

A Foolish Consistency

The Culture of Assessment in Higher Education

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Culture is formed through a network of habits, many of which come to us subconsciously from external forces, including the social contexts that shape our identities, dispositions, and deepest interests. These cultural habits serve as the framework for our understanding of the world. However they may be incorporated into our meaning-filled lives, some practices, especially bad ones, often contribute to a skewed vision of reality, which quickly turns into a kind of self-incurred tutelage that Enlightenment intellectuals warned against. Regular exercise, for instance, is good for the body, but habitual fast-food consumption is not. The same is true in reference to beliefs. Affirming climate change is not only good but critical for current and future generations; denial, on the other hand, is a seriously bad habit of mind. The challenge comes when we try to break our routines and thereby alter culture. Physical and ideological habits die hard. In his 1842 essay “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that “a foolish consistency is the hob-goblin of little minds.”¹ This great Transcendentalist intellectual, the father of American literature, was referring to habits that we’ve tacitly accepted without critical reflection on either the meaning from which they come or the power by which they seem to enchant us. Members of society rarely realize that they are stuck in cultural customs shaped by peer-driven group-think, what Friedrich Nietzsche, in a similar frame of mind as Emerson, would later refer to as herd-driven

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” In *Essays: First and Second Series* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 35.

individuality.² Such habits arrest the development of our own self-reliance, the core, I would argue, of our physical and spiritual being and becoming.

Another way of understanding the notion of a “foolish consistency,” one that may move us away from Emerson and toward thinkers like Michel Foucault, is how erstwhile good habits can inadvertently turn into negative cultural practices from which it may become equally difficult to break free. One well-worn adage may come to mind: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” A CEO of a multinational corporation may have very good physical and moral customs, but not so the company which may be complicit in destroying the environment or the lives of workers employed by the company. The “foolish consistency,” in this case, is the belief that the good personal habits of a CEO trickle down to the habits of the corporation in general. But the parts do not always reflect the whole, despite what marketing departments may say to the contrary. Culture, though inextricably tied to our everyday customs, defines us in ways that are beyond what we may anticipate. We may have a reason to employ certain practices for the purpose of achieving an appropriate end, but the moment we act, both direction and meaning slip away from us. Cultural habits move us toward meaningfulness, but “meaning,” immediately engaged and altered by those who interact with it, cannot be contained. We deceive ourselves if we think that we can control every fragment of meaning that comes by the routines inherited from our social group. And we become fools when we refuse to recognize when individual intention becomes disconnected from the wider system, the assemblage of multiple intentions. We celebrate the benevolent individual who helps the poor in providing a meal, shelter, clothing, and other essential needs, yet that individual becomes foolish when refusing to go beyond these surface level activities in dealing with the roots of poverty. We celebrate the philanthropy of the wealthiest among us, but that celebration as well as the philanthropy are often ways of distracting us from dealing with root issues. Indeed, the wealthy need social, economic, and political crises to demonstrate their benevolence. As Emerson suggests in the same essay, the little charity that we give to various social causes—slavery, in Emerson’s case—function not only to assuage our conscience but also to

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Bernard Williams, ed., trans. Josephine Naukoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 352.

excuse us from going any further, which in turn produces a shallow culture that we think rests on powerful principles.

The practice of educational assessment, comprising the various ways of measuring student learning, is a defining habit of higher education and is thus central to its culture. Most professors are required to articulate on their course syllabi the learning outcomes and the methods used to measure *summative* student learning. Tests, quizzes, written assignments—these are means to measure student learning. There are also the numerous *formative* methods that use an array of rubrics drafted by assessment teams to examine sample course work. The goal is to see whether student performance matches up to the institution’s larger outcomes.³ From specific courses, to the department, to the institution as whole, outcomes-based evidential learning seems commendably organized and thoroughly logical. Demonstrating the quality of the curriculum is vital for an institution’s sustainability, including its long-term financial health. But such an effort requires a considerable amount of dexterity, coordinating the various players—as well as interests—of an institution.

Having been actively involved in collecting data for the purposes of bettering not only student learning but my own efforts at effective teaching, I’ve noticed that assessment in some cases has fallen into a situation that, ironically, threatens the learning process itself. Many institutions have created a culture that restricts learning to what can be measured. If something cannot be measured, then it is tossed into the dustbin of uselessness. This hegemony of measurability shares a striking resemblance to what leading thinkers of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, borrowing heavily from Max Weber, called “instrumental reasoning”—namely, the reduction of life to numerical quantification.⁴ Such constricted rationalism, according to David Held, “implies that whatever cannot be reduced to numbers is illusion or metaphysics.”⁵ The culture of assessment, a derivative of the obsession with shallow quantifications and hurried interpretations, tends to present

³ Program Review, both internal and external, is likewise an important aspect of assessment, though related particularly to accreditation.

