

Assessment 101: An Introduction to Assessing Student Learning for Theological Educators

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“Assessment” has been a central focus in higher education for more than twenty years. Seminaries are expected to do assessment since the 1996 adoption of the “new” ATS Standards of Accreditation. Most schools are aware that assessment is required, but many faculty are unclear what assessment is, how to do it, or why. Despite the extensive literature on assessment and some excellent articles in the ATS journal *Theological Education*,¹ there is not a simple introduction to the topic that deans and assessment coordinators can share with their faculties to create a common understanding and vocabulary. This paper seeks to fill this need. It also seeks to make the case that assessment is not an externally imposed distraction, but a valuable and essential strategy for fulfilling our calling as theological educators.

Assessment: What and Why

What Is “Assessment”?

The term “assessment” is used in a confusing variety of ways. It may refer to evaluating applicants for admission, documenting students’ learning disabilities, or student course evaluations. In theological education, it may also refer to evaluating students’ fitness for ministry.

In the present context, “assessment” refers to evaluation of effectiveness in light of intended and actual results or outcomes. We assess the effectiveness of the admissions office by whether it successfully recruits a sufficient number of qualified students. We assess the effectiveness of the placement office by tracking how many graduating students get jobs. We assess the effectiveness of the development office by whether it raises the necessary funds to support the school. We assess the effectiveness of instructional programs by examining whether students learn what they need or are supposed to know. When we speak of “assessment” in this context, then, we are speaking of evaluating institutions or programs in terms of the extent to which they do (or do not) meet their stated goals.

This understanding of assessment is present in the 1996 ATS Standards of Accreditation. Note the use of “assessment” in relation to “performance” (3) in light of stated “goals or outcomes” (1).

1.2.2 Evaluation is a critical element in support of integrity in educational efforts, institutional renewal, and individual professional development. Evaluation is a process that includes: (1) the *identification of desired goals or outcomes* for an educational program, or institutional service, or personnel performance; (2) *a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information* related to the desired goals; (3) *the assessment of the performance* of the program, service, or person based on this information; and (4) *the establishment of revised goals or activities based on the assessment*. Institutions shall develop and implement ongoing evaluation procedures for employees, students, educational programs, and institutional activities. [italics mine]

ATS thus requires that schools assess (evaluate in terms of outcomes) every area of institutional activity.

Since a school’s most important institutional activity is education, the centerpiece of a school’s program of institutional assessment will be assessment of the school’s *educational* programs. The intended result of those programs is that students learn. “Assessment” is therefore often shorthand for “assessing student learning.” In this narrower sense, “assessment” is a process of establishing desired student learning outcomes, examining the extent to which students actually achieve these in our classes and degree programs, and using what we learn to make improvements. As theological school faculty develop programs for institutional assessment, they will be most concerned with and involved in the

¹ See especially 35:1 (1998), 39:1 and 39:2 (2003).

assessment of student learning.² This paper will therefore focus on assessing the effectiveness of a school's educational programs and "assessment" will be used to refer to assessment of student learning.

Assessing Student Learning

We are talking, then, about assessing student learning for the sake of improving our schools' educational programs. This requires us to think about our task in new ways.

Assessing student learning means ***focusing on what students learn, rather than what faculty do in class***. It is natural for faculty to focus on our role in the educational process. Course objectives are often expressed in terms of what faculty will do during a course: we "survey" a field of study, "expose" students to points of view, and "provide opportunity for reflection." Teaching, however, is not the same as learning, even if the two are closely related. Learning outcomes describe what *students* do as a result of *our* teaching. Learning is affected by other factors: students' background, interest, work schedules, and access to course materials—even by the temperature in the classroom. Instructional methods that are effective in one course or with one group of students may be ineffective in other contexts. A focus on student learning will evaluate the impact of the whole learning environment on students, as well as help determine the most effective ways to teach our particular students within that environment.

Assessing student learning means ***evaluating student learning in degree programs, not just individual courses***.³ Many faculty closely attend to the extent that their students master the objectives of their individual courses, but they often lack a clear understanding how their courses contribute to the goals of the curriculum as a whole. This is not necessarily their fault. Many schools do not have clearly articulated learning outcomes. Others have never—or have not recently—looked at the curriculum as a whole and sought to determine what particular contributions each course should make, or whether the curriculum as a whole effectively addresses all the intended outcomes.

Assessing student learning leads to ***basing educational decisions on data***.⁴ Often we unconsciously teach simply in the same way we were taught, choose topics that are commonly discussed in our field, and adjust the curriculum to strengthen training in areas in which we or some of our recent graduates may have been ill-equipped. The problem is that we have seldom gathered any real data to know whether these efforts are really necessary or effective. Assessment means we will gather and rely on data that will support good educational decisions and result in improved student learning.

Assessing student learning requires ***developing a culture of assessment***. Data-driven educational decision-making must become a consistent part of the way that we understand and go about our task. One dean decreed that he would entertain no proposals for new or revised courses, or new or revised degree programs, that did not include data supporting the change.⁵ Accreditation teams now look for evidence that schools are consistently making educational decisions based on assessment data. Schools must have

² Although faculty should be involved in assessing the effectiveness of a school's admissions program, library, technology resources and student services, other officers in the school will be probably be primarily responsible for assessing the effectiveness of such areas, as well as fundraising, finances, and facilities. On assessing institutional effectiveness generally, see the author's "Assessment 102: In Introduction to Assessing Institutional Effectiveness for Theological School Administrators," www.theologicaleducation.com (forthcoming).

³ It remains important for faculty to assess student learning within courses. The very helpful literature on classroom assessment techniques can help faculty improve student learning on the level of the individual course. See especially, Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993). Institutions, however, must also ask larger questions about the extent to which student learning outcomes are achieved in programs as a whole.

⁴ "Data" is not limited to results of objective testing. Data can be qualitative as well as quantitative and can include subjective judgments (if documented). See "Identify Instruments and Measures" below.

⁵ Assessment challenges deans and presidents, as well. Schools will make assessment part of their culture to the extent that the school's senior leadership bases major decisions on assessment data.

an ongoing process for assessment and improvement that insures that the school will continue to make sound educational decisions between ten-year accreditation visits.

Finally, assessing student learning requires **documenting assessment**, both the process and the result. One assessment maxim says that “if it isn’t written down, it didn’t happen.” Assessment is like high school algebra: you don’t get credit (even for a good answer) unless you show your work. We must be able to *demonstrate* (i.e., document), not only to accrediting agencies, but also to our various constituencies, that that we have and use a comprehensive, continuous, data-driven process to assess and improve student learning in each of our degree programs and other educational activities.

It may be helpful to note some things that assessment is *not* really about. The purpose is not to evaluate faculty performance (individually or collectively), but to improve student learning.⁶ It is not about assigning fault or blame, but about using data to improve student learning. It does not focus on evaluating individual courses, but entire programs of study (co-curricular as well as curricular). It does not publicize data on individual students, but on student populations as a whole.⁷ It does not seek to dumb down schools’ aspirations to things that can easily be counted, but calls us to do our best in evaluating student progress in the things that really matter, even if doing so is difficult or inexact. It does not ask that we take on additional and extraneous responsibilities, but that we work smarter and better—for our students, for Christ, and for his Church.

A Different Way of Thinking

Assessment requires us to think differently. Educators often think more in terms of process and resources than results. Assessment does not ignore these factors, but insists that in the end we must take a hard look at what difference it all makes. This means that it is not enough to publish the topics covered in the curriculum—we have to find out what students actually learn. It is not sufficient to show that an institution has a good-sized library—we must demonstrate that students actually locate and use appropriate resources in preparing assignments. It is no longer sufficient to show that faculty conduct research—we must identify specifically how this research has enhanced student learning. It is not enough to provide demographic data showing that we have a diverse student body—we must demonstrate that students learn to understand and work effectively together with people of other backgrounds and cultures.

