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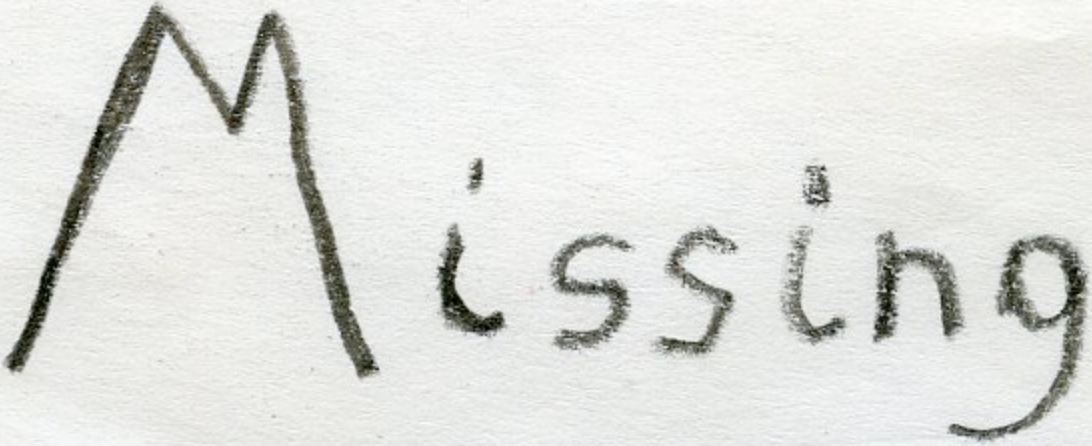
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Rigorous Program Assessment in Intercollegiate Forensics: Its Time Has Come

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ABSTRACT: *The current landscape of higher education is discussed, with emphasis on how accountability and cost-containment are shaping budgets and educational policies. The state of forensic assessment is highlighted, particularly how the cultural barriers of comparison anxiety, the absence of community standards about the educational benefits of forensic programs, and the absence of the means for using assessment efforts to change behavior, work against program assessment efforts. Finally, the criteria for sound assessment practices are outlined, as well as possible strategies for programs to begin assessment efforts, including the use of student portfolios, alumni surveys, triangulation, and external reviews. Key Terms: assessment, higher education, forensic programs, communication*

The dual forces of accountability and cost-containment are here to stay in higher education. Critics decry the high cost of higher education which grows annually far beyond the rate of inflation; the increasing time it takes for students, particularly non-traditional ones, to complete a four-year degree; and the inability of institutions to clearly articulate the value-added nature of a college degree. These critics have found a voice in both state and national government agencies and regional accrediting bodies. The process of accreditation and program assessment is being taken seriously, not only in response to political pressure, but also as one strategy in dealing with the ongoing need for cost containment. Universities are facing the obvious: passing on higher costs to consumers is no longer a viable strategy unless accompanied by other means of growing revenue and controlling costs.

The duality of accountability and cost-containment will continue to influence the well being of both individual forensic programs and the activity in general. Forensic programs will be required to explain and justify the benefits of their existence using clear and compelling evidence to both maintain their continued presence and increase the likelihood of funding at a level sufficient for achieving the program's competitive and non-competitive goals in a university environment where marginal schools, departments and programs will be eliminated or de-funded. This essay has three parts: First, a discussion of the current landscape of the higher education industry and how accountability and cost-containment will continue to shape both budgets and

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educational policies; second, the current state of forensics assessment and how some cultural barriers work against effective program assessment; and finally, some possible strategies for programs to begin a rigorous, vigorous, and continuous assessment effort.

The Current Landscape of Higher Education

American higher education faces two significant and overlapping challenges: proving effectiveness and efficiency. Dickeson (1999) observed: "American higher education is experiencing a firestorm of public criticism. Demands for increased accountability have been consistently advanced in a number of public forums throughout the United States" (p. 5). Colleges and universities have traditionally relied on simple statistics (such as graduation rates), and anecdotes from alumni about the quality of their education, to make their case justifying the high cost of obtaining an education. Institutions relied both on public good will and a tenacious defense of academic freedom and institutional self-governance to deflect any concerns that a college degree was not worth the cost, or that the institution could be equally effective with fewer resources. Such defenses no longer suffice. The Federal Government and every state government have substantially increased their scrutiny of public institutions. The Federal Government, through the power of the purse (most notably financial aid policies), has simultaneously pressured private institutions to also become more accountable for their costs and practices. The power of regional and disciplinary accrediting agencies has grown substantially, at least in part as an effort to stave off direct federal action to regulate higher education. Accreditation standards have become more rigorous and institutions have increasingly been expected to integrate assessment and cost accountability into their daily functions.