⁴ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 228.

⁵ David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 68.

learning as a closed system. The obsession with measuring ignores the reality of cognitive development, which includes appreciating the unknown as an essential part of the learning process. Assessment has not only arrested the development of the mind, it has devalued the place of mystery in learning. The “ballooning assessment industry,” Molly Whorten warns, “is a symptom of higher education’s crisis, not its solution.”⁶ The present essay considers how to reshape the culture of assessment, how to soften its rigidity by appreciating and accommodating the openness of learning.

As I have claimed above, assessment has fallen into a particular “situation.” I’m suggesting that the current *culture* of assessment should be abandoned, not assessment itself. In short, I want to challenge the way in which assessment has been “encultured.” At root, the corporatization of higher education has reconstituted our attitude toward evidence-based student learning. Colleges and universities have evolved into top-down authoritarian enterprises, mimicking the organizational structure of the modern corporation where students are viewed as consumers, faculty as disposable labor, and administrators as managers. What accounts for this transmutation of higher education? The 2008 Recession, the nadir of nearly five decades of economic stagnation, has certainly accelerated this cultural shift. Whenever a financial downturn impacts an economy, each member of an economy works to preserve his or her own interests. But in a vertical structure, those situated at the highest level of authority—in this case management—have greater power over those below. A weak economy has created a sense of urgency, which in turn has demanded tighter managerial oversight over the finances of an institution. Educational leaders, increasingly concerned with an institution’s financial future, have reacted to financial strains by tightening budgets, raising tuition, and implementing austerity measures.⁷ They can do so because, like other managers, they are in a stronger position relative to those at the bottom. And the

⁶ Molly Whorten, “The misguided drive to measure ‘learning outcomes’” *New York Times* Opinion (February 23, 2018): <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/23/opinion/sunday/colleges-measure-learning-outcomes.html>

⁷ Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier, *Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

strategy of enforcing financial realignments functions to augment the power of those making such realignments.⁸ Those who control the purse have the lion's share of power. This has resulted in the weakening of shared governance.

In *Fall of the Faculty*, Benjamin Ginsberg has examined the reasons behind the rise of what has become the all-administrative university: the decline in state funding for public institutions, a trend that began in the early 1970s; the growth in the number of students and programs that have augmented management; compliance with the growing number of mandates imposed by the federal government; and the fact that faculty members are increasingly less involved than they once were in administrative tasks.⁹ We should also note that the growth in administrative authority is reflected in the rising number of non-research degrees, including professional doctorates.¹⁰ And institutions are seeing an increasing number of holders of non-Ph.D. doctorates (e.g., Ed.D.s) filling administrative slots. Most Ed.D. programs, for instance, writes Dewitt Scott, “focus specially on preparing students to assume formal administrative leadership positions in education institutions.”¹¹ Further, many individuals with such a degree who then take an administrative position do so with very little experience in administration itself and thus, as if to jump on to a highspeed train, inherit the pressures of demonstrating the

⁸ Paul Campos, “The real reason college tuition costs so much” *New York Times*. Opinion. (April 4, 2015) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/opinion/sunday/the-real-reason-college-tuition-costs-so-much.html>

⁹ Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty and the Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters* (NY: Oxford, 2011), 30. “During the same time period,” Ginsberg continues, “the number of administrators employed by private colleges and universities grew by 135 percent” (30). See also Richard Vedder, “Kill the Administrators’ (Not Really)” *Forbes* (May 10, 2018): <https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2018/05/10/kill-all-the-administrators-not-really/#34880e716210>

¹⁰ Douglas Archbald, “The Emergence of the Nontraditional Doctorate: A Historical Overview” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 120 (Spring 2011): [http://www8.esc.edu/esconline/cdlrev2.nsf/7ee05c19c4623d128525767800520634/26fea5d0ec3c9330852578a4004d0adf/\\$FILE/C.2.4.pdf](http://www8.esc.edu/esconline/cdlrev2.nsf/7ee05c19c4623d128525767800520634/26fea5d0ec3c9330852578a4004d0adf/$FILE/C.2.4.pdf)

¹¹ DeWitt Scott, “Ph.D. v. Ed.D.” *Inside Higher Education* (October 24, 2016): <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/gradhacker/phd-vs-edd>. See also <https://www.collegerecruiter.com/blog/2015/01/16/5-career-trajectories-graduates-earn-doctoral-degrees-education/>

successfulness of their institution. Professional doctorates, unlike traditional Ph.D.s, are focused more on deepening the practices within a given field, tending toward an urgency not only to produce innovative practices, while often relegating theory, but also to produce immediate results.

