Assessment for the Right Reason
The Ethics of Outcomes Assessment

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Abstract. *This essay explores and challenges the two primary ethical arguments for assessment, accountability, and professional responsibility, by demonstrating their strengths and exposing their weaknesses, which are rooted in their limited notions of community, contract, and guild respectively. In contrast, I argue for assessment on the basis of an ethic of covenantal obligation which incorporates both accountability and responsibility but grounds them on a broader view of community, a view of the teaching-learning environment as a covenant community replete with mutual obligations and responsibilities, one of which is assessment. While the notion of covenant community has deep roots in American society, its theological underpinnings make the ethic of assessment as covenant obligation most relevant to church-related institutions of higher education, the context in which I teach and learn. I conclude the paper by delineating some principles for ethical assessment practice which follow from a covenantal perspective.*

Introduction

By some accounts, the battle over the outcomes assessment movement in higher education is over. Assessment is here to stay and will be with us for a long time. State legislatures have linked increases in funding for state universities to effective outcomes measurements. Accrediting agencies, pressured by the U.S. Department of Education, now require evidence that colleges and universities are taking assessment seriously to maintain accreditation. In the words of Trudy Banta, the assessment train has left the station; "we can either jump aboard and attempt to steer it, or stand on the tracks and be run over by it" (Banta et al.

1996, 57). From this perspective, the question of why institutions of higher education should engage in assessment is moot. The only question is how.

While the train may be leaving the station, many faculty and administrators refuse to board. They contend that accrediting agencies have not answered the question of "why" adequately, and they can think of many reasons "why not." Critics see outcomes assessment as another political fad that, like so many others, will eventually run its course. Meanwhile, they will do what they must until time or politics derails the whole movement or it runs out of steam.

Should faculty, departments, and institutions engage in assessment? In this essay, I contend that the debate over assessment is not just a debate about how to do assessment; the debate is also a moral debate about why, which has implications for the how. Advocates for assessment use moral language to make their case, particularly the language of obligation. Those involved in higher education have a moral obligation to assess student learning, they tell us. The terms most often used to describe this obligation are the words accountability and responsibility.

According to ethicist Albert Jonsen, the word "responsibility" carries two basic meanings: to answer and to promise (Jonsen 1985). "To answer" refers to accountability, being answerable for one's behavior. It is this notion that persons who emphasize accountability have in mind. When college graduates are unable to write clearly or communicate effectively we want to know who is responsible for the failure of the learning of these students. The student? The teacher? We want to hold someone accountable, partly to lay blame, but also to decide who has responsibility for making appropriate changes. "To promise" refers to commitment, the trustworthiness and dependability of the agent for some enterprise. This is the focus of some assessment advocates who emphasize

responsibility. When parents pay the bursar and leave their young adults in the hands of the faculty and staff of a particular college or university it is because they feel that they can trust those persons to provide the kind of educational experience they have promised. Responsible professionals try to live up to those promises. Of course, both conceptions of moral obligation are communal. We are accountable to, responsible to, make promises to some group or community.

In this paper, I explore the two primary ethical arguments for assessment, accountability and professional responsibility, and the conceptions of community that support them. The former emphasizes the market and contract, the latter the guild or profession. What I will show is that, while both arguments have strengths, they also have difficulties based primarily on their limited notions of community. In contrast, I will argue for a third possibility that incorporates both accountability and responsibility, assessment as part of an ethic of covenantal obligation. The foundation of this ethic is a conception of the learning community as covenant, which is broader than those views of community underlying accountability or responsibility. I contend that the teaching-learning environments in which we work are covenant communities that entail mutual obligations and responsibilities, one of which is assessment. While the view of society as a covenant community has deep roots in American society and thus is applicable to all learning communities, because of its theological underpinnings, the ethic of assessment as covenant obligation is probably most relevant to church-related institutions of higher education, the context in which I teach and learn. I will conclude the paper by delineating some principles for assessment practice that follow from a covenantal perspective.

Assessment as Accountability

The emphasis on the obligation for assessment as accountability has come primarily from groups outside the academy, particularly states, businesses, accrediting agencies, and consumers. The big push for assessment came when state policymakers became interested in assessment for holding state colleges and universities accountable (Hutchings and Marchese 1990, 16). Concerned about economic competitiveness and workforce capability, governors, state legislators, and others demand that schools engage in assessment to prove that their money is being well-spent. Instead of more money for education, they want more education for their money. They want to know that what they are getting for their money will prepare students for the world of work that awaits them. Thus,

the ethic of accountability, which Peter Ewell calls "new accountability," views higher education as "a strategic investment," which requires a "demonstrable return on that investment" (Ewell 1994, 27).

