

Surfing the sea change: Academic leaders pool their knowledge on building assessment programs

By Sarah B. Drummond

Over the course of less than a generation, the focus of educational evaluation in higher education has shifted from teachers and institutions to learners and their impact on their fields. As logical and positive as this shift may be, for theological schools it represents nothing short of a sea change.¹

Most theological schools are still at the front end of the transition into this new way of assessing educational quality. Many theological schools' educational infrastructures are not built to withstand the sea change and must be rebuilt far beyond the invention of an outcomes assessment program. New leaders are emerging, however, who understand the challenge of

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this new form of educational evaluation, see its promise for reforming institutions, and wish to work together to help theological schools face this new reality.

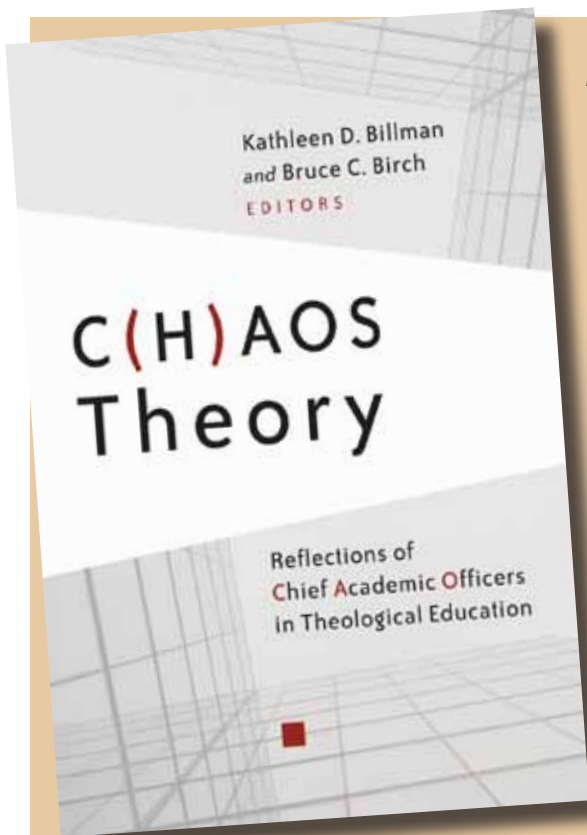
An assessment summit?

Cynthia² is a member of the faculty and associate dean at a divinity school in the northeast.

More than a year ago, she agreed to serve as the self-study chair for her school's upcoming comprehensive evaluation, held jointly with The Association of Theological Schools and the regional accrediting body. Having worked in theological education for many years, Cynthia did not underestimate the complexity of the task. She mapped out a careful approach to outcomes assessment and for securing the necessary administrative support and faculty buy-in. As she implemented the plan, however, she encountered setbacks that left her puzzled and occasionally frustrated.

During a lull in the academic year, she visited a friend on the campus of another divinity school. While meandering the halls, she stumbled upon an office nameplate that stopped her in her tracks. "Dean of Assessment" was the title underneath Bob's name. Cynthia had neither met nor heard of Bob, and she had certainly never heard of a role like dean of assessment. She rapped on the door with both curiosity and hope. Cynthia and Bob began a conversation that day that left both feeling that institutional leaders responsible for assessment at theological schools need opportunities to talk with one another about the distinctive challenges they face.

Within just a few days of that conversation, Bob and Cynthia extended an invitation to assessment-oriented leaders in theological schools in their region to gather for discussion, something like an assessment summit. Even though the gathering they proposed would take place on relatively short notice and at a particularly busy time of year, the response was overwhelming: leaders wanted to talk to one another. With Bob serving as host, and Cynthia and Bob facilitating discussion, eleven leaders gathered, representing eight institutions: Five were academic deans, three were faculty members with responsibility related to upcoming or recent accrediting evaluations, one was a dean of assessment, one was a chief financial officer, and



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one was a trustee with a high level of responsibility for a self-study underway.

