his debt to the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, the place of Nietzsche in the history of philosophy, the role of nihilist thinking in Russian literature such as Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, the response to nihilism by either the neo-Thomist philosophical movement or the efforts of C. S. Lewis, or even the relation between Kandinsky’s artwork and the *Regensburg Address* of Benedict XVI. Ideally, the student would make such connections, and more, even though no survey of the history of art could do justice to any of them. Even better, the student should be able to make connections with works, events, and ideas that are not and could not appear on the syllabus. A Student Learning Assessment Plan tied to a specific course (whether in philosophy, art, history, literature, or theology) would miss the interactions and the creative insight of students. The challenge for the Foundations Program is, therefore, to develop a means of assessing that can be applied beyond the confines of single courses and disciplines and beyond the confines of the preordained insights of the professors.

## ACTION STEPS

A proper and full assessment of the Foundations Program would be conducted at four moments within and after a student's education: (1) before taking any courses within the Foundations Program; (2) upon completion of each course or sequence of courses; (3) during and after completion of all courses in the Program; (4) and several years after graduation, where we might be able to see if students have retained habits of mind and interest in the intellectual life sufficient to carry them through a lifetime. Current assessment models within departments measure individual courses, so this is not our highest priority. Moreover, we do not have the resources to conduct studies of incoming freshmen and alumni. Currently, the only feasible moment for assessment is during and after completion of the various courses in the Program. While this can capture only part of what the Program does, it might help us develop strategies for even small samples of students before matriculating and after graduating.

Not yet required to participate in assessment procedures, the Foundations Program, based as it is on disciplinary complementarity and reflection on primary texts, seemed a perfect candidate for this experiment in non-standard assessment. The provost was supportive and other faculty and administrators involved in assessment thought such unofficial experimentation was fine. We sought an assessment instrument that would fulfill the principles and directives articulated above while also being low-cost for the program to implement and for the students to complete. We also hoped to discern how well the distinctive features of the Foundations Program aid student learning. These features include, most importantly, interdisciplinarity and a reiterative, developmental sequence of courses. We focused on the following hopes we have for students of the program:

- a) **BREADTH:** Students should become knowledgeable about a wide range of important figures, texts, and events from the development of Western civilization and the Western and Catholic intellectual traditions.
- b) **DEPTH:** As the program unfolds, students should develop a deeper understanding and thoughtfulness about these important figures, texts, and events from the development of Western civilization and the Western and Catholic intellectual traditions.
- c) **SYNTHESIS:** Students should make connections—recognizing points of divergence and convergence, disagreement and reiteration—across the program's courses and disciplines.
- d) **THOUGHTFUL APPLICATION:** Students should be able to articulate the relevance of important primary sources to understanding the world they encounter in, for example, its political, artistic, economic, religious, philosophical, and literary aspects.

The language of 'goals' and 'objectives' suggests that success is in the power of those writing the goals and objectives. Teachers, courses, and programs are crucial aids for students in their work of learning, but no teacher, course, or program can force or efficiently cause students to succeed. Consequently, we understand these as our primary hopes for student self-development.

In order to gauge how well the program helps students fulfill these hopes, we invited students to complete a survey online. We included any current student or recent graduate who had taken at least one course in the program.

First, the survey collected some demographic information about the students, for example, how much of the program they had completed. The survey proper had three phases. (1) It asked students to estimate their level of familiarity with thirty-six major figures in the history of Western Civilization and whether they had learned about these figures through primary texts. (2) It prompted them to report on how they experienced the multidisciplinary, reiterative, and developmental structure of the program.

(For example, did topics and figures reappear in multiple courses? Were later courses redundant? Did the courses seem unrelated? Did they learn new things about topics they had studied before? Did they notice differences or even disagreements course to course, discipline to discipline?) (3) Finally, the survey asked them, in a series of five questions, to name a primary text or work they had studied that helped them understand permanent human issues, themselves, or the recent world in its political, economic, artistic, religious, or ethical dimensions; the survey then asked them to elaborate how this text or work did so.

These sections correspond to our four hopes for student self-development above. Of the three sections of the survey, we expected the first to indicate very roughly how well the program achieved both *breadth* and *depth* in teaching students about Western civilization. We expected the second section to give us some hint of *synthesis*, namely whether the several layers of the program as experienced by students were successfully reiterative and deepening rather than either redundant or irrelevant to each other. We expected the third section to deliver the meat of our assessment data, giving students the opportunity to display their *depth* of understanding, their *thoughtfulness in applying primary texts* to the world, their ability to *synthesize* and understand issues and texts across disciplinary lines, and to develop their own insights. The initial survey yielded some useful information about the program, but also encountered obstacles and suffered some unforeseen limitations.<sup>7</sup>

The first set of obstacles was encountered during the development of the assessment model and attempts to improve and deploy it, even for an initial try. On the one hand, people dedicated to teaching and administrating programs like Foundations typically view assessment as an enemy, and for many good reasons, some of which have been outlined above. There was little enthusiasm or energy on their part to develop and implement this project, even though it was self-consciously counter-cultural, assessment-wise. On the other hand, people dedicated to assessment typically view non-quantitative assessment tools, or any reliance on student self-reporting, as beside-the-point because purportedly subjective and unscientific. A major objection was made by those tasked with coordinating assessment at the college that the tool being developed would not be acceptable as assessment and therefore would ultimately be a waste of time. This both lowered morale and delayed the project. Consequently, the survey has been administered only once so far.