At the same time, holding an administrative position places one in a key decision-making position at an institution. Administrators have an opportunity to shield themselves from plans that would negatively impact their own status. For instance, those at the top of the administrative ladder, especially at smaller institutions, have an intimate knowledge of the finances of a college or university, as well as very close connections with leadership further up, especially at the level of the Board of Directors. When finances are tough, administrators will carefully craft the narrative to Board Directors—often withholding information or flat-out lying.¹² Decisions are made that will, for the most part, preserve administrative authority. It is either simplistic or evasive to say that administrative growth has come as a result of addressing “real” needs, for it fails to consider, Ginsberg argues, the variations in administrative numbers among institutions—why one institution has three times as many administrators per student as opposed to another with similar economic conditions.¹³ It also fails to address the steady increase in administrative power at institutions that are more financially stable.¹⁴ The stress of the post-2008 economy certainly presented financial challenges, but the economy also intensified habits and, thus, a shared culture despite the fact that the material circumstances have not impacted institutions equally. Many college leaders have either been innocently caught up in the momentum that has fueled administrative bloat, or they have taken advantage of such bloat to strengthen their own power and create more bloat.

¹² Scott Jaschik, “Lies, Damn Lies and Rankings” *Inside Higher Education* (July 19, 2018): <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/07/10/temple-ousts-business-dean-after-report-finds-online-mba-program-years-submitted>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ben Cosman, “Universities are Cutting Tenured Faculty While They Load Up on ‘Non-Academic’ Administrators” *The Atlantic* (February 7, 2014): <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/universities-are-cutting-tenured-faculty-while-they-load-non-academic-administrators/357858/>

When certain conditions develop without creating significant ripples or generating opposition, such conditions become status quo.¹⁵ This, of course, does not mean that every administrator has a penchant for becoming a tyrant. Again, administrators may have the most upstanding intentions, but they are stuck in a systemic cycle, and it is difficult to decelerate the momentum. The Recession has helped to normalize the “foolish consistency” of assessment obsession.

A final reason for the growth in administrative power, related more toward strengthening such power, has come as a result of the overwhelming silence of the faculty. It is not uncommon for the oppressed, for whatever reason, to be complicit in their own oppression. Perhaps challenging power directly is too dangerous. Faculty members are afraid of being subject to retaliation, from sanctions to losing their jobs, if they raise issues regarding the health of an institution. Some will choose to use more creative ways to challenge managerial power. I suspect, however, that without direct confrontation the oppressed will unwittingly support that power. When taking for granted the decisions made by certain individuals regarding the financial future of a school, members of an institution, especially students and faculty, tacitly legitimize the authority of those making such decisions. (This should remind readers of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony.”¹⁶) This is not to say that faculty members have willingly come to accept the 3-to-1 administrative-faculty ratio. Again, human agency is often disconnected from cultural habits.

¹⁵ Jenny Rogers, “3 to 1: That’s the Best Ratio of Tenure-Track Faculty to Administrators, A Study Concludes” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 1, 2012) <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Administrative-Bloat-How-Much/135500>; The Office of the President of the University of California alone has over 2,000 non-teaching administrators. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2018/05/10/kill-all-the-administrators-not-really/#34880e716210>; Jon Marcus, “New Analysis Shows Problematic Boom in Higher Ed Administrators” https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/06/higher-ed-administrators-growth_n_4738584.html; <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/septoct-2011/administrators-ate-my-tuition/>

¹⁶ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (NY: International Publishers, 1971), 10. See also Valeriano Ramos, Jr., “The Concepts of Ideology, Hegemony, and Organic Intellectuals in Gramsci’s Marxism,” *Theoretical Review* 27 (March-April, 1982).

Some may think that faculty members may no longer come from a position of power to do anything substantial about the growth of the administrative institution, despite the call to do otherwise.

Faculty members need to harness the power that they have as a body to strike down the conditions that have secured such a trend. One way to do so is by getting directly involved in hiring faculty members. But who has the strongest influence when it comes to faculty hires? It is not the faculty. Some will argue that it is a Board of Trustees or Board of Regents with such authority. Technically, this is true. But remember that the vast amount of information that Board Members receive comes from administrators. Some will disagree, saying that faculty members play a very important role in governance. If that's true, then why would faculty members choose to reduce the number of long-term or tenured faculty members, to let their wages stagnate, and increase the number (and salaries) of administrators over the last decade? Seventy-five percent of all college- and university-level teaching is done by contingency faculty. Instructors have no choice but to accept a precarious situation whereby they work at the pleasure of the administration.¹⁷ The reality is that board members and administrators constitute the power bloc that makes decisions for colleges and universities. Faculty members have become, for the most part, ineffective advisers, which is no more than a euphemism for an increasingly powerless cohort within higher education. Taking comments "under advisement" very often means to ignore.

