Writing Program Assessment and the Mission-Driven Institution

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Abstract

This essay argues that the current environment of American higher education asks writing program administrators to be attentive to institutional mission, particularly as it intersects with writing program assessment. When accreditation motivates assessment, two forces shape writing assessment: the accountability agenda that values comparative evidence, and the requirement that institutions demonstrate they are fulfilling their missions, even if those missions are religious or humanistic. The essay further argues that writing assessment scholarship—while it emphasizes the local and contextual—does not sufficiently address assessment in the context of an institutional mission that aims to foster moral, ethical, or religious habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews. Highlighting the pragmatic and ethical challenges associated with assessing habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews as they are revealed in writing, this essay offers teachers and administrators a heuristic for developing assessment programs aligned with the institutional mission.

Writing program administrators are perhaps familiar with the frantic request I received late one spring semester: *We are trying to keep up with our assessment for the self-study, so can you send us a bunch of papers from English 101 that we can use to assess general education outcomes? Since almost all students take English 101, we want to use this class to assess information literacy and written communication—and maybe some other outcomes. If it too late in the year to collect everything, can you go into Turnitin.com and get some samples?* This request suggests an institution struggling to develop effective assessment programs, but it also highlights the way that writing programs gain attention during institutional assessment and reaccreditation. Because they are part of general education or because they are writing intensive,

writing courses—at or beyond the introductory level—seem a natural place to find direct evidence of student learning.

The request I received envisions writing assessment as a way to help the institution establish its effectiveness and provide accreditors with evidence of quality. When writing program assessment is connected to these larger institutional purposes, WPAs face particular challenges. In terms of institutional politics, accreditation may put (sometimes unwelcome) focus on general education writing courses, particularly when administrators "interpret accrediting agency language more narrowly than it should be interpreted" (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 78). And in terms of best assessment practices, accrediting agencies privilege numerical evidence that allows for comparisons across institutions, the kind of evidence that often seems antithetical to what we believe about writing and literacy. Writing program assessment implicated in these larger institutional purposes also presents significant challenges related to the institutional mission. I later received a follow up request that illustrates this point: *We also need to show that students are developing a sense of social justice and that they are making gains in ethical reasoning. Do you have some papers where the students wrote about that? Do we have a rubric for this?* Using writing samples to find attributes such as ethical reasoning, morality, and an understanding of social justice—and then scoring these characteristics with a rubric—raises questions not only about the role of writing programs in fostering these attributes but also about the ethics and pragmatics of this kind of assessment.

I think about the intersections of assessment and institutional mission because I direct the writing program at what is conventionally understood as a mission-driven institution. In *Joining the Mission*, Susan VanZanten defines mission-driven institutions according to three criteria, all of which describe my university: they are private, which allows them freedom to hire personnel and develop curricula; they understand their mission as inherently religious; and they intentionally keep the mission central and visible (2–3). Yet all institutions are guided by a mission, and I believe that WPAs at any institution with civic, ethical, moral, or humanistic aims benefit from examining the intersections of mission and assessment. Institutions represented by the Council of Writing Program Administrators may "undertake to educate the next generation of civic . . . leaders" (Gladstein and Regaignon 15), distinguish themselves by not defining professional or instrumental outcomes (Hartley 7), or help "students develop a sense of social responsibility" ("Liberal Education"). Our writing programs may be built on the humanistic mission Catherine Chaput advocates, or they may aim to foster habits of mind such as engagement, creativity, openness, and curiosity (Council of Writing Program Administrators, *Framework*). When

assessment and mission intersect, the challenges for WPAs are—in the language of the press and popular media—those of defending the humanities at this moment in American higher education.

My first argument in this essay is that the assessment environment in American higher education asks WPAs to be attentive to institutional mission and to the intrinsic[1] ends of our programs. And it asks for attention to mission—even religious missions or those centered on the liberal arts—in the context of an accreditation system that seeks numerical evidence of instrumental skills. Accreditation stems from an accountability agenda demanding evidence of student learning that can be aggregated and compared across institutions, an agenda predicated on the idea that perfect measurement systems should be pursued. Writing assessment scholars have largely rejected pursuing perfect psychometrics, focusing instead on local and qualitative approaches (Adler-Kassner and O'Neill; Barlow, Liparulo, and Reynolds; Broad). It is my second argument that our disciplinary focus on the local and contextual does not sufficiently address writing program assessment that is responsive to institutional mission, especially missions with religious or humanistic aims. I conclude by offering a heuristic for developing assessment programs aligned with the institutional mission that produce information for internal and external audiences.

