

Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered: Our Experiences with Assessment and the Tuning Project

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LIKE MANY PRIVATE colleges and universities during the recent deep recession, St. John's University undertook a process to reevaluate its mission and strategic priorities.¹ This collaborative process resulted in a document, "Repositioning the Strategic Plan," that served as something of a placeholder between St. John's pre-recession and post-recession strategic plans. This "Repositioning" document underscored the university's desire to address "the common challenge that emerged related to the cost/value of high education, defined as the ever-widening gap between the cost of higher education and its perceived value."² As we struggled to define the value of a St. John's education, many of us inquired, "How *do* we measure the value of a St. John's education? What indicators must we use? How does a university measure its success or assess its weaknesses?" In 2012, the Tuning Project came at an opportune moment for the History faculty at St. John's University, as it provided a way for us to respond to both internal conversations taking place on campus, as well as to contribute to national debates about the value of higher education.³ In this essay, we address how Tuning

helped us develop a culture of assessment within our department and in the St. John's University community.

As Dr. Jeffrey Fagen, Dean of St. John's College, wrote in support of our department's Tuning application, the challenges of measuring the value of an education were two-fold. The first was to document that students, in any major, achieve the learning goals that have been defined by the faculty in the discipline. The second challenge was to increase the number of students in all majors who do internships, and evaluate the effectiveness of these internships on students' learning and eventual job placement.⁴ The Tuning Project addresses both of these challenges because its purpose is to offer faculty the skills to create effective goals, outcomes, and assessment tools. Fortunately, the push for assessment and the Tuning project occurred at roughly the same time. Our participation in the Tuning Project had a profound impact on the History department, turning a core group of scholars into leading advocates for meaningful assessment.

Before Tuning

Prior to our engagement with Tuning, the department had been grappling with the central issues of assessment and pedagogy for years. Although we may not have acknowledged it, a group of us had already been engaging questions of assessment. In 2008, members of the department formed the World History Faculty Group (WHFG), comprised of full-time faculty, adjuncts, a member of the writing-center staff, and a research librarian; we met regularly to talk about best practices to teach the one history course that is part of the university's "Common Core" curriculum.⁵ During the spring semester of 2011, Carey asked the WHFG to create assessment tools for this history core class, History 1000C: Emergence of a Global Civilization, a survey of world history since 1500. This turned into a difficult exercise because the university did not have an institutional assessment officer or team to guide this process. The WHFG recognized that assessment was important; thus, there was no resistance. As a member of the WHFG group, however, Cooper noted that confusion centered around two key issues: what we should assess and for whom we were assessing it? These problems can perhaps be equated with two questions that group members found themselves tossing back and forth; although radically different, both

were indicative of our bewilderment with what we were tasked to do: “Does the student know where China is?” “What is it ‘they’ want?” (And, who was the “they?”).

We had initially agreed on six goals for this sole history course within the university’s core curriculum. In retrospect, however, we conflated goals and outcomes, which in itself reflected our ongoing struggles to differentiate knowledge and skills-based learning and assessment. The initial goals were:

1. Understand historical thinking and historical questions
2. Recognize primary sources, secondary sources, and rules of evidence
3. Recognize basic historical chronology
4. Know basic historical geography
5. Understand history as a process of change and continuity
6. Be able to critically analyze multiple diverse points of view

When the WHFG started to tackle this list by focusing on what we thought would be the easiest task, the fourth goal (historical geography), the group realized that things were not going to be easy. The sequence of our group discussion reveals the difficulties of determining what to assess, as well as how to assess what skill or discrete content knowledge we wanted our students to gain over the course of a semester. First, we discussed whether we were looking for just basic geographic knowledge as the world currently stands, or how places and spaces change over time, including those (e.g., nation-states, empires) that have come and gone. Our group evaluated various testing methods, including a pre- and post-test methodology that a group member used at the beginning and end of the course to see if students could locate thirty places that had been discussed in class. Our group considered various methods for administering such a test; for instance, which platform was better, Blackboard or Campus Guides? Would the test be administered during class, or asynchronously online?

Then we talked about what thirty places these might be; this discussion quickly led us to realize there was something awry with our planning. Group members had quite diverse opinions about what places students should know, although we could all agree on China. Our agreement on China became somewhat jokingly part

of the way we talked about the problem—the “Where is China?” question. Moreover, this was only one of the outcomes we had articulated; the WHFG would need to develop similar strategies for the other five outcomes on our list. We could end up with a test that took students at least ninety minutes to complete, twice a semester! And our results seemed self-evident, even before we had developed such an assessment tool. The first exam would serve to prove the expectation that the students were lacking knowledge; the second test would later demonstrate that they had learned something in class. But what a demoralizing way to start a course! The WHFG inched towards a test no one would want to write, no one would want to administer, no one would want to take, and no one would want to analyze. Before they realized it, they had actually gone several significant stages towards reinventing standardized testing—a million miles from where any of us wanted to be!

