Engaging Intellectual Work: The Faculty’s Role in Assessment

James F. Slevin

INTRODUCTION

The call for improved educational assessment, and specifically the assessment of writing programs, has become louder and more urgent in the past decade. I want here to explore the place of faculty and faculty values in the process of assessing the work of higher education. How can we find better ways to put the intellectual work of faculty and students at the center of our educational concerns and, as a consequence, at the center of assessment models?

A focus on first-year writing courses seems to me to be especially fruitful in responding to these questions. A university education is the work faculty and students do together, work pursued closely and undertaken carefully over time. This being the case, the first-year writing course (often the only course required of all students at a college or university) can clarify in crucial ways the primary place of intellectual work—of study and thought—in our understanding of the meaning and purposes of the university. Such a clarification can thereby help to resist the commodification of education and the corporatization of its institutions. As I have argued elsewhere, the first-year course should not be foundational to but rather be organic with the rest of the curriculum; it should not ground but enact the intellectual work of the university; it should not anticipate but begin the students’ education.

Language that conceptualizes the first-year course in terms of foundation, preparation, and anticipation narrativizes and scaffolds this course in order to empty it out: the meaning of the course is elsewhere. Its outcomes, not its work, give it its value.

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Such language thereby participates in a very powerful contemporary discourse of assessment and accountability, the purpose of which (specifically) is to narrativize and structure higher education itself so that its meaning and value come from outside. One important purpose of this essay is to examine and resist this tendency to let the purposes of education be defined (and so assessed) from outside the university. Instead, I want to re-place these processes where they belong—within the work of faculty and students that makes the university a distinctive cultural institution.

It will be helpful to clarify here what I will and will not address in this essay, concerned as it is with something so broad as the relationship between assessment and the intellectual purposes of the university in our time. I will not trouble myself with any of the most egregiously anti-intellectual forms of assessment now proposed. Indeed, I will be looking—albeit critically—only at documents developed by those whom I consider allies in the effort to support the intellectual purposes of higher education. Even with these allies, I am concerned about a failure to respond vigorously to the danger certain kinds of assessment pose to the intellectual vitality of colleges and universities. I will be coming only at the end to the specific question of the assessment of writing—particularly writing programs. I come a long way around to writing program assessment because it is inseparable from the larger context in which educational assessment now functions and the larger purposes for which it is designed.

I have offered these preliminary comments primarily to provide a context for the specific questions that follow. How do prevailing models of assessment marginalize the perspectives and work of the faculty? How can faculty work be defined and the purposes of assessment deepened in order to incorporate a more significant faculty role? In what ways are writing programs positioned to help make educational assessment generally a more complex, and therefore more accurate and helpful, contribution to improving the intellectual life of the university?

**DOMINANT MODELS OF ASSESSMENT: ABSENTING THE FACULTY**

What is now the dominant public idea of assessment? What are the key terms that go into constructing that idea? An advertisement announcing a recent conference on assessment begins in this way:

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**Figure 1. Assessment Conference Advertisement**

*Assessment as Evidence of Learning: Serving Student and Society*

*June 13–16, 1999*

*Adam’s Mark Hotel, Denver, Colorado*

Choose from 150 concurrent, interactive, and plenary sessions plus 28 workshops, and a host of poster sessions, roundtables, exhibits, publications, and more. The largest national conference on assessment in higher education is brought to you by the AAHE (American Association for Higher Education).
Those of us who spend too much time watching late-night cable TV cannot help but recognize this announcement as a kind of infomercial. It is jazzy in a studied way. We are invited to a huge number of sessions plus a (virtually Miltonic) host of other possibilities, “and more” at this, “the largest national conference” ever. The conference title, “Assessment as Evidence of Learning: Serving Student and Society,” succinctly summarizes the assessment movement today. Its five key terms merit particular attention.

- **Evidence:** Assessment takes its meaning only in relation to an act of persuasion of some kind. While its uses can be multiple, its defining purpose originates from concerns external to the work of programs.