Accreditation and Mission in Higher Education

American higher education is an industry: students and parents are consumers, institutions are corporations, and degrees are commodities. Institutions compete with one another for top rankings and top consumers, attempting to prove that their products are the most cost effective or the most prestigious. This corporate model reinforces the idea that higher education has largely instrumental ends, and it also supports the idea that more accountability and national standards will produce a better product. In 1998, the Boyer Commission Report noted that American undergraduates "can receive an education as good or better than anything available anywhere in the world, but that is not the normative experience…universities are guilty of an advertising practice they would condemn in the commercial world" (5). The testing industry unsurprisingly advocates accountability through national measures of learning: "The lack of a culture oriented toward evidence of specific student outcomes hampers informed decision-making…What is needed is a systematic, data-driven, comprehensive approach to understanding the quality of…postsecondary education, with direct, valid and reliable measures of student learning" (Dwyer, Millett, and Payne 1). Although the United States Department of Education has

not fully embraced calls to establish national measures of student learning, it certainly envisions higher education as an industry subject to regulation.

The regional accrediting system functions as quality control in contemporary American higher education.[2] Accreditation exerts tremendous influence over assessment because it accepts—and powerfully reinforces—instrumental and corporate definitions of education. Through assessment, institutions must demonstrate that students are learning (or that value has been added), and they must provide data that is persuasive in the free market: comparative evidence that can be aggregated, tracked over time, and compared against other institutions. The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association (HLC), for example, requires that "the institution provides evidence of student learning and teaching effectiveness that demonstrates it is fulfilling its educational mission" (7). And the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS) requires an "institutional commitment to the concept of quality enhancement through continuous assessment and improvement" (3). As I have noted, writing programs are regularly implicated in general education assessment, which often accompanies the accreditation self-study process. WPAs may be troubled by the force toward comparative evidence because it privileges outcomes that can be "assessed against an externally informed or benchmarked level of achievement or assessed and compared with those of similar institutions" (New Leadership Alliance 6). In a January 2013 discussion on WPA-L, participants questioned if the force toward comparative evidence is actually a directive to use standardized measures. Shirley Rose, who has served as an HLC consultant-evaluator, explained that although she never endorsed standardized tests, "comparative data is prized. Comparative data showing your own program's trends in results measured in your assessment processes would be valued." Other participants responded that they were encouraged to develop local measures but were nonetheless aiming to produce comparative evidence.

Accreditation reinforces this corporate model by exerting quality control over the claims institutions make about their missions. In the educational free market, each institution must persuade consumers that it does something best or fills a market niche others cannot. The mantra "no mission, no money; no money, no mission" has migrated into higher education, and in this era of economic scarcity, only those things that clearly contribute to the institutional mission will survive. Institutions must provide accrediting agencies with evidence that they are fulfilling their unique missions in terms of teaching and learning. SACS highlights mission as an integral part of accreditation, noting that "accreditation acknowledges an institution's prerogative to articulate its mission, including a religious mission,

within the recognized context of higher education and its responsibility to show that it is accomplishing its mission" (3). And although it does not use the language of mission, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges charges institutions with articulating their values: "The institution defines its purposes and establishes educational objectives aligned with its purposes and character. It has a clear and conscious sense of its essential values and character" (11). At the same time that institutions must produce evidence that enables rankings and comparisons, they must also give evidence of a uniquely successful mission.

It is precisely this charge to evaluate institutional mission along with instrumental skills that prompts ethical and pragmatic questions about assessment and mission. Although the market may reduce mission to an instrumental commodity, many institutions and writing programs still view mission as something with intrinsic value. A cursory review of institutional missions reveals that many aim to do what appears unmeasurable, including student development at the levels of action, mind, and spirit. Member schools of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities focus on academic skills and personal, spiritual attributes. Institutions prepare "graduates to serve in strategic capacities to renew minds, live out biblical truth, transform culture, and advance the gospel" ("Mission," Bethel College) and are "committed to engaging the culture and changing the world by graduating people of competence and character, becoming people of wisdom, and modeling grace-filled community" ("Mission," Seattle Pacific University). Within the Roman Catholic tradition, Assumption College "strives to form graduates known for critical intelligence, thoughtful citizenship and compassionate service," and Jesuit institutions encourage "an openness of mind and heart…Graduates of Jesuit schools are expected to integrate critical intelligence with an ethical perspective that today leads to generous service of others and a commitment to help build a more just and humane world" (AJCU). And through its liberal arts mission, Williams College seeks to build civic virtue including "commitment to engage both the broad public realm and community life…These virtues, in turn, have associated traits of character. For example, free inquiry requires open-mindedness, and commitment to community draws on concern for others." Envisioning personal attributes as ends of the educational experience adds layers of meaning to curriculum and pedagogy; doing so further asks those involved with institutional assessment to negotiate these layers of meaning.