It is important to recognize how sweeping and pervasive this change is. In developing its new *Criteria for Accreditation* several years ago, the Higher Learning Commission (one of the six regional accrediting bodies), reconceived the nature of higher education, by recasting the classic activities of higher education—teaching, research, and service—in outcomes language of learning, discovery and acquisition of knowledge, and engagement.⁸ This dramatically new paradigm arises from the conviction that teaching, research and service are not ends in themselves, but processes should lead to learning, discovery, and engagement with the communities of which our schools are a part.

Theological educators may feel uneasy. This emphasis on results sounds alarmingly pragmatic or utilitarian. Don’t (for example) prayer and meditation have value, even if they don’t produce tangible “results”? Yes and no. The outcomes may typically be difficult to quantify, but we do expect something to happen. Prayer and meditation are means of spiritual formation. If a student consistently prays but remains spiritually stunted, something is wrong.⁹

⁶ If students consistently perform poorly in a particular discipline, the fault could curriculum, resources, student preparation—or poor faculty performance. More investigation would be required.

⁷ Schools may evaluate individual students’ progress, but results will only be reported in the aggregate.

⁸ <http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org>.

⁹ These practices are not only, or even primarily, of value to the one who practices them. In doing these things we seek to honor God with our dependence and worship—a real outcome, if one difficult to assess.

The real issue is not, then, concern with outcomes, but with the outcomes we choose to assess. This means that we must resist the temptation to try to do assessment on the cheap and aim only for outcomes that are easily quantifiable. We must look at those stirring claims in our catalogs about the excellence of our graduates and their preparation for ministry—the things we say really matter—and find ways to demonstrate the extent to which these claims are true. Assessment of personal, spiritual or ministerial formation may not be easy, but it can be done. If it helps us train students better, it will be more than worth the effort.

Assessment and Accreditation

If we are honest, we have to admit that the main reason assessment is on our agenda is that the agencies that accredit our institutions have put it there. These requirements have arisen due to demands for greater accountability from the public, business leaders, and government officials. The federal government now requires accrediting agencies to give substantial attention to assessment. As a result, assessment of both educational and institutional effectiveness has been written into the accrediting standards of every accrediting body, including the 1996 ATS Standards of Accreditation.

This marks a change in the role of accreditation. Accrediting agencies once evaluated schools largely in terms of resources, e.g., the number of books in the library or the number of faculty with appropriate terminal degrees. Although resources remained important, ATS also began to evaluate the degree to which degree programs conformed to accepted standards (e.g., requirements, duration). Now ATS, with all other accrediting bodies, must evaluate the extent to which schools demonstrate that they are effectively meeting their educational and institutional goals.¹⁰

Some may hope that assessment is a fad that will soon go away. Most observers believe it is not and that it will not. Assessment has not replaced attention to institutional resources (e.g., we still look at the size of the library and the number of faculty with terminal degrees). Earlier concerns remain even as the emphasis on assessment has been added. Now that assessment has been incorporated into accreditation standards, it is an essential part of institutional self-study and reaffirmation of accreditation.

There is a silver lining in all this: ongoing assessment should make the ten-year self-study much simpler. If assessment and improvement are continuous, the self-study will become more of an analysis of assessment findings since the last self-study with a “meta-assessment” of the institution’s process of assessment and improvement. While faculty will still be involved in assessing student learning, this summary report and meta-assessment may require much less intensive faculty involvement.

Why Assessment?

There are more important reasons to take assessment seriously. Here are five.

- Assessment is essential to **good teaching**. Good teachers pay careful attention to what their students are learning—and what they aren’t—and make adjustments to insure that their students “get it.” Assessment is about gathering data that will help us improve student learning and, consequently, students’ ministries after graduation.
- Assessment is a matter of **scholarship**. Assessment requires us to be as thoughtful and rigorous—as scholarly—about our work as educators as we are about research in our academic fields. It means gathering critical data about the impact of our institutions on students and basing program decisions on this data to serve students better.
- Assessment is essential to our **mission**. We want our students to succeed in ministry (however differently we define “success”). One important ministry skill is the ability to be reflective and self-

¹⁰ “An Introduction to Accreditation by The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada,” in *Handbook of Accreditation: Section One* (Pittsburgh: Association of Theological Schools, n.d.), 2–3.

critical, to take stock of what we are doing and make adjustments to make ministry more effective. If we name it, and do it openly and well, our schools' practice of assessment can model for students the humility of reflective ministry that seeks continually to be increasingly faithful to its calling.

- Assessment is about pursuing *excellence*. We all grieve when our graduates struggle or fail in ministry. Assessment is about using all the tools at our disposal to train our students well, about pursuing excellence in training students for ministry.
- Assessment is a matter of *stewardship*. It arises out of our accountability to God and his people. We owe God our best. We owe God's people, who provide their gifts and their prayers to enable us to prepare their future leaders, nothing less. Doing our best requires that looking systematically at what we are accomplishing and think together as a school about how we may do it better.¹¹

While accreditation may have put assessment on our agenda, assessment is not an alien intrusion into our work: good teaching, scholarship, our mission, our commitment to excellence, and our responsibility to Christ and his church require it of us.¹²

Assessment Challenges Assumptions

As every scholar knows, the facts may be surprising. The assessment director at one university collected copies of every assignment completed by a random sample of students throughout their time in the school ("portfolio assessment" is one way of documenting student achievement). Although the faculty believed "no one requires writing any more," the portfolios showed that a great many faculty required students to write. The same faculty assumed that exams in lower-level courses were typically objective and that exams in upper-level courses typically required evidence of higher order thinking—the portfolios showed that just the opposite was true.

Theological schools may also find surprises. When asked to evaluate the extent to which the Doctor of Ministry program had fulfilled its objectives, graduating students in one program indicated that the program's greatest contribution had not been to their ministry skills, but to their spiritual formation. Members of one faculty were impressed by thoughtful exegesis in papers students submitted in biblical studies courses, but found the exegesis in senior sermon manuscripts consistently shallow. (A homiletics professor commented, "I could have told them that!" Whether they would have believed him if they had not seen it for themselves is another question.)

Findings like these can be helpful when what we "know" about our institutions is not correct (e.g., how much writing we require of students). Other times, information is available (e.g., the homiletics professor's evaluation of exegesis in sermons), but there is not a mechanism communicating it to others who need to know (e.g., the biblical studies faculty). Once schools have good information and it is distributed appropriately, these findings can provide rich opportunities for faculty discussion about educational outcomes and ways to improve what students actually learn.

What About the Intangibles?

One of the most significant concerns that theological educators have about assessment is the intangible outcomes of theological education. Many fear that assessment will result in dumbing down, in reducing the values of theological education to unimportant things that can be numbered and counted. We can give an objective test on Bible knowledge or church history, but how can we assess exegetical

¹¹ Another important reason to do assessment is to help students monitor and improve their own learning. In this paper, however, we are focusing on assessment for the purpose of improving instructional programs.

¹² For a helpful and significant treatment of the importance of assessment in theological education, see Daniel O. Aleshire, "The Character and Assessment of Learning for Religious Vocation: M.Div. Education and Numbering the Levites." *Theological Education*, 39, 1 (2003), 1–15.

sensitivity, theological maturity, Christlikeness, compassion, integrity, or leadership? Can we really assess unmeasurable, intangible things, like these?

The answer is that of course we can. We do it all the time. Every time we are asked for a recommendation on a student or graduate for a ministry position, we comment on qualities like maturity, character and leadership. In addition, whether we like it or not, the church evaluates our graduates' perceived Christlikeness, interpersonal skills and integrity, as well. We may have difficulty drafting an exhaustive definition of these qualities, but as Justice Potter Stewart famously said about obscenity, we know them when we see them. We may not be able to assess these as precisely as we assess knowledge of Greek paradigms, but they can still be assessed.¹³

One key is to look for evidence of these important and less tangible qualities in observable behaviors. The New Testament repeatedly insists that spiritual realities can be behaviorally assessed: "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15); "by their fruit you will recognize them (Matthew 7:16); "show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do" (Jas 2:18). The first letter of John can be read as a study in discerning the reality of claims to spiritual life.

