

Does Assessment Make the Grade?

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In this issue of the JOURNAL, a variety of authors discuss how assessment affects students—and the rest of us, as well. The writers explore what assessment and evaluation mean to those assessed and to the evaluator, and discuss whether our testing techniques measure what we hope they do. They also offer practical suggestions.

Public demands for rigor, high standards, high grade-point averages, and high test scores seem to suggest that there is an identifiable standard or body of knowledge that all students must acquire and achieve. Critics demand that courses be rigorous, standards high, and tests difficult to ensure high-quality education. But what is that high goal toward which we are all supposed to be striving? Can we reach it best through traditional methods of testing, evaluating, and grading?

It seems obvious that academic rigor should first of all be about learning. Does the teacher motivate students to learn? Entice them to explore new realms? Prepare them to apply their learning to life? If so, the teacher may occasionally want to see whether specific knowledge or skills have been acquired. This evaluation can be done in any number of ways. Students can produce a scholarly paper, a painting, plans for a building, a model, or other proof of achievement and mastery of the requirements.

However, the product of assessment is most often grades. In using grades, we need to consider our intent. Do we allow grades to be gatekeepers that deny access to opportunity for students who are immature or who lack adequate background in the subject being tested? Are grades intended to stratify students into those who think in certain restricted ways versus those who do not?

Adventist teachers particularly should consider the impact of grades and tests on students. We should ask ourselves these questions: Do our assessment practices help students to become better Christians and citizens? Which approaches to grading improve student learning and produce information that helps us teach more effectively?

If the intent—or even the unintended result—of assessment is to restrict access to learning and opportunities, then we should question whether our grading and testing practices fulfill the mission of Adventist education—to make people whole in spirit, body, and mind. We should ask whether our evaluation practices help to stratify people into the haves and have-nots. Rather than doing more testing, we might better look for ways to facilitate learning.

When we do have to test, let's provide more time for students who struggle with the questions because English is not their primary language, or whose manual dexterity makes it difficult for them to fill in the bubbles on standardized tests. Better yet, let's seek to de-emphasize test results and concentrate on providing curriculum and teaching methods that meet the needs of each student.

We need to ask ourselves whether our goal is to teach or to measure. If it is to teach, then we should be constantly on the lookout for better ways to help students learn. If it is only to train students to perform well on standardized tests, then we need to rethink the meaning of the word *education*.—Anita Oliver.

The coordinator for this issue, Anita Oliver holds a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She is the current Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at La Sierra University in Riverside, California. The JOURNAL staff expresses appreciation for her hard work and enthusiasm in assigning and preparing materials for the issue.