Certainly institutional missions may aim to do more than can reasonably be expected from an undergraduate education, and indeed this expansiveness is inherent in the concept of mission. Individual institutional missions may be vague or functionally meaningless, and the idea of mis-

sion itself "may feel dated, and legitimately so, since focus on institutional mission arose in the 1970s and 1980s" (VanderLei and Pugh 105) when "countless organizations expended enormous amounts of time drafting mission statements, only to later quietly file them away" (Hartley 8). While at some institutions, missions are reduced to token words engraved on a plaque, at other institutions, mission statements are "meticulously worded," deliberately consequential, and work to establish "their distinct identities, unique values, and distinguishing cultures" (VanZanten 2). My focus is on the way that accreditation—because it does not allow missions to be ambiguous or ignored—prompts all institutions to some level of clarity about their mission. When institutions devote attention and resources to fulfilling the mission, WPAs must negotiate not only the pressure to provide comparative evidence but also the challenges of teaching and assessing intrinsic educational ends.

Writing Assessment and Mission

Writing assessment scholarship has arrived at the consensus that effective, ethical assessment should be local, contextual, and even ecological (Gallagher, "Assess Locally"; Wardle and Roozen). By relying on local expertise and responding to local questions, assessment has the potential fulfill what composition scholars have identified as perhaps its most important aim—improving teaching and student learning. In *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment*, Brian Huot proposes five principles for writing assessment, all of which focus on the local and contextual: writing assessment should be site-based, locally-controlled, context-sensitive, rhetorically-based, and accessible (105). Contextual assessment requires understanding local values, and Bob Broad offers dynamic criteria mapping (DCM) a method for articulating these values. He defines DCM as a "streamlined form of qualitative inquiry that yields a detailed, complex, and useful portrait of any writing program's evaluative dynamics" and produces highly *valid* assessments (13). Local information gathered through DCM is valuable for developing scoring guidelines (although he does not advocate creating rubrics), teaching materials, and professional development materials. An essential feature of DCM is its local focus, and Broad cautions that results cannot be imported from one institution to another.

Scholarship in writing program administration further emphasizes institutional context and local values, as WPAs often conduct assessments that implicate a variety of institutional stakeholders. WPAs have used DCM and other qualitative methods to investigate place and context in assessment; their work aims to honor institutional goals by uncovering def-

initions of good writing across campus and finding connections between the writing program and other places within the institution (Adler-Kassner and Estrem; Kreth, Crawford, Taylor, and Brockman). Peggy O'Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot urge WPAs to give attention to "the values, beliefs, and perceptions that characterize a particular institution, department, or program" (11). Attending to institutional context should begin with these questions: "What defines the writing program? Where do program values and philosophies come from? Who are the students? Who are the faculty? How are program values supported—or complicated—by course goals, curricula, and instruction? What does all of this mean for writing assessment?" (60–61). Administrators may answer these questions through interviews and DCM, archival research, and observations, and they should answer these questions to support teaching and learning in a specific context.

Despite attention to the local and contextual, our scholarship has largely overlooked the role of institutional *mission*. It is nearly axiomatic that administrators must be ethnographers of their own programs, but mission is not yet an integral part of the research process. Two pieces of WPA scholarship focus on institutional mission, although neither fully address the assessment issues I confront in this essay. First, in *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*, William Macauley encourages writing center directors to discern possible connections between their assessable outcomes and the institutional mission statement—to conduct assessments that "make sense in the space between what the institution is saying, what it is doing, and the priorities and values of the writing center" (Schendel and Macauley 75). He views aligning assessment with the mission as a politically advantageous rhetorical move. Without compromising meaningful assessment or forcing a fit between the center and the mission, Macauley argues, writing center directors should identify prominent themes from the institutional mission statement and other institutional documents that "play well" with writing center outcomes (62). From this rhetorical perspective, he helpfully details the process of analyzing a mission statement and employing it for the best institutional effects. Yet he does not examine the places where missions may not play well with assessable outcomes or where missions challenge the possibility of meaningful or reliable assessment.

Second, Elizabeth VanderLei and Melody Pugh highlight the ways that institutional mission enters classrooms and writing programs. They claim that "students experience institutional mission most immediately in the classroom, through curriculum and pedagogy" (111). In this way, if the mission "emphasizes citizenship, for example, students could reasonably expect that writing courses will emphasize the skills a rhetor will need to

participate in the forums, hearings, and conversations that fuel a robust democracy" (111). Although VanderLei and Pugh urge WPAs to consider institutional mission "especially in this historical moment of intense attention to outcomes and assessment" (105), their discussion does not extend to assessment. Fostering citizenship raises the question of how to assess citizenship: how do we demonstrate that students are becoming better or more engaged citizens? And more broadly, how do we assess other qualities emphasized in institutional missions? It is conceivable that WPAs at mission-driven institutions will find strategies to fulfill multiple aims: they may design locally meaningful assessment programs, align those programs with the institutional mission, and meet the expectations of accrediting bodies. At the same time, they must contend with the way that the intrinsic ends of education may be at odds with comparative evidence of instrumental ends.

