

INTRODUCTION

This is a book of stories: stories of seven quite distinct institutions united in an effort to deepen the understanding of assessment of student learning in meaningful ways. They share a conviction, voiced by the faculty and administrators that participate in ACTC, that quantitative methods of documenting student learning outcomes should be supplemented with qualitative methods that probe more deeply into the value of liberal arts learning, specifically learning the tradition of wisdom recorded in the core texts of civilizations, in order to produce a more fully realized understanding of the benefit of such an education for students. Because these benefits may not be immediately recognizable or easily monetizable, and because they require forms that account for the individual differences in institutional mission, curricula, and pedagogy, the participating institutions have developed unique methods and rubrics for documenting what they consider most valuable about what they do and the benefits to students.

These are the stories of institutional self-examination, for the process of developing and implementing these qualitative narrative assessment strategies necessitated both deep institutional self-reflection and deep commitment to first acknowledging the value of such an assessment and then taking the necessary steps to implement those strategies. The process differed from institution to institution, as did the level of administrative commitment, faculty participation, and the action steps taken as a consequence.

Undoubtedly, the institutional self-reflection was one of the most, if not the most, significant outcome of this effort, because it required faculty and administration to articulate what had previously been understood, either collectively or individually, as an institution's ethos. The resulting conversations directed attention to areas that might indeed benefit from new approaches. Some institutions were more open to this possibility for change than others, whether because of a lack of consensus or because limited resources, common among most institutions, but especially in small, private, liberal arts institutions, precluded the possibility of substantial change. Tension between faculty and administration, or frustration at the lack of consensus resulted in some cases. Other cases indicate more progress because the hard conversations and decisions had already progressed to the point that meaningful changes could be developed and implemented.

The innovative documentation generated, collected, and analyzed is generating progress toward closing the circle of continuous improvement based on results. The hard work has been done: the institutional commitment to the inherent value of such information, the development of alternative means of demonstrating student learning, and the openness to change based on institutional self-examination and willingness to share results and lessons learned with peer institutions dedicated to the same goals.

ACTC remains committed to this initiative among its institutional members. Participants in the first cohort of institutions, in cooperation with the institutional member schools of the Association for General and Liberal Studies, with which organization ACTC worked in tandem, continue to implement and improve their projects. The preliminary reports of this first cohort were used in the summer of 2014 as the basis of ACTC's Tradition and Innovation Seminar, held on the campuses of Columbia and Yale Universities, in which teams from new institutional members planned curricula and assessment instruments appropriate to their circumstances. From the participating institutions a second Qualitative Narrative Assessment cohort is forming, thereby continuing this significant initiative and generating an ever-growing body of research. This book, and the one to follow it, will make available to all institutions

the important narrative of the commitment to quality liberal arts education as an important addition to the national conversation on the value of higher education in the 21st Century.

University of Dallas

The University of Dallas is known for its extensive core curriculum, which exceeds 60 credits, and includes a semester on its Rome campus for the majority of its undergraduate students. Its combination of a deep core text-based liberal arts undergraduate curriculum in the first two years for all students, including science and business majors, with focused disciplinary study in the second two years, results in a unique degree plan that attracts students who value the pursuit of wisdom in education. The undergraduate faculty desired an assessment instrument that emphasized this shared commitment to the pursuit of wisdom as a “proper and primary end of education,” as stated in the university’s mission statement. For the purpose of developing such an instrument wisdom was understood as intellectual maturity that would be demonstrated by a longitudinal study of undergraduate writing at the beginning, mid-, and end-point of undergraduate studies. From a language and behavioral analysis of a series of lectures presented by core curriculum faculty, graduate students in psychology, under the direction of the program director, derived eight essential descriptors of the process of intellectual maturation. From these eight essential qualities they developed a simple, easy to score rubric with which writing samples could be scored and analyzed, providing both important data sets by which to accomplish the continuous improvement cycle mandated by regional accreditors and easily communicable evidence of the value of the cherished core text-centered curriculum.