Underlying this ethic of accountability is a market conception of community that emphasizes contracts. Contract views of society are limited notions of community and obligation. Individuals and groups come together to form a relationship or agreement for some mutual purpose, benefit, or advantage. The community only exists between partners in the exchange relationship. Once both parties fulfill their contractual obligations, the obligations to one another end. They do not extend beyond the terms of the contract. In the context of higher education, individuals and groups interested in higher education for various individual and social purposes contract with educational communities to provide the education commensurate with those purposes. By granting a degree, the educational community claims it has met its obligation. The new emphasis on accountability, however, directly and indirectly challenges the claims the educational community is making. By mandating assessment, consumers force educators to take their contractual obligations seriously or risk losing their support.

The strength of the ethic of accountability is that it recognizes those external communities that have a stake in the results of education. For society, higher education is a public good, a social investment in the future; for individuals, it is a private investment in their own futures. In many ways the academy has been too self-absorbed, too oriented toward professional gain, to listen well to the paying publics we serve. Parker Palmer writes: "Bill-paying students and parents are often treated by academics with *lese majeste*: we believe that no one except our peers can adequately judge our work – and we are not entirely sure about them!" (Palmer 1998, 93). The ethic of accountability also points out that the very notions of obligation and accountability suggest relationship; we are obligated to others and held accountable by others. We cannot take those relationships lightly or dismiss their concerns as ill-informed.

Yet in noting this strength, the emphasis on accountability and contractual obligation alone is insufficient. One limitation is that this "new accountability" ethic misses what is important about assessment. Good assessment enables us to discover information about where our flaws and problems are, where student learning is not occurring. Roger Peters argues, "Effective assessment requires a diligent search for bad news, which is more useful than good, but accountability encourages the opposite. Campus officials are understandably reluctant to bear bad tidings to those who fund them" (Peters 1994, 18).

Clearly, for many who emphasize accountability the goal of education has moved away from instructional improvement to institutional accountability. We can see this in those states that have chosen to connect additional funding to demonstrated improvements. With a limited notion of community as contract, once institutions air out bad news, consumers – whether they are individuals or states – no longer feel obligated to the educational community to make needed improvements.

A second limitation is that we have little consensus on the general goals of higher education. David Labaree suggests that over the past century American society has asked higher education to fulfill three conflicting goals: social efficiency, social mobility, and democratic equality. Social efficiency is the view advocated by the states, taxpayers, and employers who see education "as a public good designed to prepare workers to fill structurally necessary market roles" (Labaree 1997, 18). This view has its roots in human capital theory that sees those who advance up the educational ladder as having learned more, making them more skillful employees. Thus, the stress on the outcomes of education has been on producing workers who are more economically productive and doing so cost-efficiently.

Social mobility is the goal most students have for higher education. For these students and their parents, Labaree says, "education is a commodity whose only purpose is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions" (Labaree 1997, 18). They do not see higher education as a public good that will contribute to the productivity of the American workforce, enabling them to compete with other countries in a global economy. Higher education is a private good, personal property, which will give them the credentials to compete successfully against their peers in moving up the social ladder.

In and of themselves, social efficiency and social mobility are understandable goals. The problem, from the perspective of many educators, is that they have become dominant, thus furthering the dominance of the market over higher education, a dominance that many faculties see as inappropriate and resist. As a result, the other public goods of higher education, democratic equality, citizenship, and a commitment to the common good, which many faculties in the liberal arts see as the most significant, get lost and carry little weight with consumers and funders. According to Alexander Astin, because of higher education students may experience affective changes that move them away from materialistic values so important to society (Astin 1993). While many faculties may feel that they have been successful in enabling students to have a love of

learning and a commitment to equality and justice, many parents and employers may feel the opposite, believing that higher education has failed them.

Another problem with the ethic of accountability is that it loses sight of others who have responsibility for the outcome. The emphasis in assessment is on the outcomes of education. For assessment to be meaningful and its results appropriate, however, we have to have some sense of the inputs. Researchers suggest that what students bring to the classroom in motivation, aptitude, and learning styles are the most important factors in student learning (Davis and Murrell 1993). The classroom environment is only one factor. Students also have personal lives, work situations, crises, interest levels, study habits, and the like, which affect their learning and development. We have all had students who had the potential to learn a great deal, but because they are working so many jobs to make ends meet or have so many other commitments, they are unable to put into the class the kind of time they might wish.

The issue of inputs becomes more crucial when we consider the rising expectation of students and their families that higher education provide the credentials for social mobility. In this context, learning has become secondary. Recent studies of undergraduates suggest that most students are putting less time and effort into earning their degrees and expecting more from faculties and institutions (Levine and Cureton 1998). Ted Marchese writes, "What do students now expect? Written summaries of lectures; course packets in place of trips to the library; the syllabus as 'ironclad contract,' with no allowance for adaptation or detour; right-answer exams, amply presaged; and grades of A and B only. In return for this customer-responsiveness, a faculty can expect favorable student evaluations" (Marchese 1998, 4). Students see their involvement in the contract as very limited, most suggesting that they will spend less than ten hours per week studying outside class. It is no wonder that many faculties feel that the overemphasis on outcomes is a way of laying blame for perceived failures of higher education and, sometimes, a smoke screen for reducing funding. However, as most educators know, learning is heavily contingent upon the inputs. In this light, we must see accountability as obligation as more encompassing.