In the meantime, however, faculty members will face increasing pressure to comply with the dictates of management. The vertical authoritative structure of the corporate world, which in academia has created administrative bloat and bloated administrative authority, instills, Jerry Muller argues in *The Tyranny of Metrics*, the "irresistible pressure to measure performance, to publicize it, and to reward it, often in the face of evidence that this just doesn't work very well."¹⁸ This "metric fixation," as Muller calls it, has deepened the urgency to comply with managerial dictatorship, creating "tension between the managers who seek to measure and reward performance, and the

¹⁷ Dan Edmonds, "More than Half College Faculty are Adjuncts: Should You Care?" (May 28, 2015): <https://www.forbes.com/sites/noodleeducation/2015/05/28/more-than-half-of-college-faculty-are-adjuncts-should-you-care/#265bba531600>.

¹⁸ Jerry Z. Muller, *The Tyranny of Metrics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 6.

ethos of the professionals (doctors, nurses, policemen, teachers, professors, etc.)” In a modern capitalist economic, workers, those who perform the main laboring task of an institution (as opposed to those who simply monitor labor), live in a culture of increased production, legitimizing an overbearing bureaucratic machine that disciplines workers in a variety of ways while directly strengthening management. Increasing production is one way to secure the longevity of a business, and one way to increase production is to employ cost-effective (and very often exploitative) forms of labor, which has always intensified, as the history of capitalism shows, tension between management and labor.¹⁹ With management’s control over intellectual labor, administrators can more effectively call the shots, demanding that faculty—both adjunct and tenured—comply with production output.²⁰

The urgency to increase output by contingent labor has the potential of endangering the quality of instruction.²¹ Submitting without question to the tyranny of metrics, allowing the hobgoblin of a bad habit to plant itself deep into our psyche, turns learning into a matter of control and domination. When the financial situation of a college or university is tenuous, instructors shift into survival mode. They feel the pressure to show learning success in the classroom, knowing all too well that administrators will cut their courses, their programs, or even their employment if they fail to show immediate results.²² Non-tenured faculty members, who ultimately serve at the pleasure of administrators, provide easier courses to please an institution’s desire to maintain

¹⁹ The same is true in the UK. Paul Jump, “Academics in the minority at more than two-thirds of UK universities” *Times Higher Education* (September 3, 2015): <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/academics-minority-more-two-thirds-uk-universities>

²⁰ Hank Reichman, “Current Hurdles to Academic Freedom and Shared Governance” (April 13, 2015) <https://academeblog.org/2015/04/13/current-hurdles-to-academic-freedom-and-shared-governance/>; <https://www.forbes.com/forbes/welcome/?toURL=https://www.forbes.com/sites/richardvedder/2018/05/10/kill-all-the-administrators-not-really/&refURL=https://www.google.com/&referrer=https://www.google.com/>

²¹ Kim Clark, “The Great Recession’s Toll on Higher Education” *U.S. News and World Reports* (September 10, 2010) <https://www.usnews.com/education/articles/2010/09/10/the-great-recessions-toll-on-higher-education>; <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/viewFile/8486/7620>

²² Peter Brown, *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

tuition-paying consumers, retention, on-time completion, and graduation rates. Such a culture discourages the taking of riskier and more creative leaps in our educational journey, because such risks may not yield immediate results. Education becomes reduced to dictation and recitation, and creatively engaging challenging issues becomes less of a priority. Imagine the number of college graduates who may be able to satisfy the instructions in a manual but have little skill in solving more complex issues. Much of human experience cannot be reduced to pat answers taken from a textbook. Life is much more complicated than that. And students are becoming increasingly aware of the declining rigor of their courses. A slim majority of students, according to a 2015 study by the National Survey of Student Engagement, have said that their classes lack significant rigor, as evidenced by minimum class requirements and easier assignments, including a considerable drop in the number of prep hours for class as well as the number of assignments.²³ Further, there has been no major reversal of this trend. Indeed, to entice consumers, the college experience has been presented less as an opportunity for learning and more of a visceral ‘happening’ filled with non-academic activities organized by non-academic staff members. College becomes a consumer trap, distracting prospective and matriculated students from the central task of education.

