

**“Know Thyself”:
Proficient Humanity, the End—Continuous Assessment, the Means**
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Introduction

If we were to offer only two words of advice to every institution of higher education, we would say quite simply, “Know thyself.” It’s ironic that colleges, 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 colleges and universities advance the myth of incomparability rather than undertaking meaningful assessment. They settle for measuring what is easy to measure, such as simplistic graduation rates, rather than measuring what is most important. They fall back on reputational rating scales, rather than providing students and families with a more in-depth and honest way to evaluate how well an institution will fit a student’s needs and educational goals. Generally, the colleges and universities, particularly large research universities, rely on growth in numbers—inertial growth—to tell their stories. But to know and articulate the real story, 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, which, in turn, relies on honest, open dialog about ends, means, and progress toward ends.

We sketch here a plan for stimulating dynamic growth through a program of continuous assessment in which our maxim, “Know thyself,” plays a central role. Our remarks focus first on

the end of undergraduate education, which is proficient humanity. Then, we discuss the responsibilities of three groups whose roles are integral to achieving that end: 1) institutional leaders, 2) the faculty, and 3) those who set education policies at a state or national level.

These ideas are developed in greater depth in our book, *Habits of Mind: Fostering Access and Excellence in Higher Education*, where we present a comprehensive plan for reform of higher education. The title and the framing argument of our book draw upon a conception of “habits of mind,” articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, and briefly defined as “the moral and intellectual condition of a people.”¹ Our view is that habits of mind are far and away the most influential determinants of human conduct in our time, and nowhere are habits of the mind more profoundly shaped than in institutions of higher education. In fact, we maintain that the chief purpose of a college or university is precisely to foster students’ development of habits of mind, which will equip them for the work (and adventure) of knowing oneself.

What this means for *any* analysis of higher education is that such an analysis must undertake to identify the broader responsibilities of higher education, including its moral responsibilities. We must judge and hold higher education accountable. Moreover, higher education must hold itself accountable. That job starts with clarity about purpose and requires excellence of judgment on the part of academic leaders, active involvement of the faculty, and appropriate policies at the national or state level.

What, then, is the basis we employ in judging higher education? What is the content of the concept, “habits of mind?” Well, here’s an example. When the conversation about excellence

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

is replaced by methodologies of excellence—such as Total Quality Management or Continuous Quality Improvement—*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. In short, where a mere focus on the means or management of higher education can and usually does disguise tacit ideology, we propose instead explicit judgment and analysis of means in light of a specific view of the ends of higher education.

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 institution must know and be able to articulate its purpose, its means of fulfilling that purpose, and the processes used 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.

Excellence of judgment

Treating higher education on the model of corporate management has led to misidentifying the goals of higher education. While there is no particular difficulty in conceiving a corporate chief executive officer who is unable to perform the discrete productive tasks that constitute the corporation’s principal productive outputs, there is every difficulty conceivable in attempting to provide academic leadership 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.

When we want to travel into space, we do well 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, which require expert judgment. If we mean, though, to ask the public to pay for our space ships, our brain surgery, or our college education, then our space scientists, our neurosurgeons, and our higher education administrators must explain to the public exactly what it will get for its money.

The trouble in higher education overall is that academic leaders fail to articulate goals that are 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.” Second, academic leaders have abandoned the true goal of higher education, proficient humanity. Thus institutions 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. The goal of such a curriculum is proficient humanity, characterized by excellence in judgment. In our book we develop, in depth, the argument for the centrality of the general education curriculum to undergraduate education. We critique current practice, discuss the overarching purpose of general education, and set out a model program, in which a college’s program of general education is the best indicator of the level of excellence of judgment on the part of its academic leaders.

In our book, we also discuss how the academy’s current emphasis on developing “critical thinking skills” in our students has displaced the worthier goal of developing their moral and intellectual judgment. We draw upon Ronald Barnett’s book, *Higher Education: A Critical*

*Business.*² Nowhere is the instrumental view of critical thinking more consistently invoked than through the lips of university presidents. 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 higher education's role in cultivating excellence in judgment as its distinctive contribution to society.

Higher 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 higher education must aim to foster such judgment. Judgment on this order involves not only distinguishing 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, but it also entails the ready expression of such judgments.

