

**“Know Thyself:
The Role of Leadership, Judgment and Standards in Educational Assessment”**

C. M. Allen and W. B. Allen
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Introduction

If we were to offer only two words of advice to every institution of higher education, we would borrow from Plato (who borrowed from Herodotus) and say quite simply, “Know thyself.” It is ironic that institutions, which still occasionally offer students the opportunity to read Herodotus and Plato, do not themselves heed the Delphic oracle’s advice. Too often, those who lead America’s colleges and universities advance the myth of incomparability rather than visible efforts to evaluate the quality of the education they offer. Now, we are confident that these statements do not apply to the leaders here today, but too many *other* academic leaders settle for measuring what is easy to measure, rather than measuring what is most important. They fall back on reputational rating scales, as measured by *U.S. News & World Reports*, rather than providing students and families with a more honest, in-depth way of evaluating how an institution will best fit a student’s educational goals. Generally, colleges and universities, particularly large research universities, rely on growth in numbers—inertial growth—to tell their stories. But to articulate the real story—the true effectiveness of a college or university in achieving its central mission of undergraduate education—we must measure dynamic growth. By dynamic growth we mean the constant refinement of procedures, resources, and facilities that is the only sure path to excellence. And the only way to measure dynamic growth is through continuous assessment. In turn, continuous assessment relies on honest, open dialog about ends, means, and progress toward ends. This sort of dialog is equally needed among K-12 educators.

We will talk with you this afternoon about the importance of stimulating dynamic growth through a program of continuous assessment in which our maxim, “Know thyself,” plays a central role. Our remarks will focus first on the ultimate end of education, which is proficient humanity. Then, we will discuss the centrality of assessment to achieving that end, giving particular attention to three aspects of assessment—namely, academic leadership, critical thought or judgment, and standards.

These ideas are developed in greater depth in our book, *Habits of Mind: Fostering Access and Excellence in Higher Education*, published by Transaction in 2003. We present there a comprehensive plan for reform of higher education. The focus of the book and of our remarks today is on higher education; however, much of what we have to say is also pertinent to K-12 education, and particularly so to charter schools.

The title and the framing argument of our book draw upon a conception of “habits of mind” as articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. He introduces the concept thusly:

Here I understand the expression “morals” in the sense that the ancients attached to the term *mores*; I apply it not only to morals properly so-called and which one may call *habits of the heart*, but to the different ideas that men possess, to the diverse opinions that are current among them, and to the totality of ideas that constitute the *habits of mind*. I include in this term the moral and intellectual condition of a people.¹

Our view is that “the moral and intellectual condition of a people” (their habits of mind) are far and away the most influential determinants of human conduct in our time, and nowhere are habits of mind more profoundly shaped than in institutions of education.

What this means for *any* analysis of education is that, in order to be appropriate to the task, such an analysis must undertake to identify the broader responsibilities of education, including its moral responsibilities. For education will, willye-nillye, form the habits of mind that constitute our most decisive collective possession. For that reason we have a responsibility individually and collectively to judge and hold education accountable. Moreover, education must hold itself accountable.

What, then, is the basis we employ in judging higher education in our book? What is the content of the concept, “habits of mind?” Well, here’s an example. When the conversation about excellence comes to be replaced by methodologies of excellence—Total Quality Management, Continuous Quality Improvement, and others—*without* any articulate understanding of the goal, means have driven out ends and habits have driven out intellection. Managers have driven out leaders or statesmen. It is the same as supplanting musicianship with musical taste. Musicianship requires disciplined habits of mind shaped by articulate ends; for musical taste habits of the heart suffice. In short, where a mere focus on the means or management of education can and usually does disguise tacit ideology, we propose explicit judgment and analysis of means in light of a specific view of the ends of education. And the tool for this analysis is continuous assessment.

In our book we pass judgment on higher education, but we do so by means of a thorough discussion of the “ways and means” of higher education and by insisting that the end of education must be constantly in view. An educational institution must, through its leaders, know and be able to articulate intersubjectively its purpose, its means of fulfilling that purpose, and the processes it uses to evaluate its progress in fulfilling that purpose. It must know itself. And this work begins with excellence of judgment in the institution’s leaders.