The agenda for the day reflected the knowledge Cynthia and Bob brought to the conversation related to assessment leadership:

- ♦ Developing goals that can be articulated as outcomes, rather than simply focusing on educational processes
- ♦ Identifying and collecting data that relates to the assessment of goals and determining who will review the data
- ♦ Program-level assessment: how to close the loop, engage faculty, and invite reflection

Participants shared in advance one-page summaries on the current state of affairs in assessment in their respective institutions. They then engaged in discussion, sharing points of tension and—in some cases—aggravation. They helped one another with problem solving while affirming one another's struggles and offering encouragement and understanding.

Perhaps one of the most telling attributes of the discussion Cynthia and Bob led was that facilitators began by carefully delineating confidentiality expectations. One cannot talk about designing and implementing a plan for assessment without airing dirty laundry—that is, sharing with one another the places where the institution is not functioning well. Considering that the institutions represented in the gathering could easily be described as competitors, a high level of trust was necessary for this discussion to take place at all.

The tug of war

The leaders who gathered for this discussion are different from one another in many ways. They hold different positions in their institutions with varied levels of administrative and academic authority. Their institutions differ as well, with some from university-rooted divinity schools and others from smaller, independent institutions. One characteristic all shared, however, was

an understanding of what it is like to be wedged between stakeholders who often do not understand one another and outcomes assessment.

On one side of the tug of war, they have accrediting bodies. Peer reviewers representing accrediting bodies tend to be knowledgeable about assessment and the way in which educational evaluation has shifted its emphasis onto outcomes. When peer evaluators view schools from afar and through brief immersions, they can see quite easily what is *not* happening. They expect integrated assessment plans, where every link in the chain—from courses, to degree programs, to the mission of the institution—hangs together. When they do not see that integration, they make a note of it. In fact, one of the schools represented at the assessment summit had received a notation in a recent peer review for a lack of cohesion in its assessment program.

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On the other side of the tug of war, they have the faculty. Faculty members tend to resist institution-wide outcomes assessment, and how to bring them aboard was a theme in the assessment summit. Why are faculty members resistant? Perhaps they wish to work independently, perhaps they fear what it would mean if their students were not learning as much as they should, or perhaps they worry about the now-and-future theological school and how much they will have to change as institutions change. Many faculty members see assessment as something imposed upon the institution from outside—from accreditation bodies in particular—and academic leaders must work hard to

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Building a program

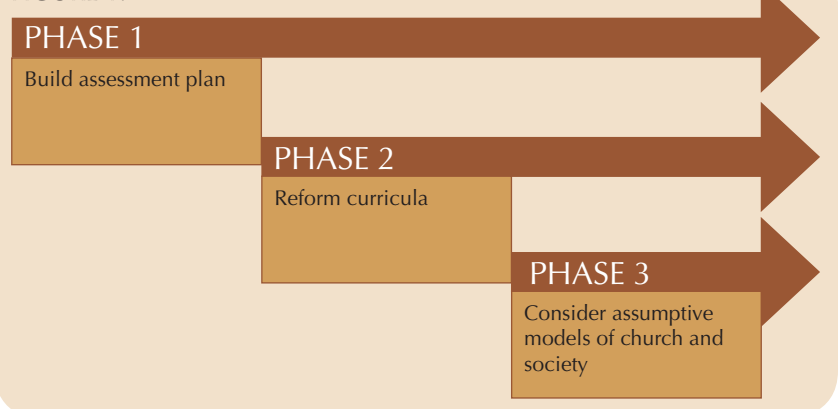
Participants in the assessment summit represented institutions at varied points in building an assessment plan. Each described a building process that included numerous phases, and leaders described moments of feeling utterly stumped. An example of a dilemma participants shared related to setting outcome goals. The following are some questions stemming from this dilemma:

- ♦ Where should the goals for a curriculum originate?
 - » If they come from the administration, how can administrators foster faculty ownership?
 - » If they emerge at a grass-roots level, how can they be incorporated into the institution's infrastructure?
- ♦ No matter where goals originate, how can processes weather delays and roadblocks inherent to communal discernment?
- ♦ To what extent does it matter that stakeholders understand the difference between a goal, an outcome, and an artifact?