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. However admirable it may be, that individuals would pay attention to the needs of other individuals before insisting on their own, it remains true that their own needs must still be defended by rational argument and are subject to be judged as fit or unfit, good or

² Ronald Barnett, Ronald. *Higher Education: A Critical Business*. Bristol, PA: SRHE and Open University Press, 1997.

bad, correct or incorrect, and right or wrong. Only a firmly established habit of mind can secure such judgment.

The point of higher 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. The challenge of academic leadership is to demonstrate ceaselessly the centrality of this work and its enduring cultural value.

The goal of higher education, then, 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. Higher education aims at proficient humanity via the route of integrated inquiry, which must inform the mission of the university. And this goal of integrated inquiry requires self-knowing not only from the leaders of the institution, but also from its faculty.

Faculty Involvement

We turn now to our second group: the faculty. What is needed is a faculty willing to ask at every step, “Are we making a difference in the lives of our students?” A faculty committed to a program of dynamic growth, which can change the institution from within. To foster change from within, we need to assess core activities. Student learning must be at the center of our assessment programs. This means, of course, that faculty engagement must also be at the heart of the enterprise. It is the faculty who must consider what questions to ask and what evidence to gather. There is little point in gathering information about student learning if that information is not used to improve teaching.

Most faculty want to be reflective practitioners, who take the time to observe the impact of their teaching on student learning and who use these observations to improve the practice of their craft. Increasing numbers of faculty see collaboration and peer review as valuable means to improve classroom performance, but on some campuses these approaches meet strong opposition, stemming largely from a misunderstanding of faculty autonomy.

The chief criticism of peer review in teaching is the claim that it mainly involves retailing hearsay. That is an odd criticism for two reasons. First, it is usually the case that so-called hearsay emerges only in contexts in which faculties stubbornly resist classroom visitation. It hardly seems fair to blame hearsay when direct evidence is deliberately withheld. Secondly, and far more importantly, what is casually called “hearsay” is in fact the meat and potatoes of academic life, *namely, deliberate, self-conscious discussion about teaching among colleagues.*

The first question to engage our attention when we speak of the evaluation of faculty ought to be the question whether and in what way they may constitute models for others who would seek like success. Do they contribute meaningfully to the foundations of knowledge regarding undergraduate instruction? What other institutions perform comparably or better in this regard? How might they assess their own performance, by which we mean to ask, are they able to articulate standards by which they are willing to be judged in a court not of their own making?

Because we value teaching—undergraduate teaching—above all other dimensions within higher education, the deliberative parsing of contributions within this arena is a necessary prelude to questions regarding internal consistency in the application of standards of evaluation. We need to know, for example, whether we regard the least acceptable level of accomplishment in any given institution as comparable to the least acceptable level of accomplishment elsewhere. Or, is that least the average elsewhere? Or, the best? What does it actually mean to say that a

faculty member demonstrates sustained excellence in teaching, when compared with teaching in institutions one would regard as comparable or nearly so?

It would be easy to mistake questions of comparability as a fruitless exercise in filling out bureaucratic scorecards in place of *self-conscious* integrity regarding a faculty's program and its intrinsic requisites. We submit, however, that the case is precisely the reverse; namely, mistaking one's own sincerity of purpose as sufficient justification before disinterested observers. The fact that one's mission is unique does not require that it be wrapped in preciousness. It is time to discard the myth of incomparability.

An example: some institutions quite plausibly claim to educate undergraduates by virtue of the specific discipline they require of them, no matter what native gifts the students bring with them. By this discipline, we mean theoretical sophistication, familiarity with canonical interpretations and intelligent challenges to them, and carefully integrated study across a general range of concerns, systematically developed through increasing levels of difficulty and, therefore, a coherent curriculum which uses the humanities to vector its content. These institutions may plausibly compete with institutions that prefer to work only with the most gifted students. Comparisons between these two types of institutions ought not to be avoided because of the supposed gap between the elite and other institutions. If institutions that educate by virtue of required discipline succeed as well as they think they do, then it is well time to inquire—or, better, to state—why they do so.

Every discussion of assessment contains at least implicitly a discussion of faculty evaluation. The conception we offer suggests an approach to faculty evaluation. Because we begin from self-consciousness of a particular approach, is it not reasonable first to judge faculty—not by student reaction—but by their respective abilities to articulate this approach both

in their teaching materials and in their own evaluative commentaries on their teaching? In other words, by their openness to self-knowledge. Moreover, would not this requirement produce in turn reasonable reliance on a faculty member's capacity to persuade colleagues that he understands and can appropriately relate the conditions of success of the curriculum as a whole?