- **Learning:** What matters in assessment—what it is that is going to be assessed—is student learning. That seems to me an unchallenged presupposition of all assessment—not just student assessment but program assessment as well.

- **Serving Student and Society:** Educational benefits are understood to derive from acts of service. Serving students means making sure they learn and helping them to learn; it is impossible to quarrel with this goal per se. Serving society also means making sure that students learn. Coming last, in the position of rhetorical prominence, serving society also subsumes the category of serving students. That is, making sure students learn is ultimately not a service to students but rather a means to serve society. That relationship affects what it is we think they should learn, and even how.

There then follows a letter from Catherine Wehlburg, a Senior Associate of the AAHE Assessment Forum (ellipses are in the original).

Dear Colleague:

If you were to ask ten different administrators and faculty members “what does assessment mean to you?” you would probably get fifteen different answers. To some, assessment is a tool for accountability. For others, assessment provides information about student outcomes that can be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

The 1999 AAHE Assessment Conference is an opportunity to further clarify the important roles for assessment. . . . To examine how different types of assessment can serve the student, the institution, state boards, policymakers, and accreditors. . . . To determine how these different types of assessment can coexist to provide the necessary information to all constituents.

Most faculty are likely to applaud the idea that ten respondents would have fifteen different answers to the question of assessment’s meaning; such a response suggests a sense of the complexity of the topic and even suggests that it is okay to feel ambivalent about it. Unfortunately, the actual conference doesn’t reflect as many opt-
tions, although it strongly reflects the two Ms. Wehblurg mentions explicitly: "a tool for accountability" and a way of getting "information about student outcomes." This narrowness is troubling, but perhaps less troubling than the fact that, again, assessment is envisioned as service, specifically to "the student, the institution, state boards, policymakers, and accreditors." Those served include faculty members only to the degree that faculty identify themselves as an unnamed but presumably implied part of "the institution." As one reads through the program, there appears to be little room for those who do not so identify, a narrowness conveyed in restricting inquiry to "clarifying" the role of assessment. Of course, I am in favor of clarifying, but at this conference one does not seem able to go beyond it. If a participant, for example, were interested in examining how different types of assessment can not serve the student, or the institution, or if she were suspicious of those mechanisms of assessment intended to serve state boards and policymakers, she would not find a session to attend. I do not mean to single out either state boards or policy makers as special objects of suspicion, but wish only to question purposes of assessment, defined as "information" provided to "constituents," that are too narrowly focused on values outside of the institution and extraneous to the intellectual work of academic programs.

The world of assessment is a world whose vocabulary is foreign to most faculty. The words that dominate the conference's self-presentation are these and their cognates (parentheses indicate number of times used): assessment (194), learning (71), measure (7), collaboration (6), teamwork (5), and portfolio (15). The conference program does occasionally introduce terms that I consider necessary in any conversation about students and their work—words such as create, engage, mind, and study. But it is telling to note how these words (each appears only once in the entire program) are used:

- "This workshop is for faculty interested in creating their own Web-based surveys."
- "You will actively engage in activities that demonstrate how methods can be applied."
- "Exploding Minds and Other Hazards of 'Really Learning' " (session title)
- "Session W-10 will close with discussion of a case study."

And then there are some words that would seem to be unmentionable, words that appear nowhere in the entire program for the conference: intellect, intelligence, imagination, wonder, contemplation, truth, inquiry, and collegiality. How is it possible, I ask, to have conversations about students, to think about what we are doing for them and with them, without once mentioning these terms? What is going on?

What is going on is what is generally now called "institutional renewal." To explore this curious phenomenon, I want to look at the Web page from the Association
of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), perhaps the most “faculty friendly” organization in or around One DuPont Circle. At the main menu of AACU’s Web page, you will find not a listing of self-congratulatory projects but rather a list of fundamental purposes, among them:

- mobilizing collaborative leadership—for educational and institutional effectiveness
- building faculty capacity—in the context of institutional renewal
- strengthening curricula—to serve student and societal needs

It would be hard to dissociate myself from these goals or purposes; I am in favor of leadership dispersed widely, of faculty and their capacities, and of a stronger (or at least better) curriculum. You can sign me up for all those things, despite the paramilitary (mobilizing, building, strengthening) diction.

