



The Global Learning Podcast Episode 6: Assessment of Learning Outcomes with Dr. Molly Worthen

Meet Molly Worthen, PhD:



Molly Worthen is an assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research and teaching focus on North American religious and intellectual history. Her most recent book, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (2013), examines American evangelical intellectual life since 1945. She is a contributing opinion writer at the *New York Times*, where she writes about religion, politics, and higher education.

Episode Transcript:

Hello and welcome to the NAFSA Global Learning Podcast. This episode is presented in conjunction with the [Forum on Global Learning](#), a new Signature Program at the NAFSA 2018 Annual Conference & Expo. Today's interview is with Dr. Molly Worthen, assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Worthen is also a contributing opinion writer at the *New York Times*. Her most recent contribution is titled [The Misguided Drive to Measure 'Learning Outcomes'](#) and this piece serves as the focus of our discussion today.

Thank you for joining us Dr. Worthen; let's go right to our first question.

1. Can you describe for the audience your recent New York Times commentary piece called *The Misguided Drive to Measure 'Learning Outcomes'*?

Thanks very much for having me. I wrote that essay primarily as a critique of the learning assessment industrial complex, this enormous bureaucratic culture and cottage industry of assessors, and test suppliers, and software companies, and growing teams of administrators and staff at many if not most colleges and universities in this country as well as in Canada and throughout Europe devoted to trying to quantify what happens in the classroom, which is a movement that has responded to a sincere set of questions about what our students are learning and how we can help them learn more effectively, especially as more and more students come through university with a really diverse range of backgrounds and levels of preparation and needs. And in my research for this article, my conversations with many professors and people in the assessment business, I was really impressed by the sincere desire to help students that really motivates everyone I've spoken to. However, to me, there are at least four big problems with the assessment industry as it's developed in our higher educational system.

I'm a historian so I came at this primarily from the perspective of history. And if you learn about the history of the assessment movement, and this is the first thing to know about it, it really took off in the 1980s in the context of a great call for, well the beginnings of a call for accountability in higher education at the same time that state legislatures around the country started defunding their investments, not just in higher education public universities, but also in all kinds of social services at all levels of society. So, there was a real rolling back of support for the kinds of education and family services that our students need years and years before they ever get to university in order to thrive at university. And my contention is that it became politically convenient for politicians to call for holding universities accountable for the costs of this really massive rollback of investment in our young people at all levels of society. And assessment can start to seem like a band aid solution for a massive problem.

And so that's the second piece of this, that if we focus too closely on assessment within our institutions and pleasing our accreditors, we really miss these macro-level problems that help explain the crisis of higher education we're in today and why it is that students often spend so much money for a degree that doesn't always clearly result in a satisfying education at the other end.

Third, I guess I've become alarmed by the bureaucratic, the culture of pleasing the bureaucratic beast that has arisen at many institutions as a result of assessment, and the way in which, even though assessment starts out with the aim of encouraging faculty to diagnose problems in their classrooms, talk with one another about how to best educate our students, in fact what happens in practice is that our departments, our programs become preoccupied with just checking the boxes required the accreditation and reaccreditation process. We resent it. It doesn't yield good, useful data. There's almost no evidence, other than kind of occasional anecdotes, that assessment actually results in improvements in student learning. And therefore, the process ends up discouraging faculty from having the very conversations we ought to have.

And I suppose my final major critique is that when assessment language and thinking goes too far, it ends up reducing the intellectual complexity of a university education, the very point of a liberal arts education, to a set of kind of job ready skills. And of course, some of what we do in our classrooms is teach skills that we hope are useful after graduation. But to me, the way in which universities contribute most to graduating young people who can thrive and contribute to our economy is actually by giving them the space to experiment and investigate complicated intellectual problems and learn habits of mind and experiment in the incredibly difficult task that is too easily summarized as critical thinking. And these are not measurable, easily quantifiable skills that immediately submit to the language of the free market quote unquote real world. And so, there's a sort of irony here that I'm not arguing for the university to isolate itself from the expectations of the marketplace, but in fact, to produce the most employable, job-ready graduates, we need to keep the university what it is. And that is a space that celebrates and protects complex intellectual inquiry that defies quantification. So that's kind of the, that's the thrust of my critique in a nutshell.

2. Good thank you; I appreciate that. I did find it a very compelling piece, and understanding that you're not an assessment professional in particular, maybe we can go a little bit deeper as to why did you want to write this piece?

Well, I think any faculty member who has been at a university or college setting for more than a semester is probably aware of assessment culture. It is, I think, slowly invading every institution from community colleges to the ivy league, from the giant state schools to the tiny little private, liberal arts

colleges because every accrediting body expects some kind of assessment. And so, I became aware of assessment at my own institution. I see some evidence in our current effort to revise our undergraduate curriculum that perhaps, expectations of assessment are going to become more stringent and invasive. And so, I wanted to learn about it because it affects my classroom, it affects my students and my colleagues and the overall culture of our institutions. And this article was a great occasion for me to read up on the subject and talk at length with professors and assessment administrators about how it works and what its strengths and weaknesses are.

3. Can you provide any examples of the assessment process in your own academic career and whether they seemed to be successful or lacking?