The corporate turn in higher education is undergirded by a very powerful ideology. In their own separate way, authors Ellen Schrecker, Henry Giroux, and Jennifer Washburn have argued that the contemporary university has been shaped by neoliberalism—an ideology that imposes discipline from the top to guarantee fiscal success not so much for the well-being of the community but for those at the top, which in turn redoubles their power.²⁴ The corporation has come to consume much—if not all—of human

²³ Dan Berrett, “For Students, Expectations of Academic Rigor Are Far From Universal” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 19, 2015) <https://www.chronicle.com/article/For-Students-Expectations/234269>

²⁴ Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (NY: New Press, 2010); Henry Giroux, *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014); Jennifer Washburn, *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education* (NY: Basic Books, 2008);

life. Herbert Marcuse predicted such a state more than fifty years ago. The contemporary world, he once wrote,

tends toward both the total administration and total dependence on administration by ruling public and private managements, strengthening the pre-established harmony between the interest of the big public and private corporations and that of their customers and servants.²⁵

Academic work by any faculty member is, Marcuse argued in another essay, “motivated, guided, and measured by standards external to [the faculty member], standards pertaining to predetermined tasks and functions.”²⁶ Neoliberalism has indeed produced its own cultural habit—that of discipline—produced in part as a result of paranoia over an imagined enemy.²⁷ As the history of capitalism has consistently shown, the enemy that requires discipline is always the main producers of wealth—namely, labor. Labor has considerable power in production. It doesn’t matter how many managers a company has at the top—no labor, no product. One would think that labor would be conscious of its powerful position; sadly, this is not the case. Management has strengthened its power not only in the sheer use of force but also by the way in which labor has come to recognize its own subservience. Despite the fact that labor organizing has been at an historic low recently, such organizing is always assumed to be the enemy that seeks to subvert management (management doesn’t like to share power), hence the reason why the latter needs to control (i.e., discipline) the former. Faculty members are often portrayed as the chief obstacle to student learning. Neoliberal administrators justify their disciplinary practices by painting a negative picture of the faculty as obstacles in the way of student learning and institutional stability.²⁸

²⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 35

²⁶ Held, *Critical Theory*, 417.

²⁷ Henry A. Giroux, “The Disimagination Machine and the Pathologies of Power” *symploke* 21, no. 1-2 (2013): 257–269.

²⁸ Jeffrey Alan Johnson, “On Assessing Student Learning, Faculty are Not the Enemy” *Inside Higher Ed* (November 7, 2014): <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/11/07/administrators-should-work-faculty-assess-learning-right-way-essay>

Within this cultural setting, assessment has become an obstacle to the life of the mind. The student debt crisis has contributed to the decline of academic rigor. College graduates hold an average debt of \$30,000 (\$1.3 trillion nationally). They also make up a high percentage of underemployment. In *Paying the Price*, Sara Goldrick-Rab writes that learning is hampered when administrators place further stress on students' financial security, not just by way of tuition hikes but also loan schemes that only deepen their financial enslavement. Stress over the affordability of college forces many students to skip meals or reduce the hours needed to sleep for the purposes of acquiring yet another job. This has an adverse effect on learning, as hungry and sleep-deprived students have difficulty focusing on their course assignments. Ultimately, the intellectual development of students—students burdened with debt, who continue to attend larger and less-than-rigorous courses—is arrested.

Likewise, professors, including adjuncts working at more than one institution, who barely make ends meet, face similar challenges: a lack of job security, minimal to no employee benefits, forced retirement, and often no long-term guarantees of stable employment. What is more, faculty members have less time for research, which negatively impacts knowledge production. Yet all the while faculty are pressured to work harder and produce more, often compelled by administrators to implement the latest pedagogical trend. Professors are required to include outcomes in their syllabi that may not serve an immediate purpose in their courses, aid in their pedagogy, or advance the developments within their field. Rather than benefiting “from serious conversations about what is and is not working in their classes,” Whorten laments, professors (and students) “end up preoccupied with feeding the bureaucratic beast.”²⁹ The double burden for intellectuals is to make advances in knowledge while complying with the dictates of administrative management. What is offered to assessment bureaucrats may only be a portion of the overall exploration that needs to be done in classroom discussion and experimentation. As Mark Salisbury writes:

When institutions narrow their educational vision to a discrete set of skills and dispositions that can be presented, performed or produced at

²⁹ Whorten, “Misguided Drive.”

the end of an undergraduate assembly line, they often do so at the expense of their own broader vision that would cultivate in students a self-sustaining approach to learning.³⁰

Learning is a process that is, Salisbury continues, “cumulative, iterative, multidimensional and, most importantly, self-sustaining long beyond graduation.” In contrast, assessment today has the tendency of sealing off learning from the rest of life.