A by-product of the growing demand for accountability has been the need for cost-containment and efficiency in resource use. In a forward to the book, *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services*, the former President of the American Council on Education observes:

> If resources to fund academic programs were inexhaustible, then perhaps setting priorities might be less important. However, although American higher education, unlike its counterpart institutions in almost every other nation, is fortunate to be able to draw on multiple sources of financial support–student tuition and fees, endowment earnings, direct and indirect support from federal and state governments, corporate support, and gifts from alumni and friends–in reality each of these sources has an ultimate limit; and many campuses are presently testing those limits. (Ikenberry, 1999, p. xii)

Both public and private institutions face the on-going need for linking their priorities to their resources. This trend will continue, as Ikenberry (1999) continues:

> The relationship between academic quality and financial resources has always been apparent; an institution's financial health is crucial to its academic quality. The paradigm has shifted, however; or at least it has expanded, to recognize that academic quality also is linked to purposeful and efficient utilization of resources. Monies wasted or underutilized mean fewer dollars for the academic priorities of greatest urgency. Using financial resources in purposeful, efficient ways is precisely what one seeks to do in the prioritization of academic programs. (p. xii)

In an environment dominated by the need for simultaneously balancing accountability pressures with the need for prioritization to achieve greater efficiency, academic programs, big and small, will be severely scrutinized. It is becoming a game of *survival of the fittest.* Those programs and curricula, which are able to document their value, rigorously and empirically, will flourish as universities embrace the culture of accountability and efficiency.

There is no single model for how universities will address these issues. Dickeson (1999) does provide a matrix for how universities might begin the prioritization process, outlining some central questions universities may ask in assessing the quality and centrality of academic programs.

1. History, Development, and Expectations. Why was the program established? What are its antecedents? What were the institution's original expectations? How has the program adapted to meet student demographics? Would it meet expectations the institution now places on new programs?

2. External Demand. In addition to measuring their own data, leaders should examine peer institution data. How is demand being met by competing institutions? What is the potential for future enrollments? Are program resources under-allocated or over-allocated? Does program "supply" correspond to demand? What external forces affect the program?

3. Internal Demand. Many academic programs are necessary because they support other programs. What programs would suffer, possibly fail, without courses offered by another program?

4. Quality of Inputs and Processes. Although there is a decided shift toward measuring what a campus accomplishes with resources (see criterion 5), quality inputs help sustain quality. Program inputs include the following:

- *Faculty and staff.* What is the expertise and reputation of program providers?
- *Instruction by full-time faculty.* An institution must balance the stability of full-time faculty with the flexibility of part-time faculty.
- *Students.* Programs that are more selective tend to attract better-prepared and better-motivated students.

- *Curriculum.* Does program curriculum match the complexity of the discipline? When was the last curriculum reform to accommodate the "knowledge explosion"?

- *Technology.* Does the program use technology to enhance learning, reinforce computer skills, attract technological support to the institution, and support research and public service?

- *Equipment, facilities, and other resources.* Are equipment and materials current?

5. *Quality of Program Outcomes.* What are the program's examples of exemplary performance? Do alumni records and placement data indicate program success? How well do graduates perform on professional licensure and certification examinations? Are undergraduates successful in seeking admission to graduate and professional schools?

6. *Size, Scope, and Productivity.* How many students are served? How many faculty and staff are assigned? What other resources are committed? How many credit hours are generated? How many degrees or certificates awarded?

7. *Revenue and Other Resources.* Many programs generate resources from enrollments, subsidies for services they provide to other programs, research grants, fund-raising, equipment or capital donations, ticket revenues, and admission, laboratory, or user fees.