I think it might be interesting to contrast an experience I've had with one experience by a colleague whom I interviewed for this article. This historian, a guy named Erik Gilbert, who's a, he's become a bit of a skeptic of assessment because of his experience. He teaches at Arkansas State University in the history department. And his experience is maybe an example of assessment at its worst and least thoughtful. He was asked by the assessment office at his institution to essentially add an extra question at the end of his final exam in his World History course about Japanese samurai culture which sounds fine. Students were given a document. They were supposed to use knowledge gained in the class to interpret this document except that world history can be taught any number of ways. And Professor Gilbert didn't teach Japanese domestic history in this course. He focused more on connections between empires, trade, war, a more kind of global approach. So, this question was a totally inappropriate tool by which to gauge what his students had or had not learned. But it was compelled by this kind of standardized, one size fits all approach that some assessors take.

Now, I would say my experience at the University of North Carolina has been very different, and on the surface, much more positive. And I think this has been true at many institutions, that departments are given a great deal of leeway to design an assessment process that answers questions they seek information on. And that sounds great in theory. So, in our case, every few years, we cull some sample seminar papers produced by our history majors who participate in a capstone research course. And we read these papers over and ask have our students learned the basics of the historical method? Have they learned how to think and write historically? And more often than we would like to see, the answer is no. Even our juniors and seniors haven't quite mastered these skills. And the trouble with that is that we gain that information each time we do this assessment and we have a set of hypotheses and potential solutions to that. We'd love to teach more building block, introductory courses earlier in their careers in small groups that help students with their writing, that help them learn how to use primary and secondary sources and use evidence to make arguments. However, this process of assessment and the results it produces, ignores the larger framework that constrains our department's ability to act on that.

So, like probably most universities our university is very focused on maximizing full-time enrollment numbers. And as a result, our department feels pressure to eliminate any barrier that might exist, that might discourage a student from taking a course by instituting pre-requisites or focusing on a particular set of skills that might not appeal to every student, perhaps non-majors. And frankly, small courses are really at a premium at a big university where we really want to get butts in seats so to speak. So that's a broader structural, cultural question that if you're simply focused on this, you know, perhaps narrow metric generated by how a stack of essays meets the demands of a particular rubric, you're not necessarily attentive to, and this is a way in which, perhaps the most well-intentioned, kind of

grassroots-generated assessment process can still mislead and ignore the broader context and not necessarily result in improvements to student learning.

- 4. Yes, thank you. I'm glad you've had a better experience with some of your assessment work and I've also read some of the things that Erik Gilbert, who is a professor of history at Arkansas State University has written. For my final question, how does your specific background as a professor of religious and intellectual history inform your perspectives on this conversation surrounding assessment?**

That's a great question. I think that professors in the humanities are particularly concerned about assessment culture, and I think for reasons that extend throughout the liberal arts. I had a really illuminating conversation with a colleague who comes from a very different perspective, who's in the health sciences and a professional school and there too, he's found that assessment presents challenges. However, in a certain way, it is a more straightforward matter because these professional students come into his program with a common goal; they have some leeway in the courses they take, but they're really on very similar tracks. At the other end, the expectations are very clear. There's a set of certifications and professional bars that they need to meet. So, the goals are concrete and are shared by all students more or less.

That is so different from the context that we have in the liberal arts, and maybe particularly in the humanities where our students come into our programs with all kinds of different levels of preparation and goals and interests. And even within a single department, they have a wide range of experiences depending on the courses they take and whether they're, you know, engaged very deeply in one kind of disciplinary study or taking a kind of broader approach and engaging with our department only because they need to knock off some general education requirements. This means that it is so difficult to get an accurate picture of who our students are coming into our classes, what their experience is like, and what the desirable outcome and reasonable expectations are at the other end. And I think too, in the humanities, where we have a great deal of anxiety about stagnant or falling enrollments, a great deal of insecurity, we feel pressure to make the case for the, you know, the cash value so to speak of our disciplines, and I think that this is true in global studies as well, which is often kind of an amorphous discipline that doesn't have a very clear definition, particularly between different schools. There's a way in which assessment can really mask some of these broader structural problems and put us on the defensive because we are so preoccupied with keeping our enrollment numbers up and constantly making the case to higher ups to state legislatures that, you know, that we can demonstrate our value.

So, this whole narrative of accountability, dovetails with a broader attack on the humanities that, I think, can be quite insidious. And lastly, I would add that simply as a historian, I came at my desire to learn about assessment from the perspective of asking, what is its history? And its history is totally entwined with a particular story, of the rise of neoliberalism and the decline of public investment in our young people. And, while of course, we can't use that broader story as educators, as an excuse to simply cede our responsibility to do some good, just because it's this giant problem we can't solve by ourselves, at the same time we always have to be frank about confronting that larger context and not allow politicians and accrediting agencies and administrators to get away with ignoring it and loading all of the expectation and accountability on to these assessment mechanisms that capture only a tiny part of the story.

Thank you so much. That's been a real, this has been a real contribution to conversation around assessment, and I greatly appreciate it. I want to thank you again, and I'm looking forward to hearing more and understanding more around all the discussions that are happening around assessment. Thank you Dr. Worthen.

Thank you for having me.

Thank you very much for joining us for this episode of the NAFSA Global Learning Podcast on the Assessment of Global Learning Outcomes with Dr. Molly Worthen. For more professional resources on assessment of global learning, please consider joining the Architecture for Global Learning e-Seminar, [Assessment of Global Learning: Performance Targets vs. Developmental Growth](#) and the [Forum on Global Learning](#) signature program at the NAFSA 2018 Annual Conference & Expo on Friday June 1st-Saturday June 2nd. Use code *1825REG* to receive 25% off Annual Conference registration when signing up for the Forum on Global Learning.

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