Our struggles to define what we wanted students to know and be able to do led to the second question the WHFG explored: “What is it ‘they’ want?” We just assumed that “they”—a mysterious force demanding assessment—would demand hard facts and figures that tested knowledge rather than skills. “They” would want comparable, repeatable tests that produced numbers, not words, which would have to be rewritten every year with new questions. “They” would then presumably use this data that we historians had painstakingly gathered to do something that might adversely affect our very positions and promotions. For the WHFG, assessment had become the bogeyman. As we slowly began to realize, however, it was time to take a deep breath and face our irrational fears. There was no “they,” except for a general institutional push towards developing assessment models, and *we, the historians*, were actually the “they”—for we were the ones who had been asked to help design our assessments. We had been invited to the conversation, to take a seat at the “assessment table.”

Tuning the St. John’s History Program

The department’s view on the need for assessment changed dramatically in a short period of time due to three events. First, during the academic year of 2011-2012, the provost’s office collected and, with department chairs, analyzed all the syllabi for all classes within the St. John’s “Common Core” curriculum. For Carey, this

was a startling revelation: there was an obvious lack of cohesion, goals, and outcomes within the common core curriculum. Second, our application to join the AHA Tuning group was accepted, and Carey attended the first Tuning meeting in Washington, D.C., where she learned more about assessment. Upon returning to New York, Carey and Cooper worked to create a sample syllabus for all adjuncts, faculty, and teaching assistants. Third, the department was compelled to confront its uncertainty about assessment when the university released a working report on the new Common Core Curriculum, in which History was no longer included. The department realized that it had to respond quickly and emphatically; thus, a smaller and very focused committee was formed.

By June of 2012, after attending the first Tuning meeting, Carey was bewitched. As a newly elected chairperson, she easily could relate Tuning to the increased attention to assessment at her university. The weekend in Washington, D.C. was a crash course in best practices. After the June meeting, Carey thought that the department might revisit its goals and outcomes for the B.A. degree in History and that this revision would serve as a springboard to tune the program. That focus changed during the Fall 2012 term, however, when history was omitted in the preliminary report for a newly conceived St. John's Common Core Curriculum.⁶ This working document was based on surveys and interviews with faculty and administrators; nonetheless, she and her colleagues were surprised by the disappearance of history from the Common Core, particularly with the global mission of the university and because the HIS1000C was one of the only classes with global content. Immediately, our historians sprang into the action using the initial Tuning and internal documents, as well as outside research, to consider and impart the importance of history. We all agreed that an introductory core history class was essential because it added to the skills of students, though it was clear by the report that we had not conveyed the value of education in history to others. We now realized that we had not thoroughly articulated our discipline's importance to a liberal arts education. More significantly, these internal studies led us to understand that we must do something to promote our existence within the university as the department most committed to the global component of the university's mission. A group of five historians responded to the call and we met over the next few weeks.

This smaller group of faculty took advantage of the school's closure following Hurricane Sandy to work some more on our assessment issues.⁷ We began by studying carefully the Tuning materials that Carey had brought back from Washington. The group took away three key lessons from the Tuning materials. First, we agreed that assessment had to be student-centered. Second, we needed to include general competencies alongside discipline-specific competencies in order to demonstrate the value of history education to administrative and academic colleagues at St. John's. Third, the different learning outcomes needed to relate to one another. Eventually, we had an "aha moment," when we decided to analyze what professors already do (and that we considered to be best practices), rather than invent some new chore to be the basis of assessment. Therefore, it seemed natural to create a rubric, a tool that was already an effective way of measuring abstract skills rather than merely factual knowledge. The use of rubrics in higher education has increased dramatically within the last few years, as educational researchers have demonstrated that they are tools of teaching *and* measuring learning. As the authors of one recent review of the literature on the use of analytical rubrics in higher education posit, "[u]sed as part of a student-centered approach to assessment, rubrics have the potential to help students understand the targets for their learning and the standards of quality for a particular assignment, as well as make dependable judgments about their own work that can inform revision and improvement." Additionally, studies have shown that the use of rubrics as teaching tools tends toward students' deeper engagement with the subject and greater skill development.⁸

We consulted the preliminary documents from the Tuning Project, and we interpreted those for a general education class. We looked at the learning goals and outcomes of the core course, including general competencies, and brainstormed all the various skills that we thought a great history common core course should be able to foster in students. Our brainstorming session proved to be an intensely creative activity that empowered us to think more broadly about the goals and outcomes of both the history degree and the specific History 1000C course in recent world history. We eventually consolidated our many ideas into five goals: Communication Skills, Information Literacy, Critical Thinking, Global and Diverse Perspectives, Historical Knowledge and Historical Thinking. We

History 1000C Goals, Outcomes, and Rubric for Historical Thinking

Goal

Ability to define history and the concepts various historical processes and perspective across global historical periods.