Higher education is not simply some product students and societies consume, a degree to use as a credential for better employment or a screen for better employees. Good higher education, as Parker Palmer points out, "is always more process than product" (Palmer 1998, 94). Higher education is a process in which participants learn and practice the virtues and values of citizenship, democratic equality, and

responsibility. These are goods intrinsic to higher education that are difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Practitioners only experience these goods when they take the time to learn and to practice what they learn. The rhetoric of outcomes, rhetoric originating in the marketplace, has the potential to lose sight of these goods which are intrinsic to the practice of higher education. Thus, as Palmer notes, a contract conception of educational community, "however apt its ethic of accountability, serves the cause poorly when it assumes that the customer is always right" (Palmer 1998, 94).

Assessment as Professional Responsibility

A second moral argument for assessment is that assessment is part of the professional responsibility of educators. If society is to respect the work we do, we must have high standards for our practice and provide mechanisms to prove that we meet those standards. This is the argument advocated by members of the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), among others, who for the past decade have provided a variety of forums, most notably the annual Assessment Forum, to strengthen the practice of assessment in higher education. While the states stressed external accountability, the impetus for the development of the AAHE Assessment Forum came from within the educational community. In particular, they point to the report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, *Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education* (1984). The authors of that report suggest that if we are to have excellence in undergraduate education we must conduct "regular and periodic assessment and feedback" (Astin et al. 1984, 21). We must become, in the words of Donald Schön, "reflective practitioners" (Schön 1983). Assessment provides a way for us to reflect-in-action and to gauge how well we are living up to our professional standards.

Underlying this ethic of professional responsibility is a view of community as guild. The academy is a professional guild that has certain practices endemic to it. Persons interested in participating in the teaching profession must apprentice themselves to others in the academy to learn the art of teaching, and, as they grow in the profession, to further those skills in their own practice and through mentoring others in the profession. In addition, certain standards of competence and morality exist by which members of the academy must abide. While no established "code of conduct" yet exists for all academicians, professional responsibility assumes certain behaviors and "best practices" against which all members of the academy should measure

themselves. The notion of the contract still plays a role for the guild, especially between the professionals and the populations they serve. Yet the ethic of professional responsibility extends the obligation of professionals not simply to fulfill the terms of the contract, but to do so in ways that meet professional standards of competency and morality.

Like all guilds or professions, the academy views itself as a self-regulating community. The idea of self-regulation has its philosophical roots in such Enlightenment thinkers as Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith. Self-regulation means that reasonable members of the community or profession will live by certain standards that will have good consequences not only for the individuals within the profession but also for the society. A central value affirmed by the academic community is autonomy, which Peter Ewell, an advocate of the ethic of professional responsibility, defines as "the complete conviction that we can and should pursue our own self-actualizing goals as an enterprise, free of the 'unhealthy' influences of external market and political forces" (Ewell 1994, 26–27). Autonomy means that we have no need for interference in the operations of the academy because there are operative principles inherent in the profession that lead to appropriate outcomes. Only we have the insight into our craft that enables us to fulfill our obligations. In fact, external interference may affect the practice of education negatively, which is the case when consumer demand for social mobility or employability becomes the sole focus. A notion of enlightened self-interest is present in the argument favoring self-regulation and autonomy. By setting high standards for our profession, and policing ourselves to be sure we attain them, we will not only further our own interests but the interests of the broader community as well. Of course, those who advocate this approach contend that in order for the academy to continue to be self-regulating and autonomous, we must assume this responsibility.

The strengths of this ethic of professional responsibility include, first, its stress on the importance of the craft and the goods intrinsic to the practice of education. These values and goods are not simply those of materialistic bent, reducible to consumer demands to make people more productive, employable, or socially mobile. The intrinsic goods include those of democratic equality, citizenship, and thinking critically about ourselves and our society in a search for truth. These goods may not seem as significant to individual consumers, but they are central to the practice of education and ultimately good for society as a whole. Second, the ethic of professional responsibility emphasizes good practice and the establishment of standards of professional

conduct that contribute to the enhancement of the education process. One component of this good practice is the recognition that we do have some responsibility for the outcomes of education, though all practitioners might not agree.

In spite of the stress on professional responsibility and self-regulation, society has charged academics, like other professionals, with failing to live up to their professed standards. Donald Schön writes, "Professionals claim to contribute to social well-being, put their clients' needs ahead of their own, and hold themselves accountable to standards of competence and morality. But both popular and scholarly critics accuse the professions of serving themselves at the expense of their clients, ignoring their obligations to public service, and failing to police themselves efficiently" (Schön 1983, 11–12). If we look honestly at ourselves, we will realize that this accusation has some merit. We have become self-absorbed in our own growth and development. While the guild attempts to be responsible, we continue to set the boundaries narrowly and often exploit the teaching-learning community for our own ends (whether they are tenure, promotion, or recognition).