A Heuristic for Writing Program Design and Assessment

I have argued in this essay first that accreditation asks WPAs to be attentive to institutional mission, and second, that scholarship on writing assessment does not address mission in ways that are sufficient to guide writing faculty and administrators at mission-driven institutions. Regardless of particular institutional missions, accreditation and general education assessment draw attention to writing, written communication, and often the writing program. For example, the VALUE rubrics from the Association of American Colleges and Universities are widely used to assess outcomes such as civic engagement, ethical reasoning, teamwork, and inquiry—yet they depend on writing. Students demonstrate civic engagement when they tailor "communication strategies to effectively express, listen, and adapt to others to establish relationships to further civic action" and provide "reflective insights or analysis about the aims and accomplishments of [their] actions." They demonstrate ethical reasoning by stating "a position and… the objections to, assumptions and implications of and can reasonably defend against…different ethical perspectives/concepts" ("Liberal Education"). General education assessment regularly requires written artifacts, and the majority of VALUE outcomes are most readily assessed through written communication.

Accreditation and institutional assessment further draw attention to WPAs as campus leaders. Faculty from multiple disciplines—who may have little knowledge about writing pedagogy or writing assessment—are charged with assessing writing. WPAs can provide needed leadership, and in this way, accreditation and general education assessment open the opportunity to initiate conversations across campus about writing and rhetoric.

They open the opportunity to shift the real and symbolic responsibility for teaching writing beyond the writing program. Liberal education and general education require writing across the curriculum (even in the absence of an official program), and the VALUE rubrics underscore this reality in the context of high stakes assessment.

Despite its focus on comparative evidence, assessment motivated by accreditation is highly contextual because institutional missions are widely varied and always locally enacted. WPAs at mission-driven institutions negotiate not only the realities I describe above but also missions that bring writing in contact with goals for personal, ethical, and even spiritual development. To this end, I offer a heuristic for WPAs designing program-level assessments that answer local questions and serve larger institutional purposes. A question we must ask in accreditation is how well students are fulfilling institutional outcomes, yet this heuristic affirms program assessment as a formative process toward program development. The questions I pose do not advocate particular measures or methods, and they use the vocabulary of educational measurement and literacy. They are ultimately intended to guide WPAs through the pragmatic and ethical challenges associated with fostering and assessing the personal, ethical, and intrinsic elements of the educational experience.

Curriculum Design

Accreditation regularly involves outcomes assessment, where we define outcomes and measure how well students are meeting them. Information drawn from this process ideally guides revisions to curriculum, pedagogy, and the outcomes themselves. In his critique of outcomes assessment, Chris Gallagher notes that outcomes have value: "they give teachers and students targets to shoot for. They provide focus, stability, clarity, and transparency…they allow us to measure and document students' performances vis-à-vis expressed goals" ("The Trouble with Outcomes" 44). However, this way of thinking limits the opportunity to think about the means, consequences, and intrinsic ends of education (Gallagher, "The Trouble" 42–9). It is my argument that operationalizing institutional missions as outcomes—or worse, standards—is similarly limiting. Just as framing habits of mind as outcomes weakens their value as intellectual processes and practices (Johnson 534–6), framing elements of an institutional mission as outcomes diminishes the sense of *mission*—the personal and intrinsic aims. Although envisioning institutional mission or liberal education as a set of outcomes limits their broad nature and intrinsic value, WPAs at mission-driven institutions must be strategic about how mission enters the curricu-

lum. As VanderLei and Pugh note, when WPAs "are able to align the goals of the writing program to the institution's mission, they position the writing program to become a valued part of the university" (112). Because my focus is mission and assessment, I add another consideration to this point: WPAs should also explore the most productive ways for mission to enter the writing program curriculum in anticipation of institutional assessment.[3]

Writing program administrators may align outcomes with the institutional mission by considering where existing outcomes intersect with elements of the mission. Although outcomes are motivated by a variety of factors, including the student population, the courses offered, and the place of writing in the university curriculum, they also often stem from the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.[4] The statement includes outcomes such as "understand[ing] the relationships among language, knowledge, and power" and "learn[ing] to balance the advantages of relying on others with the responsibility of doing their part" (Council). These aims could align, for example, with missions that emphasize ethical behavior or creativity, and writing program outcomes that include writing for public audiences may be fruitfully aligned with missions that stress citizenship or other civic behaviors. WPAs can begin the process of aligning mission and curriculum with these questions:

- What are the existing writing program outcomes, and do any of them already clearly support the institutional mission?
- Which existing writing program outcomes might be revised or rearticulated so that they more clearly support the institutional mission?
- Does the writing program need to add outcomes where writing is explicitly used to foster some element of the institutional mission?
- Does the writing program need to add outcomes where the institutional mission is explicitly used to teach a writing skill or foster a rhetorical habit of mind?

Writing Pedagogy

Writing program outcomes influence pedagogy, and WPAs should consider how claiming particular elements of the institutional mission could be pedagogically disadvantageous. Claiming some elements may expand writing program outcomes beyond what can reasonably be accomplished, negatively influencing learning and drawing negative attention to the program if it cannot meet these outcomes. For example, many institutional missions emphasize service and aim to foster certain attitudes toward service. Although service learning has been established as a beneficial component of composition courses, framing engaged or compassionate service as a writ-

ing program outcome could be problematic. Writing faculty and administrators may decide that service learning is not beneficial for all students, or they may decide that fostering attitudes toward service is too far removed from central writing program outcomes.