Another is to use our professional judgment to assess the degree to which our students achieve the intended outcomes. We can also ask others in our institutions—the bookstore and the business office may see other sides of student behavior. We can ask field education supervisors for their insights. We can solicit information from those who are familiar with graduates' ministries.¹⁴

The Assessment Process

Assessment is a process. One school's assessment plan will not look like another's (and no school will use all the tools below). Nevertheless, a school's assessment process will include the following steps.

1. Define learning outcomes
2. Align curriculum with outcomes
3. Determine what evidence would count as meeting those outcomes
4. Collect, analyze and disseminate the data
5. Use the data for continuous improvement
6. Evaluate and improve the assessment plan

1. Define Learning Outcomes

The first step in assessing progress is identifying the goal. Schools must resist the temptation to start measuring things just because they can be easily measured, but must first take the time to articulate the outcomes they believe are most important. Some faculties may find this an exciting process, as they talk together (perhaps for the first time in a long time) about their passions and dreams for their schools and their students.

Good learning outcomes flow from the institution's mission. They may be explicitly stated in the school's mission statement or they may be based on values inherent in the mission, but stated in a separate document. Either way, it is important that the learning outcomes be clearly related to the school's mission and enjoy broad support.

A statement of learning outcomes, particularly for a theological school, will typically include three sorts of intended outcomes: knowing, doing, and being. *Cognitive* outcomes will express what we expect students to know—about the Scriptures, theology, history, their own tradition, and the practices of

¹³ Perhaps we can take comfort in the aphorism that, if something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly. It is surely better to do an imperfect job of assessing these important areas than not to assess them at all.

¹⁴ See John Harris and Dennis Sansom, "Discerning Is More than Counting," *AAL Occasional Papers in Liberal Education* #3. See also below under "Learning about Assessment."

ministry. **Behavioral** outcomes will describe the skills we expect them to master (e.g., exegesis, theological reflection) and the patterns of behavior we expect them to exhibit (e.g., character, integrity, Christlike service). **Affective** outcomes describe the attitudes, values and virtues we want to see students develop (e.g., love for God and neighbor, humility).

As theologians know, words matter. The more carefully outcomes are expressed, the more helpful they will in assessing learning. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, (AACSB), which accredits business schools, suggests the following:¹⁵

- Use *action* verbs that specify definite, observable behaviors.
- Describe *student* behaviors rather than *teacher* behaviors.
- Describe a *learning outcome* rather than a learning process.
- Focus on *end-of-instruction behavior* rather than subject matter coverage.
- Use one or more *measures* for each objective.

With these guidelines in mind, we can examine the following “learning outcomes” collected from seminary course syllabi.

1. Provide opportunities for spiritual growth.
2. To provide opportunities for reflection and discussion about the biblical theology of Christian education proposed in this course.
3. The participant will consider current approaches to doing biblical theology.
4. The participant will internalize values and themes significant to Christian ministry leaders through biblical exegesis and theological reflection.

The first two statements describe the instructor’s activities rather than student activities or outcomes; they would not help us assess student learning. The third describes a student activity, but not a student outcome. The fourth describes student behavior, but not in observable (or, therefore, assessable) terms.

It can be helpful to see how other schools have attempted to articulate their outcomes. A number have developed thoughtful statements of learning outcomes (though, sadly, few are posted on schools’ web sites). New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary has adopted the following statement of learning outcomes for its students.¹⁶

All graduates are expected to have at least a minimum level of competency in all of the following seven areas:

Biblical Exposition

To interpret and communicate the Bible accurately.

Christian Theological Heritage

To understand and interpret Christian theological heritage and Baptist polity for the church.

Disciple Making

To stimulate church health through mobilizing the church for missions, evangelism, discipleship, and church growth.

Interpersonal Skills

To perform pastoral care effectively, with skills in communication and conflict management.

Servant Leadership

To serve churches effectively through team ministry.

Spiritual and Character Formation

To provide moral leadership by modeling and mentoring Christian character and devotion.

¹⁵ See http://www.aacsb.edu/resource_centers/assessment/overview-process.asp. The AACSB Assessment Resource Center (http://www.aacsb.edu/resource_centers/assessment/default.asp) contains much valuable information.

¹⁶ <http://nobts.edu/academics/pdf/7%20Basic%20Competencies.pdf>.

Worship Leadership

To facilitate worship effectively.

These statements contain a strong behavioral dimension. Biblical knowledge is not an end itself, but is to be evidenced in the way in which the Bible's message is interpreted and communicated. Theological understanding is evaluated in terms of its application to the life of the church. The other outcomes all relate specifically to ministry skills.

Moody Bible Institute has also articulated assessable outcomes.¹⁷

In keeping with our mission, our intent is to graduate students who have developed a biblical worldview that enables them to be productive in building Christ's church worldwide. Graduates of Moody Bible Institute will be noted for their commitment to:

- **The Preeminence of Christ** as evidenced through maturing lifestyles that reflect continuing submission to the Lordship of Christ.
- **The Authority of the Scriptures** as demonstrated by a knowledge of the Bible and theology, and the ability to interpret, apply, and integrate the inerrant Scriptures in all of life consistent with an orthodox, evangelical tradition.
- **The Centrality of the Church** as evidenced by service to the church of Jesus Christ through the use of ministry and vocational skills, spiritual gifts, and natural talents.
- **The Task of World Evangelization** as exhibited in a passion for the proclamation of the unique message of the gospel to the lost world.
- **The Healthy Development of Relationships** as evidenced in interpersonal, family, church, and social relationships that affirm the dignity of the individual and show sensitivity to diverse cultures and communities.
- **The Pursuit of Intellectual Excellence** as evidenced by analytical and creative thinking (formulation of a Christian worldview), lifelong development of vocational skills, clear expression of ideas, and appreciation of aesthetic values.
- **The Stewardship of the Body and Life Resources** as demonstrated in the practice of a healthy physical lifestyle and the wise management of the resources God has given.

Moody also expressed its outcomes in observable behaviors—"as evidenced through . . .," "demonstrated by . . .," "exhibited in . . ." Even potentially "fuzzy" outcomes such as a commitment to the preeminence of Christ or the centrality of the church have been connected with behaviors such as a "maturing lifestyle" and "service to the church."

Expressing outcomes in behavioral terms prevents us from settling for outcomes like "understanding" (e.g., "understands principles of conflict resolution") or "ability" (e.g., "able to preach biblically informed expository sermons"). "Understanding," in the sense of grasping ideas, is not enough.¹⁸ Likewise, "ability" is insufficient unless it is actually employed. Too many graduates with "understanding" and "ability" have difficulty managing conflict in their congregations and preach shallow sermons. Ministry leaders who know better fall into financial, interpersonal, and sexual difficulties. We want to produce students who not only have understanding and ability, but who actually act biblically, charitably, and ethically. Moody's outcomes are helpful because of the thoughtful way they link some of the "intangibles" to behaviors that can be observed.

¹⁷ "Profile of a Graduating Student," undergraduate *Catalog*, 13.

¹⁸ Carolyn Jurkowitz has pointed out that Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe view "understanding" as including explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy, and self-knowledge. (*Understanding by Design*. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998.) This still does not include a *disposition* to act in desired ways. The term will suggest only cognitive development to most faculty.

Both schools have wisely kept the number of outcomes fairly small. Veterans of educational assessment recommend no more than six to twelve outcomes for any school or degree program. For one thing, the labor involved in assessing a larger number of outcomes will be overwhelming. More importantly, the outcomes need to be few enough that faculty and students can remember easily what their purposes are in studying together. One university hangs its institution-wide learning outcomes on banners in the atrium of the administration building where everyone can see them regularly. Schools with long lists of learning specific outcomes may find that some of these might better be understood as providing evidence of more broadly worded goals.¹⁹

Schools that articulate a set of learning outcomes for all graduates (as these do) will need to adapt these to each of the school's degree programs. Adequate skills for interpreting and communicating the Bible will be different in M.A., M.Div. and Ph.D. programs. Expectations for interpersonal skills will be different for an M.A. in counseling than a Th.M. in church history. Some institutional outcomes, perhaps written with M.Div. students primarily in mind, may not be relevant to some degree programs: counseling students may take no courses in personal evangelism; Ph.D. students may have no formal opportunities to develop as worship leaders. In such cases, broad institutional statements may need to be revised to reflect the diversity of the degree programs offered (or new outcomes drafted for each program within the framework of such generic outcomes).

