Unusual educational specimen or innovative model? For years many people have viewed Alverno College as something to observe with interest, but impossible to emulate. Now they are taking a second look and discovering that there is much Alverno College can teach us about educating students. The author details these important lessons—lessons we can no longer afford to ignore.

What We Must Learn From

Alverno

By Milton D. Hakel

You know how good it feels when something you deeply wanted to happen actually happens? I've been an admirer of Alverno College for over two decades. Awestruck is closer to the truth. Alverno's faculty and students haven't figured out all the answers, but they are so far ahead of the rest of us in fostering learning that it is painful to contemplate our continual striving and the pitiful gains we achieve.

What I have wanted since the mid-1970s is for the whole world to discover how Alverno fosters learning, how it educates. And now it is happening. Oh, sure, Alverno's approach has been known for years in a too-small set of educationist circles, and its frequent listing in college selection guides has been noticed by some. However, in 1997 Alverno's approach to education is still a virtual secret, known only by a minority of the cognoscenti. But that will be changing.

A few thousand educators have visited Alverno, and many thousands more have read about Alverno and assessment-as-learning. I have been a frequent visitor and have brought others to visit with me. The intensity and excitement we observe is mind expanding, almost intoxicating. It shows possibilities. It opens up a hopeful future. It shows dramatically that there is a better way, that things don't have to be the way they are. The joy of learning is plainly visible for anyone who takes the time to look for it. It isn't easy; and it isn't always pretty but students are learning not just tons of facts but also how to go beyond knowing to being able to do what they know. Their confidence and self-assurance, resulting from genuine achievement, is marvelous. Stop any student in the hail. Ask any question you want. Think about the answers students give, and then wonder about what answers you would get from a similar haphazard cross-section on your campus.

So then you go home. You know you have witnessed something extraordinary; something very special. You resolve to try harder and to do better. You decide to talk with colleagues about it, and that's where the trouble starts.

"I visited Alverno College last week

"Where?"

"Alverno College, it's a small liberal arts college in Milwaukee."

"Never heard of it."

"Well, you will. They're doing really innovative things.They

From here, the conversation wanders down its path. coming to one of several equivalent end points: "That sounds really neat. Gotta run. See ya." "They sure made an impression on you." "We tried something like that here a few years ago, and it didn't work." "Alverno really sounds different:' Glance at wristwatch. "Oh, yeah. it's coming back to me now. I've read all about it."

Explanations begin. "They've been at it for so long—we could never catch up." "They're so small." "We've got a coed student body, and I'm not sure males can take feedback." "They don't have any research expectations for their faculty." "They're unique."

Eyes glaze over. "What they do is so labor intensive. That would never happen here." "We'll never be another Alverno." "Let me know if you get any ideas about 'how to start something like that here,"

Yawn. "Who's got the time to start something like that?" "It will take clear signals from the top." "We will need to change the promotion, tenure, and pay systems." "Is there any research data to support it?" "If what they're doing is so good, why hasn't their approach caught on anywhere else?" "That's really a revolutionary transformation. Right now we just don't have the resources to even think about it."

You quickly learn to keep your hopes to yourself and your mouth shut, It's like telling others about a great vacation, or even a great meal. The experience pales in the telling. But in the meantime, more people visit and read, and the word keeps spreading. The rest of the world is watching and changing. They've been visiting Alverno too, from Europe, Africa, Asia, South America, and the Pacific Rim. It would be a shame and a tragedy to have to import our own ideas from abroad.

Here at home our world is also watching and changing. Assessment is becoming a fact of life for educational institutions. Students, tuition payers, taxpayers, and politicians all want more for less. And American foundations are watching, paying attention to Alverno. Word is getting out, and it is attracting attention. And money. (Yes, I strongly agree that we should entertain ideas on their merits, not on whether they are lucrative, but....) Three of the nation's largest foundations awarded $2.5 million to Alverno in 1996. Leading off the action was the MacArthur Foundation. On June 26, 1996, a headline in the *New York Times* announced "6 Colleges With Bit of Genius Are Given $750,000 Rewards." The story started, "The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, best known for its 'genius' grants to creative individuals, is putting its stamp on six small, innovative liberal arts colleges that it says show a certain genius in how they educate students. The foundation is to announce today that it is giving each of the six a one-time, no-strings-attached grant of $750,000. MacArthur hopes the $4.5 million in awards will call attention to the colleges and shore them up financially."

Well, the MacArthur award sure got my attention. It was "the shot heard 'round the world:' at least my part of it. This was the first time MacArthur has given "genius grants" to educational institutions, and it will be fun to watch what Alverno does with its windfall. But that was just the first shot. Then in August the W. K. Kellogg Foundation weighed in with a $1.5 million grant, recognizing Alverno as a "comprehensive model of institutional transformation." And then the Pew Charitable Trusts presented Alverno with $250,000, one of three Pew Leadership Awards for the Renewal of Undergraduate Education. Rather a good year. all in all.

