

Scaling Student Assessment Podcast Series

[Episode 3](#) – Student Voice in Assessment with Dr. Dean Richards

Intro

Dr. Dean Richards: But why not say, What do you think? You know, what do you think would make a good unit? What goes into a good unit? So assessing their sense of quality and then incorporating that into it, they may be the toughest critics, but I think that also, you know, assessment doesn't just stand alone in a vacuum, right? It should be an inherent part of instruction.

And so when you are assessing your work, you're also wanting to improve your work because assuming you care about how well you do know on it, but then also knowing that how I, how I assesses has an impact on what my grade is or, you know, what my outcomes are in this course.

Drew Vartia: All right. Welcome to our third episode in the Scaling Assessment series. Today's topic is Scaling Student Voice. With me is Dr. Dean Richards. Tell us a little bit more about yourself.

Dr. Dean Richards: I am an assistant teaching professor in the School of Education in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching. This is my second year in this position at KU but I've been working in some sort of instructional capacity teaching undergraduate and graduate level courses at KU for the last ten years. Prior to that, I was an elementary and middle school teacher in Kansas City, Missouri, public schools for 13 years.

Drew Vartia: So today is about scaling student voice and assessment instructors often dictate what students will learn and how that learning is going to be evaluated and the kind of feedback that will be given. Students, though, typically have silent or even silenced goals for their own learning that we don't often acknowledge. Well. So, today is about figuring out what are some ways we can let students express their preferences specifically for evaluation and feedback.

And our interest here is how can we do that in courses with large numbers of students?

Dr. Dean Richards: The statement that students have silent goals or silenced goals really resounded with me like, struck me as, you know, that's something that I care about a lot with my students is making sure that their voices are included and that what they care about is something that we're we're aiming our goals and our assessments and our learning experiences towards.

But yes, so much of it is silenced. They come into courses or classes, whether it's, you know, public education, K through 12. They have to be there. You know, at this level, you know, it's different because our students generally don't have to be, but they don't get to choose the content of our courses generally or oftentimes it's something they feel they have to do because of various expectations.

But their goals may be very different than what the goals of our course are And what we feel is important for them may not necessarily be the same thing that they feel is important for them. Yeah,

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that idea. I really like that. That notion is an important thing. I think to point out that oftentimes the goals are students do have or are left out.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, they're unknown to instructors, whether that's through simple ignorance or willful ignorance, you know, one of the two. But that has a tremendous ability to shape the learning that occurs by letting students buy-in. Yeah. A technique that you've used is to ask students to determine what different levels of quality might look like. And I wondered if you would tell us a little bit more about what that work looks like for you.

Dr. Dean Richards: In thinking about quality? I think we have to hinge it on what they feel is important to them, right? What they care about. So something so just kind of present with what I'm currently doing. I teach elementary methods of preparation course where it's a social studies is the topic for the course. And so students are learning ways to teach elementary social studies and it includes a significant part of that course is a practicum experience where they go off for 5 to 6 weeks a semester.

We're able to do six weeks of practicum experience, which is great because that's when they're out really like learning the most, you know, And when they're out there working with teachers in schools that are removed from our classrooms. Right. But they can really work on the things that they feel are important to them. But we never traditionally obsess those things.

Usually, we want them to check off X, Y, Z assignments. Right. This reflection about this prepare lesson plan using this format. So there's this structure component that they have to complete, but they're still out there the majority of their day, 6 hours or so. They and their teachers have worked this out. Sometimes they have more degrees of autonomy within their classroom and depending on who their mentor teacher is.

My thought, you know, for this semester and through some of the course design institute that we did over the summer was to try to incorporate what they feel is important. You know what what would give them a quality assessment through their work in the practicum experience and what better way to do that than have them set the goals that they want to accomplish.

So I haven't totally removed the kind of standard, you know, writing a lesson plan, writing a reflection about IT components. But I did create a tool that will allow them to set two goals for their practicum experience. We did this before they went out to schools, and the goal could be whatever they want. Now, we did provide them with the interest standards which kind of guide our work in teacher preparation.