What really concerns me is a process that seems to be taking faculty out of the picture of higher education, or putting us to the side, even putting us aside. I don’t imagine this to be a purpose of AACU. But notice the language elaborating a “mobilized collaborative leadership.”

[AACU] believes that the most important outcomes of a college education result from purposeful, engaged, and cumulative learning. The curriculum as a whole and the institution as a whole are the most powerful teachers. Significant cultural, economic, and technological forces demand academic change, and academic leaders must direct campus attention not just to strong instructional programs but also to ones that are forward-looking and cost-effective.

I do not believe, for example, that the curriculum and the institution are the most powerful teachers. Teachers, in classrooms, with their students, are the most powerful teachers. And while I do not deny that there are cultural, economic, and technological forces demanding that universities change, I do worry about putting them in the same sentence, as if there is some equivalency (for example) between incorporating cultural diversity and accommodating economic pressures. Most important, though, it is the way that universities encounter these forces that concerns me. How do we define our response? Who gets to be involved in defining that response?

If we look closely at the elaboration of the next goal, concerning the faculty’s place in “institutional renewal,” we can see that faculty members have only a negligible role.

Faculty bring trained intelligence and practical application, honed by experience of teaching and participation in academic life, to the mission of higher education in American society. Transformations in society challenge higher education institutions and require of them creative adaptations to new circumstances.
There is reason enough to be concerned simply by the narrow way “faculty capacity” is understood as a combination of “trained intelligence and practical application”; this definition hardly exhausts, and in fact captures only a tiny portion of the intellectual work of faculty (as we shall see more clearly in the next section of this essay). But the more significant issue here is what “faculty capacity,” however understood, is for: it serves, we learned earlier, the institution’s “forward-looking and cost-effective” instructional programs.” It is of course desirable for universities to be forward-looking; and they operate on budgets. But reducing the intellectual work of faculty and students to the parameters of an “instructional program” substitutes managerial efficiency for educational seriousness. Values are upside down; indeed, the goal should be just the reverse. Not “building faculty capacity in the context of institutional renewal” but rather “defining institutional renewal in the context of faculty and student intellectual work.”

To bring these two institutional documents together, consider the first AACU goal in light of the cover letter for the AAHE Assessment Conference. Here are excerpts:

- AACU: “The curriculum as a whole and the institution as a whole are the most powerful teachers.”
- AAHE: “[A]ssessment provides information about student outcomes that can be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning. . . . [D]ifferent types of assessment can serve the student, the institution, state boards, policymakers, and accreditors.

What interests me here is the inscription of agency in education. Consider how these documents supply meaning for the simple but most important proposition: X educates Y for Z. One can see in these and other assessment documents that a shift in the agency of education is taking place, even at organizations that may not have this in mind. It seems to me that the “X” in the statement “X educates Y for Z” is increasingly becoming a program or process and that underlying this shift is the elevation of program managers as the real agents of education. “Instructional programs” and “the curriculum as a whole,” assessment as a personified process: these are the subject/agents. And I also suspect that in making programs and their managers the subject of our sentence, the verb “educates” gets slightly adjusted to mean “serve.” And the Z, in “X educates Y for Z,” is increasingly anything but the truth. I of course recognize a certain retrograde tendency in using the term “the truth.” It is just that, like most faculty I know, I have always thought (or misunderstood) that the purpose of a university was centrally about making knowledge and testing its truthfulness, and (more embarrassing this) I even thought that this making and testing happened not just in research but in teaching, that it was more or less what education was for.
The differences in agency can be charted through a comparison of key terms:

**Figure 2. Contrasting Models of Agency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programs as agents</th>
<th>Faculty as agents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Intellectual Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Critical Inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team/Collaboration</td>
<td>Collegiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Review (peer review)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurement</td>
<td>Study (self-study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Consequences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These columns offer a list of terms characterizing different ways of attributing agency within education. The terms on the left, it seems to me, effectively remove faculty from the process or at best make them marginal and functional. The terms on the right represent terms commonly used by, for, and about faculty members; these terms effectively ignore many of the concerns implied by the terms on the left. Because these are incommensurable vocabularies, translation is impossible. Higher education might therefore have to make a choice. What would that choice entail?

I do not have space here to develop fully all the possible meanings of the terms in the right column. Because the next section of this essay will attend particularly to the notions of intellectual work, critical inquiry, study and review, let me just say briefly here how I understand the notions of collegiality and consequences, in contrast to teamwork and outcomes, to be functioning in this framework. I understand collegiality as that tradition of respect and cordial relations that is indispensable to a culture of critical examination and dissent; but it is the critical inquiry, not the cordiality (named usually as collaboration and teamwork), that is of the essence to academic culture. The effects of education are outcomes only to the degree that they are basic and utilitarian; the term has no other meaning. Education has consequences not only in the sense of effects following logically and together, sustained over a period of time (indeed, a lifetime) but also in its more familiar, adjectival sense of consequential—that is, effects that are serious, powerful, and enduring.

**The Study and Review of Intellectual Work**

The intellectual work of faculty and students, conveyed in the right column, is of course always and by all said to matter. But it often does not really matter because prevailing models of assessment cannot do that work justice. Making intellectual work visible is extremely difficult because it ordinarily seems private and inaccessible; while
such work is acknowledged to be crucial, it is impossible to see in all its complexity and is so difficult to interpret and evaluate. Current models for discussing faculty work, even Ernest Boyer's, are not adequate. To restore the intellectual work of the faculty and students to the center of education and of its assessment, new explanatory models are required.

To clarify the kind of project I envision, I want to turn briefly to a report, *Making Faculty Work Visible: Reinterpreting Professional Service, Teaching, and Research in the Fields of Language and Literatures.* I had the privilege of helping to write this report as a member of the Modern Language Association's Commission on Professional Service. Our concern was with assessing faculty members, but it quickly became clear that dominant models of faculty assessment were constrained by categories not adequate to the faculty's intellectual work. It was necessary to find more effective ways to represent the work's complexity and range and to make both clear and central the intellectual values that would govern assessment. The report provides a model that can be extended to include the intellectual work faculty and students do together, which is my aim in this essay.

The MLA Commission recognized that the traditional representation of academic work as "research," "teaching," or "service" implicitly and inevitably ranks these faculty activities in order of esteem. The best representation of the current state of affairs might be the following chart:

**Figure 3. Current Faculty Activities Ranking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scholarship</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="chart.png" alt="Chart Image" /></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This chart makes publication (in certain venues) synonymous with scholarship and makes research a metonym for intellectual work. The model is hardly fictive; it reflects my own university's apportioning of value in the tenure process and in salary reviews. While this model is not consistent with claims made about ourselves in the college catalog, it is the way value is understood.

The weighting can differ at different institutions. At some liberal arts colleges, for example, teaching is given more weight than scholarship. But the structure of interpretation and assessment remains stable. The problem as the Commission saw
it was a model (and terms) that conflated value with kinds of work. In our judgment, the values of the academy are not adequately represented or expressed by the terms (and hierarchies) of research, teaching, and service. Some of us proposed the abandoning of these terms entirely. But they are so commonly employed that they really cannot be ignored; the Commission therefore decided to work with them for the sake of continuity and maximum usefulness. Even though these terms cannot be abandoned (or at least not yet), they can be clarified, so that they name not work but places where work occurs. That is, these terms helpfully name domains of labor and public dissemination, but they do not helpfully name the work itself. Our next step was to turn the distinction into a model for making connections.