For example, though academies place a new emphasis on teaching at the undergraduate level, and assessment language is widespread, the commitment to teaching and assessment is not. The standards of publish or perish still rule at many institutions, even those that emphasize teaching, and we are not making drastic changes at this point. What Ernest Boyer calls the "scholarship of teaching," research on classroom teaching and assessment, has not made the inroads into our practice and our evaluations of one another it needs for us to take teaching and assessment seriously (Boyer 1990).

In a traditional professional context, the responsibility is ultimately to peers: to practice the profession according to established standards. Those who contract for services lack the relevant experience of participating in the practice of education to judge adequately how well we have measured up. While this assertion has some truth, a problem emerges when we realize that we seldom assess ourselves adequately as teachers because we feel that what teachers do in the classroom is a private matter, a matter of autonomy. Parker Palmer rightly notes the difficulties that this "privatization of teaching" has generated. Whether out of some misguided notion of academic freedom or fear of scrutiny and evaluation, we "walk into the classroom and close the door – figuratively and literally – on the daunting task of teaching." The result of such privatization is that we feel disconnected and "we make it next to impossible for the academy to become more adept at its teaching mission" (Palmer 1993, 8). This makes us susceptible to the charge that we do not police ourselves and need external interference.

This stress on academic freedom signals a deeper problem with the notion of autonomy. In its traditional sense, autonomy has a communal dimension; people who participate in a profession have responsibilities to practice their profession according to established standards of practice. Many educators, however, have lost sight of that communal dimension. The evolution of teaching in colleges that took place over the last century has moved in the direction of the self-contained course as the centerpiece of collegiate education, where the instructor becomes the authority on teaching and assessment (Boyer 1987, 255). With this development has come a narrowing of the idea of autonomy and academic freedom to a principle of non-interference, which is understandable in a society that emphasizes individualism. Faculty members want the freedom to research what they want, to teach what they want without outside interference, even from peers. They accept certain responsibilities with this freedom. They have the responsibility to come to class prepared, to provide instruction that is clear, to be available for students outside of class, and to provide reasonable and fair response. To require anything else, such as a responsibility for student learning, is to extend their responsibility too far.

Assessment, however, as Pat Hutchings and Ted Marchese note, "interposes questions about a *collective* faculty responsibility for student learning" (Hutchings and Marchese 1990, 27). Assessment pushes a faculty to become clear and public about their goals, objectives, and what they expect students to learn. This collective responsibility "includes listening to the voices of our principal clients – students, employers, and society's representatives" (Ewell 1994, 28). In other words, assessment seeks to restore the communal dimension to teaching. Many faculty members, however, see this as an infringement on their authority and autonomy. As one faculty member put it, "It looks a lot like assessment will be telling me how to teach my course. Whatever happened to academic freedom?"

In fairness, the advocates of assessment as professional responsibility suggest a paradigm shift in higher education from an instruction-based paradigm to a learning-based paradigm (Barr and Tagg 1995). With the former paradigm, the focus is on giving good instruction and leaving the responsibility for learning to the student. In the latter paradigm, the teacher's role in student learning is a primary focus. Reflective practitioners in this paradigm cannot feel that they have fulfilled their responsibility unless it results in students actually learning the skills, content, etcetera, which they gear the instruction to teach. Yet, even with this shift in focus, we may feel pressure to cover the

field, to be content-driven, to sacrifice depth for breadth. In doing so we may lose sight of the truth that education is more about process than product. An emphasis on professional responsibility may lead us to rely too heavily on our expertise in the classroom, diminishing our ability to create space for any voice other than our own.

A more fundamental problem, however, is with the notion of community that undergirds this ethic. In an ethic of professional responsibility the relationship with the "client" or "student" is still a contractual relationship. The emphasis on reflective practice which assessment embodies, however, steps beyond the traditional professional contract in which the client contracts for certain services and then does with that service whatever he or she so chooses. Clearly, reflective professionals are more open to the opinion of the client and more receptive to client rights and thoughts. They do not see challenges to authority as problematic but welcomed in an exchange between the professional and the client. Reflective teaching requires a great deal of freedom, dialogue, interaction, and discussion. It requires support and commitment by the community of learners, which includes not just the members of the academy, but all members of society, all keeping in mind a common good or goal for the enterprise about which they care.

Neither contract nor guild provides the foundation for the type of community that emphasizes collective responsibility for a common good as a part of our professional obligation. Those who advocate contract views of community lack any commitment to a common good but affirm the rights of individuals to pursue individual goods, such as social mobility. Professionals, on the other hand, are usually accountable to their peers, not to those outside the profession whom they see as unknowledgeable. It may always be the case that professional guilds fall victim to serving their own interests first because they so narrowly define the communities in which members participate and they express limited indebtedness or obligation to the broader community. From the perspective of a reflective practitioner who works in a church-related institution, however, I believe we can capture the strengths of this professional ethic by placing it in the context of a broader notion of community: understanding the community of learners as a covenant community.