We do not aim here to depreciate the value of student evaluations, on which we rely in their proper role (which is a second order role). While we do not regard them as definitive evidence of good or excellent teaching, we do consider them as highly probative—that is, as having diagnostic value rather than interpretive value—with respect to bad teaching. Student evaluations have most value when indicating symptoms that may require medication, much as blood pressure or body temperature serve, when abnormal, to indicate a regimen but offer scant assurance of health when normal.

At the center of the evaluation of faculty teaching, accordingly, ought to stand the reality that we value teaching to the point of making excellence—not mere acceptability—a *sine qua non* for faculty advancement.

Success in creating a new model of undergraduate education—one in which proficient humanity is the end and continuous assessment the means to this end—depends not only on the work of the leaders and the faculty of an individual institution of higher learning, but also on the third group discussed in this paper: policy-makers at the state and national level whose work can either stimulate or stunt the institution's capacity for dynamic growth. In this discussion, we draw on our experience at the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.

Sound educational policy-making

During 1998 to 1999, William Allen served as the Director of this Council, which coordinates funding and policies for the system of public higher education in Virginia. At that time, the Council had embarked on an ambitious program of educational reform, which was only partially realized as a consequence of political and economic upheaval. The final section of this paper briefly describes three major components of that reform project, namely: 1) the six-year strategic plan known as the *1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education*, 2) a plan to revamp and significantly decentralize the process for approving new academic programs at each campus, and 3) a proposal to re-engineer state policy for funding higher education. Each of these components aimed to stimulate dynamic growth at Virginia's colleges and universities through an emphasis on continuous assessment.

University administrators are apt to recite Deming's apothegm, "what gets measured gets better." It is important to remind them of the correlate, that what fails to get measured gets neglected. This makes it imperative that assessment focus on intrinsic and systematic performance and not merely momentary issues of heightened concern. It requires the best efforts of many persons to identify measures that can adequately convey the value that higher education adds to the lives of individuals and communities, measures that look at a wider range of benefits than simply the boost that a college degree gives to one's lifetime earnings. The greatest challenge in policy development may well be to cultivate the sensibility, the language, and the benchmarks that convey the far-reaching value of that "public good" that we call a college education—a task of educational leadership more than anything else.

1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education

Thus, in producing the *1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education* (a six-year, statewide strategic plan), we spoke of the aims of higher education as lofty and of the responsibilities of state policy-makers and institutional leaders as moral. The five goals and thirty-three specific recommendations in the plan are under-girded by a philosophical discussion of four broad aims of access, quality, affordability, and accountability. We summarize here what we had to say in the plan with regard to quality and accountability and then will describe two specific goals of the plan, which were central to our underlying purpose of stimulating dynamic institutional growth.

Quality

Determinations of quality in higher education have traditionally been based primarily on the work of the admissions office rather than the graduation office. That is to say that general perceptions of institutional quality are more often influenced by the readily available academic qualifications of admittees rather than by the accomplishments of graduates. Other traditional indicators of quality are the academic qualifications of the faculty, the amount of money spent by the institution on instruction, and the beauty of campus facilities—all commonly referred to as “input” measures.

The *1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education* pursued a new conception of quality. This plan suggested that excellence in higher education is best evaluated not by who comes in, but rather by who leaves—as indicated by a variety of “output” measures. All the goals and recommendations in the *Plan* were designed to work in an interconnected way to promote an outcome based vision of quality and to enhance the capability of Virginia’s colleges and universities to deliver excellent programs. Central to realizing this new conception of quality was a new approach to accountability.

Accountability

While accountability has long been a top priority for Virginia's system of higher education, during the past decade voices from a number of quarters have called for increased accountability. Nor is Virginia alone in this experience; concerned voices in many states and nations urge colleges and universities to become more accountable to the constituents they serve. Nor—in the post-Enron era—are corporations exempt from this call. What most observers seem to mean by accountability is that institutions, private and public, must manage their resources as a public trust within an atmosphere of distrust, restraining costs and enhancing output. Many now recognize that a *new approach* to accountability is needed. All the *Virginia Plan* goals were integrated to use to strengthen accountability with a new approach, while simultaneously increasing access, enhancing quality, and controlling cost.

But we must not confuse accountability with regulation. These two concepts are diametrically opposed. While regulation means control from an external source, accountability necessitates self-control: being answerable for results or outcomes, while maintaining autonomy and a degree of flexibility. This plan sought to switch from a system of pre-approval regulations that drain administrative time and constrain strategic planning to a system of post-audit accounting of results.