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Figure 4. Revised Ranking Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Values</th>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
<th>Scholarship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borderline/ Mixed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and Professional Citizenship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The academic values are shown in the left column. Reading the grid beginning with the work of “academic and professional citizenship” to predominantly “intellectual work,” one moves from professionally useful activities with minimal intellectual effort, through a gray area where the ratio and importance of intellectual work varies, into work that is strongly intellectual. The remaining headings are sites where work of all kinds (intellectual work and the work of professional citizenship) is undertaken and disseminated. To use the common theater metaphor, these are not faculty “roles” but rather “scenes” or “settings” of faculty work.

In elaborating the model, the report specifies what might fall within particular categories. [See Figure 5.]

As you can see, some of the usual ways of assigning work to categories get revised. For example, in the old model, creating a new teaching program or directing a WAC program would have been located under service. Writing textbooks would have gone under scholarship. This model makes it possible to put such items where they belong at the same time as it recognizes their value.

The point of all this chart making is to connect academic value more clearly to the work that deserves recognition and the highest levels of encouragement and support. In Figure 5, the boxed and italicized work in each column, taken together, paint a pic-
ture of how one individual faculty member might lead an integrated and significant intellectual life. It seems to me that, to the extent that the work has intellectual worth, it should be rewarded. And it should be possible to do so without the usual stretching and pulling and crow-barring of inadequate categories just to do justice to the work.

Intellectual work, as defined here, refers to the various ways faculty members can contribute individually and jointly to projects of producing and testing knowledge. Here are some of the categories the report includes in its working definition:

- creating new questions, interpretations, frameworks of understanding;
- clarifying, critically examining, revising knowledge claims of others and oneself;
- connecting knowledge to other knowledge;
• preserving, restoring, and reinterpreting past knowledge;
• arguing knowledge claims in order to invite criticism and revision;
• making specialized knowledge accessible (to students, nonspecialists, the public);
• helping new generations to become active knowers themselves.

While these formulations might be inadequate, our aim was to try to describe the intellectual work of faculty members in ways that did not confine that work to one domain.

Take the example used a minute ago—the faculty member who is spending his/her time leading a strategic planning group, developing community action projects, directing a WAC program, and editing a journal. It seems to me that at least the first two items from the list would apply to all of these domains of work and the other items to most of the domains. Our hope was to make it possible to review with some clarity the quality of the journal editing or the WAC direction or the community action project and to reward them on the basis of the quality of the intellectual work involved, not the domain or site of the work. The examples are also meant to suggest a range of possibilities that allows work faculty do in classrooms, in meetings with community representatives, and many other places to receive credit.

Once this intellectual work can be seen, wherever it occurs, it can be studied and reviewed with rigor, according to norms generally recognized in the academy, such as these examples:

• skill, care, rigor, and intellectual honesty;
• heuristic passion for knowledge;
• originality, coherence, consistency, and development within a body of work;
• thorough knowledge and constructive use of important work by others;
• self-critical examination and openness to criticism and revision;
• sustained productivity over time.

The report's overriding concern is to make intellectual work, and not extraneous categories, the primary focus of assessment and to make important intellectual values the governing principle of assessment. It is with that concern in mind that I now turn to the assessment of writing programs and their intellectual work.

**The Intellectual Work of Faculty and Students**

As I have suggested earlier, there is no reason to restrict such considerations of intellectual work to faculty. They apply as well to students and to the work faculty and
students do together. Faculty members and students all participate in the common processes of inquiry, critical examination, and communication by which knowledge is continually produced, examined critically, and made public. At its heart, the university is the work that faculty and students do. It doesn’t include that work; it is that work. So the terms we use to represent their agency are critical. And instead of terms such as “outcomes,” “assessment,” “teamwork,” and even the venerable “learning,” I would propose those terms that characterize work and values involving a commitment to critical inquiry, collegiality, careful review, and serious study. Whatever the terms, the intellectual work and the values that underlie it should be the basis for setting goals for and assessing the education universities provide. As I noted earlier, we should define institutional renewal not in relation to values extraneous to the university but in terms of the work of inquiry and critical examination that faculty and students do together.