These awards say, in the clearest and loudest language, "Look here! These folks are doing something right. Y'all ought to start doing some of that too." Just recently the *Wall* Street *Journal* (March 7, 1997) ran a laudatory feature on Alverno. Get ready for more,

WHAT TO LEARN

IF WE ARE TO REALIZE our best hopes for higher education, there are several things we must learn from Alverno's experience. Here is my list, offered by someone who first visited Alverno over twenty years ago, who has visited on twelve occasions, and who has brought ninety other visitors (including my university president and four trustees) to this educational Mecca.

Performance counts. You get what you measure. If you want performance, then you have to measure performance. Tuition payers and taxpayers are telling us they want more performance. Now even the accrediting authorities are getting into the act. For the most part, however, no one is very discerning or specific about what kind of performance they want, they just want more and better.

Milton D. Hakel is Regents' Eminent Scholar and professor of psychology, Bowling Green State University; Ohio.

COMMUNICATION: Make connections that create meaning between yourself and your audience. Learn to speak, read, write, and listen effectively, using graphics, electronic media, computers, and quantified data.

ANALYSIS: Think clearly and critically. Fuse experience, reason, and training into considered judgment.

PROBLEM SOLVING: Figure out what the problem is and what is causing it. With others or alone, form strategies that work in different situations. Then get done what needs to be done, evaluating effectiveness.

VALUING IN DECISION MAKING: Recognize different value systems while holding strongly to your own ethic. Recognize the moral dimensions of your decisions and accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions.

SOCIAL INTERACTION: Know how to get things done in committees, task forces, team projects, and other group efforts. Elicit the views of others and help reach conclusions.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES: Act with an understanding of and a respect for the economic, social, and biological interdependence of global life.

EFFECTIVE CITIZENSHIP: Be involved and responsible in the community Act with an informed awareness of contemporary issues and their historical contexts. Develop leadership abilities.

AESTHETIC RESPONSIVENESS: Appreciate the various forms of art and the contexts from which they emerge. Make and defend judgments about the quality of artistic expressions.

Source: Alverno at a Glance. Milwaukee, Wis.: Alverno Publications. Alverno College. Nov. 1995.

What colleges and universities typically measure is knowledge, not learning. Well, OK, spitting back facts on a multiple-choice test is a kind of performance, and one must have learned something to be able to answer such questions correctly, but the problem is that knowledge alone is not enough. Knowledge is necessary - but it is not sufficient, Knowledge doesn't last unless one uses it. Reading about how to lead a group discussion, or watching and reporting about an effective leader doing so, are useful activities for gaining knowledge about leadership, but neither is sufficient for becoming an effective leader.

What's missing are means of observing what students can do with their knowledge. But not at Alverno. Faculty figured out over two decades ago how to make judgments regarding eight classes of performance, called *abilities:* communication, analysis, problem solving, valuing in decision making, social interaction, effective citizenship, global perspectives, and aesthetic responsiveness (see box).

When I first heard this list I felt incredulous: "They grade students on aesthetic responsiveness!? What could be more subjective?" My second reaction wasn't any better: "Valuing in decision making? Well, it's a Catholic school, so I know whose values they teach!" Once I calmed down and started listening, I learned that the values in question are the individual's own values and that part of the point is being able to articulate the criteria and values embedded in making decisions. As for aesthetic responsiveness, it is no less assessable than communication, analysis, problem solving, or for that matter, thinking. Thinking might not be directly observable, but the process and results of thinking surely are. "That's yucky!" is an aesthetic response, albeit only a start toward Level I (the student articulates a personal response to various works of art), and the complete definition identifies six levels of responsiveness.

The eight abilities came from trying to answer an apparently simple question: What should liberally educated people be able to do with what they know? The question's complexity comes from the necessity to integrate the content of disciplines with the skills needed for effective performance in daily life. Alverno's faculty, staff, and students would be the first to say that these abilities are not easy to assess. Fortunately, they keep trying to do so.

Does anyone have a better answer? Alverno's faculty would want to know it. They actively seek dialogue with colleagues in higher education as part of their ongoing commitment to improve what they are doing. Every educational institution has noble goals, and Alverno's faculty and staff live by the same standards that are set for its students. I have never seen in any institution elsewhere such a powerful and dynamic combination of tough-mindedness and generosity of spirit.

