

In Appreciation of Clifford Adelman

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NILOA, and the field of higher education quality, lost a tireless champion and friend last week when Clifford Adelman succumbed to cancer after a hugely productive career. In the early 1980s, Adelman first put assessment on the map and is rightly credited as one of the founding fathers of the assessment movement. His later research on student course-taking patterns was equally groundbreaking and helped illuminate the broader efforts to improve student success at the center of NILOA's work.

I first met Cliff in 1984 when he was serving as the Department of Education's (DOE) liaison for the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (authors of *Involvement in Learning*), which was staffed by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) which I had recently joined as a Senior Associate. As part of his work with the Study Group, Cliff produced two background papers—*Standardized Test Scores of College Students 1963-1982* and *Starting with Students: Promising Approaches in American Higher Education*—which respectively foreshadowed interest in assessment and what has since become known as “high impact practices.” Soon after, he underscored the critical “assessment matters” message of *Involvement in Learning* by editing a volume entitled *Performance and Judgment* that was extremely influential in our brand new field. He also helped organize the first national conference on assessment held in Columbia, South Carolina in the fall of 1985 where we presented together.

In the years that followed, Cliff produced influential studies of student progression (*The New College Course Map and Curriculum Files*), postsecondary credentialing (*A Parallel Postsecondary Universe*), the Bologna Process in Europe (*The Bologna Club*), and the student experience associated with a number of disciplines (*Men and Women of the Engineering Path*). Probably his most significant scholarship was on course-taking patterns using transcript files associated with a number of large-scale longitudinal studies conducted by the DOE's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. There he proposed and developed key behavioral enrollment phenomena like “academic intensity” that are now part of the bedrock of research on student success. This work epitomized Cliff's approach to research: patience, exactitude, and plain hard work. He literally went to bed with and pored over thousands of transcripts for a decade, developing unique and productive coding schemes to render them interpretable. These are schemes that curriculum researchers continue to use today. A lot of Cliff's awesome productivity, I learned then, was because he rarely slept!

Over the last decade, I got to know Cliff even better as a co-author (with Paul Gaston and Carol Geary Schneider) of the Lumina Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), and as a fellow traveler with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris. We had epic battles, most of which he won. But he also revealed

Viewpoint

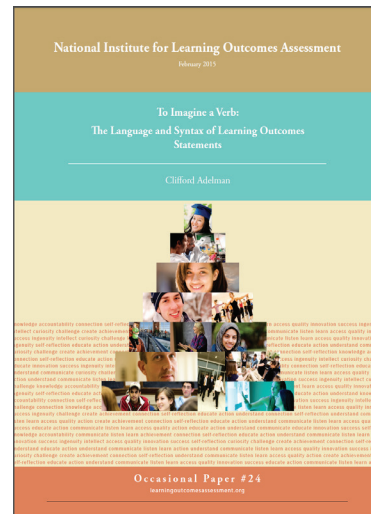
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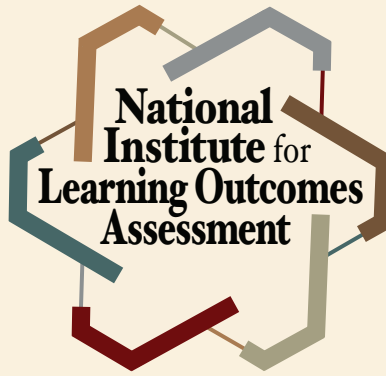
a warm and caring emotional side that complemented his acerbic intellect. He called the DQP authors “the Family” and we have remained close colleagues and friends since its publication.

I also learned that Cliff was a polymath. He was a gifted jazz pianist and a superb art photographer, as well as being a novelist and literary critic. Five years ago, he realized a major ambition by publishing a novel, *The Russian Embassy Party*, and I was privileged to give the manuscript an early couple of readings to offer encouragement and suggested edits. It will surprise no one who knew Cliff that most of my comments centered on slowing down the narrative, cutting out detail, and simplifying language. There were not too many of these, though, because Cliff was a brilliant writer. Alongside the substance of his work, his titles stand out—*Answers in the Tool Box*, *The Spaces Between Numbers*, and *To Imagine a Verb*, to name just a few. All of this reveals Cliff’s early scholarly training in literature at Brown and the University of Chicago, as well as his service as an English faculty member at City College in New York, Roosevelt University in Chicago, and William Paterson College in New Jersey.

To say that Cliff could be difficult would be a major understatement. He was verbally pugnacious in both public and in private. I always enjoyed presenting with him because no matter how contentious the subject became in interactions with the audience, I knew I could relax because all of the arrows would be directed at him. In more constricted settings such as DQP drafting sessions, he could be downright brutal. But he listened too, and used any criticism directed at him productively to hone ideas and improve what he wrote. Would that we could all make equivalent claims.

In short, Cliff Adelman was a giant of assessment and higher education scholarship. He also was a good colleague and faithful friend. We at NILOA will miss him greatly.





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