Different schools patterned their program-building efforts in ways that made sense in light of limited resources, institutional cultures, and overstretched schedules. Similarities among processes easily outstripped differences, however.

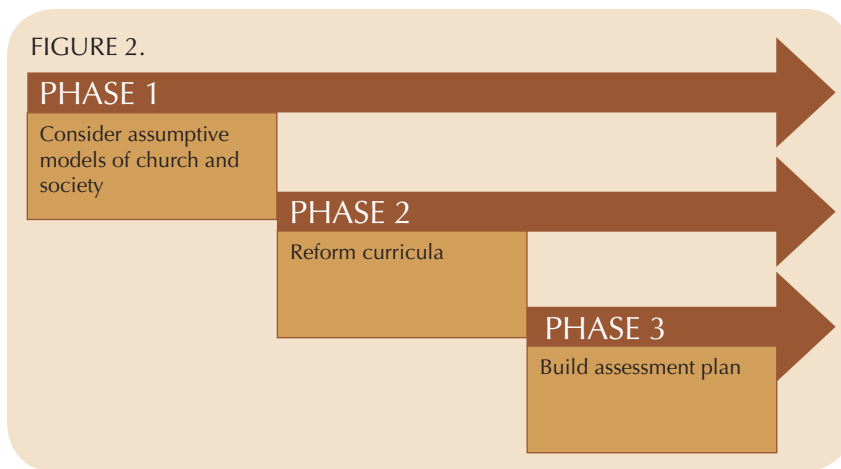
A key question that emerged from the assessment summit related to the sequence of discussions in the assessment program-building process. Most schools that took building an as-

FIGURE 1.



assessment plan seriously linked that process with curriculum reform. They started with assessment program creation, then moved to curriculum reform, but then began to question the assumptions they were making about the state of the church and requirements of ministry. (See Figure 1.)

Although the above sequence was the *de facto* course of action for most schools, participants in the assessment summit would agree that, in an ideal world, the order should be reversed. (See Figure 2.)



Several participants described a disconnect in their institutions where superimposing an assessment plan on an existing curriculum had backfired. The hope might have been to integrate assessment across the institution, linking courses with degree programs with mission, but ultimately the integration was ineffective, in part, because it was forced. One school in which the academic dean described the faculty as “obsessive” about the meaning and impact of its work found itself unable to translate its reflective practices into the language of assessment: “[O]ur assessment failed to mention those very things that are our waking passions.” Participants agreed that compelling faculty members to append learning goals to syllabi, and other practices meant to foster integration, tend to give assessment a bad rap and raise defensiveness.

Hope for the future

Some participants in the assessment summit whose institutions have engaged in formal outcomes assessment for more than three years described signs of hope. First, some named turn-

over in the faculty as a hopeful prospect. New faculty members who arrive on campus when an assessment plan is in place do not have to unlearn old, and thus relearn new, perspectives on evaluation. Second, faculty members do get used to new ways of thinking about evaluation over time. As they understand the perspectival shift better, those who resisted at first can come to embrace outcomes assessment. Third, as feedback loops develop over time, institutions can improve based on the learning generated by student learning assessment, and those results

provide encouragement to stay the course in assessment program building.

Institutional leaders charged with student learning assessment have much to gain from connecting with one another. Those who participated in the assessment summit found joy in *not* having to explain to each other some of the challenges of the role, the peccadilloes of faculties, the occasionally unre-

alistic expectations of peer reviewers, and the strains on theological education as a whole. To come out of the weeds of outcomes assessment planning, programming, and monitoring helped participants to take stock of their own work and receive the encouragement of colleagues. ♦

Sarah B. Drummond is dean of the faculty and vice president for academic affairs at Andover Newton Theological School in Newton Centre, Massachusetts.



ENDNOTES

- 1 See Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 49.
- 2 The names of consultation participants and their institutions have been changed or concealed.