Student Learning Outcomes

The student is able to define history and what a historian does.

The student has acquired the informed acquaintance with the historical background of large-scale global developments necessary for investigating the workings and developments of modern society.

The student demonstrates an understanding of historical developments that does not rely on or challenges concepts of historical inevitability.

The student demonstrates an understanding of the historical process of cause and effect, as well as an understanding that events can have more than one cause, and can differentiate between background and immediate causes.

The student demonstrates an understanding of the processes of change and continuity in shaping events in both the short and long term.

| Level 5 | Level 4 | Level 3 | Level 2 | Level 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student can skillfully analyze historical trends and processes: including cause and effect relationships, multiple causation, and change and continuity in the events they are examining. | Student can successfully analyze historical trends and processes: including cause and effect relationships, multiple causation, and change and continuity in the events they are examining. | Student can adequately analyze historical trends and processes: including cause and effect relationships, multiple causation, and change and continuity in the events they are examining. | Student inadequately analyzes historical trends and processes: including cause and effect relationships and multiple causation, and change and continuity in the events they are examining. | Student is unable to analyze historical trends and processes: including cause and effect relationships, multiple causation and/or change and continuity in the events they are examining. |

Figure 1: Initial goals, outcomes, and rubric for historical thinking in History 1000C.

defined each of these goals and paired each goal with a list of demonstrable student learning outcomes. As we were writing these goals and student learning outcomes, we developed the rubric in tandem. For institutional assessment purposes, we wanted to be able to keep the rubric on one page. Thus, the wording on the rubric tries to encapsulate and compress the more detailed definition of the goals and outcomes (**Figure 1** includes our initial effort at defining the goals and outcomes and creating a rubric for the last of our goals, Historical Thinking, for our History 1000C course).

The compression of the outcomes in the rubric serves as the basis to meet the institutional demands of assessment and to work within the confines of assessment software used at St. John's. The longer statement of the student learning outcomes is how we as historians articulate the expectations for this one core course. We went on to "tune" first our B.A. and then our M.A. degree programs, defining increasing levels of sophistication and adding other competencies, including Research Skills and Professional Development (such as internships and other ways students might apply their knowledge). In other words, we have come to understand that the goals, outcomes, and rubric for this one core class—History 1000C: Emergence of a Global Civilization—will serve as the infrastructural stepping stone for "tuning" the undergraduate and graduate degrees in history. The department unanimously approved the revised goals, outcomes, and rubric; now faculty have a common guide of expectations for this specific course, as well as for courses taught at different levels, as we have used the History 1000C course goals, outcomes, and rubric as a yardstick against which to measure suitable goals and outcomes for higher-level courses.

In Fall 2014, when the St. John's Liberal Arts Faculty Council formed an Assessment Committee, Cooper (who chaired the committee) shared our work on Tuning with colleagues from across the liberal arts and science disciplines and the committee agreed to use our His 1000 goals a springboard to develop college-wide goals and a rubric. After a lot of discussion, a much-modified version of our initial course goals was voted in as the basis for program assessment across the array of departments that form our college. The criterion for this assessment has just four goals: Communication Skills; Information Literacy; Critical, Creative and/or Quantitative Thinking; and Research Skills and Professional Development. Thus,

while the AHA Tuning project sought to articulate “the central habits of mind, skills and understanding that student’s achieve when they major in history,” our circumstances-based decision to start Tuning not with our major but with our one core class, has opportunely led to an articulated and agreed upon system of assessment, in which our history core, B.A., and M.A. are in “tune” with each other, and are also seamlessly integrated into our college’s priorities.⁹ We have come a long way from trying to reinvent standardized testing.

The initial implementation of the assessment of His 1000 has been successful, and fine tuning (pun intended) is ongoing. The members of the department are aware of assessment as a national movement in history education and not some punishment. We have also become familiar with the changes in high school education. For instance, Carey has circulated the Disciplinary Concepts and Tools for History in Dimension 2 of the C3 Framework so the historians would understand the changes in K-12 history education and consider how Tuning fits with those changes.¹⁰

All professors who teach History 1000C now assign at least twelve pages of writing to their students, of which one assignment should be designed so that they may measure the student’s level of ability against the rubric we developed. The writing that they assign does not have to be in essay format; we also developed a short two-page guide of suggested writing assignments to meet this requirement, with an emphasis on small low-stakes writing assignments. Armed with our new competencies and learning outcomes, and the assessment rubric, all professors who teach History 1000C may complete an online rubric for every student in this core class.