Assessment as Covenant Obligation

What do I mean by covenant community? As a theologian and ethicist in the Christian tradition, I confess that the biblical tradition shapes my view of covenant (see Glennon 1997 for a fuller treatment). Covenant is one of the central concepts in the Jewish

and Christian Scriptures and shapes the moral and communal lives of the characters in the stories they narrate. Although the primary covenant highlighted in that legacy is the covenant made between God and God's chosen people at Sinai, the language of covenant permeates the entire biblical record. A key feature of the biblical concept of covenant is the pledge each participant makes "to undertake an obligation towards another" (Nicholson 1986, 89). The participants in the biblical covenants make promises to and assume mutual obligations for each other (which they do not always fulfill) to establish a community that fully values all persons, including the vulnerable and the weak. Moreover, they make these promises in response to the gracious action of God toward them in creation and redemption, which serves as the transcendent norm against which they measure all human action.

The biblical account of the covenant at Sinai demonstrates that the people are connecting their lives with one another and with their God in response to the gift of life and freedom their God has given them. The obligations and responsibilities set out in the Deuteronomic code that they assume toward one another, therefore, are not limited but cover all aspects of life together. Moreover, the intention of these laws is not to reduce covenant to legalism but to create a sense of community and to build ties of affection between the members of the community. That is why both Rabbi Hillel and Jesus could easily summarize the entire law in two commandments: love God and love your neighbor. If we truly care for one another, we will seek to strengthen the relationships that bind us.

While the biblical tradition informs my conception of covenant community and has connection to church-related institutions, not every person working within those institutions finds meaning in that tradition. How would an emphasis on covenant obligation as the basis for assessment speak to them? I maintain that the language of covenant is still relevant because it resonates broadly with our communal and moral experiences. In agreement with the line of reasoning used by H. Richard Niebuhr and others, I contend that the fundamental form of human society is covenant, that is, the making and keeping of promises (see Niebuhr 1954).

Covenant structures all of our communal lives: all our relationships rely on trust and the mutual promise of fidelity. All people participate in covenants, by birth and by choice. Families, voluntary associations, and learning communities are all covenantal in structure. For example, while the family has a natural basis in sex and parental love, its essence is found in the promise-making and promise-keeping between husbands and wives, parents and children. When members of the family fail to keep their promises or fulfill their obligations to each another, the experience of

community disintegrates, in spite of the bonds of nature and affection.

Underlying the covenant conception of community in both its biblical and secular forms is a relational ontology of human life and moral agency. Human beings are fundamentally social beings; that is, relationship and interdependence are central to human experience. We exist and are sustained through our relationships with others. We find meaning, become selves, by expressing and fulfilling ourselves in these acts of mutual promise and trust. At the same time, our experiences of interdependence lead to a sense of indebtedness and obligation. Not only are we dependent upon others, cared for by others; others are also in our care, which means we have responsibilities to and for them. We entrust ourselves to each other, expecting that we will keep our promises and that others will do the same. In so doing, we restrict our freedom and risk our lives to the power others have over us. This trust placed in us obligates us to respond in ways that are trustworthy and affirm the inherent worth of others. Thus, a covenant infers a sense of mutual obligation and indebtedness that goes beyond any contractual sense of mutual advantage or professional responsibility; it attempts to create community among the members of the covenant.

Covenant community, moreover, is always triadic: the unity of the people is based upon mutual commitment to each other for a common purpose or end, a commitment based on promise to and trust in each another. The triadic form of the biblical covenant is theocentric: human action in relationship to the covenant community is always done in response to the God of all, the author of the moral ordering of history. In other institutional contexts, the common good serves as the transcendent purpose or cause toward which the community aims. A covenantal conception of the common good is neither individualistic, as in contract views, nor collectivistic. Recognizing our interdependence and fostering the growth of community means that we are interested not only in our own good but also in the good of others. The good of each is intricately interwoven. To make this cause a reality, everyone in the community must contribute to the common good. This is the vocation of all members of the community. Yet covenant affirms that a community achieves the common good best when people can pursue a plurality of goods. Members have the freedom to pursue their own good but they do so responsibly, in ways that promote the good of others in the community as well.

This notion of community makes not only ontological and ethical claims on its members, but epistemological claims as well. Persons within the teaching-learning covenant are both intricately related to each other and in relationship with a common cause: the search for truth. This reality, which we can know only in community with one another and with that reality, provides a transcendent referent that places all claims into perspective, a perspective that includes more than consumer preference or professional expertise. Thus, our community includes not only our colleagues, our students, and the publics we serve, but also the subjects we teach, the truths we seek, and the values we espouse. The learning community called Le Moyne College in which I participate is a covenant community: a community of mutual commitment, responsibilities, and obligations between faculty, students, administrators, staff, trustees, parents, funders, and society; a community that commits itself to the care of the whole person and to social justice.