While WPAs must be intentional about aligning program outcomes with the institutional mission, I also believe that they should consider how pedagogy helps preserve elements of the mission as practices and/or processes—how they help preserve the *spirit* of the mission. Institutions that emphasize developing a spiritual life do not tell students a spiritual life is a single achievement, simply acquired as a skill. In the same way, missions focused on ethical behavior want students to understand ethical behavior as not only specific actions but also a general orientation. Elements of the mission may ultimately be framed as outcomes, but WPAs can resist the idea that they should be systematized or standardized. After considering how mission aligns with program outcomes, WPAs can ask questions about practices and pedagogy:

- Which elements of the institutional mission would be disadvantageously connected with writing or located in the writing program? Which elements are far removed from writing and are things for which the writing program cannot be be responsible?
- Is the institutional mission or the institutional tradition associated with a pedagogical orientation or specific pedagogical activities?
- How can writing courses and assignments offer students the opportunity to foster particular habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews?
- How can writing pedagogy emphasize that habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews are part of the rhetorical process as well as the product?

Assessment Method

Administrators choose from a variety of program assessment methods: locally developed surveys or national surveys; interviews of students and instructors; analysis of teaching materials and course syllabi; teaching evaluations; student writing in the form of timed writing prompts, course assignments, or portfolios; and outside consultant reviews (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 123). Accreditation emphasizes direct evidence of student learning, so my focus is direct assessment of student writing. Other program assessment methods certainly complement this work, especially when they answer local questions. Interviews with students and instructors, questions on course evaluations, and analysis of course materials will elicit valuable

information about how well the writing program aligns with the institutional mission.

Assessment scholarship agrees that direct writing assessment should be rhetorical, contextual, accessible, and theoretically consistent—located in the goals and activities of writing courses (O'Neill, Moore, and Huot 57). When student writing is used in program assessment, O'Neill, Moore, and Huot explain, it "should not only be written for a particular rhetorical purpose and audience but should be embedded within the course, as a regular assignment—not required as an extra assignment for external evaluation purposes" (123). Effective assessment design begins as effective assignment design, motivated by a rhetorical purpose rather than a particular "reporting mode" (134). William Condon argues that program assessment prompts can be constructed such that they are useful and meaningful to students; these "generative prompts" produce "writing that matters, first, to the test-takers, then to their institutions" (152). Impromptu writing assignments as the one Condon describes, course assignments, and portfolios all enable writing programs to produce direct evidence of student learning while also providing students with a meaningful rhetorical purpose.

Designing writing assignments aligned with the institutional mission requires WPAs to consider how to construct a meaningful rhetorical purpose and how to elicit the habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldview associated with the mission. Using the VALUE or similar rubrics to assess ethical reasoning or civic engagement still requires a decision about how to elicit these attributes. Just as a random piece of student writing may not reflect specific outcomes (and thus be useful for program assessment), not all student writing helps us determine if students understand, for example, the ethics of language use or the relationship between writing and power. To the extent that specific habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews can be revealed or demonstrated in writing—and for the sake of assessment we may need to grant they can—WPAs should ask these questions about assignment design:

- What rhetorical tasks do we already assign in the writing course(s) that may also ask students to engage elements of the institutional mission?
- What elements of the institutional mission could offer context or content for particular rhetorical tasks?
- What habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews are we asking students to develop, and which rhetorical tasks will highlight them?
- Does using reflective writing along with another rhetorical task help us discern if students are developing certain habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews?

Reliability and Community

Assessment scholarship debates the nature and importance of reliability, yet its importance in accreditation is clear: producing comparative evidence requires WPAs to consider reliability within and across student populations. Jay Parkes suggests that reliability is an argument appealing to the values of various stakeholders, such that values should direct methodological choices (5–6). In the context of accreditation, values such as consistency and accuracy matter greatly. Habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews present challenges to reliability beyond the standard reliability challenges inherent in writing assessment. Writing ability—by its contextual, complex nature—is often at odds with reliability, focus, and consistency; habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews are not only contextual and complex but also shifting and personal.

Habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews first have a shifting, ephemeral nature that challenges reliable assessment. Multiple choice grammar tests are considered a reliable (though not valid) measure of writing ability because they divide writing ability into discrete, objective parts. Reliable tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment measure broad intellectual skills such as critical thinking through discrete tasks. Mission-driven institutions, however, have aims that are neither discrete nor objective: liberal arts institutions see their missions continuing into lifelong learning, and religious institutions see religious faith as a lived experience. Beyond the challenge of making habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews stable and discrete, they are also highly contextual. Reliability privileges measures that deliver consistent results, but different situations or assignments may produce divergent information about habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews. After designing a rhetorical task that elicits perspectives on social justice, for example, a WPA should consider how this commitment is actually manifested. Ethical behavior is by definition contextual, and people committed to ethical behavior disagree about right and wrong. Habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews are shifting and contextual, and any number of rhetorical tasks may not elicit consistent responses from the same student or students across the program.