That was all as far as I went. We introduced the standards because they'll be assessed on that during student teaching and this practicum experiences help prepare them for standard teaching. They could look at the entire standards, but they didn't have I didn't require that they use them because again, as we return to the idea of silencing their their voices, they may not feel that these standards are relevant to them.

Or they may want to note maybe they are somebody who's standards driven and they really want to make sure they're hitting us. So I left that open to them. There's always a lot of anxiety getting ready to

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go out to practicum. They're super excited, you know, about getting where am I going to be, who is my teacher going to be, what grade level in my teaching.

And a lot goes into that. And so I said, Well, we're going to do a little, you know, goal setting before we head out. And I didn't, you know, I wondered if students might be like man, something else to do? Or, you know, but there is a general in both classes, an overall level of excitement. And I think it's maybe just something because it is different.

There's essentially a blank sheet of paper that had this is where you write your goal and this is the different checkpoints we'll have for it. But it started out with what do you feel your strengths are going into this practicum experience? And then what are two goals you'd like to set for yourself? So they took a fair amount of time.

You know, getting into some were pretty simple. I want to develop meaningful relationships with my students. I don't.

Drew Vartia: I don't know that that's simple.

Dr. Dean Richards: Yes. Well, yeah, yeah, yeah. I shouldn't say yeah, I shouldn't say simple. Short to the point, I guess. And, and some were they want to, you know, develop, you know, better ways to teach math. You know, they were specific to like a content area or something pedagogical like that. They completed the goals, I collected them, they went out for their practicum and experience for three weeks.

We have kind of like a middle point checkpoint where they come back for a couple visits with us on campus and I had them revisit their goals. There's a portion and below each one where they say, How do you feel your progress is going towards this goal? Some of them wanted to change their goals. And I know sometimes we think like, well, once you set a goal, we need to stick with that.

Right. You know, especially if we're thinking of like we're starting with the end in mind or something like we have to keep our stay on target. I, I didn't see any problem with them changing. Why not modify it if it's what's important to you and maybe you've gotten out there and you figured out that that wasn't such a concern and maybe you have something else that you think is important to you.

Drew Vartia: Yeah, I think if you modify that goal in an informed way because now you've been in the field with that experience, that's sort of different than going, well, I just changed my mind.

Dr. Dean Richards: Yeah, yeah, exactly. And we've got new information. That's the practice of it, All right? Is that we're combining these things. We're learning, you know, with our experiences. And so they've revised them, I've recollected them. And today actually is their last day of practicum experience. And I joke about this. BE Well, you'll be back with us and getting bored with us back on campus, you know, and you know, it's funny and it is joke.

But at the same time, I think about, you know, we don't want it to be like that. And so we are planning on Thursday, we do these flex days where the students come back and it's it's not necessarily broken up into like math, science or social studies. We combine and we have kind of some workshop time. We're going to revisit our goals.

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We're going to share a slideshow of pictures that we've taken, and then they're going to work on a summary reflection, during which time we'll go around and confer with them and talk in depth a little bit more. We've been visiting with them regularly throughout the practicum, but it's kind of hit or miss and again, they're out there on their own for a lot of it.

So I'm looking forward to seeing how they feel. Do they progress towards their goals? Did they feel these are still relevant and in the sort of things? But this is my first time through with it.

Drew Vartia: So I'm curious to hear how that plays out as well. I know from what we're calling the alternative grading book club this semester, I was part of it seemed to be that instructors who were doing different forms of evaluation, especially those where students were ranking themselves, noticed that most of their students tended to be harder on themselves than the instructor would have been.

So I'm curious to know if that ends up being your experience as well.

Dr. Dean Richards: Yeah, I'm curious about that as well. I've done work with not so much at the collegiate level, but with my middle school students where they will self-assess projects. So we've used a lot of project-based learning. When it when I had the opportunity to, I would have students grade each other, give each other feedback based on an A rubric or a criteria that we created as a class.

Usually, we learn a unit, we'd have a unit of some sort, an inquiry, and then they would have a final project that kind of demonstrate like their learning or mastery or competencies or things, whatever we were calling it at the time. You know, then we would present as groups or share a project as a group, and the groups would give scores based on the rubric or the criteria that we created.

