

# Reimagining Assessment in Theological Education (via the Appalachian Trail)

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*ABSTRACT: This essay will explore how we might reclaim assessment from interpretations and practices that make it seem compliance-driven, technical, and reductive, and will instead propose a way forward that emphasizes stewardship, curiosity, and care. By exploring how assessment can be used to preserve and enhance well-loved resources like the Appalachian Trail, this essay will offer reframing strategies that can help us claim assessment and evaluation as activities appropriate to and worthy of theological educators.*

As a child, I didn't dream of becoming an accreditor or an assessment specialist. Even now, I don't always wake up in the morning feeling particularly excited to be doing accreditation or assessment—and I know I'm not alone. As I work with ATS schools, it's still a bit unusual to find administrators or faculty who look forward to their annual assessment days, or to collating and analyzing assessment data, or to preparing assessment reports. Even when I do find people who appreciate these processes,

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I still see them struggling to find a meaningful balance of time and energy, as well as philosophy and approach, in order to sustain this work. For many of us, assessment can feel like an externally imposed requirement, where outsiders like me harass overworked and underfunded

schools like you into preparing polished but meaningless statements of educational effectiveness, and where you feel forced into assessment plans that seem to take more time and energy than teaching itself.

During Dan Aleshire's tenure at ATS, our schools made huge progress in developing meaningful and contextually appropriate assessment strategies. The number of required reports on assessment has decreased

significantly, and the quality of assessment plans has dramatically improved. At the same time, however, governmental and other pressures have increased in ways that make this work even more challenging. We feel this in the increasing call for easily measured outcomes like graduation rates, placement rates, and loan default rate—and, while these numbers sometimes have value (you want to know if a particular category of students regularly fail to graduate or are unable to pay off their loans, for example), they are also sloppy ways to measure educational success (e.g., diploma mills typically have a 100% graduate rate, assuming one pays the appropriate fees). In addition, this emphasis on outcomes fails to attend to the nuances of theological education, including that, in our contexts, sometimes “success” is not our highest priority—both as we take risks with the widest possible range of students and also as we recognize that the best way to serve a student may be to help them recognize that their calling should take them elsewhere than seminary.

Accrediting agencies like ours also deserve some of the blame for assessment-fatigue, especially insofar as we have scared folks into doing more and more assessment work without helping them understand how to connect it to their missions and passions. It is telling that the 2012 revision of the ATS Commission Standards added the language of “simple and sustainable” to the stated expectations for assessment plans as a response to the proliferation of ones that were burdensome and unhelpfully complex. We might now understand assessment to be important, but we still struggle to engage it in meaningful and life-giving ways.

But back to my daydreaming. When I have a day off, or when I have the chance to fantasize about a life not taken, I picture myself as a serious hiker. In real life, I am simply a casual walker; my equipment consists only of good shoes, a hiking stick, and when I remember it, a water bottle. But, in spite of my own limits, I am in love with the Appalachian Trail (A.T.). On road trips or accreditation visits, I go out of my way for the chance to intersect the A.T., and my best days off are the ones where I get to spend part of a day following those two-inch by six-inch white blazes through Appalachian forests and alongside zig-zagging streams. In my spare time, I read stories of thru-hikers, learn about equipment, and enjoy hearing about best (and worst) practices. And on bad days, I imagine leaving everything behind except for what I can carry on my back, hitching a ride to Georgia, and taking up life as a thru-hiker on the Appalachian Trail.

As I write this, I recognize that hiking and/or daydreaming about the A.T. might not be your thing. My description of it might not even resonate with you. But I imagine that there is something that you care about

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deeply, something that you find fascinating or evocative outside of the world of theological education. Perhaps it is fishing, or quilting, or bicycling, or craft beer. Or maybe it's your family: nuclear or extended, by birth or by choice, human or pet. Perhaps it is more noble than the Appalachian Trail: world peace, racial justice, environmental attentiveness. Perhaps it is something less

noble but equally beautiful. In any case, I would invite you to think about that specific thing that pleases you, that calls to you, that matters to you. As I think and talk about the A.T., I would invite you to translate my images to ones that mean something to you. The key—which is something that Dan Aleshire modeled so completely—is that we need to begin by caring deeply, and then follow where that leads us.

The thesis for my essay is that assessment works when we do it out of love, curiosity, and stewardship—not out of bureaucratic obligation, out of defensiveness, or to appease external audiences. When I give presentations about educational assessment, I talk about it as the intersection of curiosity, passion, and expertise; I also suggest that assessment can (and should) be fun. But this can be hard for my audience to hear or believe, especially if their sense of educational assessment has been tainted by experiences that are bureaucratic, boring, or exhausting. It is hard to change mindsets when we start from such a heavy and depressing point. Consequently, rather than thinking about assessment in the midst of the pressures that have become so common in higher education, I would invite you to imagine it in relation to the Appalachian Trail (or whatever else you care about deeply). My hope is that this will give us a fresh start and may help us find new energy and images that lead us forward.

