
NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2007

Accountability: The Commodification of the Examined Life

by *Christopher Nelson*

In America, accountability has become the guarantor of quality in nearly everything we do. We count and measure, weigh and rank everything from peanut butter to automobiles, from hospitals to colleges, from parenthood to places of worship. Some of this is reasonable; some is pure nonsense.

We claim that the latest car will get 40 miles to the gallon, and we can back it up with numbers. We claim that a business will return 15 percent annually to its investors, and we can count and measure its performance against the claim. Many conclude from this that if we value something enough to pay money for it, someone else should be held to account for the quality of the product we have purchased.

Accountability is a concept that is well suited to the marketplace and a market-driven society, and it is appropriate when one wants to acquire a product made or sold by someone else. But this commodification model is less effective when we pay for a service, rather than a product. When I hire a plumber at \$40 per hour to find a solution to a problem not yet fully identified, I am paying for his or her professional judgment, training, and experience. I can hold that plumber to account for showing up and for working the hours agreed upon, but not for much else. The plumbing problem may have been caused by a break in the pipes blocks away that the city has to fix or perhaps it can only be repaired by digging up the foundation. So it is with most services. We pay for someone with the education, skills, and experience required to meet a need that we have. But in many cases, neither performance nor price can be guaranteed, only best efforts within the allotted time.

The model becomes even more problematic when we apply it to experiences in which we cannot so easily separate the “provider” from the one having the experience. Entertainment is like this. I buy a ticket to a movie that a friend tells me she likes. Will I like it? Can I hold the movie producer, the theater, or my friend to account for something that is or is not to my taste? It is the same with restaurants, vacation tours, the symphony, or ballet. I can hold someone accountable for opening the theater and performing the dance but not for my experience of it. The only things these “providers” are responsible for are purely secondary to what I was seeking: my enjoyment.

Then let us consider the cooperative arts, like medicine and education. If I suffer and my doctor prescribes a pill, diet, and exercise, I cannot hold anyone but myself accountable for the diet and exercise. Cures are not found without patients taking some responsibility for their own care. Similarly, I pay good money to enroll in school, but if I don’t read the assignment, go to class, and actively engage in the learning process, I won’t learn anything. And even if I do go to class and hear the lecture, I still may not get anything out of it, because learning is not simply consuming. The teacher does not pour knowledge into the student like water into a catch basin. Rather, learning is the student’s self-sustaining effort, mediated by a teacher, to reach deepened and clarified understanding.

This often involves giving up more than is taken in. To learn, one must be open to the new and the unknown; one must examine and question what one has inherited or been told by others, even what one thought one knew from prior

examination. In other words, learning is grounded in a recognition of one's own ignorance. I can hold my teacher and the school accountable for providing a lesson plan or curriculum, for opening the classroom door, and for a host of other things that afford me the opportunity to learn something, but I cannot hold them to account for what I did or did not learn, because learning belongs to me alone.

The attempt to commodify all "goods" as finished products gets in the way of a commonsense application of the principles of accountability to education. In talking about education, we need to abandon the language of the marketplace. Students are not consumers, colleges are not delivery systems, and education is not a commodity. Learning is a cooperative activity; it requires commitment and effort on the part of the student as well as on the part of the school, which is far more complicated than buying goods at the shopping mall. Diplomas are not bought and sold; they are earned.

The New Accountability

For years, accrediting agencies, Congress, and state and federal departments of education have appropriately held colleges responsible for doing what they say they're doing. However, this past year has witnessed a call for accountability for what students at each college have learned, reported in such a way that it can be compared with what students at other colleges have learned. In other words, if these recommendations are promulgated, students' performance will be held to standards external to the particular college that the student attends, regardless of whether these standards are embraced by that college.

While this new demand for accountability appears to be centered on what is good for the student, it ignores what students look for when they select a college: a specific learning community, with its distinctive ways of helping students go about learning. The diversity of institutional purposes and offerings is probably America's greatest gift to higher education worldwide. We must take care, for the sake of our students, not to weaken this institutional diversity by setting common standards.

Differences in Mission and Accountability

For students entering a school that is committed to helping them meet the qualifications for entry into a particular trade or profession, the measurement of performance against industry standards is reasonable and may be very helpful. For students seeking a liberal education, such testing is not only unhelpful but restrictive of the very freedom that is essential to that education. Let me give three personal examples, one from my undergraduate days and another two from my law-school and bar-exam experiences.

I attended St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, for two reasons. First, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, and I was looking for a faculty I could trust to help me choose freely what was right for me. In other words, I wanted them to provide me with what today would be called "inputs": in this case, the opportunity to read some 130 of the world's master works (a St. John's College requirement) and to experience a small slice of my heritage in literature, theology, and philosophy, as well as in mathematics, the laboratory sciences, languages, music, political science, and history. By this means I hoped to get some idea of what ideas undergird the wider world I would be entering when I left college.