8. *Costs and Other Expenses.* What are the direct and indirect costs associated with program delivery? Should the institution invest new resources in the program to sustain or create high quality? (pp. 2, 5)

Every university will weigh these criteria differently and individual programs will fit into the criteria in unique ways, as well. Dickeson's criteria provide a useful starting point for implementing forensics program assessment. These questions will influence decision-making in higher education in increasingly significant ways in the coming years. All disciplines and programs, including forensics, will need to provide meaningful answers to Dickeson's questions when seeking or maintaining resources, particularly as colleges must find ways to function in an environment of scarcity.

The State of Forensics Assessment

There is good news and bad news about assessment efforts in forensics. The good news is that forensics is a competitive laboratory where student efforts are constantly assessed using both quantitative and descriptive means. Competitors receive wins, ranks, rates, and written comments. They are compared to their peers by means of different contests and competitor divisions. Programs are compared through the use of various sweepstakes formulas. Treadaway (n.d.) provides a useful bibliography of studies describing the benefits of forensic participation. Against this framework, however, is the bad news:

Forensics assessment is primarily process rather than outcome-based; is virtually non-existent in assessing the qualities of forensic programs in the context of university assessment; and fails to use assessment data to create continuous quality improvements.

Most forensics assessment occurs at the process level. There is considerable data about how to successfully compete in contests; less data and even less agreement exists about what outcomes should be or actually are associated with forensic participation. Much of the outcomes data is anecdotal: self-reporting of former competitors about the value of their experience. Anecdotal data is a powerful assessment tool but is limited by both the tendency for anecdotes to only be provided by the participants who had the best experience and by the lack of context provided in many anecdotes in terms of what specific elements of forensic participation provided the greatest value. There are, of course, some empirical outcome studies (Allen, Berkowitz, Hunt, & Louden, 1999; Rogers 2002). Important work is being done, for example, on the effects of debate participation on economically disadvantaged and racial minority high school students. There seems to be strong evidence that debate participation is connected with stronger critical thinking skills as well as various other social and learning benefits (National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, 2006). Given the preponderance of anecdotes and studies linking educational benefits to forensic participation, why would program assessment continue to be a priority? The answer lies in our inability to link student benefits to either the existence of the forensic program, in general, or particular competitive orientations. Why is it necessary to have a forensic program to provide students with the benefits of forensic training? What specific aspects of forensic participation cause the greatest benefits for students?

There are not clear-cut answers to these basic questions, particularly the latter question of what activities yield the most significant benefits. There still needs to be answers to questions such as: Is debate better than individual events, vice versa, or best done in combination? Is research-based debate superior to extemporaneous debate? Is the competition-based model superior to an audience-based model? These questions are at the heart of justifying forensics as an activity, and as being worthy of university support. Conceding that there is evidence that forensic participation benefits the participant is not sufficient to justify either the existence of forensic programs, as other than an extra-curricular activity, or the particular competitive orientation of a program. Unfortunately, there are barriers to finding answers to these questions.

The first barrier is the reluctance of various forensic communities to engage in comparison. Forensics has significantly devolved into increasingly smaller communities of practitioners since the 1950's when policy debate was the activity in which most competitors participated. Supplementing debate were a small number of different individual events forms. It was easier for scholars to understand and

critique forensics at that time since everyone was, to more or less of a degree, involved in the same activities. There was vigorous scholarly discussion of the rhetorical and pedagogical values of forensics in both forensic journals and communication journals. Devolution began in the 1970's with the growth of individual events as a separate and stand-alone competitive form and the emergence of CEDA as an alternative to policy debate. Devolution has continued to the present. One effect of the devolution of forensics into smaller communities has been the decline of internal discussion about the relative values of various forensic forms. There is a strong cultural norm against criticizing other forensic communities. While every community doubtless believes their particular form of forensics to be superior, there is almost no scholarly debate about the merits of different communities. This contrasts, for example, with the vigorous discussions of debate pedagogy when CEDA and NDT communities were first divided. The absence of serious and sustained discussion of outcomes and values has discouraged research on fundamental questions about why the existence of forensic programs is necessary and how particular competitive choices might affect the achievement of outcomes, for better or worse.