The assessment culture dominating colleges and universities ignores the dynamic openness of learning. The higher or deeper one moves in an area of study the more the learner is confronted with greater challenges, obfuscations, ironies, and even paradoxes. Learning is a matter of overcoming the openings (an admitted euphemism for “ignorance”) in our perspective on reality. Indeed, there is no learning without admitting that sometimes reality cannot be packaged in tightly managed metric units. *Openness* also relates to a readiness to be surprised with new developments in the course of study. In both cases, the learner must be patient. We can never predict a moment of insight, and it often takes time to articulate just what exactly such an insight means. In this regard, new ideas, arguments, or solutions to problems cannot be forced; they come at different times for different people. A scientist (or science student), for example, cannot force a conclusion from an experiment just to satisfy the bureaucratic beast.

Of course, assessment has its place. It is most certainly helpful in terms of learning outcomes in introductory, mid-level, or skills-oriented courses (e.g., logic, communication, writing). In my lower division history class, for instance, I write out the learning outcomes on my syllabus and go over each of them at the very beginning of the course. Accordingly, students are told that while taking my class they will identify and be able to articulate names, places, and dates in a particular historical period. They will also identify and be able to articulate important historical arguments. Students will also learn how to formulate their own historical arguments—arguments that mirror those made among professionals. But at an advanced level, these positivistic requirements can be stultifying. Upper-division and certainly graduate-level courses often engage challenging questions

³⁰Mark Salisbury, “Future-Focused Assessment” *Inside Higher Ed* (December 5, 2013) <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2013/12/05/risks-assessing-only-what-students-know-and-can-do-essay>

or developments within a particular discipline, making it difficult to offer a closed and measurable list of knowledge bits for students. The higher a professor and his students move within a discipline the more difficult it is to meet time-restricted deadlines and delineate clear boundaries of what is known and what needs to be explored in greater depth. The learning process—and there is never learning without constant process—cannot always be presented in a neatly packaged manner, “as a closed loop.” We cannot reduce deep learning to the length of a social media status update or a TED talk. Many courses will spend an entire semester grappling with a handful of problems, often without a satisfactory resolution. But the benefit of such a class is that the questions remain with students long after a course is completed. In many ways, questions should be considered as having greater value than answers because they tend to stay with us much longer. How does an instructor provide learning outcomes for a class that grapples with a problem of historical interpretation? Can an instructor provide a satisfactory learning outcome in a part of his or her discipline that is in development, where the contours of what is to be studied are admittedly blurry? A response to the problems of assessment in advanced studies might be that a disciplinary problem or question can be easily presented as a measurable learning outcome in itself, that a professor can articulate in his or her syllabus that students will be able to recognize and articulate such challenges, leaving out the issue of answerability. This is perfectly fine; many professors do just that. But more pervasively (and perhaps more perniciously), assessment has cultivated a different habit. Administrators want tangible results—outcomes that are not only quantifiable but also marketable. Leaving the world open-ended does not satisfy consumer demand.

Socrates spent his life asking questions. He not only resisted but directly challenged simplistic answers to serious questions of life. Socrates—along with many other great thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition—would have been an unreliable candidate in providing assessment, yet he remains regarded as one of the wisest thinkers in history. For millennia, true knowledge was never divorced from wisdom. Indeed, the two were one and the same. Wisdom goes beyond isolated knowledge units and towards an interconnected and transcendent moment of superior insight. The expulsion of wisdom from the Western intellectual garden began in earnest around the time of the nineteenth century. Many thinkers have reacted against such developments. Nineteenth-century Transcendentalists sought to regain a sense of wisdom by

attempting to bridge the divide between Understanding and Reason, the former focusing on the basic stuff of knowledge and the latter going beyond static bits of data (like words, logic, or personhood) to a higher plain, one focused on the whole mind, the whole person—body and soul. Understanding is abstract; Reason is experientially embedded. Understanding can be closed, but Reason remains open. Unfortunately, institutions nowadays have confused measurable knowledge parts (Understanding) *as* definite knowledge (Reason).

The beauty of wisdom is that it can hold out aspects of knowledge without restricting the openness of a greater knowledge experience. One way to understand this paradox is to think of the raw data of knowledge, the composition of Understanding, as having meaning only by way of relating with other aspects of reality, moving us into the transcendental realm of Reason. The various modes of being that structure reality—biological, emotional, rational, economic, aesthetic, religious, etc.—congeal into a meaningful language that we call “culture.” An economic mode of being, for instance, is given its meaning by how it relates to other modes—*aesthetic, logical, biological, psychological, emotional, and so forth.* The wise person pursues an integrated life and mind, putting together the pieces of reality to form a rich—and richly transcendent—mosaic. To do this, however, learning must be allowed to remain open. Assessment obsession is stuck in the world of “Understanding”—the surface level of knowledge that can be measured, the isolated points on a spreadsheet or the ephemeral flashiness of a PowerPoint presentation. Wisdom dictates that a more complete epistemology, accepting the relational aspects that make up reality, as more than just “Understanding” but also transcendent “Reason.”