Schools can use a matrix to compare expectations for different degree programs. Suppose a school were to adopt the following set of outcomes for its graduates.²⁰

1. Exhibits a substantial and growing spiritual and personal maturity.
2. Understands, interprets and communicates the message of the Bible accurately.
3. Understands and effectively applies insights from systematic theology and church history to life and ministry.
4. Demonstrates winsome and effective interpersonal skills, including communication and conflict management.
5. Demonstrates ability to influence and lead others individually and corporately.

A matrix like the following could be developed.

	<i>M.A. (Counseling)</i>	<i>M.Div.</i>	<i>Th.M. (Theology)</i>	<i>D.Min.</i>
Maturity	Demonstrates personal wholeness	An exemplary follower of Christ	N.A.	Disciples leaders who disciple others
Bible	Interprets Bible accurately, applies to clients' concerns	Exegetes accurately using original languages	Exegetes accurately using original languages	Applies significant biblical insights to ministry practice
Theology	Basic awareness of theological concepts	Solid knowledge of theology in the seminary's tradition	Advanced theological understanding	Applies significant theological insights to ministry practice
Interpersonal	Relates to others empathetically	Preaches adequately and satisfactorily manages conflict	N.A.	Substantial skills in communicating and managing conflict
Leadership	Inspires others to wholeness	Influences and leads others	N.A.	Develops leaders; produces research that benefits church

¹⁹ See the "Principles of Undergraduate Education" of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), a leader in assessment in higher education, at http://www.iport.iupui.edu/teach/teach_pul.htm.

²⁰ This set of outcomes is deliberately minimal for purposes of illustration.

Note that the Th.M. curriculum, as a primarily academic degree, does not explicitly seek to address spiritual or personal formation, interpersonal skills, or leadership.

If a school has not articulated learning outcomes for its degree programs, how should it develop them? A key place to start is existing institutional documents. The school's *Catalog*, web site, or mission statement may already describe skills and attributes the school values. It is often wise, however, to set these documents aside at some point and brainstorm. Think about the most recent graduating class: Of which students are you most proud? What attributes or skills do they have that excite or please you most? About which students' future ministries are you concerned, and why?²¹ Ask the same questions about your alumni. The answers to questions like these begin to get at some of the outcomes the school values most. Schools may also gather groups of alumni and ask what they believe students most need to be, know, and do.

Schools must also consider external expectations. Denominations may have stated expectations for graduates of related schools. ATS has articulated standards for each degree program in its Standards of Accreditation. While it is helpful to look at outcome statements developed by other schools, it is essential that a school's outcomes reflect the distinctive character and mission of the particular school. A statement of learning outcomes is a statement of the school's vision and values that can play a powerful role in shaping the institution. Schools that take the time and effort to develop outcomes that genuinely express their vision for training students are likely to see faculty increasingly committed to the school and energized about their calling.

2. Align Curriculum with Outcomes

Once schools are clear on outcomes, they must take a look at the means they will use to achieve these outcomes, i.e., the curriculum. They must identify where in the curriculum they teach students the things they say they want to see realized in their lives and ministries, and where students have the opportunity to develop and/or demonstrate their achievement. A first look at the curriculum often finds that, regardless of what our mission statements say about spiritual formation and ministry skills, the greater part of the curriculum focuses on acquiring knowledge. Even "practical" courses sometimes devote more attention to teaching concepts than to skill development. (Do students learn principles of leadership or conflict resolution, or do they actually practice and improve skills in these areas? Where, if anywhere, are they graded on their use of such skills?)

It is at this point that a *curriculum map* can be helpful. A curriculum map is a matrix showing the contributions each (required) course makes toward the achievement of the learning outcomes.²² Few courses will contribute to every outcome, but every outcome should receive sustained attention throughout the curriculum. The map assures faculty members that they are not responsible for all of the outcomes, while clarifying what each course is responsible for. A curriculum map can highlight weaknesses in the curriculum and set the stage for rewarding discussions about how to strengthen the curriculum so that it more effectively provides opportunities for students to achieve the desired outcomes. These discussions should result in a greater sense of teamwork and ownership of the curriculum as a whole. A map can also raise questions about the extent to which the stated outcomes reflect the school's real commitments: one school identified a global awareness among its intended outcomes for all graduates, but only the M.Div. curriculum required students to take a mission course—change was needed, either in the statement of intended outcomes or in the curricula for other degree programs.

²¹ I am indebted to ATS Executive Director Dan Aleshire for this stimulating approach.

²² For an example from another discipline, see the very thorough matrix developed by a business program at http://www.aacsb.edu/resource_centers/assessment/practices-MontanaState.asp (a pdf file).

We can use the sample set of learning outcomes introduced above to create a map for a hypothetical M.Div. curriculum. Each assignment listed represents an assessment of the student's progress in developing the requisite knowledge, skills, and capacities. ***Bold italics*** indicate *summative* assessments (see below) near the end of a student's studies.

Sample Curriculum Map

	<i>Maturity</i>	<i>Bible</i>	<i>Theology</i>	<i>Interpersonal</i>	<i>Leadership</i>
Biblical Interpretation		First exegesis paper			
Old Testament I		Exegesis assignments			
Old Testament II		Exegesis assignments			
New Testament I		Exegesis assignments			
New Testament II		<i>Final exegesis project</i>			
Theology I			First theology paper		
Theology II			<i>Final theology paper</i>		
Christian Ethics			Final exam		
Church History			Final exam		
Denominational History & Polity			Final exam		
Spiritual Formation	Self-examination				
Introduction to Preaching		Observed in sermons	Observed in sermons	Observed in sermons	
Christian Worship		Theology of worship	Theology of worship		Practice in class
Pastoral Care/Counseling	Self-examination			Observed in role play	
Pastoral Leadership				Observed in role play	Observed in role play
Educational Ministry		Practice teaching	Practice teaching	Practice teaching	Practice teaching
Mission of the Church		Theology of mission	Theology of mission		
Field Education I	Performance in field	Performance in field	Performance in field	Performance in field	Performance in field
Field Education II	<i>Performance in field</i>	<i>Performance in field</i>	<i>Performance in field</i>	<i>Performance in field</i>	<i>Performance in field</i>
Capstone Project (response to assigned ministry problem)		<i>Demonstrated in solution</i>	<i>Demonstrated in solution</i>	<i>Demonstrated in solution</i>	<i>Demonstrated in solution</i>

Like many seminary curricula, much of the curriculum in this example focuses on biblical and theological knowledge and skills. Students have few intentional opportunities *in the curriculum* to develop or demonstrate spiritual/personal maturity, interpersonal skills or leadership.²³ This school has made a

²³ Note the way in which this curriculum map supports the common observation that seminary graduates frequently know a great deal about the Bible and theology but lack people and other ministry skills.

significant attempt to develop students' ministry skills by including role-plays in several courses and a case study as the capstone project. The school also sees field education as an important opportunity to see how well students can "put it all together" in a practical ministry context.

While a curriculum map may suggest the need for curricular reform, few schools will find it necessary to tear up the existing curriculum and start from scratch. Most seminaries are still going to have a course on the gospels, an introduction to preaching, and survey courses in theology and church history. Many creative things, however, can be done within the existing structures. To help students develop their ability to relate to other faiths, the Old Testament curriculum could include an exploration of how Israel related to the gods of the nations, and the systematics curriculum could include the Muslim view of God alongside variations within the Christian tradition. A New Testament professor at one seminary, noting that his school's outcomes included the ability to work effectively as a member of a team, added a team project to a required course on the gospels and graded students not only on the paper that the team produced but also on how well each worked with others. A professor of homiletics at another school requires that students submit, in addition to full sermon manuscripts, exegetical papers that support the interpretation of the text offered in the sermon; both are graded.