Inevitably, a second set of obstacles was discovered upon administration of the survey. First, the survey suffered from a few technical faults; for example, several questions were not presented to students at all, or not presented to the proper subset of students. Second, a small majority of students skipped some questions entirely; they were especially prone to skip those questions we were most interested in (the third type of question listed above). This has tended to reinforce criticisms of the methods used and the overall impression by those opposed to these methods that only quantitative measures are useful; of course, traditional assessment methods can also suffer from students not putting in a full effort, since poor performance on an assessment tool, as opposed to a graded assignment, is usually of no consequence to students. Hopefully, with some technical adjustments and an increased incentive to develop answers to the short essay questions, these problems can be fixed or mitigated in the future.

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<sup>7</sup> The first deployment of this survey has suffered from several problems in application. First, some of the so called "skip logic" directed all students past some questions rather than only those students to whom the questions did not apply. Second, the database used failed to include a whole the most recent freshman class of students. This seems to have been the result of migrating it between versions of administrative software. As the survey is reissued it will be refined and corrected, and the database of students will be improved.

In spite of these limitations, the survey, even in its test-run, yielded some useful information about the program—both about what is working well and about what calls for improvement.

First, the reiterative nature of the program seems to work. It has been experienced well by students. By very large numbers students reported that the program's courses were clearly connected and relevant to each other. They also reported, in large numbers, that referring to events or issues in repeated courses was not redundant or inconsistent, but rather that it extended their knowledge and deepened their understanding. This is how the program is supposed to work. The persons about whom students reported having a stronger depth of knowledge were also the figures they were most likely to have seen in multiple Foundations courses. This correlation may be intuitively obvious to experienced teachers, but it is reassuring to see it surface in the assessment data.

Second, the interdisciplinary nature of the program seems to work. A strong majority of students noticed professors linking their course material to other courses or disciplines; a strong majority reported making connections on their own to other courses and disciplines; and a strong majority reported noticing differences of opinion (but not inconsistencies) about how to evaluate or understand events or issues. This is how the program is supposed to work. Also, the Art and Politics sequence and the Philosophy and Religion sequence were the sources of a strong majority of the primary works named and commented upon by students when asked to articulate the relevance of a great work to contemporary or perennial issues. Because these are the two interdisciplinary sequences within the program, this fact might suggest that the more interdisciplinary aspects of the program seem to have the most impact on a student's ability to deploy great texts in understanding the world. Of course, instead this fact might just reflect the habit of the disciplines involved or the way these particular courses are taught.

Third, both in reporting their depth of knowledge about important persons and in their naming primary texts and applying them, students seemed especially strong and thoughtful about artistic, political theoretic, religious, and philosophical persons and texts, and they seemed especially strong, both in breadth and depth, on ancient, medieval, and early modern figures and texts. Apart from showing strength and depth on Kant, Marx, and Nietzsche, students' knowledge of and thoughtfulness about late modern and more contemporary persons and texts seemed weaker.

Fourth, with a few exceptions, students showed marked weakness on literary figures and texts from all eras. This evidence is important but not surprising, given that in recent years the program has not been able to regularly offer the year-long Literary Foundations of the West sequence. This does not show a weakness in the program on paper, but in its execution. It does underscore that even students going through the program lack knowledge about a significant aspect of Western Civilization.

Fifth, the survey revealed little about how well the year-long History of Western Civilization course works within the program. On the one hand, judging from the data, it clearly provided students, often through primary sources, with increased breadth of knowledge about many of the important persons not covered in the other courses. On the other hand, these persons and texts did not show up often when students were asked to name and apply great texts. This suggests, perhaps, that while these courses serve to provide students with essential breadth about Western Civilization, they are insufficiently integrated programmatically with the other courses or disciplines involved in the program. It also suggests that perhaps the survey should be adjusted so that it might better intimate the influence of the history sequence on students.

Regarding the four learning goals listed above, breadth, depth, synthesis, and thoughtful application, the survey seems to indicate that the Foundations Program serves its students well, although it also indicates that the program has a few lacunae that might be filled with increased programmatic attention and coordination among its several sequences of courses.

### **INFORMED JUDGEMENTS**

As this report shows, despite the imperfections in the initial administration of the survey, we gained some perspective on the program. What we have learned about the program may seem modest. It is. But the method's costs in resources and time were also modest. Moreover, it is as useful as any results we have ever seen of traditional assessment tools applied to liberal arts programs. Compared to such traditional assessment models, this process has given us more helpful insight into how well the program coheres as a program, across courses and disciplines, *in student experience*. It has not given us exact data as to whether students are caused to meet the objectives teachers and administrators preordain for them, and it has not pretended to. This model clearly does not meet expectations for scientific validity, since it has not tried, in pursuit of a one-sided notion of objectivity, to abstract from the judgment of students and teachers. Most importantly, this model, in line with our five principles and directives above, does not invite us to diminish our hopes for students into objectives that may seem more exactly measurable.

Finally, it should be noted that assessment tools must not be accepted naively. This is true for standard assessment models as well as for the experiments in liberal arts-friendly assessment. Assessment tools should be designed to help detect weaknesses and strengths of academic programs; sometimes, they indicate their own weaknesses instead.

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