Focus on learning. A key consequence of teaching for abilities and assessment-as-learning is the way faculty and staff focus attention first on learning, and then on teaching that would evoke it. Changing the question from *How will I teach this?* to *How will students learn this?* lays bare tacit assumptions about what should be learned and how it should be taught. Specifying what "this" is turns out to be a difficult problem. All too often what is learned turns out not to be what was intended, which often is different also from what was actually taught.

Ubiquitous, unavoidable, and helpful feed-back. I've spent a lot of my adult life trying to avoid feedback. When ratings are passed out, I want only the best. I fear accurate ratings and evaluations, because they might upset my carefully cultivated and vigorously defended self-image. Unwelcome feedback arouses defensiveness, especially when it draws attention to the self. Somehow, Alverno has figured out how to present feedback effectively. I think that part of their success is in making feedback ubiquitous and unavoidable. It is part and parcel of the educational experience. No one can enroll at Alverno without knowing that they will receive lots of feedback. Another facet is that feedback is constructive. One

eventually learns that the feedback can be incredibly useful and learns to seek and use it rather than to avoid it. A big part of Alverno's success is in making feedback helpful.

Self-assessment. Self-assessment plays an integral role in Alverno's approach. Students learn to use evidence to document their own and others' performances. Since abilities and levels are defined publicly, students quickly learn the standards to be attained. Moreover, self-assessments and faculty external, and peer assessments converge, creating shared meaning. Differences of opinion are resolved by reviewing the available evidence.

Competing against oneself, not others. The bell curve is dead. So is the 90 percent or 92 percent A. So is grade inflation. Comparative or competitive grading has no place at Alverno. Competition still occurs, but it occurs against the standards and requirements of the curriculum, rather than against peers.

Alverno does not assign grades in the conventional sense - rather, the faculty report narrative descriptions of what students did in each course. No longer is cramming sufficient, because what is assessed goes beyond knowledge to its successful use within the context provided by specific performances. Students create *products*, such as brochures or business plans, and make *presentations*, many of which are recorded on videotape. These public performances are the basis of assessment, and students' transcripts consist of narrations of observed performances in relation to an Ability and its Level as defined in the pertinent course syllabus. For example, consider an environmental psychology course requiring demonstration of Level 3 of Analysis for its successful completion. Before entering this class, the student will already have demonstrated in several previous courses that she can make accurate observations (Level 1) and draw reasonable inferences (Level 2). Level 3 requires students to demonstrate that they can perceive and make relationships, as in recognizing patterns, trends, and emphases. In the course, a student analyzing the relationship between chair placement and verbal interaction might begin by observing different placements and recording the amount of verbal exchange (observable behavior), then develop a set of hypotheses (implicit assumptions) about why verbal exchange differs with different arrangement, and finally set up several placements to test her hypotheses. Her transcript entry will report her observable behavior in perceiving and making relationships in this specific context. If she passes the course, the transcript will contain descriptions of what she did to meet the Level 3 standard. If she does not pass the course, the transcript will identify in specific rather than summary terms what she needs to master. The emphasis throughout is on useable feedback, and the richness of detailed descriptions makes summary letter grades seem archaic.

Qualification, not quantification. No one seriously believes that a person's worth can be summed up by a single number, nor even by a small set of numbers. Yet educational practice nowadays dwells on numbers. Test scores abound, and grade point averages summarize not just ability but also a lot about environment (course choices and difficulty; for example). At Alverno, however, the quality and immense quantity of performance information gathered about and for each student is used for development rather than for rewards and punishments. Students become qualified instead of quantified, and their qualifications are evident in graduate and professional schools, careers, and civic life.

Coherent language and definitions. Alverno's eight abilities and the six levels within each of them provide a common language, an interdisciplinary language, that gives operational clarity to its educational mission. It is estimated that it takes about three years for a new faculty member to become fully productive and completely integrated into Alverno's culture. Certainly an important factor in this socialization process is learning new ways of thinking about education and devoting attention to learning, not just to teaching. Goals and learning outcomes shared across disciplines provide cohesiveness to the institution, and they are a novelty after the rigors of academic preparation in a specialty-focused Ph.D. program.

The common language is not just for faculty. Students use it too: "I finish Global Perspectives this semester - it's my last Level 4." That sounds like jargon to outsiders, and it is. It means that the student has successfully completed the college-wide requirements and will graduate when the major requirements are finished. Course and disciplinary content provide the vehicle through which ability levels are assessed. All of the definitions and standards are public, and expectations are clear for what students must demonstrate as evidence of their learning. Faculty, peer, and external assessments all converge with self-assessments on the same targets. Everyone speaks the same language. How sensible.