Second, I longed for a classroom in which I would be an active participant and be encouraged to try out ideas, test them with my classmates, and judge them by the light of my developing reason. I could not bear to hear another lecture, and I would have dreaded being judged according to someone else's determination of the appropriate "outcome" for my education. I found what I was looking for at St. John's, reveled in my freedom, and learned to love what I was studying simply because I wanted to understand it and thought it might promote my happiness and the well-being of the communities in which I was living: my family, college, city, country, church, workplace, and the clubs and associations

to which I belonged.

I am a free American: Tell me what I should be, what the “outcome” of my education ought to be, and I’ll rebel. But let me experience the riches of the world, and I’ll make a better life for myself than I ever could have imagined before I opened my eyes, ears, and mind to them. Surely this is the kind of freedom that proponents of accountability would want for students.

I went on from St. John’s College to the University of Utah’s College of Law. Here again, I was looking for two things. The first was a legal education that would afford me the best opportunity for happiness in the greatest number of things I was likely to want to do professionally—be it the practice of law, the management of a business, a life in politics, or leadership of a non-profit organization. Second, I was looking for a school that had the courage to say that some instructional materials and courses were better for that purpose than others, that some “inputs” might be necessary to allow me to achieve my own goal. I was grateful that this law school did not simply train me for a particular profession or prepare me to pass a bar exam that I might never feel the need to take. It was doing more than that; it was sharpening the arts of freedom I had begun to cultivate at St. John’s.

I took the bar exam in the summer after my graduation from law school. Before I did, though, I enrolled in a course whose sole objective was to prepare me to pass that particular test. This last bit of “education” was not freeing or liberal in any sense, and it was not designed to be. For that purpose and that limited period of time, I wanted only what was required to pass the test and get on with my career (and indeed, I practiced law for the next 18 years). Once again, I had found the right course of study for my needs.

It turns out that it is not hard to find a school that meets your needs, even when you recognize that you don’t know what those needs are. Some schools are particularly good places to help you free yourself from your fears or from the limitations of your upbringing, so that you may find the path through life that belongs to you. Others are more narrowly instrumental.

The kind of comparative public accountability appropriate to one kind of school or one expectation of education would not be right for another. It would be appropriate to expect the bar-exam pass/fail rates of students who took the bar-exam course to be published and compared, since those rates would be relevant to the course’s purposes—even if, in the end, it is the student’s responsibility to learn what is needed to pass. For the law school, the appropriateness of those passage rates is more problematic: It has made a number of judgments about what is needed for a good professional education, and these may differ from school to school. To the extent that various law schools agree on these judgments, and only to that extent, comparative data from outside measures may be useful.

In the case of the liberal-arts college, whose very purpose is to prepare the individual for the unknown, testing against an outside standard makes less sense and could do real harm. Testing at the classroom level, where students and faculty are working together and where it is important to know if the student is fully engaged, is sensible. But the further one gets from the classroom, even at the departmental or college-wide level, the less likely it is that testing will have anything to do with what is going on in the classroom or what needs to be going on there.

To test is to assume something is known and also that some answers are generally acknowledged to be better than others. Only some of what we study falls into this category, and it tends to be the less important part. A liberal education is designed to help one freely make a life worth living. Testing what can be tested and counting what can be counted are activities that can interfere with that freedom and hence restrict a liberal education. Unless one is teaching to the test (like my bar-exam course was), good performance on a test becomes a mere by-product of the liberating work that is going on.

Why would I want to see the federal government or some national accrediting body judge my college by its by-products? Why would I want the distraction from the liberating work of the classroom? Our current accreditation process has a perfectly appropriate way to find out on a school-by-school basis whether a school is doing what it says it is doing and accomplishing what it intends to accomplish. In those reviews, our accrediting bodies look at our performance against institutional mission. Those reviews combine an institution's serious self-reflection with peer review by an academic team that is likely to understand the distinctive qualities, programs, or mission of a particular school.

My personal experience with accreditation is modest to be sure: I've participated as a trustee, college official, or peer-review team member in seven accreditation reviews of small liberal-arts colleges. But each college took the review seriously, was open and candid about its strengths and weaknesses, and was much the better for undergoing the study and being held responsible for the improvements that were recommended.

Accreditation practices today help us aspire to the best we are capable of being. They ask us to assess how we are doing against our aspirations before they ask whether we meet minimum standards. If we want our colleges to soar, we ought to urge them to fulfill their dreams, not rank them according to whether those dreams serve the global economy or our marketplace sensibility, as the Spellings Commission suggested last fall. The biggest problem with this new model of accountability is that it asks too little of our colleges and far less than our existing peer-review process does.

To ask liberal-arts colleges to adopt common measures of performance by which students at multiple institutions would be tested suggests several things, all of which are problematic:

- (1) That the federal government or some regional accrediting agency knows better than the classroom teacher what a student ought to learn;
- (2) That all of our colleges (or even a group of liberal-arts colleges) agree or ought to agree on what is to be learned;
- (3) That distinctions among colleges' missions can be ignored, since what is distinctive won't be tested and assessed;
- (4) That the experience of great and beautiful things matters less than what we are told is supposed to have been learned from them.
- (5) That answers are more important than questions, when questions, not answers, open the world to the eager learner.