Reliability further values consistency and fairness from the people involved in assessment—from the community of teachers, administrators, and readers. Consistent judgment from one or more readers requires agreement on what is being measured. Habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews are not easily defined, and at mission-driven institutions, these attributes are defined by the community. Discussing the mission across campus reveals power dynamics that shape how the mission is defined,

and it reveals varied interpretations of official mission documents (Vander-Lei and Pugh 109–13). In the same way, those involved in assessment will hold varying definitions of ethical behavior, social justice, and even religious maturity. WPAs who lead assessment programs face the challenge of encouraging multiple perspectives and promoting consistent judgments—asking readers to agree on a definition, keeping that definition stable while accounting for the multiplicity of ways it is manifested, and deciding how to respond when students offer disconcerting information. When deciding how to assess writing that offers information about how well students are fulfilling the mission, WPAs should consider these questions about reliability and community:

- What kind of rhetorical task is narrow enough to elicit evidence about how well students are fulfilling specific elements of the institutional mission but broad enough to capture the way that habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews exist?
- What kind of rhetorical task is specific enough to elicit a meaningful response but broad enough to provide all students with avenues through which to engage the issue?
- Would some form of Dynamic Criteria Mapping (Broad) help to discern how people within the writing program and across the university understand the mission as it relates to learning outcomes?
- What level or type of reader/interrater reliability is persuasive in this context, and to what extent should the community agree on the meaning of elements of the institutional mission and its habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews?

Validity and Ethics

Mission-driven institutions educate and develop persons. Assessing the mission requires making judgments about habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews—if not judgments about the persons who hold them. Making these judgments seems easiest and even most ethical when attributes are evident in a product; as the VALUE rubrics suggest, general education assessment relies on student products, samples, or artifacts. In writing programs at mission-driven institutions, this gap between product and person raises validity issues. WPAs should first contend with this validity question: are we interested in how well students *reveal/demonstrate* specific habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews in their writing, or are we interested in the extent to which students actually *hold* these things? A basic definition of validity—if the assessment measures what it intends to measure—highlights this problem. Rather than assessing what we assume

are authentic personal elements, the assessment may measure and actually encourage mere performance.

Institutional assessment and general education assessment regularly depend on student writing, and a program at Washington State University offers an example of a rhetorical task that could elicit mere performance. Condon describes a prompt that yields institutional data by asking students to write an essay about how specific courses helped them accomplish two of the six university-wide student learning outcomes (145). Asking students about personal/educational experiences is, according to Condon, a valid assessment because it calls upon an experience that "we *know* they all share, and invit[es] them to provide responses that range as broadly as that experience allows" (145). The assessment is valid with regard to the content of the rhetorical task, certainly, but it may produce other validity concerns. Asking questions about this kind of intellectual development encourages students to demonstrate their proficiency in critical thinking and communication, yet it may also encourage performance in the interest of a higher score.

Validity and ethics intersect when assessing institutional missions, raising a second question for WPAs: is reflective writing or self-assessment a valid and ethical way to assess habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews? Rather than looking at a piece of writing to determine if students understand, for example, the relationship between power and language, we might ask students to reflect on their understanding of this issue. Beyond the validity question about the difference between *holding* a worldview and *reflecting* on one, ethical issues remain when assessment hinges on reflective writing. Ellen Schendel and Peggy O'Neill argue that self-assessment "does not allow much room for resistance, for the gaze stretches far—and is, in this case, internalized, becoming a means by which students self-regulate, self-discipline" (207). In the same way, Susan Latta and Janice Lauer note that self-assessment asks students to "internalize the strictures and guidelines of a system that may be discriminatory" (32). They also highlight possibilities for critique through reflection and self-assessment: "Student self-assessment, therefore, could provide students with the opportunity to clarify for themselves the differences between their understandings of academic expectations with their own, an opportunity for students to genuinely engage with the academic institution on their own terms and to offer them a possible forum for critique" (30). When students are asked to reflect on their learning in the way that Condon describes, they may benefit not only from analyzing their own development but also from critiquing institutional expectations.