What is missing from a transcendentalist epistemology is the social embeddedness of knowing, which also speaks to the openness of learning. In contrast to mere intelligence, which is “fixed, impersonal, and, in an odd sense, nonsocial,” wisdom, according to author Steven Hall, is “profoundly social, deeply personal, adaptive, and intuitive.”³¹ Wisdom acknowledges abstract concepts and social contexts that contribute to meanings. Indeed, it is the dynamic of the social that gives meaning to our ideas. The philosophy of pragmatism, for example, a school of thought that

³¹ Stephen Hall, *Wisdom: From Philosophy to Neuroscience* (NY: Knopf, 2010), 43.

has done quite a bit to shape the methodology of modern American scholarship, has sought to regain wisdom by reminding us that meaning must remain open and that truth emerges from within the dialectics of the social context. Pragmatists accept contingency, patiently waiting for useful and applicable results—results that are not always immediate.³² Yet pragmatism allows the social context to direct the development of truth. It is, if you will, an epistemology that is bottom up, not top down. Knowledge production must rely on a social context (i.e., peer evaluation); it cannot be dictated, predicted with absolute certainty, or fit into the time constraints of administrative-driven assessment.

Pragmatism also appreciates the application of a diversity of perspectives in the pursuit of more clearly realizing and sharpening “workable truths.” The greater diversity, in terms of the number of individuals involved in the learning process, the richer the outcome. A one-size-fits-all imposition ignores the cognitive range among learners—cognitive ranges situated and delimited by specific social, economic, and culture contexts. The culture of assessment undermines social, economic, and intellectual diversity. Measurability creates a kind of sameness, a homogeneity that resists difference. Multiple perspectives have the potential of yielding a richer understanding of reality. Institutions nonetheless force assimilation through content assessment (distinct from skill-measuring assessment), which seems to conflict with the drive toward greater diversity on the college campus. Are institutions truly committed to diversity if only in the social but not the cognitive sense? Transcendentalist “reason” and the importance of the social in American pragmatism, which recognizes the openness of learning, protect knowledge from ossification and in this way preserves wisdom.

Sadly, however, the contemporary world has turned its back on wisdom. Perhaps this is because wisdom, which grows by way of experience and is defined in part as an acceptance of the unknown, cannot be easily measured. According to Hall, wisdom converges

³² Whereas the historical roots of American pragmatism are perhaps most acutely present in the lectures of William James, a more contemporary application of the pragmatic principles of a dialectical pursuit of meaning may be found, for example, in Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*.

on recurrent and common elements: humility, patience, and a clear-eyed, dispassionate view of human nature and the human predicament, as well as emotional resilience, an ability to cope with adversity, and an almost philosophical acknowledgement of ambiguity and the limitations of knowledge.³³

One part of this definition seems to stand out: the idea that wisdom is emotional steadiness in the face of the unknown: “Real life,” Hall continues, “is not confined to a board; it is not symmetrical and neat; it does not always reward boldness and aggression; it does not forbid a new piece from flying in out of left field.”³⁴ Indeed, real life cannot be quantified in any final sense, because new experiences force us to adjust to new circumstances. Wisdom relates to a “higher level of understanding, almost intuition, of knowing when experience should guide decisions and when you have to throw out the experiential playbook and literally do a rethink.”³⁵ Wise people do not panic when an answer is not readily available. They are grounded but clear-minded enough to deal with contingency: “Knowledge offers comfort; wisdom feels comfortable with uncertainty.”³⁶

Working through the unknown, the openness of reality, requires patience and humility. “Patience,” a mark of wisdom, Hall writes, “is the battle ground for now versus later, immediate reward versus delayed gratification, impulsivity versus prudence.”³⁷ He suggests that the corporate mind is the furthest thing from what we would consider as wise. “Narcissistic CEOs,” he writes,

[tend] to make more “extreme choices,” and, in essence, [are] the corporate equivalent of drama queens, typically pursuing abrupt shifts in business...big wins, big losses.... Executive narcissists bring a lot of drama into the

³³ Hall, *Wisdom*, 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

boardroom, but that drama does not produce systematically better corporate performance.³⁸