I oftentimes found that students very fair. Sometimes you might think, they're going to grade each other really harshly or grade each other really easily, you know, go easy on each other. But they're actually very fair and it became very meaningful and that was a part of their score. And then I gave a score as well. And then the group gave themselves a score.

And I usually found that groups felt they hadn't done as well as I thought they had, that they were generally their own worst critics. It's no surprise that there are a lot of parallels I find, between teaching at various levels with students. But yeah, with this one there's no grade attached to it or anything like that, so it's just totally opened.

I'm looking and exploring ways to perhaps make that part of a grade. But again, when we get into grading, then we there's constraints. You know what that.

Drew Vartia: Could you tell me a little bit more about the process that you used perhaps in each case in working with students to build these rubrics and to set these different levels of expectation, What does that process look like in working with them?

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Dr. Dean Richards: At one point of teaching in a K-8 school, I had sixth grade and I taught science and social studies. And so I would oftentimes combine the subjects into like a block time. And so we might do a project on the development of agriculture. I would usually be like a four week unit or something like that. And I would oftentimes and this is this is how I taught it.

And looking back on it, I might do it differently. But I would start out with, you know, kind of delivering the material like this is the background knowledge. We'd explore different sources and sometimes that would be then within groups, you know, doing that, sometimes it might be me doing like short lectures, presentations and things like that over, you know, the development of agriculture from like hunter gatherer societies to Mesopotamia and, you know, the early civilizations.

So I would kind of provide that background, but then I would try to build on that and see what students interests were, and they would go in and start finding sources and sharing those sort of things. And so ideally, by the end of it, you kind of have this the students are becoming experts, you know, within this subject area with me trying to act as a guide and not just kind of this didactic like sage on the stage, you know, model, which with sixth graders oftentimes doesn't work very well.

And so and a lot of times these things, I developed them out of necessity for, you know, this is how we get to the day. And because if if students are interested in what they're doing and they're finding things and they're becoming the experts and sharing information back with their peers, that's that's a lot more engaging than taking notes off a PowerPoint.

Drew Vartia: I think that has some parallels to higher education at the moment where instructors are really struggling with student engagement. So point in point well taken.

Dr. Dean Richards: Yeah. And I think throughout higher education, that's still the dominant paradigm, right? Is that you're coming to a place where the experts are not saying we're not experts, right. We think we are, but and students are coming to learn from us. Right? We don't want to remove that responsibility that well, you're you're the learner. You know it.

The onus is on you. We still have we are the teachers, right? I'm coming here for a reason and many students will have that expectation. But yeah, it doesn't necessarily mean that we are just using this banking model. Right. As Frederick said, that we're, you know, depositing information into empty vessels, you know, like return to how this would look for the for the student assessment we would develop, you know, our knowledge base and our different sources and things.

And then we would brainstorm how could we, like, share this information with somebody else, maybe with another class, or if we had some families come in or something like that, how can we share this information? And so we might brainstorm. You know, students might say, well, we could create a presentation. Like, What would you do? I had students one time where they wanted to put on a play.

So this is a number of different things, you know, but let's let them throw some things out there. Usually it was a it was a presentation project, so maybe they would build something like a diorama or a model or something. You might narrow to one thing that you want everybody to do, or they may all want to do that, or you may kind of leave it open to some different options

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Through that, we would have to set the the measures of our quality right? And you can do that with, you know, a rubric. I'm generally not a big fan of rubrics, though. I know they're pretty heavily used, kind of like lecture notes, you know, and things like that and what we do in education. But I like to develop more of kind of general like criteria.

And sometimes these are subjective, you know, But I think it is useful to have a checklist of things. And most people appreciate that this is what I'm expected to do. But instead of me handing it to the students, we would discuss together and share what would make a good project. You know, and I like to use those terms like good or quality or something, because I think people do have an intuitive sense of what they're looking for.

We would set the criteria as a class brainstorming it. Each group might get to choose like one thing that was important to include in the project, but then there would also be can you, as a teacher, you still guide things sort of like the nuts and bolts sort of things like we're making sure that our writing is error free or that we're speaking clearly, you know, and those sort of requirements.