When writing scholarship explores these validity questions and ethical issues, it primarily addresses writing ability or more instrumental intel-

lectual skills. But the ethical stakes are higher when students are asked to reflect on personal attributes: habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews. The gaze of assessment stretches beyond intellectual skills, and students are perhaps more inhibited from using self-assessment as a site of critique. Asking students to report on their habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews—even in the context of a mission that encourages particular attributes—and using this information for the purpose of institutional assessment certainly raises questions about the ethics and validity of such self-assessment. When deciding how to assess writing that gathers information about how well students are fulfilling the mission, WPAs should consider these questions about validity and ethics:

- Should the assessment gather information about how well students *reveal* or *demonstrate* in their writing that they have developed particular habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews? Or should the assessment gather information about the extent to which students actually *hold* particular habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews?
- How will writing courses teach students to *reveal* or *demonstrate* their habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews in writing? Or how will writing courses teach students to *reflect* on their habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews in writing?
- How will readers assess responses where students claim to have developed particular habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews but where their claims seem inaccurate or disingenuous?
- Should rhetorical tasks be designed to address the problem of mere performance by encouraging honest and authentic responses?
- Should rhetorical tasks allow room for institutional or personal critique, and how will readers assess responses that are critical of institutional values?

Assessment Consequences

Writing assessment ultimately produces results for various audiences and consequences for students, teachers, administrators, and even the institution. Huot argues in *(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment* that validity in writing assessment extends beyond design into the way the assessment is used; validity "scrutinizes the decisions that are based on a test—how they impact students, teachers and educational programs" (178). The consequences of an assessment should be appropriately related to the purpose of the assessment, and they should, Huot claims, primarily support teaching and learning. When institutions assess how well students are fulfilling the

mission, their purpose extends beyond academic achievement; therefore, the way assessment results are used becomes significant on a different level. WPAs conducting program assessment in this context must decide if the habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews students reveal should influence their grades—or should influence more high stakes decisions such as passing the course or fulfilling a graduation requirement. And because program assessment guides administrative work, WPAs must decide if the assessment process will influence personnel or curricular decisions.

While writing program assessment is not always high stakes and may serve only program development, institutional assessment often has high stakes including accreditation. WPAs who design program assessments that serve these larger institutional purposes finally need to explore the consequences of writing program assessment for program activities, identity, and status. If the writing program cannot demonstrate it successfully fosters particular habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews, WPAs may initiate further research or faculty development efforts focused on the mission. They may also appeal to values such as validity, reliability, consistency, or ethics that elements of the mission should not be framed as writing outcomes specifically or educational outcomes generally. If the writing program demonstrates success, WPAs should understand how they will be held responsible for elements of the institutional mission and how they may be called to campus leadership. When weighing the consequences of program assessment implicated in larger institutional purposes, WPAs should consider these questions:

- What effect will the assessment have on writing students directly, and what are the consequences for successfully or unsuccessfully demonstrating, revealing, holding, or reflecting on particular habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews?
- Are the consequences ethical and appropriately related to the purpose of the assessment?
- What effect will the assessment have within the writing program in terms of curriculum and faculty development?
- What effect will the assessment have on the writing program in terms of institutional status and institutional responsibility?

Engaging the Mission

Writing program administrators may question their understanding of validity, curriculum design, ethics, and reliability when assessment and mission intersect. The heuristic I have offered brings these questions to the forefront, highlighting the ways that comparative evidence competes with

the ideals of an institutional mission and the instrumental ends of higher education compete with the intrinsic ends. It is my hope WPAs will use the heuristic in ways that serve their programs and engage their institutional missions, and I do not want to detract from this process of inquiry by outlining sample assessment schemes. I will instead conclude by addressing a question implicit in the heuristic: although our assessments are necessarily incomplete or indirect, what is valuable about including habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews in writing program assessment?

Aligning writing program assessment with the institutional mission exposes a difficult reality: using writing to assess intrinsic elements of the educational experience is inescapably indirect. If the gaze of our assessment includes persons, this gaze is veiled by writing as a technology; if assessments are designed for students to enact (rather than simply describe or reflect upon) qualities associated with the mission, we see these qualities only through written products. For example, an assessment may ask students to enact ethical reasoning by making an argument about an ethical, societal, or moral issue. Students who successfully enact ethical reasoning might explore the complexities of the issue and examine the implications of their argument. However, students who demonstrate deep engagement with the ethical complexity of the issue may struggle to focus their argument, or they may not exercise control over all their ideas. They may clearly enact intrinsic elements that are obscured by instrumental elements that WPAs cannot simply ignore.[5] Even when intrinsic qualities are enacted in a written product, writing teachers and administrators are permitted only an indirect or veiled gaze.

Accreditation is designed for consumers to see educational institutions clearly, and WPAs in particular are challenged to produce evidence of qualities that are not readily discernable. As I suggested in the heuristic, WPAs have several options for assessing habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and values. They could decide to evaluate intrinsic elements (such as ethical reasoning, in the example above) and instrumental elements separately, producing distinct judgments about the writing and the person. They could also rely on reflective writing, understanding that students are describing rather than enacting particular qualities. Representing the results to an external audience is ultimately a rhetorical act, but few options are fully satisfying. In "Fighting Number with Number," Richard Haswell admonishes writing faculty and WPAs to provide numerical evidence for its rhetorical value—to anticipate what external agencies expect and value (413–17). Yet representing intrinsic ends in hard, numerical terms seems to violate the spirit of these educational experiences: can we comfortably claim that eighty percent of students are *competent* at ethical reasoning (because they

scored four on a six point scale) or that fifty percent have *adequate* spiritual lives? WPAs could choose not to provide comparative evidence of these intrinsic qualities, but doing so risks irrelevance and lost resources.

