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Kicking and Screaming

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Kicking and Screaming: How One Truculent Sociology Department Made Peace with Mandatory Assessment

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Abstract

The authors provide an account of their department's minimalist and largely reluctant approach to mandatory assessment in the past decade. A decade earlier, the department had gone all out in an experimental assessment effort supported by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, an effort the department was neither willing nor able to make once the college's accreditation agency mandated assessment in 2000. The authors describe another "less-than-ideal design" that has nonetheless involved many of the assessment elements described elsewhere (e.g., alumni and student surveys, classroom assignments, external reviewers, research papers) and has nonetheless yielded usable and utilized feedback for both teaching and curriculum construction.

Keywords

capstone course, faculty assessment, course assessment

It has been argued that academics, like other professionals such as physicians, have witnessed the deprofessionalization of their occupation, rendering it more equivalent to a blue-collar one in which managers rather than autonomous professionals control the workplace (see Johnson, Kavanagh, and Mattson 2003; Noble 2001). Our experience of assessment brought to the surface an increased recognition of the parallels of our work to less professional forms as well as the tensions and conflicts that can emerge when the workplace is being transformed. Although we had participated 20 years ago in a pilot assessment program, sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), that experience did not create the same unease, because it was a project pursued by department initiative on a collegewide grant written by one of our faculty members, with a financial incentive for success. In contrast, the circumstances for embarking on assessment in 2000 were

very different: In the wake of the requirement in 2000 by our college's regional accreditation agency (the New England Association of Schools and Colleges) that assessment be incorporated within departments by the time of the agency's return decennial visit, we were instructed to design and execute programmed assessment of student learning. In effect, our participation was obligatory, and although we never actually tested the consequences of not obliging, it was clear that our reward was essentially that of being good citizen employees of the college who shared the administrative norm of ensuring that students were learning.

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In our presentation of our experience with assessment as a case study, we examine it from the perspective of deprofessionalized employees in a changing workplace. We consider how underlying our efforts to do the right thing professionally was an unspoken struggle to maintain some professional integrity against the incursion of administrative decision making.

EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION: AUTHENTIC OR NOT?

Vallas (2006) presented two opposing views of the postmodern (industrial) workplace that are united in one commonality: that increased employee input is the inevitable outcome of new managerial approaches. He asserted, however, that under the “hegemonic” view, the input is not authentic, and workers are misled by the appeal of concepts such as “teamwork” and “continuous quality improvement.” Hodson and Roscigno (2004) also identified employee involvement as one of the most effective organizational practices to accomplish workplace change. Certainly one of the ways that our institution sweetened the deal was that, at least at this stage, our state Board of Governors was leaving it to individual departments to work on their own goals, their own assessment methodologies, meant largely to give themselves information about their own programs. We also recognized that this was an accommodation that the board and the college’s administration had worked out in response to demands by the regional accreditation agency (see Weiss et al. 2002 for a more general discussion of the forces behind the assessment movement). In fact, we were simply being asked by our board to do one of the least noxious forms of assessment outlined by Pratto (1996) in his outline of possible assessment designs: one whose *purpose* was to improve teaching, whose *extensiveness* could be limited to summative (rather than formative; see below) assessment, whose *population* being assessed was admittedly us (the department faculty), but whose *agent* of assessment was also us. The more we contemplated the Janus-headed features of the board and the administration, the more we saw benevolence in the faces they showed us.

As we went through the process, however, there recurred concrete manifestations of what Pratto (1996) called the “deep tension and suspicion between faculty and administrators about

assessment” (p. 120). First of all, the entire process of assessment was questioning the validity of our grades and therefore undermining our competence as professional assessors. Second, we were concerned about the possibility of role overload as yet another task was demanded of us (without additional remuneration). After all, we were an 11-member sociology department, already dealing with about 100 sociology majors and with about 300 justice studies majors, whose program is housed with us. We, like our colleagues elsewhere at Rhode Island College, a “comprehensive” state college with about 9,000 students, teach four classes a semester, with an average of about 30 students a class. Many of us feel the need to teach overload and summer classes to make ends meet; the American Association of University Professors (2009) recently classified our professors’ salaries as falling into category 5, those in the 20th percentile or less nationally (in a region where cost of living is high). In addition, other new demands were foreseeable, such as a mandatory advising program that, with our large number of majors, has in fact left each of us with over 40 students to advise every semester. As Pienaar and Bester (2009) found in their study of barriers to academic work success, role overload was the second most commonly identified obstacle.