St. Bonaventure University

The core curriculum at St. Bonaventure University has as its foundation and organizing principle the *Itinerarium, or, The Soul’s Journey into God*, a core text of spiritual writing by its namesake, that provides a template to liberal learning. Bonaventure’s approach, rooted in the Christian-Franciscan tradition, holds that God exists, that God created all that exists, and that God has in mind a future of peace for all of creation. The journey occurs in three dimensions: the world outside, the world within, and the world above. As Bonaventure attempted to show that the aim of human life (perfection or happiness) is the gradual experience of the presence of the divine in all levels of reality, so students, by extension, seek wisdom in a complex surrounding as they journey through academics framed by the liberal arts. All students are required to participate in a common essay final exam in the Intellectual Journey capstone course in which they are asked to analyze and interpret an excerpt of a core text chosen by the faculty. Common syllabi and similarly constructed essay writing opportunities over the course of the undergraduate curriculum provide writing samples for analysis.

Carthage College

At Carthage College, the institutional decision to adopt qualitative narrative assessment coincided with a review of the core curriculum course sequence. The impetus for re-evaluating the existing assessment procedure was feedback from a student survey indicating that students did not perceive that they had improved in the ability to construct logical arguments in defense of a thesis or benefitted from a mandated a paper re-write and review process that the faculty understood to be an essential pillar of writing instruction. The faculty focus, therefore, was on pedagogical choices. Obstacles and delays resulting from such a major undertaking slowed but did not stop the implementation of a revised,

qualitative narrative assessment instrument as well as a recommitment to writing instruction. The supporting documents for this report include an example of narrative assessment: an edited transcription of a panel discussion among three faculty members involved in the project. Their ability to verbally articulate the values, the concerns, and the outcomes of the process successfully document the institutional commitment to student success, the concrete steps taken to maximize that success, and important insights faculty gained from personal classroom experience that are best expressed in language.

Samford University

The leadership team of what is now named the Core Texts Program at Samford University welcomed the chance to participate in an assessment project that they believed would help them measure the highest levels of student learning in the required two-course first year sequence, known as Cultural Perspectives, in ways that traditional assessments did not. The program is itself a larger narrative containing many smaller narratives; thus, a narrative measure with qualitative indicators rather than quantitative rubrics might indicate not simply if but what students are learning. The project was intended to function much like a comprehensive final exam across all participating classes, but abbreviated for quick comparisons, with the implicit assumption that any successful assessment would also indicate areas for improvement. A small group of representative faculty directly involved with the project ultimately reached similar conclusions. Weak results in the first year convinced them to restructure their approaches in the second year, giving closer attention to frameworks in class. In addition, they determined that the program itself needed a stronger framework to make it coherent and visible beyond the classroom. In the end, the project resulted in improved classroom teaching, and a stronger program: results the administration deemed more significant than those achievable by simply collating and evaluating approximately 350 short essays using the usual assessment rubrics.

Lynchburg College

Seniors at Lynchburg are required to successfully complete a Senior Symposium capstone course that uses as its text an anthology of long selections from core texts while focusing on a specific theme that varies yearly. Institutional data suggest that students struggle with selecting, using, and developing strong and clear lines of evidence from both written sources (core texts) and oral sources such as the public lectures featured in Senior Symposium. In a trial semester half of the faculty teaching the Senior Symposium volunteered to study and develop a narrative assessment instrument. While discontinuing or modifying some early ideas as a result of practical considerations, at the end of the semester the participating faculty reviewed student progress by examining the written assignments, then preparing a brief written summary analysis limited to, at maximum, a single page for a small sample of randomly selected students, narrating development in their learning outcomes. The administration recognized that such a non-quantitative narrative assessment, while providing a more holistic means of determining if, and possibly how, students' skills in higher order thinking are developing during the progress of a single course, could also support the college's ongoing Quality Enhancement Plan.