Academic Leadership

Treating higher education on the model of corporate management has led to the misfortune of mis-identifying its goals. While there is no particular difficulty in conceiving a chief executive officer who is unable to perform the discrete tasks that constitute the principal outputs of a corporation, there is every difficulty conceivable in attempting to provide leadership in higher education without the leaders accomplishing in themselves the very goal of higher education. The reason for this plainly is that the productive goal or “principal output” of higher education is fundamentally identical with the capability required for effective management, and that is excellence in judgment. We believe that this line of reasoning can be applied as well to those who lead elementary and secondary schools, especially charter schools, where the leader of an individual school has a significant ability to shape the school’s program. Our view that excellence in

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la Démocratie en Amérique*, vol. I, chapter IX, sec. 4 (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981). Translated by W. B. Allen.

judgment is a principal output of education is clearly shared by AALE; in fact, in last spring's issue of the *AALE Newsletter*, Jeffrey Wallin described liberal education as adding up to something that is more than the sum of its parts, and noted that "this something else is connected, in ways still not...fully understood, to judgment."²

It would be idle to insist that a university president or school principal must use his rostrum "or betray a trust," unless one could also expect such excellence of judgment as justifies the "heavy responsibility for explaining not only his own institution but also the cause of education generally." However it is precisely excellence in judgment that qualifies one for "leadership as to ends and purposes and not as to methods and subject matter,"³ as Harold Stoke discusses in his book, *The American College President*. So what do we seek in an academic leader?

When we want to travel into space, we are well advised to place ourselves in the hands of technical experts who can get us there and back again. When we require brain surgery, we do well to consult neurosurgeons. Education is in many ways not different from such challenging initiatives; appropriate goal setting requires expert judgment. If we mean, though, to ask the public to pay for our space ships, our brain surgery, or our education, then our space scientists, our neurosurgeons, and our education administrators must explain to the public exactly what it will get for its money. In all cases the fundamental commitment of public support turns on decisions that must be made by public bodies.

Technical experts provide the public information that constitutes the basis of sound decisions, enabling all stakeholders to play appropriate roles in carrying out crucial missions. Lay boards are incompetent to declare what appropriate educational goals should be, but they are perfectly competent to say, "I understand," when presented with articulate formulations of those goals by academic leaders. Effective lay leaders are not troubled by the fact that they might fail to understand a thing itself perfectly understandable. And why should they be? For they are typically experts in their own right in other fields. The trouble in education overall is that leaders fail to articulate goals not merely understandable but also appropriately elevated.

There are two reasons for this failure. First, the goal of university education has been corrupted by the proliferation of ancillary subject matters and demands for skills certification. In a like manner, the goal of K-12 education has been corrupted by the proliferation of programs aimed at a social rather than an academic agenda. The second reason for this failure is that most leaders have abandoned the highest goal of education, proficient humanity. Thus we substitute "critical thinking," "values clarification," or "tolerance" for skill in moral judgment. While these may be tools of effective management, they do not answer to the central requirement or skill of excellence in judgment.

What does answer to that central requirement is a robust curriculum of general education. A college or university's program of general education is the best indicator of the quality of judgment found in the institution's academic leaders. The commitment of AALE-accredited institutions to a robust program of general education is commendable and points the way to widening reform in this area. Nonetheless, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni reminded us in their April 2004 report, *The Hollow Core*, that many colleges and universities have not yet followed your lead.

² Jeffrey Wallin, "From the President's Desk: The Importance of a Liberal Arts Education," *AALE Newsletter*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2003): 2.

³ Harold W. Stoke, *The American College President* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), 94.

In our book, we frame our discussion of general education by comparing the programs offered by colleges and universities in Virginia today with the aims of general education as originally described in the official declarations of the Commonwealth of Virginia (which aimed not for the lesser goal of cultural familiarity but the noble goal of ability to direct and form culture—that is, excellence of judgment). We contrast the present widespread goal that general education programs should produce proficient specialists, with the goals expressed in the founding documents of the University of Virginia, which aimed to produce “intelligent and faithful citizens” and, to the extent possible, “statesmen, legislators, and judges.”⁴

It has long been recognized as insufficient to think of “statesmen, legislators, and judges” as merely proficient specialists. But a discussion of “critical thinking” will clarify the distinction between the civilizing talent, judgment, and mere talent. Proficient specialists are talented, indeed, but unless their specialties entail judgment across disciplines and needs, they are not talented enough to lead communities and they cannot qualify to lead our educational institutions.

From Critical Thinking to Proficient Humanity

The question before us is why critical thinking is too narrow a goal for education, and in particular for higher education. They err who place “critical thinking” in the role that has been reserved for “thinking” and “judgment.”