One way that we may have asserted our authority was to revisit what we had done with the FIPSE project a decade earlier and to choose not to replicate those elements that would be costly in time and effort. Previously, with FIPSE support, we had come up with a list of 10 specific learning goals for our majors (see Table 1); developed, tested, and implemented inventories of sociological knowledge that were given at designated points in the major; and used field trials of the new Educational Testing Service undergraduate sociology examination. We also worked on techniques for evaluating the major research projects from our first research methods course and our senior seminar (described by Jackson et al. 1992). From this comprehensive list of activities, all that was retained were the goals,¹ which we proudly published on our department Web site, once Web sites had been invented. The fact that we had the power to choose to limit our workload must be seen in light of the administration’s offering of extremely limited resources for assessment, which would have rendered the other activities unfeasible in any case.

Table 1. Rhode Island College Sociology Department Learning Goals

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1. A familiarity with the history of and major thinkers in sociology
 2. An understanding of basic sociological concepts, theories, and paradigms
 3. An understanding of the relations between theory and research
 4. An appreciation of the research process
 5. An ability to do sociological research
 6. An ability to articulate sociological analyses in oral and written form
 7. An understanding of statistical methods in social research as well as an ability to use computers appropriately in sociological work
 8. An understanding of the contribution of sociology to understanding the social world
 9. An ability to apply sociological perspectives to interpersonal and intergroup relations
 10. A familiarity with the occupational opportunities provided by sociological skills and understanding
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THE CHAIR DEFINES ASSESSMENT: MANAGER OR WORKER?

The literature is replete with assertions that the role of the department chair is a tangle not only of leadership, managerial, and scholarly responsibilities but also of loyalties to both upper administration and faculty members (e.g., Gmelch and Burns 1994; Sarros, Gmelch, and Tanewski 1997; Seagren 1993). Such complex loyalties led our chair to volunteer to be point person in our initial efforts. In 2000, with the full support of a faculty that did not want to be bothered about assessment, he opted for perhaps the easiest, and therefore from our point of view, best mode of assessment: surveys of former and current students. Wagenaar (2002) found these also the most commonly used among sociology departments nationally. Our first alumni survey, an adaptation of one created by California State University-Sacramento and included in the American Sociological Association's guide (Dorn 2001), was sent in spring 2002 to departmental alumni who graduated between 1987 and 1992. Thirty-five individuals responded (a response rate cannot be calculated because the original sampling frame is now unknown). A survey for graduating seniors was developed in house and completed by the 17 students enrolled in the senior seminar class.

Our experience with these surveys informed further assessment activities in a number of ways. First, we realized that the alumni survey, with its focus on postgraduation employment and pursuit of graduate degrees, did not actually address whether any of the 10 learning goals we had formulated in the early 1990s under a FIPSE grant and to which we were still committed had

been met. The graduating senior survey did ask respondents to rate the extent to which (seven of) the goals had been attained, and we recognized the alumni survey would have been improved if it had done likewise. In another alumni survey that was conducted in 2008, this component was added. However, Cameron et al. (2002) stressed the potential methodological weaknesses of student self-ratings, suggesting that an overestimation of skills by students may be inversely related to actual mastery of skills. We therefore concluded that reliance on self-ratings of learning objective attainment could not be sufficient by itself, and this led to a second epiphany. Namely, we reasoned that assessment would need to be a multifaceted, multipronged approach, and we branched out to other assessment techniques. Finally, because of a lack of resources, the experience forced us to combine creatively assessment tasks with student learning, in this case by having a research methods class actually carry out the data analysis of survey data. The use of assessment activities as an opportunity for student engagement in a practical application of their skills would continue throughout the years that followed.²