Matrix organization. A feature of Alverno's academic organization that facilitates the common language but gets too little notice is its matrix organization for faculty members. One is not only a member of an academic department - psychology; for example - but also of an interdisciplinary group focused on one of the eight abilities. These groups work to improve the means of assessment, the ways in which assessments are made. Imagine a collaboration among a large and diverse group of faculty (for instance, business administration, sociology, art, dance, chemistry; literature, and nursing), all bringing their disciplinary knowledge and perspectives to bear on improving the assessment of, say, effective citizenship. Would such a group on your campus have anything in common to work on? At Alverno these "ability departments" help to maintain and reinforce the strong emphasis on student learning and help to integrate knowledge across disciplines. The ability departments also participate in personnel management actions (promotion, tenure, and pay decisions), creating a dual allegiance that reinforces the institutional mission over sometimes conflicting and competing disciplinary missions.

Continuous improvement. Alverno's approach epitomizes continuous improvement. Everything is

assessed, which means that not only is everything evaluated but also that the evaluations are not then simply ignored. They are the basis for analysis, problem solving, implementation of a new scheme for learning, and further assessment. Both when the ability-based curriculum was devised and ever since then, representatives of each discipline have had to answer four basic questions:

- What kind of questions are being asked by professionals in your field that relate to the validity of your discipline in a total college program?
- What is your department's position on these?
- How are you dealing with problems in your general education courses and in the work for a major in your field?
- What are you teaching that is so important that students cannot afford to pass up courses in your department?

Assessment propels a cycle, and Alverno's faculty will tell you that they have not created a finished piece of work. The fundamental outline and structure has been in place for twenty-five years, yet there have been immense changes in the institution. It will be fascinating to watch the next twenty-five years, to see how Alverno adapts electronic technology and the Web to its ends, and what it does with the largesse from its benefactors.

So WHAT?

SO MUCH for vicarious learning. Observation is great. As human beings, we can't help but learn from things we see. Unfortunately, learning is not performance - knowing *what* is not the same as knowing *how.* And knowing how is not the same as being able to do, or doing. So for me, and for anyone who has read about or actually visited Alverno, the real work, the doing, remains to be started.

Because regional accreditation authorities now require assessment plans to be an integral part of reac-creditation reviews, there is bound to be someone or maybe even several people on a campus who at a minimum are concerned about how to comply with yet another bureaucratic hassle. That is not a promising place to start, but at least it offers some leverage for giving Alverno - inspired assessment a try. Try it.

That brings me to an observation made by Jack Matson, an engineer at the University of Houston who teaches a course popularly known as Failure 101: "Always prefer intelligent fast failure to slow stupid failure." One political reality of our time is that failure is intolerable, that those who fail should be investigated, humiliated in the media, and punished. Yet the reality of all times is that eventual failure in inevitable, Matson's point is that we need to learn how to fail intelligently, and that doing so quickly gives us the chance to improve what we are doing and to adapt to changing circumstances. Assessment is part of the answer - we cannot learn how to improve without it, so the sooner we begin assessing programmatically, the better we can educate.

And that brings me finally to a "changing circumstance" that appears to be the favorite place for faculty and staff members to lay the blame for the demoralized state of higher education - these #!$•%* students. Widely regarded as passive, sluggish, and dull, their lethargy is credited to exposure to TV and video games, and their academic inadequacies are credited to lax preparation in primary and secondary schools and to decaying family values .The faculty wants better quality students, meaning not only higher SAT/ACT scores but especially students who are eager and obviously motivated to learn.

Alverno has what surely looks like better students, the kind I want. When one visits, it is crystal clear that their students are eager and motivated to learn. Is Alverno a special case because of the kinds of students who choose to go there? Is Alverno successful because it attracts students who have already developed the eight abilities? It's not likely, because the demographic and aptitude profile of the student body suggests only a moderate probability of educational success. Initial assessments forecast a similar prospect. Then Alverno's unique approach to education takes over, and assessment-as-learning pervades the curriculum. Its cumulative impact is visible in portfolios, videotapes, and transcripts. And the evidence of developed. integrated skills is visible long after college is completed - the longitudinal study of Alverno's alums shows a dramatic picture of career and life success.

Where does Alverno find its eager and motivated students? They develop on campus, building on whatever skills they have when they arrive. The ultimate secret of Alverno's success is, I believe, that students learn how to use assessment feedback and can see their own development while it happens. When the rest of us figure out how to put this lesson to work in our own assessment programs, we will begin not only to realize what all the Alverno excitement is about but we will begin to experience some of that excitement ourselves.

Knowing about Alverno is not enough. As I've said. learning goes beyond knowing to being able to do what we know. Twenty-five years from now, what will our performance records show?

NOTES

Arenson, K. W. "6 Colleges With a Bit of Genius Are Given $750,000 Rewards." *New York Times,* June 26, 1996.

Crossen, C. "Real-Life Lessons vs. the Ivory Tower." *Wall Street Journal,* Mar. 7, 1997.