What are the implications of covenant, with its strong sense of mutual obligation and affirmation of a common good, for assessment? The covenant with our students requires that we provide an environment that is conducive to learning. This is an environment that promotes active learning, an environment filled with instructional activities that involve students in "doing things and thinking about the things they are doing" (Bonwell and Eison 1991, 2). Students can expect that we will further our knowledge about the subjects we teach and about appropriate pedagogies to teach our disciplines. They can expect that we will respect their rights to be treated fairly, to have voice in the direction of their learning, to receive prompt response, and to know the basis upon which we will evaluate them. We will seek to understand and appreciate their different learning styles and their learning needs.

In fulfilling our responsibilities and respecting their rights, students have an obligation to us and to one another. Students must be willing to engage in the learning process, to be active participants. Students must take time to discern their learning needs, to generate learning objectives that they want to complete, and to express those needs and objectives to us. Students cannot sit passively in our classes, put forth minimal effort, and then blame us if they do not learn anything. As noted above, learning outcomes are heavily contingent upon student involvement in the learning process. They have a responsibility to expend the time and effort to make learning challenging and exciting, both within and without the classroom. Fulfilling this obligation means students must be willing, with appropriate guidance and instruction from us, to assess themselves and one another honestly. This responsibility also means that students will cooperate with other students in the learning process. Students are members of a learning community that includes their peers. They have a responsibility both to learn from them and to share learning with them.

The covenant we have with our colleagues involves taking our responsibility for teaching and student

learning seriously and talking about it openly with an eye toward improving our craft. Many institutions struggle with this. Because of the trend toward the "privatization of teaching," we often keep teaching to ourselves. Public discussion about teaching practices can even evoke strong emotional reaction. An example at my institution is the attitude of some faculty toward the pedagogy group, an informal mechanism for faculty across disciplines to gather to discuss pedagogical techniques. The number who participate in the group is fairly small, but there is a wide spectrum of teaching practices represented there. Yet some faculty members do not trust the group, feeling that it represents a kind of "thought police" which accepts only a narrow view of accepted teaching practices. Developing a skill, however, depends largely upon trial and error. Growth is more likely to occur in a community that supports and encourages such risk-taking. This requires honest dialogue between practitioners.

Advocating public discussion of teaching does not dismiss academic freedom. Academic freedom in a covenant community, however, does not mean that we can do what we want in any way we want. Exercising our freedom means that we do so responsibly, in ways that not only promote our own good but also respect the worth and the good of others in the community. A part of that common good is a shared responsibility for common goals, including student learning. We have an obligation to students to deliver instruction and education commensurate with our promises and student investment. From a covenantal perspective, faculty members who limit their obligation to their teaching and place sole responsibility for learning on the student are just as problematic as students who place the entire burden of their learning on teachers.

The covenant also extends to others who work at our institutions, especially student life and athletics. Our colleagues must work to ensure that the kind of environment they are creating is supportive of the academic goals and values of the institution. They cannot work at odds with us, promoting lifestyles and behaviors that contribute to student passivity and irresponsibility. They have the obligation to work with us to create a total environment that encourages student growth, development, and responsibility. Moreover, as faculty members, we must make ourselves available outside the classroom to contribute to this environment.

Covenantal obligation between the administration, trustees, and us means that if we are engaged in our work to the level indicated above, the college must fulfill its obligations to us, to support and recognize our efforts, to attend to what Parker Palmer calls "the inner life of the teacher" (Palmer 1998). One fundamental problem at many institutions in the past has been the way in which administrations sometimes narrowly define their obligations to the faculty and staff as contract. If we did not spell out their obligations clearly in our contracts, then they sometimes refused to honor them. This narrowing of obligation has created hard feelings and a sense of mistrust. The vast majority of the people who work at our school have a broader view of the learning community we call Le Moyne. We do not say to one another, "that is not in my contract." Instead, we ask ourselves what will benefit the community as a whole and work to achieve that greater good. When it comes to rewarding such efforts, however, the language of contract and efficiency sometimes rears its ugly head, leaving many feeling bewildered and betrayed.

The covenantal emphasis on mutual obligation and the common good has implications for some resistance to outcomes assessment. First, the primary purpose of assessment must be the improvement of the teaching-learning process, the intrinsic goods of education, not accountability. As most advocates of assessment would suggest, assessment receives more faculty support when we gear it toward improvement as opposed to accountability. When public accountability is the emphasis, institutions want to put their best face forward and may resist asking the probing questions that they need to address. This does not mean that we cannot establish accountability, but the primacy of improvement redirects institutional focus and encourages people to ask significant questions. (Of course, if institutions do not have internal assessment processes going on, then the pressures for external mandates become stronger.) Moreover, focus on improvement limits further the dominance of the market in higher education that many faculties resist.

Second, if faculty members are willing to engage in outcomes assessment as part of their covenant responsibility, then colleges and universities have a mutual obligation to provide the time and money for them to do so. Improving the teaching and learning environment is time-consuming; our institutions cannot respond simply by raising our class size, or asking us to teach more sections. The Middle States Association recognized this obligation when they suggested that Le Moyne College provide consultants, workshops and other resources to help faculties become familiar with the purposes and practices of assessment and give release time and summer stipends to support faculty research and development of assessment strategies. We cannot, because of financial constraints or efficiency, simply add assessment to the workload of a faculty while also seeking to raise class size or have us teach more sections. Assessment will get shortchanged.