## Encountering the trail

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*One day's exposure to mountains is better than cartloads of books.*

~ *John Muir*, *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*

The National Park Service describes the Appalachian Trail as “a 2180+ mile long public footpath that traverses the scenic, wooded, pastoral, wild, and culturally resonant lands of the Appalachian Mountains.”<sup>1</sup> The trail winds its way from Katahdin Mountain in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia, crossing through New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. The trail was first proposed in 1921 and was completed in 1937, although “completion” is a bit of a misnomer because the trail shifts a bit every year as land-rights change, as trail councils address issues of erosion and environmental damage, and as hikers create shortcuts or switchbacks. In fact, no one knows the exact distance of the A.T. from end to end because it is constantly in flux. Today, the majority of the trail is on public land and is managed by the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), numerous state agencies, and thousands of volunteers.

It is estimated by the ATC that three million visitors hike some portion of the Appalachian Trail each year—mostly via day hikes and short backpacking trips—and that many of these access the trail from well-known and high-traffic areas.<sup>2</sup> Those who hike the entire A.T. in 12 months or less are called thru-hikers; others choose to engage the trail as section-hikers, only hiking one portion at a time, and often taking years (or decades) to complete the entire trail. The ATC hosts a voluntary registry of hikers; from this, they observe that, while thousands of hikers attempt a thru-hike each year, only about one in four makes it all the way. The ATC describes thru-hiking as “a grueling and demanding endeavor” that “requires great physical and mental stamina and determination.”<sup>3</sup> The trail is often rocky,

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1 National Park Service, [www.nps.gov/appa/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/appa/index.htm).

2 Appalachian Trail Conservancy, [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org).

3 Appalachian Trail Conservancy, [www.appalachiantrail.org/home/explore-the-trail/thru-hiking/faqs](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/home/explore-the-trail/thru-hiking/faqs).

is regularly muddy, and sometimes involves fording dangerous streams; overall, the elevation gain and loss from end to end is roughly equivalent to hiking Mount Everest from sea level and back 16 times. Given all this, it may be surprising to learn that more than 18,000 hike completions have been recorded since records were first kept in 1936,<sup>4</sup> that completions have been recorded by hikers of all ages and abilities, and that hikers regularly describe the A.T. as “one of the most rewarding, exhilarating, and memorable ways you can spend six months of your life.”<sup>5</sup>

## Assessing the trail

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*There are three things: to walk, to see, and to see what you see.*

*~ Benton MacKaye, An Appalachian Trail:*

*A Project in Regional Planning*

Until recently, if you had asked me about the relationship between assessment and the Appalachian Trail, I would only have named the kinds of assessment that tend to be done by the individual hiker herself. These sorts of “assessments” have captured the public imagination, too, in such books-turned-movies as *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed or *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson. Folks who are considering a thru-hike might spend a year or more planning their trips, setting goals for their physical conditioning, researching and acquiring their gear, and so on. In each of these areas, they need to assess when they have done enough preparation to begin, as well as engage in ongoing assessment about whether and how to change their plans. For example, most thru-hikers discard some of their gear along the way as they discover what they don’t need, or swap out their equipment for lighter or more waterproof options. Three out of four hikers who begin a thru-hike will abandon it. This, too, itself suggests a sort of self-assessment: Do I have the energy to complete this? Will my blisters get better? Is this what I want to be doing right now? These sorts of self-assessments remind me of those done by our students: Should I enroll? Which degree should I take? Can I complete this? They also remind me of how an

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4 Appalachian Trail Conservancy, [www.appalachiantrail.org/home/community/2000-milers](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/home/community/2000-milers).

5 Appalachian Trail Conservancy, [www.appalachiantrail.org/home/explore-the-trail/thru-hiking/faqs](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/home/explore-the-trail/thru-hiking/faqs).

instructor might evaluate a course (What went well? What might I change next time around?) or how an institution might evaluate potential graduates (Do we affirm their academic abilities? Do we recommend them for ministry?). We are like hikers: setting goals, gathering data, raising questions, making decisions, and (sometimes) implementing change.

