

Assessment, Teaching, and Learning

The Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education

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The Gordon Commission and the Narrative toward Why

My father, Edmund Tayloe Gordon, graduated from Leonard's Medical School — essentially an arts-and-crafts training school — 102 years ago. Within 20 years of his graduation, the school closed. Following the release of the *Flexner Report*, medical education shifted away from the arts and crafts of medicine to an emphasis on the science of medicine. Medical education moved to the universities where these sciences were taught, and the practice of medicine and medical education changed as the profession became grounded in modern science.

The field of education has undergone a similar transformation. Education has historically been more of an art, like medical practice was during an earlier period. Now, the preparation for teaching continually embraces the sciences that inform pedagogy.

I took my first course in education at Howard University in 1939. The curriculum at Howard, like all other universities where courses in education are taught, has changed drastically from how to teach to what, when, and how to enable learning. Even more important is the fact that students of education are expected to know and understand the disciplines that they teach, as well as the disciplines that inform teaching and learning processes. The sciences of pedagogy, disciplines like anthropology, economics, psychology, political science, and sociology — sometimes called “learning sciences” — are moving the education profession away from a concern for the transfer of the capacity to appreciate and understand knowledge and to utilize skills, toward the following:

- concern for involvement of learners in the creation of their own knowledge and understanding
- contextualizing the learning experience and its content
- problematizing the conventional knowledge and perspectives

Conceptions of what it means to educate and to be an educated person are changing. Our notions of and demands on practice in the teaching and learning enterprise are broadening and expanding, while the concern with accountability forces this dynamic and eclectic enterprise to constrict in the interest of meeting certain accountability criteria. Specifically, the privileging of accountability, prediction, and selection based on standardized and norm-based academic achievement tests is limiting creativity and flexibility in teaching and learning transactions at the very time when pedagogical and societal changes are demanding greater fluidity, more canonical inclusiveness, contextualist and perspectivist thought, and personalized pedagogical engagement directed by the learner. Assessment in education and pedagogical intervention are moving in opposite directions.

These are among the perceived problems that led to the creation of the Gordon Commission. We argue that

Assessment, Teaching, and Learning (ATL) is a bi-monthly bulletin that is the primary instrument of communication from the Chairman of the Gordon Commission to a broad audience of readers who are concerned with the relationships between psychometrics and education. The intent is to use this bulletin to stimulate conversation and debate concerning the multiple purposes of assessment in education; the possibilities for the improvement of teaching and learning processes and outcomes through the more creative use of measurement in education; visions of future change in the nature and practice of education; and the need for change in the capacity of the educational measurement enterprise necessary to the needs implicit in those visions. *ATL* is available, without cost to the reader, electronically and in print. Subsequent issues will address: Assessment, Teaching, and Learning: The Pedagogical Troika; Systems of Educational Examinations; Curriculum-Embedded and Proximal Assessments; Extant Varieties of Educational Measurement; and the Relational Analysis and Management of Educational Tests Data.

changing conceptions of and practices in educational assessment are making many of the capabilities of traditional conceptions and practices in educational assessment obsolete. We believe that changes in the conceptions and practices of education are moving more rapidly than those in educational assessment.

The Gordon Commission is positioned to engage multiple spaces of assessment in an effort to move past what is known toward new knowledge and practical understanding. This dynamic theory and practice work is first done by working through the broad areas of **knowledge and thought synthesis; imagination and speculation; communication; and specification of models for policy, practice, and instrumentation.**

Through **knowledge and thought synthesis**, we inquire into the best of what we know and do; the limitations and problems with what we know and do; and what is on the horizon in terms of emerging science and technologies.

We will use **imagination and speculation** to inquire into what the fields of education and its measurement could become — for example, emerging developments in electronic technologies and prognostications for insight into the ways in which these amplifiers of human abilities can be employed to address the expanded functions and purposes of assessment.

To better inform ourselves and stimulate a national conversation concerning the relationships between assessment and education, the Gordon Commission will leverage **communication** strategies by engaging practitioners and policymakers, students and parents, and the psychometric community through a website; this bi-monthly bulletin, *ATL*; the hosting of public hearings and forums with key stakeholders; and the use social media for the dissemination of messages to target audiences.

The Gordon Commission will produce **specifications of models for policy, practice, and instrumentation** appropriate to our visions of the future and implications of emerging science and technology with special emphasis on the integration of assessment, teaching, and learning.

These articulated broad areas will provide foundational markers that will allow for a global scope of assessment and will undoubtedly provide additional areas of work for the educational assessment enterprise.

The Gordon Commission Why and What?

Conceptions of what it means to educate and to be an educated person are changing. Notions of and demands on practice in the teaching and learning enterprise are broadening and expanding. And the concern with accountability forces this dynamic and eclectic enterprise to constrict and, in the worst of instances, to compromise in the interest of meeting certain accountability criteria.