Foolish leadership, Hall continues, “often boils down to a failure of character, a personal estrangement from the virtues we associate with wisdom: a sense of fairness, humility, emotional regulation, deliberation.”³⁹ Colleges and universities are increasingly being run in this manner: managed by leaders who lack not only fairness, humility, and emotional regulation but also an open mind. A considerable dose of humility is necessary when acknowledging ontological contingency and epistemic limitations. Yet in a world that is fixated on quantifying the smallest units of production, there is very little room for such a quality. In the realm of higher education, it is hard to admit ignorance in an assessment report or a program review. Exposing the weaknesses or shortcomings of administrators gets in the way of showing the viability of a school, hence the reason why some schools have either withheld vital information about their program or have straight out lied.⁴⁰ What keeps an institution moving is not action based on data but on the bullying will of narcissistic leaders. It takes humility to work through challenging issues. But in a context dominated by ephemeral blips of information, we have very little patience for individuals or groups who take time to work through a problem and admit of the limitations in their knowledge or methodology. We have even less patience for those who respect such limitations as an essential part of the knowledge process. Author John Meacham tells us that “to be wise is not to know particular facts but to know without excessive confidence or excessive cautiousness.”⁴¹

Contemporary assessment has ignored the unpredictable, boundless, and even messy ways in which knowledge evolves. Assessment—and assessment-obsessed administrators—will never be able to corner an evolutionary moment in a field of study. Professionals in my own field of history are regularly confronted with new data, ideas, arguments, or paradigms that change the way

³⁸ Ibid., 140.

³⁹ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁰ Scott Jaschik, “Temple Rankings Scandal: From Bad to Worse” (July 26, 2018) <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2018/07/26/temple-admits-it-provided-false-rankings-data-six-more-programs>

⁴¹ Meacham quote in Hall, *Wisdom*, 144.

we do history. But such changes—some minor, some major—cannot be predetermined or packaged for students to simplistically point to and regurgitate for assessment officers. This kind of thinking is restricted to the textbook. According to Robert Dickerson, the current state of accreditation, which incorporates assessment, has “outlived its usefulness.”⁴² Higher education should invite students to grapple courageously with mystery, irony, and contingency, to revel in the mysterious, to study the great works in the humanities, sciences, social science, and the arts to forge innovative ideas that bridge the gaps in our knowledge.

So how might we break the obsessive habit of assessment and return to a posture of openness and patience integral to the production of knowledge? One strategy would be to confront the neoliberal ideology that has perverted higher education. Institutional leaders need to gain the courage to break the “foolish consistency”—the metric fixation exacerbated by a consumer culture—that has come to dominate the life of the mind. I’m not sure how to accomplish such a task without some sort of clamorous but unified barrage of criticism. A second more practical solution—one that will return us to a healthier approach to assessment—would be for faculty members to return to the teaching and scholarly outcomes articulated by their own disciplines.⁴³ Faculty members regularly visit such outcomes as they develop those for their courses and departments. Institutional and department outcomes should be directed from the outcomes specific to an academic discipline. Outcomes should be generated from the bottom, from departments, up. Faculty members must take the lead in articulating institutional outcomes through the use of the outcomes in their respective disciplines.⁴⁴ In an ideal

⁴² Robert C. Dickerson, “The need for accreditation reform” <https://www2.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/dickeson.pdf>
See also Valerie Strauss, “11 problems created by the standardized test obsession” https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2014/04/22/11-problems-created-by-the-standardized-testing-obsession/?utm_term=.bdba1ff4a8f6

⁴³ The American Historical Association, for instance, has its own resources, including outcomes, for teaching and learning: <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning>

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Alan Johnson, “On assessing student learning: faculty are not the enemy” *Inside Higher Ed* (November 7, 2014) <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/11/07/administrators-should-work-faculty-assess-learning-right-way-essay>

situation, faculty bodies should have sovereignty over curriculum development, which should include assessment and program review. The sad reality is, however, that administrations have relegated faculty members to advisory positions, which is tantamount to taking away their responsibilities as primary judges of student learning.⁴⁵

Finally, the defeat of the current hobgoblin demands a shift in the power structure of higher education—namely, a return to a truly shared governance model. There is a lot of talk about the importance of shared governance, but very little movement in trying to regain it. For the majority of institutions, governance is concentrated in the hands of administrators. Faculty members need to hold their own and create a unified front against overgrown administrative authority. They need to find ways beyond tenure—because tenure is no longer a guarantee of job security—to protect their interests from the directives of corporatized management. Perhaps they should tighten their association with not only their professional organizations but also organizations like the American Association of University Professors. What is more, such association must form the basis for a united front among faculty bodies, forging alliances from within their own institutions but with other institutions as well. Assessment, within limits, is invaluable. But obsession with assessment can be, to borrow from Max Weber, disenchanting. Faculty members should be at the forefront of the campaign to breach the restrictive walls of contemporary assessment—only then will institutions move closer to regaining the transcendent mysteries of learning.

⁴⁵ James Derounian “University administration should enable, not disable” *The Guardian* (July 31, 2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/jul/31/the-role-of-university-administrators>