To the end of answering that question, we lean on the important work of Ronald Barnett, *Higher Education: A Critical Business*.⁵ To place that work in its proper context, however, it is necessary first to comprehend the claims most generally made for “critical thinking,” which now is often touted as the most highly valued “transferable skill” provided by liberal education.

An example of the kind of understanding that attaches to the invocation of “critical thinking” is that provided by Martha Nussbaum, in her book, *Cultivating Humanity*.⁶ Her “political science student, Anna” found herself unprepared to work in China by reason of having failed to take courses that exposed her to a diversity of cultural practices: “Her imaginative capacity to enter the lives of people of other nations had been blunted by lack of practice.” Nussbaum believes that the kind of “critical thinking” that would make one a more sensitive judge of different cultures is achieved primarily through “introduction” to cultural differences, as opposed to mature intellectual performance.

This is where Barnett’s work is significant, for he carefully differentiates “critical thinking” from “critical thought,” arguing that excellence in thought and judgment is the true goal of education (rather than mere familiarization). Among the defects of the familiarization approach, he argued, is to “leave our students sensing that there is a givenness to the knowledge structures that they are encountering or that those structures are socially neutral.”⁷

⁴ Report of the Commissioners for the University of Virginia, Assembled at Rock-Fish Gap, in the County of Augusta, August 1, 1818 (Charlottesville: C. P. McKennie, 1824).

⁵ Ronald Barnett, *Higher Education: A Critical Business* (Bristol, PA: SRHE and Open University Press, 1997).

⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), chapter two, “Citizens of the World.”

⁷ Barnett, 5.

Barnett's agenda is to assure that higher education aim for the regenerative power of "symbolic creation" (or pushing the frontiers of knowledge) as opposed to the mere analysis or manipulation of symbols. This refocuses our thinking on the ends of education.

Today we will only touch on two of Barnett's most striking conclusions. First, he specifically maintains that deep familiarity with a "single intellectual field" is superior to a "superficial encounter" with diverse subjects or disciplines. If "cognitive transformation" is our end, as it should be, then our attention must be focused on levels of intellectual accomplishment more than on ranges of intellectual exposure. For that purpose, we require to identify and adhere to "critical standards."

Secondly, such intellectual maturity may be accomplished only on the strength of universal standards or principles:

But these are large claims and they open up a number of large problems... it could mean that there are cross-disciplinary critical standards to which we could resort. The first possibility is that of linking territories together, if only in a piecemeal way. This is the Bailey's bridge route to critical reconstruction: creating new linkages but probably of a limited and temporary character. The second possibility is the cartographer's route in which we detect new connections in the map of knowledge, local territories being seen to be part of a new and larger map of the whole territory.⁸

The second possibility, that which envisions connecting the diverse strands of a continuing conversation across the ages, is the one that opens for us the door to a fuller understanding of the requisites of academic leadership. Liberal education aims for each student to connect the conversations of fundamental inquiry or, as Michael Oakeshott expressed it, to acquire a "language" and not just a "literature" of the disciplines.⁹

Moreover, it is plausible to maintain that the advance of society or civilization is directly tied to our ability to connect the conversations regarding being and knowing. In that regard, the multiversity cannot be allowed to descend further into "discrete academic subcultures" without rendering itself inert for the task of sustaining social momentum.

It falls to academic leaders to express whether a relationship may be maintained "between transferable skills and critical thought." In permitting the emergence of transferable skills at the expense of "critical thought," universities permit the "instrumental, the technological, and the performative" to sideline the "hermeneutic, the liberal and the contemplative." What we see in the university, Barnett maintains, is a passing from "a hermeneutic mode of communication" to "an instrumental mode of communication." Now, our chief communicators are our academic leaders. Hence, the burden of justifying this change, or of arresting it, must fall to them.

It will now be clear why this discussion of critical thinking is pertinent to our discussion of academic leadership and the assessment of education. Nowhere is the instrumental view of critical thinking more consistently invoked than through the lips of university provosts and presidents, although some school principals may qualify as close runners-up. They doubtless do not see themselves participating in a post-modernist rejection of universal standards. Perhaps, though, they can be led to see that they thereby abandon disciplinary standards and put at risk education's role in cultivating excellence in judgment as its distinctive contribution to society. For, as Jacques Maritain puts it, "... supremacy of means over ends and the consequent collapse

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1991), 192.

of all sure purpose and real efficiency seems to be the main reproach to contemporary education.”¹⁰

What we require of academic leaders is that they be able to speak intelligently about this process of change that engulfs all of education, and that they demonstrate in their conversation about it the specific excellence in judgment that qualifies them for their offices. We recognize that they must perform this work in an environment of heightened transparency, as the organizational imperatives of modern academic life have changed. They must provide the “accountability, efficiency, and responsiveness” the present demand-oriented environment provides for, even while practicing substantive, hermeneutic leadership.