And so we would set our criteria. I would try to keep it short and to the point, you know, concise and economic. And then once we had that, that's when the group work would begin. So we have our goal set in mind and our criteria, and then the groups can start. And they, of course, would be encouraged to revisit those things as they're working on it.

And it would be posted on an anchor chart. The tough part for me as a middle school teacher was to keep the groups on track, like working well, and you might have some groups that will finish within a day and then others have just got their title slide done. So finding time that they can work a different kind of the differentiation that goes into that was always a challenge.

But by the end of it, once we have, you know, the projects completed are in good enough shape that we feel we can share them, try to make it into some kind of event. We might call it like a when we do writing pieces, we call it like a publishing party, but it might just be presentations, might be having another class in to lecture that maybe do a gallery walk or things like that.

But we would then do the scoring, as I talked about earlier, with the students scoring each other, scoring themselves and me scoring, everybody adheres to the rubric or the criteria though, that we that we developed. And in that way it was not just me handing it to them saying, This is your assignment, you have to do this and this is what your grades are going to be.

It was this is what we think is important and this is what we want to learn. This is what we want to share. And this is what we think will be a measure of success or that.

Drew Vartia: So is this process playing out in a similar way in your university courses?

Dr. Dean Richards: I haven't in I think it was the the workshop that we had here a month ago or so. That's when I started revisiting those ideas of what I had done and started thinking about to meet there. And maybe for a lot there seem to be kind of like a break between teaching in K-through-12 public schools and coming to the university.

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Some things transfer to well, but I think sometimes in our mind we tend to try to fit in with the way things are going, you know, like final exams and things like that that we didn't usually do at an elementary and middle school level. My wheels have been turning about that like and so we have a final project that they do in, in social studies class where they create an inquiry-based unit of instruction and it should be developed to be used towards or with a classroom setting similar to the one they in for practicum or having learned the things they have in practicum or experience the things they have.

How can you use this to plan a better unit of instruction? So they're creating an inquiry-based unit and they can decide, you know, how they will assess students and all those things. But I'm assessing them on how they create a unit. The funny thing about like teacher education is we're teaching people to be teachers, so of course we want to try to model those things that we want to see in teachers.

And sometimes it happens and sometimes it doesn't.

Drew Vartia: It's very meta.

Dr. Dean Richards: Yeah, very meta process. I'm thinking that we'll do kind of similar. We'll look at different examples of the inquiry-based units that they'll be designing. We'll kind of do the nuts and bolts of like this is what goes into this unit. This is what a compelling question is, this is why this is important. Design those different pieces and then I have the criteria for them.

But why not say, What do you think? Maybe I don't know. It might be it'd be something to try, you know. What do you think would make a good unit? What goes into a good unit? So assessing their sense of quality and then incorporating that into it. But I don't see why we couldn't also have them score, score their own units and see how they do.

I'm definitely open to that idea. And again, they may be their toughest critics, but I think that also, you know, assessment doesn't just stand alone in a vacuum, right? It should be an inherent part of instruction. And so when you are assessing your work, you're also wanting to improve your work because assuming you care about how well you do in on it, but then also knowing that how I, how I assess this is having an impact on what my grade is or, you know, what my outcomes are in this course, which.

Drew Vartia: Everything that you've described sounds great. What, what number of students are we talking about? What does enrollment look like?

Dr. Dean Richards: In both sections 24 and 25 students?

Drew Vartia: Okay. A kicker question that I have for you then is for instructors who have quote unquote large courses or really anybody since enrollment is increasing. And the load is perhaps more than instructors are used to. How would you take the kinds of things that you've done? How would you recommend, I guess, that instructors deal with those larger numbers?

Dr. Dean Richards: The largest class I have taught up here is 65. I would think that even at that level, if we because we do final projects and those I think I could still gather criteria. What do you think is important now? I think given, you know, the possibilities that we have with AI and different software that's out there, I mean, there's different ways you could gather what students think are important for a

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project or what makes a good project or what would be a good assessment of what I've learned that you could gather on like a Google doc and have the results if you have them type out responses, have them like feed them through a chat bot or something and and pull out themes. Clever. I don't see why you couldn't do that. You could also have, you know, set certain like parameters of like the requirements that you would like to see and that and have them rank their top three and pull those out, have it tabulated through the Google form.