These realities, coupled with changes in epistemology, cognitive, and learning sciences, as well as in the pedagogical technologies that inform teaching and learning, are narrowing — possibly even stifling — creativity and flexibility in teaching and learning transactions. This is the perceived problem that led to the creation of the Gordon Commission.

Still, though these immediate issues are foundational in the establishment of the Gordon Commission, a second and more compelling contextual problem helps to drive its mission. The emerging changes referenced above frame the paradox that we currently face, so much so that changing conceptions of and practices in educational assessment are making many of the capabilities of traditional conceptions and practices in educational assessment obsolete.

The Gordon Commission — Our Vision

The Gordon Commission has been created to investigate and advise on the nature and use of educational testing in the 21st century.

Scholars, policymakers, and practitioners who comprise the Gordon Commission are identifying critical issues concerning educational measurement, investigating those issues, and developing position and review papers that will inform the Gordon Commission's recommendations for policy and practice in educational measurement. We're focusing, in particular, on the development of frameworks that will best leverage educational measurement to inform and improve teaching and learning processes, as well as outcomes.

Through its commitment to influence the future of assessment in education, the Gordon Commission seeks to stimulate a national conversation on possible relationships between assessment and education. Toward that end, we consult with a wide variety of experts ranging from consumers of tests and test results, to research and development scholars who produce tests and knowledge relevant to assessment, as well as policymakers who determine the broad importance and application of tests.

For the past 50 years, some of us have debated the merits of psychological testing or criticized the limits of extant theories, practices, instruments, and procedures. The field of psychometrics has responded with growth in conceptualization, its capacity to serve, and the scope of its concerns. Still, the persistent, implicit question has been raised: "What makes you think that scholarship applied to this set of issues will make a difference when such debate has not radically changed the field in 50 years?"

Our knowledge base has changed. Our theories have become more complex. Our instrumentation is more sophisticated. But it is the judgment of some that educational measurement has not kept pace with changes in educational policy and practice, and there are many signals indicating that our culture and its demands on education will continue to change.

The sciences of pedagogy are moving the education profession away from a concern for the transfer of the capacity to appreciate and understand knowledge and to utilize skills, toward concern for involvement of learners in the creation of their own knowledge and understanding. "Learning sciences" — such as anthropology, economics, psychology, political science, and sociology — are being positioned toward problematizing the learning experience and its content.

The Gordon Commission works to place the activity and goal of an educated mind at the center with intent of leveraging the science of assessment in ways that compliment and contribute to the teaching and learning processes, rather than the "objective" defining of them.

Some argue that the expectation of such shifts and changes in our beliefs and realities will require us to transform what we do in, through, and with education. Educational measurement will need to be responsive to these changed conditions. Some of us believe that assessment in education can inform and influence the nature of the conditions and processes that are the foci of measurement.

Our major tasks are to anticipate how the field of education will respond to these evolving changes and to think about how the field of assessment in education can become adequately responsive to our nation's future needs and practices in education. We begin with an assumption that assessment in education can inform and improve teaching and learning processes and outcomes.



Edmund W. Gordon
Chairman
Gordon Commission

Chairman Gordon also is the John M. Musser Professor of Psychology–Emeritus, Yale University, and the Richard March Hoe Professor of Psychology and Education–Emeritus, Teachers College, Columbia University.

A significant overview of the tasks that the Gordon Commission will address also is bound in what we refer to as the Knowledge Synthesis Project. Below are general items addressed in this project:

- Work to understand what it will mean to be an educated person in the mid-21st century.
- Consider the impact of social and political factors on education testing in the United States.
- Examine and understand the shifting foundation of knowledge assessment.
- Determine best strategies for testing what is taught.
- Utilize culturally applicable information that will help measure human abilities.
- Explore flexible teaching strategies and assessment to develop a teaching pattern for education in the United States that matches the needs of education in the 21st century.
- Understand diversified assessment in education and the achievement of excellence and equity.
- Determine best practices in the accommodation for disabilities, diversity, and variety in human characteristics (e.g., language).
- Consider cognitive, emotional, and social factors in learning.
- Articulate the variety in the functions and purposes of assessment in education.
- Measure relationships between environment and human performance.
- Connect data to educational measurement.
- Explore relationships between contexts and human performance.
- Incorporate technology to increase human potential to increase human performance and human assessment.
- Develop a culture of self-evaluation in education and the use of test data as effective feedback.
- Adapt educational measurement to predict, account, and inform teaching and learning processes and outcomes.

In line with Chairman Gordon's thinking, *ATL* is committed to pushing forward innovative and practical considerations from scholars that take seriously the advancement of human capital through the development of strong minds. Perspectives will be anchored in the desire and need to do better in the utilization of assessment, and will be supplemented in future issues with readings, resources and lists that help to frame the future of assessment in a way that is responsive to 21st-century learners. We look forward to public discourse and trust our readers also will make their perspectives known through contacting us.

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The Gordon Commission was established by ETS to investigate and advise on the nature and use of educational testing in the 21st century. 18654