Other synergies may develop within departments. A sequence of required courses could take students through a considered series of gradually increasing expectations in developing exegetical skill or theological reflection, culminating in a major project or paper in the final course in the sequence. Schools that have an introductory orientation to the ministry early in the curriculum, could ask students to develop a personal growth plan that is reviewed (and progress graded) later in their studies.

One dean kept a map of his school's M.Div. curriculum displayed prominently on the wall of his office. It reminded him, as well as faculty who came to his office, of how the whole curriculum fit together. Substantive changes to course content and assignments require careful consideration of the impact of the change on the curriculum as a whole.

3. *Identify Instruments and Measures*

Once outcomes have been identified and the curriculum tuned so that it clearly provides opportunity for students to achieve the outcomes, schools are ready to identify the means they will use to assess the extent to which the outcomes are achieved. All the eggs cannot go in one basket—**multiple measures** must be used to assess each outcome (some means may be used to assess more than one outcome).

Schools often think first about **indirect measures** of assessment: surveys (of students, graduating students, or alumni), exit interviews, focus groups (of students or alumni), or placement data. Such data is valuable and should be included as part of a school's assessment plan.²⁴ It is important for ministry-bound students to develop skills in self-evaluation, because many will work in ministry contexts in which they will lack skilled and consistent feedback from others. Nevertheless, these tools tell us what only students *think* they have learned; they do not measure student learning directly.

It is therefore important to include **direct measures** of student learning.

- **Capstone projects** near the end of a student's program provide an opportunity to "put it all together." Senior sermons can demonstrate exegetical, theological, and cultural competence, along with communication skills. One seminary requires students to work in groups on a practical ministry problem: on successive weeks they must demonstrate biblical, theological, historical, ethical, and leadership strategies for addressing the problem in presentations to a pair of faculty members (the regular instructor plus a member of the department primarily responsible that week's skill).²⁵

²⁴ The ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire and can be a helpful part of an assessment plan.

²⁵ See a business school capstone at http://www.aacsb.edu/resource_centers/assessment/practices-KingsColl.asp.

- **Portfolios** are collections of students’ work from throughout their course of study. A portfolio may contain all of a student’s work or specific or representative assignments. A faculty team evaluates each student’s body of work as a whole in light of agreed upon standards.²⁶
- **Course assignments** can be used for assessment purposes, particularly when the course represents the culmination of work in a particular discipline. In order to use course assignments effectively, however, it is necessary to specify how the assignment is to be evaluated, particularly if different instructors may teach the course from time to time. **Rubrics**²⁷ can help by clarifying and standardizing expectations, as well as identifying particular areas of strength or weakness.

**Sample Rubric
Exegetical Paper**

	Outstanding (4 or 3 points)	Acceptable (2 or 1 points)	Unacceptable (0 points)
Use of original languages			
Sensitivity to context (literary, historical)			
Theological sensitivity (biblical, systematic)			
Proposed homiletical application			
Organization, clarity, etc.			
Conclusions, cogency of argument			
Language (grammar, style, etc.)			
Bibliography, use of resources			

Outstanding: Excellent insights, thoughtful conclusion, cogently argued; clearly written and well organized; anticipates and responds to objections; shows considerable skill using the original languages; impressive awareness of relevant literature.

Acceptable: Satisfactory, but predictable (or idiosyncratic) insights; organization and argument are generally (but not always) clear; some use of original languages; minor defects only in grammar and style; cites only the “usual” references.

Unacceptable: Little insight or evident effort; little awareness of other viewpoints or objections; poor writing/grammar/organizational skills; inadequate use or misuse of resources.

Total score: _____

- **Professional exams** (i.e., ordination, professional licensure) can directly measure student learning, if the school is able to obtain consistent and reliable data from the examiners on areas in which students’ performance was weak or particularly strong.
- **Internship or field education evaluations** can provide valuable information about students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes in more of a “real world environment” than the classroom. Getting reliable data, however, requires that expectations be carefully and clearly communicated to the supervisors. Again, the use of rubrics may help, by providing a framework in which supervisors may report information.²⁸

²⁶ For more information, see <http://www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/bibs/portfoli.html>.

²⁷ A rubric is a set of rules or categories to guide in the evaluation of student performance. A rubric describes levels of performance and guides scoring of the work being evaluated. Good rubrics clarify expectations for the student and increase consistency of evaluation. There are many kinds of rubrics.

²⁸ Narrative comments in supervisor evaluations can be very enlightening, but summarizing them for assessment purposes can be time consuming. Schools that ask for narrative comments from supervisors may also wish to ask that students be rated on a Likert scale in areas related to desired learning outcomes.

- **Special examinations**, especially standardized exams, are used in some academic disciplines. However, there are no widely used exams in theological education, and the differences between traditions would make development of widely used instruments unlikely. Some schools have developed their own exams, e.g., an exit exam assessing Bible knowledge. Experience has shown, however, that students fail to take seriously exams that seem “added on” and not clearly related to the curriculum. This is especially true when the exam is purely for assessment purposes and does not affect the students’ academic standing. It is generally better to use **embedded assessments** that fit naturally into the curriculum.

Faculty often ask if **grades** can be used for assessment purposes. The short answer is “no.” The reason is that a single grade tells little about relative strengths and weaknesses. A student who gets an A in a course on, e.g., the Pauline epistles, probably did just about everything right. But a C does not indicate where the weakness lay: Did the student do poorly on the exegetical assignment? The Greek translation? The objective questions about the historical and geographical aspects of the apostle’s ministry? The essay exam on major themes in Pauline theology? The grade indicates only that the student fell short of expectations, but does not tell us how or where. As a result, we have no information that would help improve teaching and learning. A further challenge is that goals or assignments in a course may vary from year to year and standards may differ between the various instructors who may teach the course at different times.

Although grades do not provide assessment data, **grading** of assignments may provide data through **primary trait analysis**.²⁹ This requires that instructors agree on the traits of a good assignment (a sermon, for example) and then develop and agree on a set of standards to use in evaluating each trait expected in the assignment, i.e., a rubric.

Student course evaluations are of limited value for assessment, because they are not direct measures of student learning. As indirect measures they may be helpful if they ask specifically for students’ evaluation of the extent to which the course helped them develop specified outcomes.

Sometimes faculty are concerned that assessment will lead to “**teaching to the test**.” “Teaching to the test” is problematic, however, only if the test does not adequately assess the outcomes students should achieve.³⁰ If a test could provide a thorough assessment of desired outcomes, we would *want* faculty to “teach to the test” and be disappointed if they did not. If theological schools develop more authentic means of assessment (see below) that reflect student performance in ministry situations, then “teaching to the test” would mean teaching students to do well in ministry. Isn’t that what we should be striving to do?

The assessment process should include both formative and summative assessment. **Formative** assessment comes during a course or a course of studies and gives students feedback that enables them to see where they need to improve and helps them to do so.³¹ **Summative** assessment comes at the end of a course or course of studies and determines the extent to which students have met desired outcomes. Schools will employ summative assessment in evaluating the effectiveness of their educational programs.

Some schools use a **pretest-posttest** approach, in which they test entering students in key areas to establish a **baseline** against which to measure subsequent progress. Entering and exit scores may be compared student-by-student or (more commonly) for the class as a whole. Schools can then see how

²⁹ For more on primary trait analysis, see <http://www.siue.edu/~deder/assess/cats/pta.html>.

³⁰ This concern is often expressed about the extensive dependence on objective standardized testing in public elementary and secondary schools. The complaint is that these objective tests do not measure important higher order skills. If teachers only “teach to the test,” students will only develop the rote knowledge on which they will be tested and their learning will effectively be limited by the test. The problem, however, is not “teaching to the test,” but the decisions made about what outcomes will be tested.