The ethical and pragmatic challenges of assessing habits of mind, attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews often seem to outweigh any possible benefits. It is nonetheless my belief that undertaking the challenging project of mission-oriented assessment realizes pedagogical benefits. Including intrinsic ends in writing assessment helps students engage the institutional mission, first because responsible programs will align teaching, learning, and assessment by integrating these intrinsic ends and experiences in the curriculum. And further, simply performing the assessment activity—such as reflecting on a spiritual practice or practicing ethical reasoning—offers students the opportunity to explore and enact certain qualities. Condon notes in his work on general education assessment that asking students to "reflect on a complex set of experiences and to relate those experiences to a complex set of goals" helps them "produce writing that is, first, useful to themselves" (152). I would add that this assessment activity is valuable because it constructs a rhetorical situation in which students can actually enact goals such as critical and creative thinking, information literacy, and communication (153–54). When WPAs ask students to do more than demonstrate instrumental skills, they reinforce the importance of intrinsic ends and provide rhetorical spaces for students to grow and demonstrate growth in personal, moral, intellectual, and ethical terms.

Including intrinsic aims in writing program assessment also realizes institutional benefits for writing and writing programs. Another difficult reality in American education becomes advantageous for writing programs when mission and assessment intersect: only those things that are assessed receive resources and attention. The educational system focused on instrumental skills may obscure intrinsic educational ends, but those things associated with the institutional mission will remain consequential because they must be assessed. Aligning a writing program with the mission certainly makes an argument for relevance, but writing programs become more than simply relevant when the institutional mission encompasses values inherent in our discipline. Composition studies already upholds values present in many institutional missions: the humanist tradition, civic engagement, and habits of mind outlined in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* such as creativity, responsibility, engagement, and curiosity (Council 4). These values reflect many of our most deeply held reasons for teaching writing; in the context of accreditation and institutional assessment, they highlight how writing programs perform vital institutional work.

Engaging the project of mission-oriented assessment is finally a call to think more deeply about context in writing assessment and writing program administration. When WPAs discuss institutional context, we often focus on internal machinations and politics that must be negotiated: the pressures that students, teachers and staff, other programs, administrative structures, and funding put our programs. Shifting this discussion to mission gives WPAs a fuller way to think about what we and our institutions do in the world. Missions define what institutions offer to society and the world, and as I have argued in this essay, writing programs are currently challenged to align their work with the mission and articulate what they offer to society—to articulate what it means to successfully foster habits of mind, ethical communicative practices, and broad intellectual growth. By understanding what our programs and institutions aim to do in the world, we begin to theorize and perform the administrative work that represents and fulfills these missions.

$$\boxed{\begin{array}{c|c} W & P \\ \hline \rotatebox{20}{\text{✎}} & A \end{array}}$$

Notes

1. I use the term *intrinsic* in contrast with *instrumental*. In *Academe*, Howard Brody argues that "the humanities have both instrumental and intrinsic value… The wrong sorts of evaluation tools focus solely on the instrumental value and ignore the intrinsic value, threatening the future of the humanities in higher education." Intrinsic educational elements—those described by Gallagher in "The Trouble with Outcomes," Catherine Chaput, and the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*—are part of the rhetorical tradition and many college writing programs. The testing industry problematically describes these intrinsic elements as "soft skills" or "noncognitive skills" (Dwyer, Millett, and Payne 14).

2. Two types of accreditation exist: institutional accreditation and specialized accreditation. Entire colleges or universities are given institutional accreditation by one of six regional agencies; specific programs and/or institutions such as medical schools, rabbinical schools, and performing arts schools are given specialized accreditation by a different group of specialized accrediting agencies.

3. In this essay, I am exploring the question of how to demonstrate that students are meeting outcomes aligned with the institutional mission or fulfilling elements of the mission. I do not consider what is certainly the far more complex issue of demonstrating student *growth* in these areas.

4. In Chapter 4 of *Building Writing Center Assessments that Matter*, Ellen Schendel provides an excellent discussion of how to adapt writing center outcomes

from the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition and the LEAP initiative from the American Association of Colleges and Universities. WPAs developing outcomes related to the liberal arts in particular will certainly benefit from consulting this chapter.

5. I am implying a dichotomy between content and form (or intrinsic and instrumental) in this point. Although it is not my intention to separate these elements of writing, I would argue that our concerns about writing do exist on a continuum from instrumental (issues of usage and form) to intrinsic (issues of intellectual complexity and creativity). Determining the relative weight of these elements is a challenge in any writing assessment.

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