Fresno Pacific University

Fresno Pacific used the occasion of institution-wide preparation for the re-accreditation process to review and update their sequence of core requirements, embedding specific assignments into common

syllabi in order to generate meaningful sets of writing samples to be analyzed according to rubrics that aligned with student learning outcomes. Planning discussions revealed that, as it had been understood, the Stories of People and Cultures core sequence was assumed to be the primary, if not sole, opportunity for assessing student learning outcomes related to narrative. As a consequence of the curricular review the rigid link between program structure and student learning outcomes was reframed such that outcomes can now be measured throughout the general education program. The resulting updated processes, including a qualitative narrative assessment, were incorporated into a new data management system.

Assumption College

Assumption's core sequence, the Fortin and Gonthier Foundations of Western Civilization Program, has been in place since 1979. Faculty who teach in the foundations program, and who perceive standardized modes of quantitative assessment insufficient to articulate the value of such course work to students, sought new models to determine how and how well students learn liberally in multidisciplinary programs that prioritize student engagement with core texts and how well the distinctive features of the Foundations Program in particular aid that learning. Having articulated a set of principles and directives, they sought to develop a cost effective assessment instrument to meet these objectives. Expressing these objectives as "hopes" and narrowing their focus for the sake of expediency, the faculty devised a survey and invited students, including any current student or recent graduate who had taken at least one course in the program, to complete it online. Despite problems with implementation and a cool response from administrators to the results, the small sample produced information about what is working well and about what calls for improvement in the program. The process of developing a qualitative method of assessment that provides information that faculty perceive to demonstrate how well the program coheres as a program, across courses and disciplines, in student experience in tension with an administration that, mindful of the parameters of financial constraint, prioritizes the efficiencies and cost savings of standardized quantitative means of assessment presents in microcosm the larger issues with which all institutions contend.

All seven of the institutions represented here are private, faith-based, and non-profit; five of the seven enroll less than two thousand undergraduate students. The very thin financial margins on which they operate in the current economic climate preclude a dedicated staff whose function it is to "close the loop" of institutional research, developing and implementing changes based on data-driven decisions. The responsibility falls instead to the administration and to the faculty to, in addition to their other responsibilities, evaluate existing curricula and policies in order to take necessary steps to improve them. In providing the framework for these self-studies that emphasize qualitative, narrative descriptors of student learning, the participating schools maximized scant resources by using the process as a means of both discerning their on-going commitments to their individual missions and goals and identifying areas of intra-mural satisfaction and dissatisfaction with achievements of those objectives, as well as deriving data that can be expressed in the quantitative terms preferred by their respective accreditors. The contribution of in-kind service and work-hours by members of several areas of responsibility served the additional benefit of creating a sense of ownership in the process, strengthening a sense of shared commitment and having a positive impact on morale.

Different as these seven projects are, the unifying theme that emerges from them in the aggregate is a shared commitment to producing a thoughtful, alternative to the "one size fits all" quantitative assessment instruments that, while they produce measurable data, miss the invaluable, if intangible, qualities in which the real value of a liberal arts education grounded in core texts resides. There is not a

direct correlation between input and results; often students do not become aware of the genuine benefit of such an education until long after they have received their diplomas; insight, subtlety of mind, recognition of paradigms, patterns, context, these are not easily demonstrable skills, nor are they driven by discrete goals. They are lifetime intellectual habits that inform and shape the decisions and thinking of students in whatever directions their lives take after graduation.

My co-editor, Dr. David DiMattio, on whom I have come to rely as a trusted colleague and friend, and I appreciate the opportunity to work with and come to know the administrators and faculty so dedicated to the invaluable role of core texts in American higher education, but most of all, dedicated to enhancing the lives of the students they consider themselves privileged to teach. I wish to express my gratitude to everyone who participated in the project for reminding me that the *cor* of core text education is an act of love.

Kathleen Burk, Ph.D.