In 2005, our department took advantage of an invitation to participate in an online senior-year survey sponsored by the American Sociological Association. The survey touched on conceptual abilities and skills of the major that were comparable to those covered in our learning objectives and therefore could provide data useful for assessment with minimal input of time and effort on our part. Unfortunately, only 10 of our 15 seniors (in our capstone course) completed the survey, and the American Sociological Association's data analysis indicated only the proportion choosing

“strongly agree” for each statement and how our students compared with national norms for choosing this response (they were frequently “below average” in comparison). Moreover, the survey showed our students to be different from the national norms in background (demographic) variables and in reasons for majoring in sociology; as Cappell and Kamens (2002) pointed out the need to take into account differences in student input when measuring outcomes, we were uncertain how to interpret the survey findings. Nevertheless, the participation in the survey offered an alternative tool that we could revisit or adapt in the future.

In 2008, a second alumni survey was conducted as a project students could opt to select in our experiential learning course, *Community*. (It should be noted that this course became our response to alumni demand for more applied, practical, field experience-oriented coursework, uncovered in our first alumni survey.) Two students in the *Community* course in the fall of 2008 designed a survey for alumni, obtained addresses from the college’s Alumni Office of sociology alumni graduating in the years 2004 to 2008, sent out the mail questionnaire to 132 alumni, analyzed the data, and prepared a report. The survey had a response rate of 33 percent ($n = 41$), with 39 questionnaires ultimately deemed to be usable (a response rate of 30 percent). The report based on the findings was presented at a department meeting for discussion, submitted with our annual assessment report to the college’s Committee Assessing Student Outcomes and used as promotional material at recruiting events such as the college’s open house. Like the preceding survey, the student-designed survey did collect information on postgraduation employment and educational pursuits. In addition, their survey provided an explicit list of the department’s learning goals and, using a Likert-type scale, asked respondents to rate the extent to which they believed the goals were met. Through these means, we were able to establish that our respondents concurred that the department’s learning goals had been met. Interestingly, the goal with the lowest median score had to do with familiarity with occupational opportunities of sociology, which had indirectly been the centerpiece of the first alumni survey by its emphasis on employment. With this second survey, we were able to enhance our assessment activities without incurring a burden on faculty members, while engaging our students in applied sociology.

This is consistent with Hower’s (2001) argument that assessment should be a student-involved process for improving quality (not just proving quality).

QUALITY IS JOB ONE

Like Ford workers, we recognized that our ultimate goal was to ensure the quality of our collective product. But we had mistakenly treated postgraduate employment or educational success as our product, and in the next stage, we sought to identify a more appropriate output that would reflect our joint efforts (rather than our individual performances as workers or instructors). At this point, our college had begun to institutionalize its commitment to assessment through the development of various oversight committees and external consultants. As Weakliem and Frenkel (2006) demonstrated in their research, employee productivity is enhanced when management regards product quality to be important. In light of the shortcomings of the alumni and graduating senior survey, we embarked on a process of concept mapping to create a matrix that would show where in our curriculum (i.e., in which courses) each of the learning goals was expected to be covered and which learning products could measure learning outcomes (see Hohm and Johnson 2001 for an explanation of this approach). The process enabled us to identify those goals to which students were exposed at multiple points in our curriculum and to thereby narrow down the 10 goals to a more manageable number of 4 primary ones: (1) an understanding of basic sociological concepts, theories, and paradigms; (2) an ability to do sociological research; (3) an ability to articulate sociological analysis in a written form; and (4) an understanding of statistical methods in social research as well as an ability to use computers appropriately in sociological work. Moreover, we were able to determine at which junctures in the curriculum we could most efficiently measure the greatest number of goals. Ultimately the process led us to the recognition that our senior seminar capstone course lent itself to the assessment process in two very important ways. First, the senior seminar research projects embodied simultaneously 4 of our learning goals: more goals than most courses attempted to cover and four of the goals most covered by other courses overall. Second, the seminar research projects could be treated as a product to be

evaluated in terms of the 4 learning goals, thereby eliminating the need to introduce any additional activities or work for students or faculty (such as an Educational Testing Service exam or embedded exam questions).