³¹ Students are motivated and learning increases when they are able to monitor their progress.

much students learned while in their institution.³² Not all assessment practitioners follow a pretest-posttest model. Schools may choose simply to assess the extent to which graduating students have achieved the stated outcomes. Since we know (for example) that few students arrive having studied Hebrew or the intricacies of denominational governance, we can be reasonably confident that they learned what they know about these things through their studies prior to graduation. A school might choose to use a pretest-posttest approach to assessing some outcomes and not others. While a pretest-posttest approach offers certain advantages, schools must carefully evaluate their resources and determine whether the advantages outweigh the substantial effort that a pretest-posttest approach can require.

One of the most important sources of information about students that seminaries have is the **professional judgment** of its faculty and staff. Faculty observe students in a variety of contexts, particularly (though not exclusively) in smaller schools. These may include intentional relationships for mentoring or spiritual direction—faculty reports on their advisees can be mined for aggregate data for assessment purposes. Better data can be obtained if more than one instructor were to evaluate each student. There may be also others in the institution who are able to offer informed evaluation of students, particularly those with experience in ministry and those who may supervise student workers on campus. The professional judgment of faculty and staff can be particularly helpful in assessing outcomes such as maturity, leadership, and people skills.

The best assessment is **authentic**. Authentic assessment assesses student performance “real-world tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills.”³³ Think of a flight simulator, which “combines teaching, learning, and assessing into a real task.”³⁴ The more realistic the simulation, the more students learn and the more accurately teachers can assess whether students have learned what they need to know. Field education, role-play, and evaluating exegesis in sermons could be means of authentic assessment. In addition to traditional papers and tests, schools might also ask students to respond—orally—to the kinds of questions pastors are often asked: explaining a theological position to a Sunday visitor from a different tradition or a biblical text to a twelve-year old. We strengthen both ministry training and assessment as we provide more “real life” situations in our instructional programs.

It may be helpful to **summarize** means of assessment visually. Kenrick School of Theology has neatly summarized both outcomes and measures in a simple table.³⁵

Ordination/Master of Divinity Program Outcomes	Means of Assessment
As a result of the Ordination/Master of Divinity Program, Kenrick students will:	
1 be configured in their very being to Jesus Christ, head, shepherd, and spouse of the Church	Ordination Self-report Pastoral-employer survey Supervised Ministry Survey
2 be placed both within the Church and in the forefront of the Church	Ordination Self-report Pastoral-employer survey Supervised Ministry Survey

³² “While” is not the same as “because of.” Not all the learning that takes place will be attributable to the curriculum or even the school. Students will also learn through involvement with church, work, and family.

³³ See Jon Mueller’s excellent tutorial at <http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/>.

³⁴ David Sill and Douglass Eder in a presentation titled “Deep Learning: Student Learning As Community Property.” See “SIUE New Faculty Orientation” at <http://www.siue.edu/assessment/index.html>.

³⁵ <http://www.kenrick.edu/Assessment/ordivassescht.html>. See also the similar table for the M.A. program (<http://www.kenrick.edu/Assessment/masartassescht.html>).

3	hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience	Canonical Profession of Faith Self-report Pastoral-employer survey
	and proclaim this faith in word and action as taught by the Gospel and the Church's tradition	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey Juried video evaluation Exit Interview Supervised Ministry Survey
4	celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey Juried video evaluation
	faithfully celebrate the liturgy of the hours	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey
5	bring the faithful together in a unified family, coordinate all the gifts and charisms which the Spirit inspires in the community	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey Critical incident and evaluation Supervised Ministry Survey
6	live continently without wife or family; love the Church in the total and exclusive manner in which Christ loves her	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey
7	use material goods lovingly and responsibly; care for the poor and the weakest; make themselves available to be sent wherever their work is needed	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey Critical incident and evaluation Supervised Ministry Survey
8	respect and obey their ordinary, as conscientious fellow-workers and in solidarity with the presbyterate	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey
9	consecrate their lives to God; unite themselves more closely every day to Christ the High Priest	Self-report Pastoral-employer survey Supervised Ministry Survey

Kenrick identified multiple means to assess students' mastery of each desired outcome. It has chosen to use primarily means of assessment that arise out of students' ministry in the life of the church, rather than simply in the classroom. And it has kept the plan fairly manageable by using a total of eight means to assess nine outcomes.

In developing an assessment plan, schools must begin by identifying **information that is already available**. Does the school require any kind of psychological testing of incoming students? Do applicants write a statement of their faith commitment or reasons for entering ministry? This information could be compared with tests taken or materials produced later in a student's program. Field education evaluations can provide a great deal of information that is particularly useful because it comes from actual ministry settings rather than the classroom; the challenge is finding a simple and effective way to summarize the large amount of information usually available. There is also valuable data available from non-academic departments: the business office, financial aid office, registrar's office, bookstore, and housing office observe student behavior (interpersonal, financial, organizational) and see traits that may not be evident in the classroom.

Some schools have what are really capstone projects, but may not have identified them as such. A major assignment in any course typically taken by students in the last year of their studies may serve as a capstone experience if it builds on previous courses in that subject area. The last required homiletics course is effectively a capstone experience in homiletics (and possibly exegesis). M.A. and Th.M. theses, D.Min. projects, and Ph.D. dissertations are capstone projects that can provide valuable assessment data. Simple rubrics can be used to evaluate capstone projects like these, not only to give students feedback on

their work, but also (when collected over a period of several years) to provide valuable feedback for the school on the areas of strengths and weaknesses in projects submitted. Such an embedded means of assessment requires little additional work: the theses are already required and already evaluated—all that is necessary is to capture the evaluation in a way that it could be aggregated and used for assessment.

Suppose a seminary decided to use an already existing senior preaching course as a capstone assignment for both homiletics and exegesis. Students turn in both a sermon manuscript and a paper developing the exegesis of the text(s) on which the sermon is based. Students also preach the sermon in class. Biblical studies faculty evaluate the exegesis in both the papers and the sermon manuscripts using rubrics developed for each. Homiletics faculty use a rubric to evaluate the sermon, both in manuscript form and as preached. All of these rubrics become the basis for the student's grade on the assignment; copies of the rubrics are also retained in the assessment file for the next curriculum review. When the review committee surveys several years' rubrics, they find that:

- Papers and sermons showed a considerable degree of theological reflection. This was one of the goals of the last curriculum revision and the faculty from various disciplines worked to bring this about. The faculty is encouraged.
- Papers showed that students did a good job of consulting appropriate reference works and other materials in exegeting their texts. Some credit goes to the new library director, who began conducting an introduction to theological bibliography for new students as part of orientation. She has also worked creatively with the faculty to develop online bibliographic guides for each course in the core curriculum. The faculty is very thankful to have her at their institution.
- Students did a poor job using the original languages. They may have been unclear about expectations for the assignment, lacked the ability use languages effectively, or don't believe that using the languages is important for preaching. Further study would be required to determine the cause and to design a remedy.
- Students showed poor organization and language skills, both in the papers and in the sermons. Members of the committee agree that this is a problem in other courses as well. The seminary may need to assess students' writing and language skills early in their seminary careers and provide remedial measures to help bring these skills up to the desired level. (Some faculty members complain that it is not the seminary's job to teach undergraduate skills in writing and critical thinking. The president, however, who just got an earful from a couple of influential pastors about the deficiencies of several recent grads, argues that the churches will nonetheless hold the seminary responsible for graduates who cannot express themselves well.)

Schools also have a great deal of *informal information* that can become assessment data. Presidents hear comments from alumni and churches about their schools' preparation of students for ministry; recording notes or dictating a summary on the trip home can produce data for assessment. One director of alumni support often hears from alumni at crucial points in ministry (e.g., "how do I deal with this crisis?" "is it time to seek a new position?"); by using a phone log he began compiling data on the most common struggles alumni face, data that can help faculty better prepare students to face these challenges. Faculty in counseling may require students to write about one of their own significant personal problems; a summary of the most frequently mentioned problems could provide important data. The registrar may keep a list of reasons students give for dropping out of school; while this does not directly measure student learning, it provides valuable data about the school's support for students and possibly about students' perceptions of the school and the training it provides. The key is to find simple ways to document information that is already present and use it constructively.

