

NILOA Remembers Assessment Pioneer Sister Joel Read of Alverno College

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Peter Ewell, Pat Hutchings, & Russ Edgerton

NILOA joins with colleagues around the world to mourn the recent passing of Sister Joel Read, president emeritus of Alverno College, and to acknowledge her visionary, unflinching leadership in advancing student learning and outcomes assessment. It is an honor to feature recollections from three influential thought leaders and assessment champions about the life and times of Sister Joel. The first two are by NILOA Senior Scholars Peter Ewell and Pat Hutchings. The third is from Russ Edgerton, president emeritus of the American Association for Higher Education, an organization which under Russ' steady, forward-looking hand was instrumental in launching and supporting the assessment movement in U.S. colleges and universities. Peter, Pat and Russ knew Sister Joel well, and we encourage you to read their reflections about some of her many contributions to Alverno College and collegiate quality in American higher education.

Tributes to Sister Joel Read

Put simply, Sister Joel Read was one of assessment's greatest champions and a relentlessly transformational leader. I initially met her and learned the Alverno story, while preparing my earliest publication on assessment, *The Self-Regarding Institution*, in 1984. That volume was one of the first to publicize assessment as a major movement in higher education and I needed compelling case studies that could portray, in some variety, what had been and could be done. I chose three—Northeast Missouri State University (now Truman State University), the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, and Alverno. I had heard about Alverno from Russ Edgerton, then President of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) and visited Alverno shortly thereafter. I recall that I stayed in the college's guest suite, "re-captured" as Sister Joel put it, from the former priest President's quarters and put to better use. (Joel never had much use for priests!) I left the campus both impressed and cowed by what she and the faculty had accomplished there.

But my relationship with Joel was not always smooth sailing. I recall vividly some early discussions (arguments, actually) with her and her close colleague Austin Doherty about the legitimate meaning of the term "assessment." Alverno had claimed it as its own, guided by thorough study of the assessment center methodology applied to examine individual student mastery and rooted in the Latin term *ad sedere*—"to sit down beside." But the term was also claimed by large-scale assessment practitioners in K-12 education which was (and still is) based on standardized testing in the aggregate. Yet a third meaning, based on program evaluation (the one that eventually stuck) was gaining ground on the basis of the experiences of pioneer institutions like UT-Knoxville and James Madison University. Joel and Austin lost that battle, as they admitted gracefully about a year later. But they won the war:

Viewpoint

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The vision of assessment that they enacted at Alverno is the model that has ultimately triumphed. There are three reasons why I advance this claim.

First, while it has become fashionable these days to talk about “competency-based” education, Alverno under Joel’s leadership actually **practiced** it. The “abilities based” curriculum that she and the faculty put in place there in the late 1970s was masterful in its blend of cognitive outcomes and what we would now call “soft skills” (thank heavens, they didn’t!), and remains a model for institutions today.

Second, “assessment” as practiced to determine the extent to which students have mastered these abilities, is both authentic and firmly embedded in the design of the curriculum. Unlike the kind of assessment that I have lately termed “exo-skeletal” based on examinations and demonstrations engaged in alongside the core teaching/learning process, assessment at Alverno never leaves this realm. In fact, I recall Joel and Austin telling me that early in the Alverno “revolution,” they went to ETS, ACT and other testing organizations with their ideas, with the hope that these “professionals” could build for them the kinds of instruments that could realize their teaching ambitions, only to be disappointed at these organizations’ lack of creativity and responsiveness. I found this story revealing in its portrait of Joel’s humility and willingness to learn from anybody and everybody; despite her stature as a prophet, she never claimed to have the right answer.

Third and finally, teaching and learning at Alverno is overwhelmingly what we would today term “student centered.” Its central object is not only to increase the individual learner’s knowledge and skill, but to **transform** her entire approach to looking at things as well. This is why the most important area of mastery for students at Alverno is “self-assessment”—the act of monitoring and consistently improving one’s own learning process.

Joel would, of course, never claim that she did all this herself. But over almost four decades, she provided both the vision and the unflagging (sometimes ruthless) attention that made that vision real. We in assessment treasure this, and will be forever in her debt.