Third, institutions have the obligation to include work done on assessment into our reward structures. A covenant community is one where all the members contribute meaningfully to the common good and where the community insures the well-being of every member. One of the most disheartening experiences young faculty members can have is to expend time and effort improving the teaching and learning environment at their institutions (the common good) only to have their colleagues or administrators tell them that not enough time was spent in another area, especially research in their fields. To keep faith with them and to honor their commitment to our learning communities, we have to broaden our conception of scholarship to incorporate the ''scholarship of teaching,'' which includes classroom research on teaching and assessment. We have to make this integral to our tenure and promotion decisions.

Moreover, our institutions, including administrators and trustees, have an obligation to make sure that there is funding for the results of assessment. Mutual obligation and responsibility mean that if we do assessment in good faith to fulfill the common goals of the learning community, then they must help us address the results of assessment. If we require more resources for remedial help, then they have to promise to expand resources to help this happen. They cannot ask us to increase our efforts at effective assessment, increasing our workload in the process, and then claim ''there is no money'' when we tell them what we need to enhance student learning and outcomes. This claim will undermine the common good of the learning community by leaving needs unmet and by generating mistrust among the faculty, staff, and students. At the same time, we cannot come to them with unrealistic demands. We must be willing to work as efficiently as possible.

Our institutions must recognize and honor the stake that the public – including parents, legislators, funders, and society – has in our learning communities. We cannot simply dismiss their concerns as irrelevant or deny our indebtedness to them. Our covenant, the educational promises we make and keep, is with them as well. At the same time, as members of our learning community, they must remember the goal is the well-being of all and the search for truth. They cannot continue to come to us with narrow, self-interested agendas. They must be willing to see the bigger picture. They must understand that the value and purpose of higher education are not simply to get a job or train a future employee, but also to produce educated citizens willing and able to take their places in society to make life better for all, not just themselves. When we accomplish these objectives, moreover, the public must acknowledge its indebtedness to us and support

and recognize our efforts. Such support means funding for the things we are doing or need to do to enhance the common good. It also means correcting for some of the deficiencies that students bring with them from earlier levels (therefore our covenant extends to elementary and secondary schools). Recognition means praising us for what we do well, rather than simply criticizing us for our failings.

Clearly, this covenantal view of assessment reflects the strengths of advocates of accountability and professional responsibility. Like accountability, the ethic of covenantal obligation affirms the indebtedness the educational community has to the broader communities with which we relate and our need to be responsive and responsible to those communities. Like professional responsibility, covenantal obligation emphasizes the goods intrinsic to the practice of education, such as democratic equality, citizenship, and thinking critically about ourselves and our society in a search for truth. It also contends that these goods are central to the educational process and contribute meaningfully to the common good. Yet the ethic of covenantal obligation places these strengths in a broader conception of community that incorporates both accountability and responsibility more fully in the notion of mutual obligation and provides a stronger foundation for a common good that fully respects individual goods.

Ethical Assessment

Many people engaged in assessment do so out of pragmatic necessity, for funding or accreditation. Those who argue for assessment as a moral imperative suggest that their view of the teaching-learning community has implications not just for why we do assessment (the ''ought'' of assessment) but also for how (the ''is'' of assessment). Advocates of the ethic of accountability, with its focus on outcomes, generally seek forms of assessment that they standardize. They seek certain skills and competencies from the education process, and assessment, then, should measure the degree to which all participants, despite institutional context, can display those skills and competencies. The ethic of professional responsibility, with its focus on improvement, affirms many assessment measures that involve the faculty at every level. Thus, instead of advocating one form of assessment over others, they have developed a set of ''principles of good practice'' that are receptive of standardized forms of assessment but also encourage faculties and institutions to develop assessment measures appropriate to their values and mission (Astin et al. 1992).

Taking seriously the notion that the teaching-learning community is a covenantal community also

has implications for ethical assessment practice. Knowledge and learning are relational and socially constructed. This leads to assessment methods that are not singular but varied and diverse. To illuminate this, let me delineate four covenantal principles of assessment practice. These principles are neither exhaustive nor exclusive of other "principles of good practice"; as I will show, they sometimes overlap. The difference lies in the foundation for these principles: a covenantal versus a contractual or guild conception of community.

First, covenantal assessment is participatory. Since relationship and interdependence are at the heart of the covenant community, assessment from this perspective must be interactive and dialogical. Those affected by the teaching-learning community must have opportunity to participate meaningfully in determining the goals of the educational process and in assessing the achievement of those goals. All participants, including faculty, administrators, staff, alumni, and students, must participate in the conversation. This principle moves away from the use of external experts imposing standardized forms of assessment. A covenant community requires a wide range of assessment measures, qualitative and quantitative, to incorporate everyone's voice. Accountability still has a place in assessment. We are accountable to each other and to the truths and values we teach and share. More importantly, accountability becomes linked to responsibility. In a covenant learning community, each participant has the responsibility to participate in the process. We can have no free riders.