Many theological schools may wish to begin their assessment planning with the M.Div., which often influences the curriculum for other degree programs. When M.A. programs share a set of core

courses with the M.Div., a plan to assess the M.A. will likely share the means to assess similar outcomes, while making adjustments appropriate to that program (e.g., omitting biblical language skills or adding counseling practicum skills).

It is important to identify as many existing sources of information as possible, to keep new initiatives as few and unobtrusive as possible. It is far better to start simple and gradually improve, than to be too ambitious, fail to deliver anything of value, and sour everyone on the whole process.

4. Collect, Analyze and Disseminate the Data

Faculty are understandably concerned about the amount of work involved in gathering assessment data. While faculty must be involved in assessing student learning (evaluating papers or sermons, for example), faculty should not normally collate and tabulate raw data that could be handled by clerical staff or student workers. (Faculty with experience in social science research may help with analyses of quantitative data.)

Once results have been tabulated, the faculty and administration need to spend time analyzing the results. If graduating students are weak in basic Bible knowledge, what might be the cause(s)? If field education supervisors find students resistant to taking direction, why might this be? If a significant percentage of counseling graduates fail the state licensure exam, what does that say about our program?

It is important to look at positive, as well as negative, results. If senior theology papers are steadily improving, how was this accomplished? Are there lessons to be shared with the rest of the faculty? What are the school's three or four greatest strengths? These may indicate the school's greatest contribution to the church. How can these strengths be preserved and even increased?

Questions like these need to be discussed on several levels. A committee may do some initial work by drafting a preliminary analysis with recommendations as a springboard for discussion by the entire faculty. Some findings may need to be discussed at length by particular departments. Nevertheless, there should be opportunity for the faculty as a whole to think together about the overall picture.

Once information has been collected and analyzed, the results must be shared broadly with faculty, staff, students, trustees, and other key constituents. This is essential for two reasons. First, it is imperative that the information get to all can use it to strengthen the school's educational programs. Other (non-academic) departments may have valuable input, either into analysis or recommendations; the dean of students, the library director, the manager of IT services, and the registrar will all have information to offer and will be affected by the recommendations eventually adopted. Students will be interested in the data and may have helpful suggestions regarding the eventual recommendations. If graduates have participated in focus groups or surveys, providing a summary of findings and proposed changes is an appropriate way to express thanks and shows that the school has taken their input seriously. Some colleges distribute a written summary report across campus. Others have an annual assessment day, when various departments share what they have learned from their assessment efforts and what steps they are planning to take to strengthen their programs. Such sharing of assessment results and goals can go a long way to building understanding of what others are doing in pursuit of our common goals. However it is done, the critical thing is to get the information to everyone who can make a contribution.

Second, it is essential that assessment remain on everyone's agenda. Developing a lasting culture of assessment, in which schools consistently make educational decisions based on assessment data, takes years. Some universities (and even some smaller colleges) raise and maintain awareness of assessment by sending out periodic newsletters highlighting assessment findings and positive changes that have resulted. It will take time for faculty to learn how to gather good assessment data and become accustomed to making educational decisions on the basis of it. Non-academic departments will need to learn to respond to assessment data (e.g., if data shows that learning is better in smaller classes and seminars, there are

implications for facilities planning). Trustees must be taught to use assessment data in making major decisions regarding educational programs.

It is particularly important to highlight “success stories.” Faculty, staff, and students need to see that assessment activities are worthwhile. Report positive findings, even if small ones, to help people see the value of what is being done. When assessment data leads to changes in the educational program and those changes can be shown to make a difference, throw a party so that everyone can celebrate!

5. Use the Data for Continuous Improvement

The job is not done until we “close the loop” by using assessment data to make improvements in the educational program. “A lesson from the farm: a pig doesn’t get any fatter merely by weighing it.”³⁶ In other words, we have to use what we have learned. What strengths must we maintain and improve? How will we do so? What concerns must we address? How will we do so?³⁷

To track and summarize their findings and action steps, some schools use a grid like the one below. (Hypothetical results for only two outcomes are listed.)

Assessment Grid

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Methods & Criteria</i>	<i>Results</i>	<i>Analysis</i>	<i>Action</i>
Bible	80% of seniors score 75% or higher on Bible knowledge exam	Only 50% of seniors scored 75% or higher	Did not meet goal; courses did not focus on details	Faculty to include factual knowledge tests in core Bible courses next fall
	90% of exegesis projects rated acceptable or higher	75% of projects rated acceptable or higher	Did not meet goal; faculty differ on expectations for exegesis papers	Faculty to develop a common rubric for papers in all courses in exegesis
	90% rated acceptable by senior field ed supervisors	89% rated acceptable	Met goal for first time; clarifying “good exegesis” on rating forms may have helped	Continue to monitor progress
Leadership	80% acceptable in final role plays course on Pastoral Leadership	70% acceptable in final role plays course on Pastoral Leadership	Did not meet goal; students had only one prior role play	Instructor to revise format to provide more opportunities for practice
	90% acceptable or higher on capstone project	80% rated acceptable or higher	Did not meet goal; rating variations may indicate need to clarify expectations for faculty observers	Instructor to refine rubric for evaluation and provide an orientation for faculty observers
	90% acceptable or higher on field ed supervisor reports	95% rated acceptable or higher	Met goal	Continue to monitor

One of the virtues of such a grid is that it provides a record of the findings, the analysis, and the action planned. (Remember, if assessment isn’t documented, it didn’t happen!)

³⁶ David Sill and Douglass Eder in “Deep Learning: Student Learning As Community Property,” a downloadable file labeled “SIUE New Faculty Orientation” at <http://www.siue.edu/assessment/index.html>.

³⁷ I am indebted to Carolyn Jurkowitz for pointing out that the “loop” is not unidirectional and we may learn things before we get to the “end” of the process. For example, a curriculum map may indicate lack of commitment to certain outcomes, or attempts at assessment may indicate that outcomes are poorly worded.

Once results have been tabulated (the first four columns), the faculty and administration must take steps to address the findings. If graduating students are weak in church history, how might this be remedied? If field education supervisors find students have poor interpersonal skills, how might the school address this? If D.Min. projects seem to be methodologically weak, what steps could be taken to improve the quality? On the positive side, what challenges do we face in maintaining our distinctive strengths? What steps do we need to take (perhaps in light of some financial pressures or upcoming faculty retirements) to preserve and enhance them?

These questions need to be discussed on several levels. Departments or committees may discuss some data in detail and propose recommendations. Actions that require the cooperation of other departments in the institution (e.g., doubling the number of computers in the library, or creating more small classrooms for seminars) must include those responsible for these departments and their budgets in the discussion. Sometimes a dean or president may need to force the issue, e.g., refusing to consider course or curriculum proposals without supporting assessment data. Students often have insight into the impact of proposed changes and can offer valuable suggestions. Nevertheless, if the faculty as a whole is responsible for the curriculum as a whole, the entire faculty must eventually own both the analysis and the resulting recommendations.

If assessment must lead to continuous improvement, assessment must be continuous as well. It cannot wait until the eve of the next accreditation visit. At the same time, it is not necessary to conduct a major review of every program every year. Some programs may enroll or graduate too few students to produce meaningful data until several years' data has been collected. A number of schools establish regular curriculum review cycles, in which they review each degree program every four or five years.³⁸ Schools will, however, need to collect and summarize assessment data from each degree program each year to monitor progress and make minor adjustments, even if they do not conduct a comprehensive analysis of the data until the next scheduled review.

“Closing the loop” involves more than the curriculum. Assessment data has implications for almost every area of the institution. A school might determine that it needs more classroom technology or more classrooms suited to small seminars. Students in the counseling program may need greater access to specialized publications. There may be need to be greater support for development of strong student marriages (including counseling services), financial counseling, or training in healthy personal lifestyles. Schools might make changes in chapel services or introduce new co-curricular activities.