I would emphasize that the intellectual work and values I have been talking about are essential to writing programs. Writing programs can and should be among the places where this work and these values have their most significant institutional embodiment. Efforts to understand and judge the quality of programs should focus on the study and review of how the program creates a spirit of collegiality devoted to critical inquiry—the producing and testing of knowledge. In other words, we should take the work of writing programs not as a prelude to the work of higher education, but rather as the epitome of what is most important about higher education.

If we thought of writing programs in this way, what would their assessment mean and how would we go about it? Where would it be located within higher education? Who would undertake it? For what purposes? My response to these questions takes the form of five principles guiding the kind of evaluation that will both in the short term and the long term benefit writing programs and enhance the work they do.

1. The writing curriculum should be built from the intellectual interests of faculty and students.

2. Faculty should be encouraged and helped to take ownership of their own courses and the writing program.

3. Writing programs enact, even epitomize—and do not simply prepare people for—the intellectual work of the university.

4. Writing seminars entail assessment as part of their intellectual work; assessment should be integrated within and during, not outside and after, the intellectual work of the faculty and students.

5. Writing programs should help faculty develop a sense of responsibility not only for the teaching of writing but for the continuing study and review of its quality.
The Writing Curriculum Should Be Built from the Intellectual Interests of Faculty and Students

The curriculum should originate from the faculty's and students' intellectual interests and the intellectual work they will do together, not from some hypothesis concerning "learning outcomes." It is always best to envision the curriculum of the writing program as a work in progress and a federation of separate, sometimes converging and sometimes competing, intellectual interests operating at the highest level.

Of course, there may be some reasonable concern that the issues and material of greatest interest to the faculty might be inaccessible to first-year students, who are unprepared to enter into such advanced deliberations. But one might reasonably argue that being "unprepared" for the expectations of the faculty defines what it means to be a student, especially at the general education level. To the extent that they are committed to responsible educational practices, all courses accommodate this gap between the work that characterizes the discipline and the work that students come already prepared to do. First-year writing courses, because they pay such thoughtful attention to the importance of student writing and students' active participation in the course, act in especially responsible ways to address this problem. Because (as I say) it is a problem intrinsic to university work, the first-year course plays a crucial role, because gaps and differences are not only addressed but also considered, made the object of thought and study.

But I also wish to examine this concern from a different perspective. One dimension of the problem being raised here is the way institutions imagine their students, specifically the way students disperse themselves throughout the multiple course sections available. In this regard, institutional context is all important. If, for example, one wishes to regularize the composition curriculum, so that it can be taught with uniformity across the multiple sections, then one will choose or be forced to imagine students as basically homogeneous. Apart from remedial prerequisites, each section will be constructed uniformly so that it can accommodate the interests and experiences of almost anyone who shows up. This model is safe and even reassuring. Moreover, it is teacher-proof: even new and unprepared instructors can be hired to teach its courses.

Where budget constraints and other political issues make such a model necessary, there is little, I suppose, that can be done. The mistake is universalizing this way of imagining students so that other possibilities—in different institutional contexts—are suppressed. It does not have to be this way.

It is important to remember that students bring to higher education a rich array of personal interests and intellectual resources, some of them highly specialized, even eccentric. This consideration governs not just the resources that students bring but
where they choose to bring them. It is true that, randomly selected, a classful of students may not reasonably be expected to be either ready or eager for any number of the highly focused, intellectually exciting courses that emerge from faculty specializations. But the general and vague question—will “students” be interested in this?—is simply the wrong question. The better question is much more specific: Can the entering class of the college or university yield twenty or twenty-five students for whom a particular topic, however advanced and difficult, might be not just interesting but exciting? And, given their interest and excitement, is this course not perhaps the best way for them to learn to write?