Second, student involvement in assessment is critical. This principle is implicit in the first, but requires separate treatment. Covenant community is committed to freedom and plurality, to taking all voices seriously and providing opportunity for all to participate meaningfully. We must allow the student members of our communities to take responsibility for their learning and to provide the space for them to steer their learning in ways that benefit them and the community as a whole. Moreover, students are key contributors to the information necessary for authentic assessment, information about where and why learning is and is not taking place. We must encourage them to participate actively in the assessment process, to assume their role as co-assessors with faculty and staff.

I concede that getting students to be active participants in the assessment of their learning will not be easy. Not only do many students see education in utilitarian terms, as a tool for social mobility, but we have taught them to be passive – to accept the authority of the instructor and not to trust their own judgments about truths and learning. Thus, this principle has implications for pedagogical philosophies and methodologies. We can no longer satisfy ourselves with teacher-centered modes of instruction. We must get students to be active in their learning if we want them to be active in the assessment of their learning. This requires learner-centered teaching that pays attention to the distinctiveness and contributions of all students (see Glennon 1995).

Third, context is critical from a covenantal perspective. Academic research often abstracts and decontextualizes findings. Since relationship is at the heart of the covenant, however, we cannot make abstractions that disconnect assessment from the lives and dreams of the members of the community. Learning communities are made up of diverse populations who often commit themselves to diverse values. Who participates in the community, the questions they ask, and the goals they seek together are critical in determining the types of assessment measures that make sense for the institution. The importance of context is reflected well in the second principle advocated by the AAHE Assessment Forum: "Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about" (Astin et al. 1992). This means that the way we do assessment should emerge from the questions, experiences, and desires that are important to a particular teaching-learning community. Another element of context is institutional values and commitments. Alexander Astin puts it well when he suggests, "an institution's assessment practices are a reflection of its values. Assessment should further the aims and purpose of the institution" (Astin 1993, 3). This means that assessment at Le Moyne College, a Catholic institution in the Jesuit tradition, should take some different forms than schools with different institutional aims.

Finally, covenantal assessment emphasizes values. For many institutions, assessment practices seek to measure primarily the knowledge and skills students are learning. While knowledge and skills are important in any educational institution, a covenantal view of the teaching-learning community also seeks to measure how well students develop an appreciation for the core values at the heart of the community. These values include respect for freedom, plurality, and diversity, coupled with a recognition of and commitment to the common good. A covenant community intricately connects the well-being of each member to the well-being of others and all have a responsibility to further that common good. Thus, covenantal assessment places equal stress on both the process and the product of education. Assessment in this context seeks to measure how well the educational process instills these values and provides opportunity for participants to incorporate them into their daily lives.

What do these principles mean for how the covenantal teaching-learning community called Le Moyne College does assessment? What types of assessment measures would help us at Le Moyne achieve our objectives and yet keep in line with our mission and values, which emphasize the care of the whole person, a commitment to social justice, and enabling students to become lifelong learners? Given our institutional values and mission, I think standardized tests as the way to assess student learning would be inappropriate. I have no intention of rehearsing the difficulties raised by standardized tests; too much literature can already do so (Courts and McInerney 1993). Even local forms of testing all students strike me as problematic if we are serious about taking student needs, learning styles, and voices into our assessment efforts. More effective ways, from a covenantal view, which fit both the values of our institution and the questions we are asking, are course-embedded measures, such as classroom assessment techniques (Angelo and Cross 1994) and student portfolios. Both assessment tools encourage exchange among participants in the teaching-learning community. Both incorporate student voice and self-assessment in the process, a critical skill students need if they are to become lifelong learners. Most important, both mechanisms provide the flexibility to reflect institutional context and the breadth to measure student appreciation of Le Moyne's core values.

Conclusion

Confusion about and resistance to assessment will continue if institutions of higher education see no intrinsic reasons for engaging in this extremely time-consuming process. What I hope I have shown in this essay, however, is that we have moral reasons for engaging in assessment. We are members of teaching-learning communities. Students, parents, and society have entrusted us with their learning and development, and we have a moral responsibility to fulfill this obligation faithfully. We work hard and are worthy of their trust, but we need to assess our efforts, not just to demonstrate this to those who doubt us, but also to gain insight into ways to improve our craft in our ever changing world. It is not our responsibility alone; students, parents, administrators, staff, and society all have to work with us, living up to their responsibilities. Nevertheless, we dare not forsake the responsibility we bear. To extend the train metaphor noted at the beginning: we should not jump aboard the assessment train to steer it in the right direction out of fear that it will run us over if we do not. We should board the train willingly, claiming our place as co-conductor, welcoming all aboard to journey with us into the exciting world we call higher education.

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