While no nation or state invents education, each certainly makes use of it. The point of that observation is to underscore the extent to which the university and the school must transcend the political organization of the society and therefore the extent to which the academic leader must protect the integrity of the overall educational enterprise, even while responding to the political imperatives that often drive planning in many modern educational settings.

Education aims most comprehensively to eventuate in proficient humanity, and if proficient humanity entails not just the capacity for but also the practice of intelligent judgment across the range of human circumstances, then education must aim to foster such judgment.

Judgment on this order involves not only distinguishing but also the ready expression of judgments about the correct and the incorrect, the good and the bad, the fit and the unfit, and the right and the wrong across the extraordinary range of unique individual situations that constitute human life.

The ready expression of such judgments cannot result from any practice other than the application of consistent rules. Where any two particulars are separately equal to any third particular, the foregoing two must be equal to each other. No issue of taste, choice, background, or inclination may be allowed to intrude upon that rule-based conclusion. In that sense proficient judgment results from proficiency in thinking, and not the mere assertion of preferences even when preferences are informed by comparative awareness of the preferences of others or the consequences for others.

Because human situations are relative, it is all the more important that proficient judgment be rule-based. Judgment across the range of variable circumstances cannot be trusted if judgment may vary as the situations or circumstances vary. It is the purpose of the rule to support the adequacy of judgment in every particular circumstance. This indeed is the answer to the question raised rhetorically by Jeffrey Wallin in the Spring 2003 *AALÉ Newsletter*: “...how can we say that different circumstances require different moral judgments without giving in to one of the most banal features of moral relativism?” (p. 4)

The point of higher education, and particularly liberal education, as opposed to any more utilitarian training is to enable the eventual adept to distinguish in each case the good and the bad and the right and the wrong. This is the sort of judgment praised by Peter Kalkavage of St. Johns in his half of the “AALÉ Scholars Debate,” held in November 1999. He elaborated the continuing relevance in today’s college curriculum of cultivating “that intellectual virtue Aristotle calls *phronesis* or practical intelligence.” Kalkavage further describes *phronesis* as “our capacity for perceiving the morally ‘just right.’”¹¹ The challenge of academic leadership is to

¹⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven: Yale University Press):3.

¹¹ Peter Kalkavage, “Advantages of an Integrated Liberal Arts Program,” *Two Approaches to Constructing Liberal Education: An AALÉ Scholar’s Debate*. AALÉ Occasional Papers in Liberal Education #1, November 13, 1999.

demonstrate ceaselessly the centrality of this work and its enduring cultural value. The highest goal of education, again, is to foster tough judgments under the guidance of high standards. The specific challenge to academic leaders is to apply such tough judgments and rigorous standards in their own work. Proficient specialists are capable of doing just this within the narrow range of disciplinary interests. Proficient humanity performs at this level across the range of human interests.

The Role of Standards

We turn now, briefly, to the third aspect of assessment on our agenda today—one which certainly is on your agenda—namely, standards, and specifically standards in relation to accreditation. We have suggested in this talk that the dictum “Know thyself” figures prominently in the assessment of both collegiate and pre-collegiate education—or at least that it ought to do so. But this process of self-knowing ought not to take place within a vacuum. Rather, there is a complex context within which this process of self-assessment occurs, and against which it must be judged.

In her excellent book, *National Standards in American Education*, Diane Ravitch reminds us that “‘Education’ means to lead forth, but it is impossible to lead anyone anywhere without knowing where you want to go.”¹² Ravitch draws upon the dual meaning of the term “standards” to point out that “A standard is both a *goal* (what should be done) and a *measure* of progress toward the goal (how well it was done.)” (p. 7) Speaking specifically about the movement toward national standards for schools, she says:

...the purpose of establishing standards and assessments is to raise the academic achievement of all or nearly all children, to signal students and teachers about the kind of achievement that is possible with hard work, to emphasize the value of education for future success in college and careers, to encourage improvement of instruction and collaboration among teachers, and to motivate students to have higher aspirations in their school work. (p. 5)

We are certain that we do not need to make the case for the benefit of rigorous academic standards to this audience. Instead, we will briefly recommend that a comprehensive plan for educational assessment should include a combination of external standards, peer review (through accreditation and other means), internal review, and market forces.