However, the kind of assessment we are called to do as theological educators is not only the assessment of or by the hiker. It is also the assessment of the trail. And, in fact, it is this latter kind of assessment that ATS requires of its member schools, through the process of accreditation. It almost goes without saying that the hiker will evaluate whether her pack is too heavy, whether her shoes are too small, whether she can make it to the final peak. But someone also needs to tend to the trail. For the Appalachian Trail, this level of assessment is embodied and enacted through local volunteer hiking clubs as well as umbrella agencies such as the ATC, which describes its mission as “to preserve and manage the Appalachian Trail—ensuring that its vast natural beauty and priceless cultural heritage can be shared and enjoyed today, tomorrow, and for centuries to come.”<sup>6</sup> Each of these clubs and groups, large and small, engages in assessment—and not the collection of random information that then gets stored in filing cabinets until an accrediting body asks for it, but an assessment grounded in intentional curiosity and care that helps them advance their missions. This is a level of assessment that hikers (and daydreamers) might never see, but it is essential to the quality of hiker experiences now as well as to protect the trail’s resources for the future.

For example, the ATC has recognized that it needs to attend not only to obvious threats to the trail (housing developments, climate change) but also to “a more nuanced, internal threat from the people who love the trail the most.”<sup>7</sup> With millions of visitors each year on the trail and with particularly heavy usage in iconic locations or near population centers, there is a need to balance competing interests—the more people use the trail, the more they love and support it; the more people use the trail, the more they harm and wear it out. This awareness has led to a variety of efforts that we might recognize as an assessment cycle. Based on its initial questions/

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6 Appalachian Trail Conservancy, [www.appalachiantrail.org/home/about-us/mission-vision-values](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/home/about-us/mission-vision-values).

7 Tenny Webster, “Hot spots: Evidence-based methods to uphold the health of a popular trail,” *A.T. Journeys*, Summer 2016, 22.

concerns (What's the current impact on the trail? How do we better protect the trail?), the ATC undertook significant data collection efforts (counting actual usage and measuring impacts such as tree damage, improper waste disposal, unauthorized campsites, and so on), analyzed the data, and then developed intervention strategies to respond to what they had discovered (a voluntary registry of thru-hikers, increased Leave No Trace educational efforts, additional locations for campsites). From here, the various agencies involved have been continuing to assess their efforts, to observe whether the efforts are having the desired impact on the trail (setting benchmarks for success and then evaluating whether they have met their goals) as well as to discern where the intervention strategies need to be adjusted (e.g., revising the registry to be more user friendly and to incorporate section and weekend hikers)—the infamous “assess the assessment plan.” An unexpected benefit of this work has been that it has not only served to preserve the integrity of the trail itself but has also improved the user experience, for example, by helping hikers find available campsites or solitude.<sup>8</sup> As with our schools, the assessment we do for the good of our institutions (and, for theological education more broadly) can also directly serve our students.

It is important to note that assessment is useful not only for preservation but also for progress. For example, one of the ATC's data-gathering initiatives has focused on the demographics of hikers. In 2014, they found that of approximately 3,000 registered thru-hikers, 28% were female; in 2016, of the hikers who reported race or ethnicity, 2% were Hispanic or Latino/a, 2.5% were Asian, and less than 1% were African American.<sup>9</sup> By gathering qualitative data from women hikers and hikers of color who describe experiences of harassment and discrimination on the trail and in the towns that surround it, stakeholders are better able to stage interventions and work toward change.<sup>10</sup> This, too, is the familiar cycle of assessment—asking questions, collecting data, analyzing data, implementing change, and assessing the results of these processes.

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8 Jessica Porter, “A PATHE to preservation,” *A.T. Journeys*, Winter 2017, 17.

9 Rahway Haile, “We go it alone,” *Outside Magazine*, May 2017, 96.

10 Tik Root, “Changing the Face of National Parks,” *National Geographic*, February 2017, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/02/diversity-in-national-parks/>.

## **Passion, curiosity, and expertise**

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*Travel by foot. There is so much you can't identify at top speed.*

*~ Cheryl Strayed, Brave Enough*

One thing that intrigues me about assessment in the context of the Appalachian Trail is that no one is telling the ATC or other agencies that they need to do assessment; in fact, most of the work is done by volunteers—and, eagerly so. Why is it that these folks take on assessment so enthusiastically and with such a clear sense of it as a meaningful and useful activity—and yet we struggle so much with it? As I noted earlier, when I give presentations about educational assessment, I talk about it as the intersection of passion, curiosity, and expertise. These three characteristics can be readily seen in the assessment strategies for the Appalachian Trail, and I see them as central to the success of their process and outcomes.

### **Passion**

The ATC folks engage in evaluation because they want the best for the trail and for those who use it. The trail exists almost exclusively due to the efforts of volunteers, with more than 250,000 volunteer hours recorded last year.<sup>11</sup> These volunteers give their time freely to help other hikers, to preserve the trail for the future, and even just to have an excuse to spend time on it themselves—and, as part of this, they recognize an interdependence of passions, where one volunteer might care deeply about one aspect of trail life (perhaps conservation) and another might care deeply about something else (perhaps advocacy). Together, these passions allow them to engage in assessment in ways that are fulsome and meaningful—not out of a sense of defensiveness or anxiety (the land will outlast them!) nor of going through the motions, but rather because they care about the trail and want the best for it, now and in the future.