We felt we could not, in good conscience, simply adapt the approach we had used to evaluate research methods and senior seminar papers during the FIPSE years. That approach had been admirable in its effort to implement formative assessment (i.e., assessment of changes in student skills and knowledge) rather than mere summative assessment (i.e., assessment of what skills and knowledge students have at the end point in their undergraduate programs). We did not aspire to this lofty goal (i.e., formative assessment), if only because it meant more work, and we were not yet being asked to do it. Moreover, because our earlier effort had been used in conjunction with tools we had no intention of resurrecting (inventories of student knowledge that would take months to create) and Educational Testing Service exams (that we could no longer afford), we realized our old "rubrics" for evaluating student research papers were inadequate. They had simply tapped writing skills such as "organization," "creation of a literature review," "conceptualization," "implementation," "citations," and "language usage" (Jackson et al. 1992:97). They had not done much tapping of any of our department goals, other than the one that had to do with "articulating sociological analysis in a . . . written form" (see goal 6 in Table 1). We wanted our initial assessment effort, even if it was not "formative," to focus on a wider range of department goals than this.

Evaluation of senior seminar papers would become the cornerstone of our assessment process, surprisingly being more common at private institutions, not public ones such as ours, according to Weiss (2002). But we still had work to do to match the pared-down set of goals with the products of our senior seminars. To that point, senior seminars had been taught by a variety of faculty members, with slightly divergent goals and significantly different means for finding out whether those goals were met. Some taught a senior seminar that focused solely on guiding students through individual research projects, with no shared readings and few common classroom experiences; some focused on relatively short research and writing assignments, taking off from a common set of readings. All did, in fact, seem to

require some kind of research paper. Suppose all who taught the senior seminar agreed to assign at least one research paper that asked students to demonstrate mastery of the capacities implicit in the four goals we had not only agreed on but that could be demonstrated through a research paper. This approach had the advantage of minimal initial disruption of current course offerings. Fortunately, the then current senior seminar instructors expressed willingness to serve as guinea pigs, offering their student projects up for our more general assessment efforts.

By now, we had had experience creating rubrics for assessment purposes, and we now put these skills to work so we could measure student performance against our goals. Table 2 lays out the standards by which we intended to judge our students' performance on each of our four goals.

Our first attempts to use the new rubric backfired in amusing ways. The first year, we tried using it ourselves, with faculty members evaluating 6 of the 30 senior seminar papers from the previous year, yielding two readings per paper so that we could check the intercoder reliability of our assessments. In general, the student papers fared well, but there was distressingly little agreement on which papers were "above" or even "at" standard on any of the four dimensions of concern. None of us had seen negative coefficients as measures of intercoder reliability before. In retrospect, the lack of agreement was not surprising. Half of our faculty members teach largely or exclusively sociology courses for the justice studies major rather than the core courses for the sociology major (there are roughly three times as many justice studies majors as sociology majors). Another quarter of our faculty members devote their teaching primarily to the introductory-level courses serving the general education requirements of our institution. The faculty members who did teach the senior seminar courses—the only course to always require a research project—did not participate in the process. Moreover, we had naively believed that "good" papers would be obvious given our criteria and had not shared model, average, and subpar papers in a prior training session. The upshot of this experiment was that we were either going to have to undergo serious training (probably not a bad thing, though more time-consuming than we wanted) or find another way.