The second problem with contemporary forensics assessment is the absence of community standards about the educational benefits of the forensic program. While we know some things about what a successful competitor is, and why forensics is beneficial, we lack any basis to assess the forensic program beyond the simplistic success measures gleaned through competition. There has always been a tension between the educational and competitive values of forensics, with greater emphasis traditionally given to competition (Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2001; Burnett, Brand, & Meister, 2003). Modern forensics can be said to have begun after World War II when the tournament model finally replaced the inter-squad (school versus school public debate) model. There was discussion of program quality issues in the 1950's, addressing such questions as whether programs should be open to all students, or be represented by only of the most talented, and the extent to which competitive and non-competitive activities should be balanced. These discussions have virtually disappeared, at least in the scholarly realm. There is little available scholarship to answer even a basic question about why a university should have a forensic program. Only rarely have researchers even attempted to understand administrator's attitudes about forensics, which might provide the necessary insight into how to persuade those administrators to support the activity. It would be helpful to follow-up on Littlefield's study (1991) of administrator attitudes, which showed decidedly mixed attitudes about forensics. There are at least three reasons for this apparent absence of research assessing program qualities to establish shared community agreement about the qualities of a strong program.

First, devolution has created so many competitive measures of success that programs may no longer perceive the need to assess them-

selves in broader ways that are connected to the university mission. There are so many ways, for example, to be *national champion* in one or more events. It is easier to rely on trophy count, or other competitor success measures, to justify a forensic program as "good public relations," rather than finding justifications grounded in student outcomes which are, of course, extremely hard to measure.

Second, is the shrinking pool of forensic educators and fewer rewards for forensic scholarship in the communication discipline. There is a disturbing trend toward forensic programs being either student-run, or directed by non-tenure line faculty members who leave, after a time, for greener pastures, or who are expected to produce non-forensic scholarship to achieve tenure. This is not an indictment of either student-run programs or ones directed by non-tenure line instructors. Both of these scenarios, however, can make program justification a more difficult challenge when administrators must make choices about resource allocation based upon perceptions of mission-centrality and value. It only would be natural for an administrator to ask: "If this program is so valuable, why is it operating without the direction of a tenure-track faculty member?"

Third, is the overheated workload of forensic educators who, because of competitive pressures, spend more time teaching, coaching, and traveling, at the expense of time for scholarly reflection. Competitive success often depends upon having a very active travel schedule during a season that can last from October through April. The forensic educator may not be an active participant in campus life or clearly understand how the processes of accountability and cost-containment are being played out on campus. The lack of a vigorous pan-forensic community discussion of forensic outcomes and their relationship to larger university concerns makes it more difficult for forensic educators to articulate the value of their program, or, in the case of student-run programs, makes it virtually impossible.

The fourth problem with forensics assessment is the absence of means for using assessment efforts to change behavior. One of the most critical functions of assessment is the process of benchmarking and quality improvement. It is not sufficient merely to collect data; the data must be used to improve processes. Forensic competitors understand this need. Competitors read the comments on their ballots and determine how to change their speeches or strategies to be more successful. Unfortunately, given the lack of consensual community benchmarks, it would be extremely difficult for an individual program to make changes grounded in the gathering and interpretation of appropriate data. Forensic programs, of course, can change. A program might move from one debate community to another, but these changes are often competition-reactive rather than mission-grounded. Program directors may believe that, given their level of funding, they cannot be competitive in one community and move to another community where their chances might be better. Such a change may be couched in mission terms (e.g., "Parliamentary debate

better fits our program's mission."), but unless change can be clearly justified with assessment data, it fails the true test and may well prove, in the long run, to be unsuccessful or unsustainable.

Identifying and Implementing Sound Assessment Practices

This section has two purposes, to briefly outline the criteria for sound assessment practices and to suggest some possible assessment strategies. There is an important caveat here: assessment strategies are often university-specific and it is incumbent upon anyone choosing to pursue assessment to make sure that the chosen approach is consistent with other university assessment initiatives and strategies. Astin (1993) defines assessment as:

> Assessment includes the gathering of information concerning the functioning of students, staff, and institutions of higher education. The information may or may not be in numerical form, but the basic motive for gathering it is to improve the functioning of the institution and its people. Functioning refers to the broad social purposes of a college or university: to facilitate student learning and development, to advance the frontiers of knowledge, and to contribute to the community and the society. (p. 2.)