As a school begins to make changes in its educational programs based on its assessment programs, it must also assess the impact of those changes. Since the goal is to improve student learning, the school must continue gathering data to determine whether student learning has in fact been improved.

6. Evaluate and Improve the Assessment Plan

Finally, even assessment efforts must be assessed. Does the assessment plan tell us what we want and need to know? Are we gathering data we don't need? Are we getting all the information we do need? Are there things we can do better or more easily? The plan itself must be assessed and improved.

This is actually good news. It is expected that the assessment plan gets better over time. Schools do not have to wait—and should not wait—until they have a perfect plan before they begin to assess student learning. Waiting would be unwise in any case. Faculty know that a course is almost always much better the second time they teach it, no matter how well they prepared the first time. The same is true of assessing student learning. As schools gain experience with assessment, they will learn by experience

³⁸ A school with a four-year cycle might review one or two degree programs each year. Degree programs that share a common core of courses, however, may need to be reviewed at the same time.

what works best in their situation and with their desired outcomes. The important thing is to get started as soon as possible and then continually to review and improve the process.

Part of the assessment plan, then, must be a plan to review the plan. As schools are beginning with assessment, this may require frequent attention. On a department or program level, it is natural to take stock each time any assessment data is being analyzed by asking, “Is this telling us what we need to know? Are there things we need to know that we don’t know?” Later, there should be a thorough periodic review of the institution’s whole assessment process, looking at how assessment has been carried out over a period of several years and noting what has been learned, what changes have been made, and whether these changes have been beneficial. This global evaluation may be a task for senior administrators rather than for faculty (depending on the school’s particular traditions and governance model). Nevertheless, the results of such evaluation should be discussed with the faculty and with the school’s governing body.

Learning about Assessment

There are many ways theological educators can learn more about assessment. Excellent online resources,³⁹ include some oriented to those getting started with assessment.⁴⁰ Many universities have developed excellent web sites to assist their own faculty.⁴¹ Seminaries can help the entire community of theological schools by publishing more information about their assessment processes online. Regionally accredited seminaries will particularly need to become familiar with assessment resources available from those bodies, but any school may benefit from the information that is available from regional and other specialized agencies.⁴²

Workshops on assessment are held throughout the year. Accrediting associations, along with some colleges and other organizations, offer periodic workshops.⁴³ Sadly, the well-regarded annual assessment conference formerly held by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) has ceased with that closing of that organization.

There are excellent books and articles available. The AACSB web site offers suggested reading lists for books, articles and journals.⁴⁴ Many other articles are available through the ERIC database.⁴⁵ The ATS continues to provide excellent case studies and articles on particular aspects of assessment in theological education.⁴⁶

Local universities (including those of which some seminaries are a part) may have assessment offices that would share their expertise with theological schools. Graduate programs in education may

³⁹ Addresses shown are current at the time of writing. Search engines can locate sites that have moved. An up-to-date listing is available at <http://www.ats.edu/projects/Onlineassessmentresourcesintro.asp>.

⁴⁰ See especially the sites of Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville (<http://www.siu.edu/~deder/assess>) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, a specialized accrediting agency (http://www.aacsb.edu/resource_centers/Assessment/default.asp).

⁴¹ See especially North Dakota State (<http://www.ndsu.edu/ndsu/accreditation/assessment/index.shtml>), North Carolina State (<http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm>).

⁴² Two that seem particularly helpful are the North Central Association/Higher Learning Commission (<http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/resources/assessment/index.html>) and Middle States (<http://www.msache.org/oldsite/s2.html>).

⁴³ I personally found the annual meetings of the North Central Association/Higher Learning Commission helpful, not only from seeing what others were doing, but from the annual reorientation to assessment.

⁴⁴ http://www.aacsb.edu/resource_centers/assessment/reading-lists.asp. Works by Tom Angelo, Trudy Banta, and Patricia Cross have been particularly influential.

⁴⁵ <http://www.eric.ed.gov>.

⁴⁶ See especially 35:1 (1998), 39:1 and 39:2 (2003). A series of case studies will be forthcoming as part of the Character and Assessment of Theological Education Project.

have students who would be delighted to help a seminary develop or strengthen assessment strategies as part of their own dissertation research.

Theological schools can learn much from other disciplines. We are not as different from other institutions of higher learning as we sometimes think. It may seem simple for schools of accounting or nursing assessment make graduates' passing of a professional exam a major indicator of the school's educational effectiveness when much of theological education is devoted to intangibles. Other professional schools (e.g., schools of business, social work, medicine, and military academies), however, are also seeking to assess many of the same soft skills: leadership, teamwork, working with diversity, ethical behavior, communication, and empathy. Some of these have considerable resources and it only makes sense to learn from them all that we can.⁴⁷

Two Cautions

Simple makes sustainable. This essay has surveyed terms and tools faculty will encounter in reading about assessment. No school will use all of these and none should try. Schools that create extensive new processes risk burnout. It is essential to start small and keep assessment simple. Then, as faculty see positive results, the school can strengthen the process each year. Schools will be on the right track if they assess student progress in the four areas of the ATS Degree Standards (religious heritage, cultural context, formation, and leadership), assess students broadly near the time of graduation, and follow up in some way with graduates in ministry. Plans should gather data from faculty (direct evaluation of student learning, including evaluation of ministry skills by field education supervisors), students (self-assessment), and, at least in ministry-oriented degrees, graduates (in light of their post-graduation experience in ministry). Since most schools are still developing assessment skills, it will not be a surprise if visiting teams recommend follow-up reports on schools' continued progress in gathering and using assessment data—they recognize that change is difficult and want to make sure schools follow through with their plans until assessment has become a way of life.

Leadership. Institutional leaders have a particularly important responsibility in helping their institutions develop a culture of assessment. Mandating assessment without adequate efforts to inform, motivate, and support faculty will only, as it has often done, lead to passive or even active resistance. Change is difficult and must be managed carefully.⁴⁸ It is easy to unveil a new priority or initiative, but unconsciously undermine it by continuing to do things as they have always been done. The dean who refused to consider proposals for new or revised courses or programs without assessment data understood. Faculty members will not believe that they have to do things differently until their deans act differently, by insisting on data from assessment. Conversely, if curricular requirements are revised or new programs approved without consideration of assessment data, faculty will conclude that assessment has little to do with the ongoing operation of the school. Presidents (i.e., chief administrative officers) must also make data-driven, learning-oriented assessment part of the regular evaluation process for administrative departments and their heads (admissions, student services, library, finance, development, and information resources, as well as academics). They must insist that assessment data be employed in annual budgeting and long-range planning and take the lead in helping the school's board to understand the necessity of considering assessment data in every major decision. No theological school will develop a stronger

⁴⁷ There is much we can learn from the many creative and gifted people working in assessment in many different kinds of schools. I have benefited from presentations by veterinary schools, community colleges, business schools, undergraduate English departments, and a master's program in zoology.

⁴⁸ For an extraordinarily helpful study of the change process in organizations and why it often fails, see John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996).

culture of assessment than its senior leadership demands. Assessment will become instinctive for members of the faculty only when it has become second nature for the school's leaders.

Summary

This paper has attempted to clarify what assessment means for theological educators and to provide theological educators with a basic understanding of tools for assessing student learning. We can summarize by noting that a good assessment plan:

- Flows out of the school's mission.
- Has clear learning outcomes expressed in observable behaviors.
- Measures things that matter.
- Makes sense—tells the school what it wants and needs to know.
- Uses multiple measures for each outcome.
- Fits naturally into the educational process, using embedded and authentic assessment.
- Is simple and sustainable; starts small and builds on success.
- Builds on processes and structures that are already in place.
- Leads to improvement in the educational program.
- Is itself assessed regularly and improves over time.
- Is supported by decision-making processes at the highest levels of the institution.

If we understand it correctly, we will not do assessment simply because others require us to. We will pursue data-driven assessment of student learning because we wish to prepare students well for life and ministry, both for their good and for the sake of Christ and his Church.

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