Tying Program Approval to Assessment

If then, the Council of Higher Education for Virginia were serious about utilizing a new approach to accountability, what specific measures would realize this goal? Two broad policy changes were endorsed, which augured sweeping change in the methods through which institutions would be held accountable and offered new incentives for institutions to commit to a process of continuous improvement. Goal One of the *1999 Virginia Plan* (“To develop long-

term, stable funding provisions”) produced the Virginia performance funding model, which we will describe in a moment. Goal Two of the *Plan* (“To strengthen the ongoing assessment of Virginia’s colleges and universities by focusing on outcomes and value-added analysis”) was partially realized in the revision to the Council’s program approval process.

As a practical matter, in order to provide an incentive for Virginia’s public colleges and universities to strengthen their assessment practices, the Council put in place a sort of *quid pro quo*. In return for a streamlined procedure for the review and approval of *new* academic programs (one in which some of the responsibility would be shifted away from the Council to an intra-institutional locus), the institutions committed to develop more concrete measures for assessing the *outcomes* of programs. Thus, we proposed substituting for a make-work, bureaucratic pre-approval process a much more meaningful evaluation of results through processes that would be primarily developed and carried out within the institutions.

While the set of modifications to the program approval process that the Council finally endorsed was less extensive than what was initially envisioned, the resulting policy moves assessment in Virginia in the right direction—a move away from “bean-counting” and regulation to real accountability for results.

Virginia Performance Funding Model

In order to engage in the meaningful strategic decision-making urged throughout the *Plan*, Virginia’s public colleges and universities needed added control of their human, fiscal, and capital resources. Further, to engage in long-term strategic planning, they needed an improved ability to anticipate future funding provisions and to understand the probable impact of their planning on funding provisions. Planning and budgeting needed to be more closely coordinated.

Also, the overall provisions for allocating taxpayer support to public and private institutions needed to be more securely connected to the public policy purposes that originated the support.

In developing budget recommendations to the Governor and General Assembly, the Council adopted a new approach to determine institutional appropriations. The Council sought to reward productivity, heighten accountability, avert lowest-common-denominator standard measures, and balance access and quality. At the same time, they wished to rely upon the discipline of the free market and encourage cost-containment. Finally, they sought assurance of efficiency—core knowledge as an outcome—and decentralization.

The funding model combined guaranteed base-budget funding (and an annual inflationary increase) with incentive funding tied directly to performance. Here we describe only the incentive funding component. The Virginia Council decided that a specified percentage of state higher education funding should be set aside to create a pool of monies to reward an institution's performance in relation to student outcomes and other areas as determined by the needs and interests of the Commonwealth. The focus of performance efforts was to be on outcome measures rather than input measures.

To create this incentive structure only a composite index of weighted averages across several outcome measures would suffice. The outcome measures are institution-specific performance targets or “expected” values. Such institution-specific benchmarking controls for the diversity of mission characteristic of Virginia's public colleges and universities. Once a single, weighted performance metric is derived for each institution, however, relative comparisons among institutions guide the allocation of performance funds. In other words, although an institution's performance will be *measured* only against its own targets or expected values and, therefore, only in the context of its own unique mission, once measured, performance

funds could be proportionately allocated across institutions by the measure of how each fared against its own expectations.

We identified six measures that can effectively support incentive funding (recognizing that others are possible): graduation rates, retention rates, scores on “exit exams,” post-graduate placement, faculty productivity, and, for two-year programs, successful “transition” rates. After the *1999 Virginia Plan for Higher Education* was adopted by the Council, the Council’s staff set to work on developing a complex project to set institution specific goals on each of these six measures and to track progress toward those goals biennially. The resulting program came to be known as “Reports of Institutional Effectiveness.” In these reports Virginia’s public colleges and universities provide concise assessments of their progress on fourteen common measures (five of which were among the six measures initially proposed in 1999) as well as optional additional measures. But here our personal involvement with this project came to an end with our return to Michigan. The ideas that drove this period of intense reform of higher education in Virginia are, however, offered to a wider audience of policy-makers, academic leaders, and faculty through our book and presentations such as this.

As we see it, the main work for these three groups is to help the system of higher education recall and return to its truest and deepest purpose—the development of proficient humanity. We shall all succeed in this work only to the extent that we come to “know ourselves” and to develop those habits of mind that will make education the most treasured charm in the modern university.