So a voting mechanism of sorts.

Yeah, voting mechanism if you wanted to. But I think there are ways you could manage that. Of course, it's something I think you have to start probably small with and build off board from. It doesn't start small if you got 400 students, but, but maybe something simple that it will rank for one assignment. I think. I think just making it more democratic in that way, Democratic assessment, that's a term.

Drew Vartia: But it is now.

Dr. Dean Richards: Yeah, they could, you know, have that input in that way. And we know it's not perfect, right, Because there's many voices coming into this. But it might make a difference if students know that they do have some choice and input into that. And it's not just being set in some nebulous, you know, source or by the person who is teaching the course.

Drew Vartia: You know what I like about the first involving A.I. is that it is so open and it's really students generating responses. I think what I like about your second proposal is that and especially for instructors of large courses, there's a retention of a sense of control where they've set some boundaries on things and students are allowed a choice within those boundaries.

And so there's some safeguard against things going off the rails right, Which you don't want with hundreds of students. Yeah. And I think your advice to about, you know, try it with one assignment and dip your toe in as opposed to make it a policy for the course and go all in. You know.

Dr. Dean Richards: We're doing this on all or no. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I think the other thing is the with really large courses is making a manageable all to have so many different points of input coming in I think there could be hesitance so to want to have to process and deal with that and then how do we still assess something that's open ended in that way If we're doing like project-based learning, which I think is hard to do, harder to do in a larger setting for sure, you know, in terms of how we score it and things like that.

Much easier to score multiple choice, you know, when we're dealing with hundreds of assessment items, you know, then having students submit online presentations and watching all of.

Drew Vartia: Them, Yeah, it takes a lot of logistical imagination to make that work. It can be done. And I've seen a number of people do that very successfully, but. It's a bit of an art.

Dr. Dean Richards: How would somebody within like if you've seen like a project based approach with a really large class, what sort of like products or items are students creating short manuals?

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Drew Vartia: I've seen that Dea Follmer (Greenhoot). Who's actually the director of the Center for Teaching Excellence? She has, as the product be a live, web-accessible blog post. That's basically an advice column, psychological advice, which is a fancier version of the like the Lucy Five Cents, you know, the Peanuts.

Dr. Dean Richards: yeah. Yeah. Gotcha. Yes, gotcha.

Drew Vartia: The things that aren't necessarily written products, but maybe something more tangible. I feel like these types of assignments appear maybe in ECAC with coding and some of the engineering disciplines which tend to be project-based anyway, just by the nature of what it is. Yeah, engineering necessarily makes people have to make things. Yeah. And so they end up with some tangible products in there, more project-based courses.

But I know instructors of large courses have done those types of things around the university.

Dr. Dean Richards: I would think that if you're willing to do or you have to do those kind of projects for assessments, that those tend to lend themselves more to, like students providing voice in what they think is a quality project or product. Of course, you have like your professional standards or like us with the test standards that we're guided by that we have to adhere to.

I still think there's a room there still for student voice to be brought in in tandem or as an additional component, at least, you know, for assessing those engineering.

Drew Vartia: And what you were saying together kind of made me think of it. But there will be, you know, professional standards or specifications for a project. But there's not really a reason that those can't be complemented by a parallel set that are student derived in terms of the meaning or development that they hope for by completing it.

Dr. Dean Richards: Maybe something that branches across different discipline. Like competencies. Yeah. That. That we want to see within our learners competencies to meet the specifications and engineering project competencies. And in teaching to engage your learners, you know, or to utilize a particular pedagogical approach or develop a formative in a summit, an assessment.

Drew Vartia: For somebody wanting to try this because you have experience in this area, you know, what are some pitfalls that you might alert people to and how do you kind of avoid those?

Dr. Dean Richards: I generally have had success with trying to includes students voices and finding out what they think is important and what they care about. It's it's hard to say there's much negative to that, you know, or drawbacks to it. I do think it's important that there still is a teacher in the room. Right. And so you still provide the direction.