There is substantial literature about assessment both in terms of program assessment and the assessment of learning. Gray (1999) offers a general set of criteria for effective university assessment:

- Assessment is a well-planned, systematic, and ongoing process that involves the gathering, interpretation, and application of information for continuous improvement of teaching and learning.
- The assessment plan continually flows from and feeds into the institutional mission, goals, and objectives.
- A multiple-measures approach allows each department to develop an assessment approach appropriate to its discipline.
- Academic assessment is the responsibility of the faculty, administration, staff, and students.
- Academic assessment improves the teaching and learning process.
- Academic assessment plays an integral role in planning, budgeting, and allocating resources.
- Academic assessment helps to improve student satisfaction.
- Individual unit assessment plans will be continually evaluated and improved to meet the ever-changing needs of the student population.

- The university's assessment plan will be reviewed on a regular basis and appropriate revision will be made accordingly. (pp. 8-9)

Gray's criteria provide a useful starting point for forensics assessment. The goal of forensics assessment is four-fold: Improving the quality of the participant's learning; strengthening the relationship between the forensic program and university objectives; creating a decision-making context for program choices and objectives; and establishing and measuring benchmarks for program quality.

First, and foremost, assessment should attempt to measure the learning, which occurs through forensics. This goal assumes that forensics is a curricular rather than an extra-curricular activity. As a curricular activity, forensic programs should be able to identify what pedagogical goals are being sought; attempt to ascertain what specific events or skills are most likely to achieve those goals; and measure the long-term benefits of participation, particularly once a participant leaves the university and has the ability to put their forensic experience in context.

Second, assessment should help to clarify and strengthen the relationship between the forensic program, as a part of the curriculum, and the larger university objectives. Most every university has a long-range planning document that often is the starting point for assessment and accreditation studies. The forensic program, as is the case with every department and program, should attempt to assess the degree to which the program contributes to achieving those objectives. Any particular program or department will not necessarily contribute to every university objective, but university decision-makers, as discussed earlier, will be increasingly faced with the need to prioritize and support programs perceived as most central to mission. Mission centrality can be assessed and hopefully supported.

Third, forensics assessment needs to guide program choices. One key indicator of robust assessment is the degree to which educators make choices informed by the evidence gathered and interpreted in the assessment process. Assessment may confirm the benefits of a particular program orientation or may suggest the need for change. For example, if program alumni report that they made particular use of research skills learned in forensics, the forensic educator may need to determine whether the program's current emphasis on extemporaneous debate or individual events is adequately building those research skills. The educator can then consider change: Emphasizing other activities; modifying pedagogy to more effectively emphasize research skills; or even deciding that the program cannot adequately accomplish that end and that students will need to complement forensic participation with other activities.

Fourth, forensics assessment should be used to establish and track benchmarks that can be used to assess overall program quality. A benchmark measures progress toward achieving a goal, and may be as

simple as the number of students participating in the program or more complex (e.g., the GPAs of forensic students in their majors). The purpose of benchmarking is to assist in justifying the program and its educational choices. Forensic educators should collaborate with department and university colleagues to establish benchmarks. Collaboration is valuable because it can reinforce the relationship between the program and larger university objectives, and reinforce the relationship between financial, physical, and personnel support and the achievement of particular goals. If a benchmark is, for example, that the program will increase its number of novice competitors, decision-makers will be in a better position to understand why that may require more financial resources and part-time coaching support to achieve that goal.

Assessment is not, however, a panacea. Even the most careful assessment activities cannot increase financial support for a program when the university is facing significant financial problems. Assessment alone cannot cause a university to hire a new tenure-line forensic director during a hiring freeze. Assessment also cannot quickly change perceptions about the importance and perceived value of forensics to administrators and faculty who may believe forensics is merely recreation. Absent effective assessment activities, however, the ability of forensic programs to change perceptions is increasingly less likely. Programs will be forced to rely even more heavily on press releases, trophy counts, and administrative good will, none of which will be sufficient to guarantee long-term program health.

There are a substantial number of data gathering approaches to be used for forensics assessment. The choice of methods depends upon several factors: What questions are being asked; what resources and skills the forensic educator has to devote to assessment; and what logistical support is available to assist in assessment. The latter two factors should not be underestimated. Assessment takes time and energy, which forensic educators sometimes seem to lack. Engaging in assessment will require tradeoffs that must be recognized and supported. Also, effective assessment likely will require support from other university offices. For example, Offices of Institutional Research may help in collecting student data; and alumni offices may provide accurate alumni addresses and other demographic information. Before beginning an assessment process, it will be useful to determine what logistical support will be necessary and the degree to which that support is available.