Through the Tuning process, we have achieved a number of positive outcomes of the assessment model we developed:

- A student-centered approach that may be used with a wide variety of teaching styles and platforms, including increased use of the flipped classroom or online teaching or technology-heavy teaching, which will thus adapt to future trends.
- A portable tool for all our programs, which can now all be tuned against one another so we can more readily articulate what we expect from students at different levels.
- The ability to collect data easily that measures students’ learning rather than just instructors’ performance (which we measure with

student evaluations, which have low response rates, and internal evaluations for promotion and post-tenure review).

- A tool that is not time-consuming to complete, collect, and analyze. It has also inspired the development of assignments more focused on the competencies that we have now articulated clearly.
- Data collected allows the department to see not only where it shines, but also the areas that need improvement. Ultimately, the data allows the department to deploy its strengths more effectively in student recruitment, retention, and engagement.
- A greater understanding of history education in primary, secondary, and university levels.
- The tuning of the B.A. and M.A. programs as relatable yet increasingly challenging academically, has produced central concepts that are easily communicated to other stakeholders such as students, parents, potential employers, alumni, and administrators.

In addition to the above, we have been able to secure History's presence in the St. John's "Common Core Curriculum"—being able to state clearly what history students know and can do convinced St. John's curriculum and academic planners that history education has a place within the St. John's core. We've also moved on to new ventures in "Tune" with our now confidently articulated goals, such as engaging various stakeholders, including potential local employers, in discussions about what can be expected from a St. John's history major; the more targeted recruitment of career-minded students who want to know what marketable skills their history degree will give them; and a popular event, "What Can I Do With My History Degree?", when we invite former students back to tell our present cohort about their careers. In addition, a well-used departmental blog helps to meet our "Research Skills and Professional Development" goal by alerting St. John's history students to opportunities in research, internships, employment, and creating among them a distinctive professional identity as historians.

The *Great American Songbook* standard, "Bewitched, Bothered, Bewildered," describes our experience with Tuning and assessment, but in reverse.¹¹ Our bewildered first stab at assessment ("Do students know where China is?" and "What do the fictitious assessment bogeymen want?") became something we were very

bothered about after potentially losing our core class. Finally, we experienced the bewitching feeling of clearly articulating what our students should expect to achieve by studying history at all levels, and of bringing order to the way we, *ourselves*, assess whether we are meeting our *own* expectations.

Notes

1. Brad Wolverton, "Economy's Troubles Could Hit Colleges Unusually Hard," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 28, 2008; Beckie Supiano, "As Tough Times Persist, Colleges Must Live with Last Year's Decisions," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 7, 2010; Kent John Chabotar delineates the many challenges that smaller private colleges and universities faced during the Great Recession in "What About the Rest of Us? Small Colleges in Financial Crisis," *Change* (July-August 2010): 7-12.

2. St. John's University, "Repositioning the Strategic Plan, 2011-2014 (August 2011)," 8-9, <<http://www.stjohns.edu/about/leadership/strategic-planning>>.

3. For example, see Richard Arum, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus, *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting our Money and Failing our Kids and What We Can Do About It* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010).

4. Jeff Fagen communications to Julia Brookins, March 9, 2012, in possession of authors.

5. Like many private universities, St. John's requires all students to complete a "Common Core" sequence of courses that reflect the institution's Catholic affiliation and commitment to a global education: a two-semester sequence of English composition and world literature, an introduction to global world history, three philosophy courses including Philosophy of the Human Person and metaphysics, one introductory course in speech and three theology courses including "Introduction to Christianity.

6. "Assessing the Core Curriculum," October 12, 2012, in possession of authors.

7. Also see Elaine Carey, Tracey-Anne Cooper, Elizabeth Herbin-Triant, Philip Misevich, and Alejandro Quintana, "Tuning the Core: History, Assessment, and the St. John's University Core Curriculum," *Perspectives on History* 51, no. 4 (April 2013).

8. Y. Malini Reddy and Heidi Andrade, "A Review of Rubric Use in Higher Education," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 35, no. 4 (July 2010): 435-448, quote on 437; Catherine Hack, "Analytical Rubrics in Higher Education:

A Repository of Data,” *British Journal of Educational Technology* 46, no. 5 (September 2015): 924-927, reports on an initiative in the U.K. to create an open repository of assessment reports on student learning before rubric use and after the widespread adoption of rubrics in higher education; Rebecca J. Howell, “Grading Rubrics: Hoopla or Help?” *Innovations in Education & Teaching International* 51, no. 4 (2014): 400-410.

9. Anne Hyde, “AHA History Tuning Project: History Discipline Core,” September 2013, <<https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/tuning/history-discipline-core>>.

10. National Council for Social Studies, *College, Career, and Civics (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS 2013).

11. From the 1940 Rodgers and Hart musical, *Pal Joey*.