We found another way. We requested nominal honoraria from our dean for two alumni assessors

Table 2. Performance Criteria Used to Assess Senior Seminar Papers

Goal	Performance Criteria
Use theory appropriately	Above standard (four or five, depending on how well objectives were attained): an appropriate sociological theory has been identified, its major tenets explained accurately, and the connection between the theory and the student's own research has been clearly made. At standard (three): most of the elements described above are present. Below standard (one or two, depending on how poorly objectives were attained): few of the elements described above are present.
Can do sociological research	Above standard (four or five): all components of research design (statement of research problem; literature review; research question or hypothesis; identification and operationalization of variables; discussion of validity, reliability, and level of measurement; selection and explanation of sample; selection and explanation of sociological method selected; data analysis; discussion of research limitations) are present; the research is clearly conceptualized and appropriately executed. At standard (three): most of the elements described above are present. Below standard (one or two): few of the elements described above are present.
Write well	Above standard (four or five): written paper is well organized, consistent and proper use of citations is made, there are few obvious errors in language use, and conventions for presenting a sociological research paper have been followed. At standard (three): most of the elements described above are present. Below standard (one or two): few of the elements described above are present.
Use statistics and computers well	Above standard (four or five): both text and tabular presentations of data are included, pertinent to the research project, and appropriately executed, using computer software programs as necessary. At standard (three): most of the elements described above are present. Below standard (one or two): few of the elements described above are present.

to be trained by a faculty member who teaches the senior seminar to rate senior seminar papers using the criteria for learning goals agreed on by the faculty. Because of the limited funds our dean had available to cover the honoraria, it would have been unrealistic to ask scholars from a comparable institution to rate the 40 papers per year generated in senior seminar. In addition, the dean had instituted the interdisciplinary Data Reliability Committee to oversee assessment, and this committee indicated that we were required to use two external coders on most or all of the senior seminar papers (rather than a single external assessor and/or a sample of papers). And so alumni raters—who themselves would have been more familiar with the requirements of a senior seminar research project than many department faculty members—have done the job for the past 6 years. Immediately, measures of interrater reliability skyrocketed, but at least initially, so did the ratings of our student papers. We had decided, early on, that our benchmarks for success would be 80 percent of the seminar papers scoring “at

standard or above” on each of the measured criteria and 20 percent scoring at “above standard.” But something about the interaction of our rubric with our alumni assessors generated what some might call a “Lake Wobegon effect.” For a couple of years running, upward of 60 percent, 70 percent, and 80 percent of our graduating seniors were receiving “above average” scores on all dimensions assessed, while most of the rest were scoring “at average.” Clearly, we were either supplying tremendous teaching, or our system needed adjustment.

We thought both things might be true, modestly tinkering with the former and radically altering the latter. In the first two years using alumni assessors, the two dimensions that consistently yielded the lowest scores (with as few as 60 percent of seminar papers receiving “above average” ratings) were those addressing “research” and “statistics and computers.” As a consequence, some of us who taught the courses in the (two-course) research methods sequence began requiring that students write research papers as part of

course requirements so, for instance, they would have actually had practice with writing about things such as the operationalization of variables, discussing sample type, and making tabular presentations of data in the context of research reports by the time they reached the senior seminar. This might be viewed as merely “teaching to the test,” except that it reflected a genuine interest in our students’ learning about how to do and therefore understand research. It had the unexpected consequence, for those of us requiring research reports in research courses, of helping students integrate materials that had theretofore seemed impossibly disparate. And, by the way, student performance in “research” and “using statistics and computers” on senior seminar papers subsequently rose, in the estimate of our assessors, to the level of other tested dimensions (i.e., “use of theory” and “effective writing”).

We also worked, in a couple of ways, toward minimizing the “Lake Wobegon effect.” For one thing, we reduced the number of assessment categories for each dimension from five to three, thinking that giving two categories (four and five) that were adjudged to be “above average” and only one (three) that counted as “average” might have biased the results. (Somehow, having two “below average” categories [one and two] had not created the balance we envisioned.) We frankly hoped that reducing the number of categories might also improve our already decent interrater reliability. (It did, for a while.) We also may have informally conveyed in our training of the alumni assessors that such dramatic “successes” were not required. In one recent iteration, both alumni assessors read virtually all dimensions of all papers as “average,” a most unsatisfactory and particularly useless result for assessment (and, not incidentally, lowering measures of interrater reliability, since at least some variation is required for nonzero coefficients). When 30 student papers are all judged to have been indistinguishable on four criteria, the resulting data are simply too implausible to be used for serious assessment of teaching. The following year, we trained new alumni assessors who, fortunately, provided helpful, and measurably reliable, feedback. In any case, after six years of tinkering, we think we have achieved, in the senior seminar paper review, a device that, interpreted with care, yields useful measures of the relative strengths and weaknesses of our graduating seniors along dimensions of learning we, as a department, value.

