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Assessing Students' Moral and Spiritual Growth at Catholic Liberal Arts Colleges: A Collaborative Grant-Funded Initiative¹

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Abstract

Faith-affiliated colleges and universities confront a special challenge in assessing students' development relative to dispositional learning goals. Since 2007, three New England Catholic colleges have collaborated to evaluate students' religious, spiritual, moral, and ethical growth. A four-part mixed-method study resulted in qualitative as well as quantitative data. The findings prompt some legitimate concern but also suggest ways to enhance these campuses' success in following through on the commitments they make to educating the whole person.

Background

The educational outcomes that an institution claims can almost always be distributed among three broad categories: outcomes relating to *knowledge*, to *skills*, and to *dispositions*.³ Of the three, it is the set of outcomes related to students' dispositions (or values, or attitudes) that most resist assessment. This holds true at every stage of the traditional assessment cycle. Dispositional outcomes are hard to define in language that is clear and uncontroversial. They seldom align neatly with specific courses, majors, or cocurricular programs. And determining the degree to which they have been achieved demands exceptionally subtle analysis of feedback that the students themselves may be quite reluctant to reveal.

¹ The authors wish to acknowledge the generous financial support of the Teagle Foundation and the enthusiasm and commitment of their colleagues at Assumption College, Saint Anselm College, and the College of the Holy Cross.

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³ An alternative triad of names for these three categories focuses on the character of the changes that students undergo: Are those changes cognitive, behavioral, or affective?

At the undergraduate level, the assessment of student dispositions is most often deployed to gauge institutional success in attaining relatively broad educational goals: “providing a preparation for engaged citizenship,” for instance, or “linking learning with leadership in service to the world.” Law schools and colleges that prepare students for careers in various healthcare fields, by contrast, typically base their approaches on professional codes of ethics—the mastery of which are critical to licensure. But faith-affiliated colleges and universities confront a special challenge. To different degrees and in varying forms, they advance the claim that all students who enroll on their campuses will grow not only intellectually but also spiritually and morally—and often, indeed, that they will do so in relation to a particular religious tradition.

At the same time, these institutions have compelling reasons to evaluate their own performance in this area carefully and accurately. High school students and their families rely on the claim that a campus will foster spiritual and moral development when they are considering where to apply.⁴ Many alumni and alumnae base their support for their alma mater on their evaluations of its commitment to delivering on that same claim—especially alumni and alumnae from earlier decades for whom the faith affiliation of their school was more explicitly reflected in the curriculum and in student life. And even re-accreditation teams, on their decennial visits to campus, will frequently allude to whatever claims the institution may have made about maintaining the religious traditions with which it has historically been associated.

In this context, it is surprising to learn from a 2011 article by leading assessment theorists Alexander and Helen Astin that “very little empirical research has been done on students’ religious or spiritual development” (p. 18). This is a deficit that the Astins and coauthor Jennifer Lindholm have themselves remedied in part by publishing the results of a national survey of over 100,000 students (Astin, Astin & Lindholm, 2011). As valuable as their findings are in establishing a national context for the assessment of students’ moral and religious development, several critical institution-specific questions that confront each faith-affiliated school remain unanswered: What religious and ethical knowledge, skills, and dispositions do our first-year students bring with them from high school? What opportunities do we then provide so that students can build on that foundation—and to what extent do they draw on those opportunities? And what measurable impact do the college years have on the faith commitments of our alumni and alumnae? Since 2007, three New England Catholic colleges have been engaged as partners in a project funded by the Teagle Foundation and designed to answer precisely these questions.

Project Overview

A project director funded by the grant worked with a steering committee, consisting of two faculty members or administrators from each of the institutions, to provide overall guidance for the project. The members of the steering committee, in turn, consulted periodically with advisory groups of approximately twenty-five faculty members, administrators, and students on their respective campuses. More rarely (but at key points

⁴ Richard A. Yanikoski (2010) highlights data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA showing that in 2009, 17.6% of matriculants at Catholic institutions reported that “the religious affiliation of the college” was “very important” to them as they made their decision about where to enroll (p. 589).

in the project's evolution), plenary meetings of representatives from all three participating schools were held to gauge stakeholders' response to the progress that had been made.⁵