There are at least four assessment strategies, which might be considered: the student portfolio, alumni tracking, triangulation, and external reviews. There is no single method for doing any of these, and they depend, of course, on the questions being asked, assessor resources and skills, and logistical support, as previously discussed. Schechter (n.p.) has a web page with a very comprehensive list of assessment sources and ideas.

The Student Portfolio

Student portfolios are widely used as an assessment tool. The portfolio, in its simplest form, is a collection of artifacts from which student learning may be documented. Portfolios may include: a resume; a collection of papers or speeches; and usually includes some form of self-reflection from the student about their learning. The structure of the portfolio, and which kinds of artifacts should be included, is open. The portfolio may be very helpful in collecting data about critical thinking, the degree to which students are active on campus, and the effects of forensic participation on selecting and completing majors, to name a few. There are many web pages, books and articles about portfolios (Zubizaretta, 2004).

Alumni surveys

Alumni surveys are frequently used in university assessment and accreditation to gather empirical data about what alumni are doing, as well as the alumni's impressions of what they found valuable during their education. Alumni perceptions may change over time as their lives and careers change, and they have time to reflect more dispassionately about their college experience. Alumni testimonials have always been a powerful source of support for forensic programs. The goal would not be blanket testimonials, as much as learning about the specific aspects of forensic training perceived by alumni to have the greatest value. Data about the relationship between forensic training and other educational experiences would be equally insightful.

Triangulation

Most universities, as part of assessment efforts, identify comparison groups. Comparison groups are useful for the university when comparing their programs, students, and profiles with others they would like to be more like, or with whom they compete, or with whom they share characteristics where such comparisons can be meaningful. Universities often have multiple comparison groups: aspirational (universities they would like to become more like), competitive/affiliational (e.g., sports leagues, same-state public universities, religious affiliations), and structural/ organizational (liberal arts colleges with similar endowments, research universities, etcetera).

Institutional research offices often can assist in the construction of comparison groups. A forensic program may use comparison groups to understand demographic, financial, educational philosophy and other differences that may exist. For example, if University X aspires to be like University Y, and University Y has a forensic program with a different competitive orientation, that could be a significant assessment variable. Triangulation depends, of course, on sharing accurate information. Unlike much of the data a university has access to from federally collected data, or data supplied to agencies such as *United States News and World Report*, information about individual forensic programs may not be as readily available. When such data can be

accessed, it may be helpful in identifying useful benchmarks.

External Reviews

An essential part of the accreditation process for universities is the external review, where outside faculty and staff visit the university to study processes, verify written claims, and talk with members of the campus community. The use of external reviews seems relatively rare for forensic programs. External reviews can be a valuable form of assessment. A reviewer, particularly one who may bring the perception of credibility, can be helpful in several ways: Framing questions needing analysis; providing administrators and faculty a different perspective about the relationship of quality and resources; providing affirmation, when appropriate, for what the forensic educator is accomplishing; and offering suggestions for improvement.

An external review of a forensic program need not be as complex as that of a university or school accreditation visit. It may be as simple as the identification of a reviewer acceptable to the decision-makers participating in the process; establishment of a budget for the review; identification of review questions which the reviewer will investigate; provision of relevant information in advance to the reviewer; scheduling of an on-campus visit where the reviewer can meet with administrators, faculty, students and others to learn about the program; and the submission, by the reviewer, of a written report. An external review could be helpful when a program is attempting to begin regular assessment activities, and is most valuable when done at regular intervals, serving as a benchmark to track changes in the program over time.

Conclusion

Assessment is both necessary and challenging. It is necessary as one of the tools institutions will use to enhance accountability and achieve cost containment. It is challenging because it is not one of the skills traditionally associated with forensic education, at least at the program level. It will initially be time-consuming, as assessment mechanisms are selected and implemented, and initial benchmarks established. Assessment is also risky, in the sense that, true assessment speaks truth to power. Vigorous assessment must challenge conventional wisdom about the relationships between competitive form and outcome, as well as the relationship between desired outcomes and program choices. We might not always like what we learn and it may cause programs to necessarily make new choices about what they do, but in the end, such hard work should pay off in a more defensible and stronger forensic community.

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