I think when we ask students, what do you think should go in this or what's important, of course, we have to make sure that things stay on track and that we're guiding that discussion or that we've provided a structure in place. Whether you're checking the top three things that you think are important or we're bringing all the responses together into a place and cleaning out the themes, the teacher is still the guide, the facilitator, and the planner.

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So I think you're sort of playing your role because that is your duty and your responsibility that you're also giving room, you know, for students to share what they think is important in terms of other drawbacks or things or pitfalls or potential things that could come to mind. I mean, I think for yourself, of course, you know, start out with something manageable, at least for me, when I get like my mind going about something like, I'll want to try this, I want to do that, and we could do it this way.

And then as you gets closer to it, you're like, even talking about this final project that we're going to do in my current courses if the time does isn't there to do it, it's okay to not, you know, we don't have to we don't want to do a badly and be rushed, you know, to do it. So I think being willing to be flexible, of course, but I think we all know that as educators at this point that that's the name of the game being willing to explore things, but also with what you think is manageable, what you can do realistically with the time you have with your content area, with your with your students. Yeah, I don't have any stories of like something that went bad, you know, or when it's quite bad or off the rails or something. There's probably something I another thing I used to do was when we were doing writing in assessments of quality, and this is just something I did kind of as like an experiment. Have you read the book *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*?

Drew Vartia: I actually have not. I know tons of people have.

Dr. Dean Richards: Okay. The author, Robert Pirsig, was a philosopher, but he wrote the story and built his philosophy into the story. A lot of it is about assessing quality, and one of his main points is that quality is an intuitive thing, but in the Western world and paradigm, we've tried to break it down into like categories, but really it's something that we that we obsess, assess as an intuitive.

It's part of our nature according to it's a pure. So I got this idea when I was reading that I was teaching and I think I had like a fifth or sixth grade classroom and we were doing writing pieces and we were doing it. It was like informational texts or something like that. And I took three pieces of writing.

I think this time I, I wrote them myself. So like, modeled after what the students might, how they might write students kept coming up to me say, is this good? Is this good? Could you read my paper? Is it good? You know, I used to get those questions a lot and I'd be like, Well, what do you what do you think?

I don't know. You're the teacher. I bet you could tell the difference between a good piece of writing and a piece of writing that you think is not so good. And so I would write out different examples and I would put them up different paragraphs and I would have them ranked. So I might write like five paragraphs of different varying what I thought were different levels of quality and writing over a modeling that the type of writing we were doing, the students would get it like.

And I usually had large classes like 30 students, you know, at a time, and they would get it every time they'd have it doing that, the exact right order. And I was like, You all know what is good writing and what is not as good writing, you know? So this is what you need to do to assess your writing, to try to make it more authentic.

Sometimes I would use students pieces of writing. There's a pitfall in that, though, of course. You know, when you're sharing students range, you have to get the okay beforehand with students. But I did never

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wanted, you know, post work. I'm a student who might be struggling with something or they didn't put their best effort into it or something like that.

So maybe a pitfall there. But again, that was just another example, that kind of popped in my head.

Drew Vartia: I feel like well-crafted or well-chosen exemplars can go a long way for students. And it's not just elementary school students, right? Our college students do the same thing, you know, is this good? And I feel like it's a human quality because as adults, whether we would admit it or not, as faculty, we regularly want to know if our work is good and seek validation for it.

Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Dean Richards: Definitely. And particularly, you know, with younger people, they want that validation from a role model or, you know, a mentor. That's important. But like you said, I think it's important for all of us to still have somebody come in and do a peer evaluation of your classroom or, you know, if your teacher and if you're somebody else, I.

Drew Vartia: Think it's good. But what do you think?

Dr. Dean Richards: Yeah, And again, we're often our worst critics, you know, So it's nice to hear somebody else say that. No, this is actually really good.

Drew Vartia: Well, thanks, Dr. Dean, for being here. I appreciate your time.

Dr. Dean Richards: Well, thanks. Thank you for having me. And happy to have had this opportunity.