Prior to embarking on the project, the three colleges had agreed that its goal should be to measure students' moral, ethical, spiritual, and religious growth. (Space limitations do not permit a detailed account of the lengthy discussions that surrounded the decision to use the terms *moral* as well as *ethical*, and *religious* as well as *spiritual*. Members of each pairing are used interchangeably throughout this article.) They had also approved the following learning goals:

Students will demonstrate the capacity to examine and articulate core values, the sources of those values, and the effect that those values exert on actions. Their explorations will include thoughtful and open-minded consideration of the religious, spiritual, moral and ethical perspectives espoused by their college as well as those of other traditions, and will be founded on respect for the dignity of every human person. These explorations will strengthen in them convictions that have the potential to sustain them in their lives beyond graduation.

And to gauge students' success in achieving these goals, we had developed plans for a mixed-method study that would generate both qualitative and quantitative data drawn from multiple populations.

Specifically, we wanted to capitalize on the rich insights afforded by qualitative data while also considering large-sample data in the form of easily comparable statistics. To this end, we proposed four distinct but complementary sub-projects.

- The Opportunities Sub-Project was designed to create at each of the participating institutions an inventory of those programs that faculty, administrators, and students regarded as contributing to students' moral, ethical, spiritual, or religious growth—both in general and in the context of the respective faith traditions of the three colleges. (Although all three of the participating colleges are Roman Catholic, each was founded by a different religious order: Assumption College by the Augustinians of the Assumption, Holy Cross by the Society of Jesus or the Jesuits, and Saint Anselm College by the Order of Saint Benedict or the Benedictines.) One way to think of this audit is as analogous to the “curriculum mapping” exercise common in most learning outcomes assessment studies—that is, as an effort to determine the loci in which learning (or growth) most probably occurs. We expected that spiritual retreats, service-learning courses, volunteering opportunities in the community, and “alternative” spring-break immersion trips would be among the most widely cited examples of “opportunities” relevant to our study.

⁵ These lively meetings emerged as a serendipitous but widely acclaimed benefit of the project. Indeed, the collaborative nature of the study as a whole allowed our three institutions to grapple together with the many challenges we face in motivating students to think about the many complex issues involved in ethical, moral, spiritual, and religious development. In the process, we learned much from and about one another. It should also be noted that perhaps the richest contribution to this project came in the form of the student voices we heard from the beginning of the project to its end. Throughout our work, students expressed appreciation for and genuine enjoyment in the active role they were able to play as equal participants.

- A second strategy was to leverage survey data already collected by each of the three collaborating institutions. Like most colleges, Saint Anselm, Assumption, and Holy Cross all participate in many surveys, but they only administer one survey in common: the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE). Unfortunately, NSSE generates relatively little information about students' ethical or religious development. Nevertheless, we believed it was important to include a Survey Data Sub-Project in our design to learn as much as possible from the responses already on file.
- Since the first two sub-projects would generate only the barest factual information, we anticipated the need to follow up on those findings by conducting focus groups that would include first-year students, seniors, and alumni. Like all qualitative assessment studies, our Focus Group Sub-Project promised to be labor-intensive, but we hoped that it would provide greater insight into students' choices and motivations, while incidentally offering us opportunities to engage members of various campus constituencies in our work at an individual level.
- Finally, we also planned to conduct a Direct Assessment Sub-Project, exploring students' demonstrated capacity to meet the expectations captured in our learning goals by completing tasks designed to evoke their skills and dispositions in key areas. "Direct" assessment measures, which ask students to represent or demonstrate learning rather than merely to share their perceptions about and attitudes towards the learning process, are regarded as the "gold standard" by outcomes assessment theorists.

Opportunities Sub-Project

Data for this sub-project were compiled from several sources. First, emails were sent to various offices on each campus soliciting items that related in any way at all to students' moral and spiritual growth. This resulted in a "shoebox" of materials showcasing the activities and programs offered at each of the colleges, which we supplemented with resources readily available on the schools' websites. Next, the project director interviewed a wide range of administrators on each campus with the goal of supplementing and contextualizing the growing inventory, while faculty members were asked to list any courses they regularly taught in which students would necessarily encounter "moral, spiritual, ethical, or religious values." Finally, all these data were organized to provide a broad overview of the colleges' offerings.