*Faculty Should Be Encouraged and Helped to Take Ownership of Their Own Courses and the Writing Program*

To make writing organically formative of university life and not simply a prerequisite, faculty development has to be equally “organic,” emerging from conversations with the faculty and not directions for them or instructions to them. If writing programs want faculty in other disciplines to become interested in what they might learn from us, then we need first to become interested in what they do. Indeed, we need to learn from them even more than they learn from us.

While all faculty teaching in a first-year program need to have a shared understanding of the guidelines covering the program’s courses, these guidelines simply clarify specific responsibilities; they do not define the work or the program. Rather, faculty in various disciplines should be encouraged to work collaboratively with one another to create the courses that constitute the first-year writing program. With the help of experienced teachers and writing program leaders, the program’s curriculum would be understood as coming into being through this dialogue; it is the consequence of the work faculty do both alone and together. The standards governing its practice would be the multiple, sometimes competing, and always evolving standards that come into play in any complex university-wide intellectual project.

*Writing Programs Enact, Even Epitomize—and Do Not Simply Prepare People for—the Intellectual Work of the University*

Because the teaching of writing is among the most serious matters, it must be governed in both its practice and its evaluation by the highest expectations for the intellectual work required of faculty and students alike—critical inquiry, close study, constant review, and attention to consequences, all in the spirit of collegiality. The work and values charted in the MLA report might serve as a basis for realizing this goal.
I have said earlier that the categories most useful in the perception, interpretation, and evaluation of intellectual work are incommensurate with the reductive categories now commonly deployed to assess education. But the terms listed in the preceding chart, although developed with respect to a wide range of disciplines and intellectual work, are fully commensurate with the work of writing programs. In ways transportable to many disciplinary and interdisciplinary projects, the categories of work embrace the activities of inventing, revising, synthesizing, arguing, interpreting, and learning actively through writing. The categories of value go even further to recover and articulate why writing matters so much to the intellectual vitality of higher education. They focus not merely on avoiding dishonesty but on aspiring to intellectual honesty—care, rigor, self-questioning, and the constructive use of others' work. They emphasize the place of passion in education—a concept that cannot quite be grasped by looking at outcomes, even "affective" outcomes. They remind us that, if we take seriously the ideal of "lifelong learning," we are committed to enabling sustained intellectual productivity, not just receptivity. And they celebrate a genuine openness to revision, not as a strategy in paper production but as a dimension of collegiality within an intellectual culture that values originality, self-critical examination, and dissent.

*Writing Seminars Entail Assessment as Part of Their Intellectual Work; Assessment Should Be Integrated Within and During, Not Added Outside and After, the Intellectual Work of the Faculty and Students*

As I have argued, many current models of assessment constrain and even harm the intellectual work of students and faculty and so defeat the fundamental mission of
the university. The work is not for assessment; assessment, by which I mean critical study and review, is for the work and has an important place in the work. For example, it is critical to any effort at revision and any process of teaching revision; it helps students understand how to undertake that and other kinds of work more effectively; it provides students with a perspective on the quality of their work that can enhance the work.

These purposes of assessment are intrinsic to the work of the writing program and the courses offered within it. To undertake assessment understood in this way, as critical examination enabling productive work, it is hardly necessary or even desirable for the teacher to assume total responsibility for it, and indeed it should be the responsibility of others in the class as well, including peer review and each student's critical self-study. In this regard, assessment is valuable and authorized because helping students to develop a set of standards is a crucial purpose of the writing course, one of the things necessary in order to do the work of the course. In other words, the course is not driven by assessment, but assessment is driven by, or rather organically related to, the purposes of the course and is incorporated within the course as something to be studied, critically examined, disputed, and most of all contextualized. Such an understanding is a corollary of the view that writing courses are organically connected to the intellectual work of the university and may even be said to epitomize that work.