We have also created an assessment tool that combines three strategies used elsewhere: a classroom assignment, external assessors, and a research paper.

VALUE ADDED AND THE VOICE OF THE CONSUMER

Our college’s Committee for Assessing Student Outcomes consistently gave high marks to our assessment reports on the basis of senior seminar paper evaluation, and our approach was viewed as a model for the entire college. The only eventual criticism was that our efforts were wholly summative and were lacking a formative component; in other words, how could we establish that the value added by our labor was responsible for the outcomes achieved by our students, which has been a component of efforts to assess learning (cf. Carini, Kuh, and Klein 2006)? In department meetings, we reflected on strategies we might adopt to gather data at an earlier stage in our students’ careers and came up against a number of obstacles. The first course our students would normally take in the major—one of our introductory courses that focus on the family, crime and criminal justice, minority group relations, aging, or urban sociology—is primarily a service course for the general education program. Were we to test sociological skill and knowledge at this point, the preponderance of the data collected would refer to nonmajors. Following the introductory course, there are three paths a student might take, separately or simultaneously: the first in our sequence of theory courses, the first in our sequence of methods courses, or an elective course (presuming that students abided by our prerequisites). Not only are there too many options of courses where we would need to capture students at the beginning of their sociology instruction, but in none of them could we easily pretest all of the four learning goals that we essentially posttest in our senior seminar course. To do so would require integrating into these courses artificial rather than naturally occurring, classroom embedded assignments or tests that could serve as baseline measures. We chose not to disrupt the organization of these courses solely for the purposes of assessment by incorporating extra evaluative elements.

As an alternative means of acquiring some sort of earlier snapshot of our students, we began administering a survey to them when they came

to our department to declare a major in sociology. Our institution requires that a declaration-of-major form, signed by the department chair or another authorized person, be completed by students in the department, where an advisor is assigned before the form will be processed in the college's records office. The declaration-of-major form is completed usually, but not always, at the beginning of a student's involvement in the major (some students "forgot" to complete the form until nearly done with all their courses). The survey was first administered in 2004 and aggregate analyses of all entering students were carried out at the end of each calendar year thereafter. The surveys did not attempt to assess objective knowledge and skills of our majors but rather to document what drew them to the major, what their expectations of the major were, and what factors in their recruitment and retention might be under our control.

Although in no way a substitute for formative assessment, the entering student surveys did provide us with valuable insights related to our teaching endeavors and the structure of our program and introduced the voice of our (prospective) consumers. We learned that, unfailingly, students were not aware of what our program's goals were but assumed that they were aligned with their career objectives. They were often unaware of the sequencing of the courses and frequently had not consulted with an advisor in the department (even when advising became mandatory in 2008). We discovered that the proportion of our students drawn to the program by enrollment in our introductory general education courses declined in tandem with a decline in the proportion of those courses taught by full-time rather than adjunct faculty members. We found that rarely did students find their way to our major through open house or career fair events but rather from encouragement by other majors, a positive experience of a sociology course in high school, or having realized that the courses required to complete the (popular) justice studies major overlapped considerably with those required for a sociology major (and therefore a double major could be easily obtained). We were also made aware of the extensive competing obligations of our students (often an average of 40 hours of paid employment per week), which could impede completion of the major.