Not unsurprisingly, our three institutions proved to offer substantially similar ranges of opportunities, which we subsequently organized into four broad categories. Three of those categories correspond to areas of campus life defined by the offices or divisions traditionally responsible for their administration: academic affairs, student affairs, and the chaplains. The fourth category encompasses factors related to the general campus environment, ranging from public artwork to the visible presence on campus of members of the religious order that founded the institution.

The longer-term significance of the inventory created by this sub-project lies in the information it provides for faculty members and administrators seeking to respond to the findings of our study as a whole. Specifically, once a given institution has defined either a strength that it wishes to capitalize on or a deficiency it wishes to remedy, the relevant campus inventory may be relied upon to suggest which programs are plausible candidates for enhancement or realignment in its pursuit of those goals. Absent such an inventory,

any efforts at self-improvement would inevitably proceed more slowly and with less chance of achieving the desired results.

Survey Data Sub-Project

Despite some limitations noted above, the NSSE does provide a broad statistical measure of students' participation (a) in activities to enhance spirituality, (b) in community service and volunteering, (c) in personal reflection about values, and (d) in dialogue with people who hold values differing from their own. It also gauges the perceived impact of each college in developing a "deepened sense of spirituality" and a "personal code of values and ethics" in its graduates. We, therefore, compiled and analyzed responses to the relevant items from the 2008 and 2009 administrations of NSSE to both the first- and the fourth-year cohorts at each school.

As we learned when we shared our analyses with faculty members, administrators, and students on our campuses, students' responses certainly provide the basis for lively discussion. Some provoke widespread puzzlement: Why, for example, would any student at a religiously affiliated liberal arts college indicate that they "strongly disagree" with the statement that the "ethical and spiritual development of students is an important part of the mission?" Other data, by contrast, prompt thoughtful questions. Given the general attitudes typical of 18- to 22-year-old students, how frequently should we *expect* them to participate in organized "activities to enhance spirituality"—even at a Catholic college? And in any case, how reliable is participation as a measure of their moral or religious development? As we had suspected in designing the project, in fact, the survey data only indicated the need for a qualitative follow-up study.

Focus Group Sub-Project

Focus group interviews were, therefore, conducted with first-year students, fourth-year students, and alumni between five and ten years beyond graduation. Our goal was to gain insight into each population's expectations for, or reflections on, their own moral, ethical, spiritual, and religious growth while at college.

- The target population for the first-year focus groups was the entire entering class, for whom resident assistants served as our recruiting agents.
- For our fourth-year focus groups, we identified three sub-populations that we wanted to sample. Students who had been active in their campus ministry or chaplains' office during their years at the college were recruited by those offices for a first set of focus groups. A second set of sessions targeted students who had actively participated in community-service activities but not in religious life. Candidates for these "service-only" groups were contacted through the community-service office on each campus. A third set of focus group sessions involved students active in neither religious nor service activities and were populated by other administrative offices on the respective campuses.
- The alumni groups consisted entirely of volunteers contacted by the institutions' Alumni Relations Offices.

The project director moderated all of the focus groups meetings, which lasted between sixty and seventy-five minutes, using an instrument that had been developed over the course of a full academic year in thoughtful and thorough discussions on each campus. The sessions were digitally audio-recorded and the recordings transcribed by an administrative assistant.

As we had expected, the focus group data proved to be the richest to emerge from the project as a whole. Recruitment proved more difficult than we had anticipated, and our groups were not as representative as we had hoped. As a result, we are being careful not to rely too heavily on the results until we are able to confirm them in other ways. Nevertheless, the themes sounded by the participants offer a human “texture” missing from the more quantitative results of the other sub-projects and suggest a number of avenues that cry out for further exploration.

Direct Assessment Sub-Project

By design, our project culminated with a study that sought to generate direct evidence of students’ growth as ethical and moral individuals. For this purpose, a separate group of six expert “faculty fellows”—two from each of the three partner institutions—was commissioned to develop an approach that they believed would accurately assess attainment of our agreed learning goals. They designed a two-part instrument. The first part, “Facing a Moral Dilemma,” confronted students with a realistic scenario that challenged their judgment with respect to a specific moral issue. The second, “Prioritizing the Positives,” presented the participants with a situation in which they were called upon to make a choice when all of the available options could be considered “good.” A standardized sixty-minute procedure was developed that involved both written and oral components, and all responses were typed up before being evaluated by the faculty fellows. A scoring guide was also prepared, with each response being rated on three dimensions: (a) the respondent’s ability to recognize in the scenario with which she or he was presented the existence of a significant moral or spiritual issue, (b) her or his ability to take a position on that issue and make an argument for that position, and (c) her or his capacity to concede the existence of moral complexity by acknowledging the existence of multiple valid perspectives. At least three, and as many as six, raters scored each response.