*Writing Programs Should Help Faculty Develop a Sense of Responsibility Not Only for the Teaching of Writing but for the Continuing Study and Review of Its Quality*

It is my argument that the most neglected aspect of assessment is staffing; assessment begins with recruitment—hiring, if you will. In the final analysis, writing programs are renewed and made effective by a process of recruiting and retaining the most intellectually serious teachers, carefully reviewing their credentials and commitments, and choosing those who will do the work most effectively. So the assessment of the worth of a program needs to focus, not entirely of course but still centrally, on how that program selects and keeps those who will teach the courses, provides them the support they need to work effectively, and empowers them to create out of their own intellectual interests and work the highest quality of education.

Given this understanding of the way assessment works for and within the intellectual purposes of the course, program review should focus primarily on the faculty, specifically the intellectual work in which they engage and with which they engage their students. The quality of the faculty's study and review of student learning will be a factor in program review, and faculty should demonstrate that they have developed sound professional practices for informing students about the quality of their work and the progress of their education. Although enabling students to undertake
rigorous work is the goal of teaching, student performance should never be—as an independent and separately assessed measure—the primary consideration in program review. Moreover, the evaluation of students (i.e., the study and review of student work) is the sole province of the faculty member who teaches them.

More generally, because the faculty who teach in the program are responsible for continuing self-study and peer review, they must be responsible for the assessment of it. That is, the review of a writing program ought not only to be most concerned with those who are teaching writing but also concerned with involving them centrally in the process of evaluating the quality of the program. Just as the students who enroll in the courses are invited to make the work their own, so the faculty who teach the courses must be invited to make the program their own. If for no other reason, they are therefore the ones who by right and obligation should evaluate its worth. This evaluation in itself be intellectual work, a self-study and critical review undertaken collegially and concerned with the most serious consequences of the program, not only for students but also for the sustained commitment of the faculty.

Finally, I would argue, faculty members have an obligation to undertake this work. While I have emphasized the importance of giving faculty members a central role in the governing and assessment of writing programs, it is even more urgent now that faculty commit themselves to embracing this role. Faculty need to recognize the program’s defining place in the curriculum—its way of conceptualizing and publicly representing the purposes of higher education. They need to appreciate and strengthen the critical role writing programs could (but often do not) play in resisting the corporatization of the university and the commercialization of knowledge. For these reasons alone, faculty should more than ever devote themselves to this work—particularly to teaching the first-year course—and to participation in directing and assessing this defining moment of the university curriculum.

NOTES


2. I am happy enough with many of the statements emerging from my own professional associations (Conference on College Composition and Communication; Council of Writing Program Administrators; the Association of Departments of English). Although predictable and perhaps even self-serving, their official statements on assessment are particularly strong in recognizing the importance of professional knowledge in the development of assessment mechanisms.

3. A brief note on terminology: I pigheadedly keep referring to the teachers of these first-year courses as faculty members. Colleagues who heard me give a version of this article as a lecture mentioned that talking about “comp instructors” as “faculty members” was (variously) “inaccurate,” “inappropriate,” and “untrue.” I suppose that it is each of these things, but I retain the term because (1) I actually think faculty should be doing this work, (2) they do in more places than we realize, and (3) the kind of writing course and
writing program I advocate may have something to do with changing how we perceive and even recognize all those who teach these courses.


5. This report originally appeared in Profession 96 (New York: MLA, 1996: 161–216). It is also available as a separate monograph from the MLA. I have adapted some of the report’s charts for this article. I want to recognize the contributions made by my Commission colleagues Claire Kramsch (Chair), Phyllis Franklin, Robert Denham, Janet Swaffar, John Rassias, and especially Louise Phelps, whose thoughtfulness energized and guided us all. I am considering this report here primarily because I think assessment in general and writing program assessment in particular can benefit from the process we followed and from many of the conclusions we drew. I would add that, for reasons I will develop in the section on intellectual work, writing programs can offer privileged views of the intellectual work of faculty and students and so can become a vehicle for refining and improving processes of assessment.