### **Curiosity**

Because of their passion for the trail, volunteers and agencies want to understand it better and then to be able to make data-informed decisions. They are purposefully curious. Because they experience limited resources (money and volunteer hours), they have to prioritize their efforts—and

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11 Jessica Porter, "The soul of the Appalachian Trail," *A.T. Journeys*, Spring 2017, 10.

assessment helps them determine what is most pressing, and which efforts are most impactful.<sup>12</sup> Because they want to improve hiker experiences, they have to address sticky problems (e.g., how to reach communities of color, how to positively impact trail towns)—and assessment helps them here as well.<sup>13</sup> This sort of curiosity also draws on a sense of humility. Rather than drawing only on their own “hunches” (that tend to be skewed to one’s own perspective), this sort of curiosity allows them to ask interesting questions and then seek out data that might even prove them wrong—all for the good of the trail.

## Expertise

Because of their passion for and curiosity about the A.T., the people from the ATC and individual hiking clubs are—in many ways—the best ones to be defining the benchmarks and indicators for success as they evaluate the current state and future potential of the trail. This is not a time to listen only to those who are seeking to make money or who have other interests, nor only to those who have no idea of what the trail means to those who use it. Capitalists and bureaucrats, for example, might look only at the bottom line and suggest that a good outcome is to sell or rent parcels of land or to move the trail to areas that are less costly and also less scenic. It is important that assessment be driven by those who seek the best for the trail as a trail, who understand its history and potential, who recognize what it gives to those who use it, and who desire to preserve it while also making it even more accessible for a wider range of folks. At the same time, it is also important that these stakeholders recognize their own limits as far as assessment is concerned and that they embrace an interdependent perspective that draws not only on the experiences of thru-hikers but also on the expertise of those who bring a wide range of skills and gifts (scientists, publicists, fundraisers) and those who may be a bit contrary-minded and who allow the trail-fanatics to focus their efforts and sharpen their arguments.

These are likely not the only characteristics that contribute to the success (of process and outcome) of the assessment strategies used within the Appalachian Trail community, but these do offer us a glimpse of what

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12 Dennis Shaffer, “Landscapes of the Appalachian Trail,” *A.T. Journeys*, Winter 2017, 39.

13 Jessica Porter, “A PATHE to preservation,” *A.T. Journeys*, Winter 2017, 13.

a meaningful assessment process might look and feel like outside of the heaviness of educational assessment. Passion and interdependence, curiosity and humility, and expertise and limits—taken together, these form the foundation of healthy practices that help foster information-based decision making, integrity to stakeholders, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

## **Closing thoughts**

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*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.*

~ *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*, *The Little Prince*

As I noted at the beginning, I am aware that my readers might not care about the Appalachian Trail the way I do. But my hope is that the narrative here offers a glimpse of how assessment works (and works well) in this context, and that it might also resonate with whatever else you might care deeply about—including theological education. This combination of passion, curiosity, and expertise has the potential to ground our assessment work from the inside—not as bureaucratic or compliance-driven, but as something we do out of love and stewardship. When assessment works well at our schools, it carries this sort of beauty. It is grounded in a deep passion for our students, our institutions, our disciplines, our churches, and our communities. It is fed by a playful curiosity, a desire to learn, a bravery to ask and explore risky questions. And it is scaffolded by the wisdom and expertise that we bring to our work, particularly as those are based in the mission and context of our institutions as well as our own vocational journeys. If we can do assessment from these places—rather than out of fear, defensiveness, obligation, or boredom—I believe that our assessment process can be meaningful, energizing, and perhaps even fun.

I was surprised when Dan Aleshire invited me to join the ATS staff, and then again when I was asked to take the lead for our assessment work—I'm not very good at following rules or doing things because they're supposed to be done, and I never dreamed of being a bureaucrat. But then again, neither did Dan. In his book *Earthen Vessels*, as in so many other places, he grounds his work in an appreciation of theological schools (not a critique or suspicion of them), and he talks about assessment mattering because we care about the subjects we teach and we care about the people

and institutions our students will serve as graduates.<sup>14</sup> He invited us as staff colleagues to come and share this sense of appreciation, to embody

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it as we work with our schools, and to bring our own curiosities, passion, and expertise to this work. When he hired us, he knew the gifts and interests we each brought—and with me comes not only my academic and accrediting experience but also my love for trees and trails, for curiosity, and for exploration. My hope is that this not only continues to feed my own work but also can be a model

that helps our schools reclaim assessment and evaluation as activities worthy of theological educators.

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14 Daniel Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), xiii and 52.