To recruit first-year students to participate in this sub-project, each institution utilized its first-year program (or similar curricular structures). For fourth-year students, department chairs were asked to reach out to students majoring in their respective disciplines and extend a personal invitation to participate—a tactic that proved to be one of the more successful in securing student volunteers.

In designing the rubric, in administering the instrument in practice, and in scoring the responses, we were repeatedly reminded how difficult it is to design direct assessment measures of dispositional outcomes. As with the Focus Group Sub-Project, however, we value the results for the questions they prompt and the challenges they pose for future study.

Tentative Conclusions and Future Plans

In light of some of the methodological limitations alluded to above, it would be foolish, and perhaps even dangerous, to draw on our results to speak with too much certainty about the complex and subtle challenges we face in fostering students’ moral and spiritual development—let alone to propose specific programmatic responses. Much additional work is needed to confirm (or disconfirm) and explicate (or complicate) our initial analyses. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to offer a few tentative reflections based on the clearest of our conclusions thus far and to outline some institutional initiatives that they might suggest.

On the one hand, some of our results certainly appear to challenge claims that our institutions regard as central to our missions as Catholic colleges. While students typically “agree,” for example, that our campuses provide “opportunities for students to strengthen their religious commitment” (a judgment that the data from our Opportunities Sub-Project certainly indicate is well founded), somewhere between one in five and one in three respondents to the 2008 and 2009 NSSE surveys stated that they “never” take advantage of those opportunities—a proportion that remained essentially unaltered from their first year through their fourth. Similarly disturbing is the fact that the ability of students at all stages of their undergraduate careers to identify, explain, and resolve moral and ethical dilemmas of the kind presented in our Direct Assessment Sub-Project fell short of the standard that our panel of faculty fellows had initially set as an acceptable minimum (even if, in this case, the performance of seniors did demonstrate modest improvement over that of first-year students).

On the other hand, we have learned much of great value. Our focus groups, in particular, provided information about the barriers that prevent students from accessing the activities and programs that our campuses make available, as well as about some incentives that might break down those barriers. By all means, as our group participants told us, there are some students for whom religious or spiritual programs simply hold no attraction; but others view participation as problematic or even impossible primarily because of other demands on their time that they perceive as almost overwhelming. There is an irony here, of course. At each of our colleges, where reflection on institutional mission underlies even the most routine tasks, we are comfortable in insisting on an ethical and normative role for liberal education. Yet, the increasingly hectic schedules of our students discourage quiet time for individual reflection on and thoughtful discussion of issues that lie at the heart of our institutions.

On the hopeful side of the ledger, our results suggest two strategies well worth exploring for their potential to lead more of our students to explore more of the resources available to them. One would involve tapping into the remarkable power of peer influence. For first-year students, the activities to which they are irresistibly attracted are those that seem to them to hold out the opportunity to create social links with fellow students, while seniors report that an invitation from a member of their established network of friends is the single factor most likely to persuade them to pursue a new interest. A second strategy with real promise of success would be to build upon the impressive increase over four years in the level of students’ commitment to service activities (from 40% or 50% among first-year students to more than 80% among seniors).

And there are other positive findings that emerge from our project. Those students who do find an activity that appeals to them, for example, perceive a real benefit from their participation—a benefit that becomes markedly more pronounced if they then explore additional ways to become involved. Interestingly, this is true regardless of whether the pursuits in question are closely related: A weekend retreat may reinforce growth initiated by taking a community-based learning class, while a course in ethics can similarly complement an alternative spring-break trip.

In short, it seems that many of the students on our campuses can and do mature as we hope they will, in part because of the rich and varied curricular and cocurricular programs we provide. The challenge remains to induce a generation of young women and men with high academic ambitions to make room in their crowded schedules to open themselves up to all that those courses and programs can provide.

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