In tracking these findings over the past five years, we as a department have been able to

pinpoint the issues we need to address to enhance the prospects of success for our students. The survey allows us to embody one of the characteristics of learning-centered institutions, that is, to learn about students to assist them in learning (Doherty, Riordan, and Roth 2002). Knowing that our students enter the major as second majors or having switched majors at an advanced point in their academic careers, we have had to acknowledge that their experience in our program will often be a truncated one, with the ideal sequencing of courses over a period of time not feasible for many. To offset the late entry into the major, we have put together a package of recruiting materials about the sociology major and its occupational and postgraduate opportunities to be circulated in classes filled with (nonmajor) freshmen and sophomores. We have also developed online courses to accommodate students with heavy competing obligations. Recognizing that full-time faculty members appear to play an instrumental role in attracting students to the major, we have made assignment of full-time faculty members to introductory courses a priority. Being aware that students are unfamiliar with our program's learning goals, we have worked to increase that familiarity through simple and easy steps such as posting them on our departmental Web site. We have also strived to augment the pedagogical content of our Web site by, for instance, including an electronic term paper guide. Finally, in continually finding that students stated they wanted internship courses but then did not enroll in them when they were offered, we were able to experiment with different course offerings until we eventually discovered that students would enroll in a course called Community rather than a course called Applied Sociology (even though the course content and professor were the same).

Paradoxically, the entering student survey may have led to more department-wide changes in approach to our students than the evaluation of senior seminar papers. Because we have tended to meet the benchmarks set for learning goals in the senior seminar papers, there has been no compelling reason to make dramatic changes in our curriculum or in our teaching of core courses (apart from some of the tinkering mentioned above). The entering student survey, in contrast, raised much broader issues of how students enter our major and what may prevent them from completing it which we have addressed as described above.

LESSONS LEARNED

From over two decades of intermittent involvement with assessment of a sociology program, we have derived several lessons we would like to share with others. In that time, we have experienced various kinds of motivation to do assessment (from the mercenary interest in rewards offered by FIPSE to the need to meet mandatory requirements imposed indirectly by an accrediting agency and mediated by the Board of Governors). We have also used, at one time or another, virtually all assessment strategies uncovered by experts in the field (e.g., Wagenaar 2002; Weiss 2002): external reviewers, work in capstone courses, in-house pre- and posttests, work required in a major course, alumni surveys, student surveys, nationally normed exams, and senior exit surveys. We have done formative and summative assessment. Here are some of the things we think we have learned:

1. Programwide assessment is not perceived or acted on as a natural faculty function. Most of us enter the field from some combination of interests in making a living, teaching, doing research, and performing useful service. We engage in programwide assessment only when we are promised rewards for doing so, promised penalties for not doing so, or fear the kind of programwide assessment that might be imposed on us by others (see, e.g., Cameron et al., 2002). Mandatory assessment reminded us of our relative powerlessness as employees (and of our union, which never intervened on our behalf).
2. The pressure on faculty members to do programwide assessment has, nonetheless, increased over the past two decades, so many of us will have to learn to live with it. In doing so, we suggest the following strategies:
 - a. There are advantages of indigenously produced assessment approaches. Other departments at our institution have selected very different approaches to assessment of their majors, and we appreciate that these other strategies were not imposed on us. For example, very few of our professors use multiple-choice exams, so relying on an external standardized test (as the biology department does and as we did under the FIPSE regime) or embedding multiple-choice questions into exams across the curriculum (as the psychology department does) would not have made sense for us (nor would our students have likely demonstrated mastery of our learning goals through these mechanisms).
 - b. There is a beauty in minimalism. For the sake of preserving autonomy and academic freedom in teaching and for the sake of avoiding extra work for our students, we were opposed, especially in the most recent, mandated form of assessment, to developing additional evaluation tasks that would have to be uniformly appended to coursework. Instead, we sought, where possible, to use existing learning products (such as senior seminar research papers) or adapt easily administered research tools (such as the alumni and entering student surveys) for assessment. Our principle of minimalism is consonant, we believe, with the principle of the embedded classroom assignment advocated by Weiss et al. (2002).
 - c. Even modest assessment strategies require nurturing. Our perennial need to dicker with the training of alumni assessors, with the senior seminar rubric, but most especially with our student and alumni surveys, suggests that assessment never goes on automatic pilot and what seems to work perfectly one year does not the next, as the players in the mix (students, assessors, faculty members) change.
 - d. Even reluctant assessment efforts can be transformative. Under FIPSE, many of us had been enthusiastically engaged in the preparation of internal tests and rubrics, as well as the search of multiple methods of assessment. Our goal was to show that our students were learning something, a goal we achieved admirably and whose achievement led to generous rewards. What we did not do was change our approach to teaching or our curriculum much as a result. We did not really have time to absorb the lessons.