Peter Ewell, President Emeritus of NCHEMS and NILOA Senior Scholar

With the passing of Sister Joel Read, we have lost a force of nature, one who truly changed the contours of higher education.

I first met Sister Joel when I joined the Alverno College faculty fresh out of graduate school in the mid-1970s. The College was in the early stage of a transformation that continues today--and, as I soon learned from my new colleagues, that transformation was set in motion by her challenge, as president, to every program and department: to explain what they taught without which Alverno’s students could not flourish.

Today we have catch phrases for this kind of focus. Learning or learner centered. Outcomes oriented. Maybe even competency based. For Sister Joel it was, I believe, an expression of her understanding of Alverno’s students and her care for them. Driven by that understanding and care, she then marched (herself and the rest of us) into a whole host of challenges that follow from a clear, explicit focus on what students should know and be able to do. “Unflinching” is a word that comes to mind.

As readers of NILOA’s newsletter know, one of those challenges was assessment--a

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process that Sister Joel helped to put on higher education's map. For her, assessment was not about compliance (indeed, no one at that time was asking for it); it was an enactment of our professional responsibility for students' learning. Over the years, that idea spawned all kinds of new practices and processes that one can now see (though not enough) on other campuses: the explicit articulation of expected learning outcomes from first year to graduation; course-based assessment that relies on the assignments faculty design and require of students; the establishment of an office tasked with studying student growth, both during and beyond their years at the college; the involvement of community members and employers as "external assessors"; and, most of all, attention to students' ability to "self-assess" in ways that deepen their own learning.

Sister Joel would no doubt jump in here if she were reading this, protesting that I am attributing too much to her influence. Yes, a team of powerful women in key positions played critical roles all along the way. And faculty were intimately involved as well, working to invent a curriculum that broke the mold in all kinds of ways.

But Sister Joel's signature is on just about everything that has made Alverno a pioneer in teaching, learning, and assessment. An unparalleled leader, she set the tone, gave voice to the vision, held feet to the fire, and urged everyone on to things that sometimes seemed (but were not) beyond us.

Pat Hutchings, NILOA Senior Scholar, and former Alverno College faculty member

When Sister Joel Read became president of Alverno College, she brought with her a deep belief that student performance was the key to college quality. Only if students were required to use their knowledge would they develop the abilities that are essential to continuous learning.

In the spring of 1973 Alverno embraced this idea as its own.

Thus began the remarkable story of how Sister Joel became a national educational leader and how Alverno became Mecca for colleges interested in creating an ability-based curriculum. I believe she transformed our ideas about higher education in three ways.

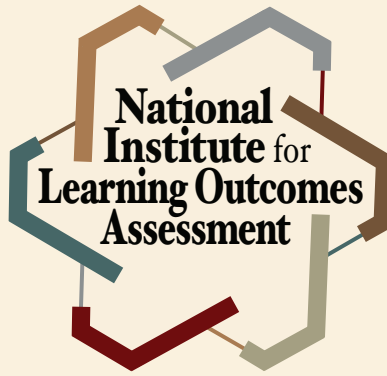
First, she set a new standard for how we think about the quality of higher education. Second, she taught us that to achieve this standard colleges must re-center their mission on learning rather than on teaching. And third she taught us that prestige was not the only source of influence over educational policy and practice--that with passion, persistence and chutzpah a small women's college from the south side of Milwaukee could make a big difference.

I once asked Sister Joel what incentives she used to overcome the skepticism some faculty expressed about all the changes implied by her vision for Alverno's work. "Incentives? Money? I don't have any money," she shot back. "I tell faculty the same thing Dick Powell told Ruby Keeler in the movie *42nd Street*. 'Stick with me baby and you'll see your name in lights.'" As some of those faculty will tell you, she was right.

There's so much more that could be said, but I'll end with this: Sister Joel loved people. She was interested in you. She listened. She asked you hard questions. She made you think. She made you change your mind. She was, in short, an educator--and, for me, a mentor and a beloved friend. I will sorely miss her.

Russell Edgerton, President Emeritus, American Association for Higher Education

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