

# WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY ACCREDITATION UPDATES

September 2008 Newsletter

## The Mignonette

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In the “culture of assessment” that the accreditation process seeks to foster, there is a tendency to equate “precise” or “more” with “better.” All too often institutions collect piles of very precise useless data that sit, unanalyzed, in neat boxes waiting for the next accreditation review. Unfortunately, despite all the many things that we could precisely measure about our students, such as height, weight, or eye color, what we should measure, learning, is harder to quantify and lends itself to imprecise measurements. However, even an imprecise measure of learning is more useful than the most precise measure of something that will not lead to improved learning.

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principle involved whether the legal doctrine of “necessity” had justified their action. As diligent law students we had carefully studied other cases on “necessity” to ensure that we understood the principle. All of us were shocked when the question on the exam was, “Define ‘mignonette.’” The answer, “Any of several Mediterranean plants of the genus *Reseda*, especially *R. odorata*, widely cultivated for its terminal, dense, spike-like clusters of very fragrant but inconspicuous greenish flowers,” is very precise, but was and is meaningless in the context of the legal issue we were trying to learn.

As we consider what we measure, the first question that we need to ask ourselves is, “How will this help my students learn?” Until and unless we can answer that question, our assessment will have the value of the definition of the mignonette.



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I learned this lesson in a very concrete way many years ago, in a Criminal Law exam. During the semester we had studied a grisly case, *Regina v. Dudley and Stephens*, which involved four crewmembers of a shipwrecked boat, the *Mignonette*, who killed and ate another crewmember. The legal