What a College Owes to Its Students

I firmly believe that colleges owe a great deal to their students—but it is not learning. It is the opportunity for a liberal education. A college might tell a student something like this:

We make no effort to tell you what you ought to learn here; that is your business. Instead we will provide you with rich material for learning—reading matter, art, music, laboratory tools—that we consider the best to help you free yourselves from your fear of the unknown, from inherited prejudices, and from popular opinion untested by your reason. We will provide small classes that give you ample opportunity to participate in conversation, demonstration, experimentation, and translation. We won't lecture at you or tell you what to think, but we will do our utmost to respect the dignity of each individual in the class and to encourage the capacity and desire to learn that are already within each of you—in short, to encourage your love of learning. If you

choose to miss classes, to ignore your assignments, to sit on the sidelines waiting to be spoon-fed—in other words, if you fail to participate in your own education—we will ask you to leave, because you will be wasting your time here and everyone else's.

These conditions for learning may look more like “inputs” than “outcomes,” but they are how liberal-arts colleges and liberal-arts programs in larger universities help students to make their learning their own.

Now, someone might argue, “You don't really mean that. You have daily expectations for those would-be learners. They ought to be improving their powers of thought and persuasion and their capacity to solve problems, and they need to master some of the useful means to get there: vocabulary, grammar, mathematics, and the like. Surely, you either test your students for this or want them to acquire many such things that can be tested.”

I would respond, “Yes. Some of the things you speak of are helpful means to an education for freedom; others are useful by-products that we'd be happy to see all of our students acquire. To the extent that we think these are necessary, we will test our students to satisfy ourselves and the students themselves that they can freely proceed, unhampered by the lack of adequate tools. However, to suggest that a college should be judged and compared with other schools on the basis of its means or by-products runs the risk of distorting or forgetting our higher purposes.

“First, we would be judged by standards that are not our own, increasing the likelihood that we might attract students who don't belong here. Second, and more problematic, we would be expected, according to the latest accountability proposals, to use these test results to improve our instructional plans. This requires that we either embrace the test as a measure of our ends (which would require a change in mission or purpose) or that we pretend to do so, which perpetuates a lie and encourages an ugly cynicism instead of the healthy skepticism required for a liberal education.”

The Ends of a Liberal Education

To those who imagine that I resist all forms of assessment, let me be clear that I do not. Any college that embraces an end that it believes can reasonably be measured by outside agencies should also accept the accounting that goes with it. All of us, in any event, should recognize the need for the self-improvement that comes from self examination. Our students and we ourselves might as well be dead if we are not asking ourselves who we are, what kind of world we inhabit, and what our place should be in the scheme of things. I accept the wisdom of Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living. And just as our students require individual assessment to learn, so must institutional self assessment be an integral part of our colleges' learning.

But once we accept that an education may be about more than making a living, that it is instead about making a life worth living, the problems of accountability prove difficult indeed. The only fair judge of the success of the life worth living is the man or woman who lives it. The rest of us can only see signs of it, and even those signs may not become apparent to us before we have witnessed the quality of that life over the full span of years.

If we would substitute our own judgment for our students' about what the product of their self-examination should be, we would be lying when we say we want our students to determine the ends of their education. Thus we should do all in our power to prevent others from holding us accountable for the very thing that most belongs to our students—the choice of how they should live their lives, a choice made freely because it is made thoughtfully and with some understanding of their own true character.

Conflicting beliefs can be held by thoughtful, decent human beings who have put themselves and their beliefs through the crucible of self-examination. To suggest that we put the measure of their beliefs in the hands of a testing agency would do violence to the project of a liberal education. Let us never sacrifice the search for wisdom that requires

thoughtful reflection for the ritual of counting the countable.

I had thought to remind readers that the quality of spirit, like the love of learning, resisted the measuring stick. Then I recalled reading an article entitled "Spiritual Accountability" that described a Spiritual Transformation Inventory that some of our religious colleges are developing to compare the individual and collective spiritual development of their students against benchmarks at other colleges. The spirit within me shrunk upon reading this. What a way to crush and drain the swelling of the heart! Shall we then develop a Love of Learning Inventory for the liberal-arts colleges?

Let us remind those who seek to turn education into a commodity that job placement, earnings, commercial success, and prosperity are only a few of the goods this country stands for. A liberal education can be the means for the exercise of our birthright to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as well. We should not permit the tyranny of the marketplace to allow us to forget the deeper foundations in human freedom on which free markets rest.

We must remember always to treasure the autonomy of the individual. I say this both for those who believe that the cultivation of the individual intellect or improvement of individual character is a proper end in itself and for those who believe that the health of the community is. Individuals educated to freedom will, we have found over the years, also improve the conditions of those around them.

Virginia Woolf, a passionate advocate for the autonomy of the individual, had this to say about measuring learning in *A Room of One's Own*:

No, delightful as the pastime of measuring may be, it is the most futile of all occupations, and to submit to the decrees of the measurers the most servile of attitudes. ... To sacrifice a half of the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery.

I shudder to think how she would respond to the arguments for accountability we are hearing in this age.

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