Our mandatory efforts, although less wholehearted, have nonetheless over the course of time yielded information that has transformed our curricular offerings (both in the form of new courses offerings, such as applied sociology and online courses, and in the form of substantive changes within courses, such as having students produce research reports in our two research methods courses and using students in those classes to analyze some of our assessment data). Most of us remain reluctant about mandatory assessment, but most too would, at least grudgingly, admit that it has usefully affected our way of thinking about teaching sociology.

CONCLUSION

We entered our second assessment decade, one motivated by external mandate, “kicking and screaming,” acutely aware of the deprofessionalizing potential of such a compulsory effort. We resented the implicit criticism of our grading efforts and the extra demands on our time, but we were able to retain our professional integrity for a number of reasons. First, we were given the latitude by our college to tailor our assessment work, and by relying predominantly on surveys of alumni and current students rather than on the more laborious work of evaluating student performance directly (though we did some of that as well), we were able to minimize our time commitment. Second, both of the chairs who presided over the assessment efforts identified themselves primarily as faculty members rather than as administrative lackeys and consequently advocated for the least intrusive forms of assessment involving the least amount of additional input by department members. Third, the ultimate product that became the centerpiece of assessment, the senior seminar paper, was palatable because the department is intrinsically interested in the quality of an assignment already designed to demonstrate cumulative mastery of a variety of skills. Had an externally devised product or measure of performance been imposed to gauge learning, and therefore teaching, our views would have been different. Finally, by listening to the “voice of our consumers,” assessment became something other

than just alternative ways of “grading” student learning. In response to student feedback, gathered almost incidentally to the assessment process, we have introduced new courses and teaching modalities, redistributed full-time faculty members more thoughtfully throughout our course offerings, and enhanced our advising efforts electronically. The professor’s role has long involved things such as curriculum development, developing new approaches to teaching, and advising. But it is only through the course of time that we have been able to see assessment as a tool for these activities rather than as a bureaucratic ritual.

Has our experience with mandatory assessment led us to revise our view that it is a sign of deprofessionalization within the professoriate? Not entirely. The terms of our particular mandate and the conditions outlined above permitted useful results to be obtained without enormous effort. We can, however, imagine less liberal mandates with less happy consequences.

NOTES

Reviewers for this manuscript were, in alphabetical order, Chad Hanson and John Zipp.

1. In 2002, we made the distinction between 3 overall goals for the department and a subordinate set of 10 learning objectives created under FIPSE and stemming from the overarching goals; we also linked the learning objectives to the college’s mission statement. The three overall goals were to develop understanding of the range of sociological theory and methodology, to impart analytical skills required to identify and interpret significant social problems or processes, and to enhance critical thinking about social issues, matched with a capacity to identify and assess solution strategies. Thereafter, we were rarely encouraged to refer to these overall goals in our assessment efforts, so we have tended to use the terms *learning goals* and *learning objectives* interchangeably.
2. For instance, for a couple of years, we sponsored surveys based on qualitative interviews carried out by senior seminar students, with each senior interviewing an accomplished alumnus (selected by the seminar instructor) primarily with an eye toward engendering an understanding of how a sociology education had prepared successful graduates for their careers (see goal 10 in Table 1). These graduates praised the background in methods, statistics, and computer use they had received at the college (relevant to goals 4, 5, and 7), thus providing some balance to the early news we inferred from our assessment of senior seminar papers (see the next section) that background in these areas might still be improved. Notably, these

alumni interview surveys combined two often distinguished modalities of assessment: the alumni survey and the class assignment.

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BIOS

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