Chester Finn playfully discusses three of these four factors in his 2002 essay “Real Accountability in K-12 Education: The Marriage of Ted and Alice.”¹³ While the focus of his essay is a bit different from our focus today, his conceit is too memorable to resist appropriating it. His insightful paper “appraises the four versions of accountability that are important to education reform in today’s United States” (p. 23) and discusses how these versions of accountability work in the charter school context. He uses the title and characters of the 1960s film *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* to explore whether and how various combinations of these approaches to accountability either “tend to fight” or to “make beautiful music together.”

¹² Diane Ravitch, *National Standards in American Education: A Citizen’s Guide* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1995), p. 25.

¹³ Chester Finn, “Real Accountability in K-12 Education: The Marriage of Ted and Alice” in *School Accountability* edited by Williamson M. Evers and Herbert J. Walberg (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2002).

He gives to Bob the role “compliance” or the bureaucratic, top-down version of accountability that we all love to hate. To Carol he assigns the “trust the experts” approach. Ted stands for standards-based reform, particularly when it is a “top-down, externally imposed strategy.” Last he introduces Alice who has a starring role as the representative of market-style accountability. He then explores various pairings as well as several *ménage-à-trois* scenarios, both for the purpose of describing actual combinations of accountability at work in school reform today, and in order to evaluate which combinations produce desired results, which are most amenable to implementation, and which system carries the most negative baggage. He closes by discussing charter schools as an exemplary pairing of Ted and Alice:

Charter schools...must answer in both directions: to Ted, for meeting the state’s academic standards...and to Alice (i.e., to their client marketplace)... They never escape entirely from Bob’s compliance regimen... But for the most part these schools are self-guided and free from much conventional red tape. Hence it’s possible for many of them to develop elements of what Paul Hill and colleagues term “internal accountability,” defined as “the ways the school leadership and staff work together on a day-to-day basis to ensure that the school works for students and is therefore able to keep its promises to others.” (pp. 35-36)

We see internal accountability not, as Finn does in his analysis, as a variation of professional accountability, but as a separate and quite important actor in the overall assessment enterprise. Thus, we agree with David Dill’s pronouncement that “...new mechanisms of external accountability should be focused on assuring the presence and effective functioning of internal mechanisms of accountability.”¹⁴ Our model, therefore, proposes throwing out, to the extent possible, the bureaucratic, top-down compliance approach to accountability, which Finn assigned to Bob. We instead award to Bob the invaluable work of internal assessment.

At the same time that we insist that internal assessment, and particularly the involvement of faculty and teachers, must be central to educational assessment, we must acknowledge the reality expressed a decade ago by Peter Ewell that “The time is long past when we will be allowed to assess success only against goals that we ourselves establish.”¹⁵ Had we any doubt about that, the ongoing efforts by the U.S. Department of Education to reconfigure traditional accreditation as well as the searing exposé of the regional accreditation processes written by George Leef and Roxanna Burris would quickly eradicate those doubts.¹⁶

So, we envision a *ménage-à-quatre* combination in which Bob (recast as internal assessment measuring dynamic growth) and Carol (expert peer review) and Ted (external standards) and Alice (market forces) each play a significant role in a comprehensive program of assessment and accountability.

But, someone else has beat us to this desirable combination, and that someone is AALE. The accreditation standards and processes developed by AALE for liberal collegiate education and for charter schools exemplify a happy marriage of all the key components needed for an effective, comprehensive program of assessment. You have developed a winning combination to

¹⁴ David Dill, et.al., “Accreditation and academic quality assurance,” *Change* v. 28, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 1996): 16-35.

¹⁵ Peter Ewell, “A Matter of Integrity: Accountability and the Future of Self-Regulation,” *Change* v. 26, no. 6 (Nov. 1994): 24-30.

¹⁶ George C. Leef and Roxana D. Burris, *Can College Accreditation Live Up to its Promise?* (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Trustees and Alumni).

assist educational institutions in knowing themselves and in acting upon that knowledge with an aim toward continuously improving the best gift we can give our offspring—namely, the cultivation of good habits of decision on sound moral grounds. The best schools, the best education—well-represented by those here today—provide exactly such a gift.