

Book review:
*Assessment clear and simple: a practical guide for institutions,
departments and general education*

Walvoord, B. E. (2nd ed., 2010). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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As higher education continues to face increasing financial pressures, institutions are being asked to be more accountable for their funding. The Gulf is not immune from these same pressures, and one of the major ways in which institutions can demonstrate accountability is through the effective assessment of student learning at the macro- level. This is most often aggregate data generated at the program or departmental level and is recognized as part of the quality assurance process.

Though institutional missions often encompass the tripartite constructs of teaching, research, and service, it is still the teaching and learning dimension that is far and away the most important. It is because of this that assessment of student learning is so vital to demonstrate both a high level of accountability and a commitment to improving student learning. With *Assessment Clear and Simple*, Walvoord has written one of the two assessment books (the other being Suskie's *Assessing Student Learning*) that should be on the shelf of everyone involved in the assessment of student learning in higher education. The clarity of prose and purpose makes the book almost indispensable.

Walvoord has divided the book into only four chapters, but given the value and importance of the appendices and resources, it is more accurate to state that the book has five sections. Interestingly, the book does not need to be read as a complete whole since most of the chapters have been written targeting specific audiences. My initial impression of the book was its striking simplicity in terms of both layout and design. Within each chapter there is liberal use of headings, formatting, white space, and figures. Chapters are then further sub-divided through the use of section summaries, which are boxes containing bullet points of the main ideas within each section. A chapter summary is also included at the end of each chapter for review purposes. Most importantly, the book is full of practical examples and case studies from experiences garnered from the more than 350 institutions where the author has consulted or provided workshops.

The first chapter is the one chapter that must be read by everyone because it provides the overview for assessment and provides the foundational scaffolding necessary for the remaining four sections to be of the most value. It begins by explaining what assessment is, and it then addresses common faculty concerns and queries such as *Does assessment violate academic freedom? Will assessment results be used to evaluate my teaching?* and *Why can't we just use grades?* It then speaks to the benefits of assessment and offers general guidelines for the three steps of assessment which are writing outcomes, gathering and analyzing data, and taking action. The chapter stresses that effective assessment ends in actions, and that the processes implemented should be simple.

Chapter two is the chapter aimed at institutional leaders, those with the entire perspective of assessment at an institution. The chapter begins by targeting the development of an assessment culture on campus, and it does this by focusing on the vision, mission, and outcomes development. For effective

assessment programs this should revolve around the concept that the aim of assessment is not compliance with accreditors, but is actually to produce informed actions to enhance student learning. The next section is the most impactful for me personally because it looked at ways to improve existing assessment programs. Given my role as the lead administrator for my institution's assessment program and the rate at which the program is rapidly maturing, this was extremely pertinent. The sub-section titled *Improving the "Digestion" of Data* was of greatest value because it focused on how to do something meaningful with the data. This is often an overlooked aspect of the assessment process as there does need to be a deliberate process and purposive structures to be successful. This echoes one of the key findings from the Wabash Assessment Study where they found that "most institutions have routinized data collection, but they have little experience in reviewing and making sense of data" (Blaich & Wise, 2011, p. 12). The chapter continues to provide useful suggestions for how to improve assessment systems and offers many concrete examples from actual institutions. It concludes by stressing the importance of using the information that is collected, and keeping the assessment processes simple.

The audiences for the third chapter are faculty or administrators, those managing department or program assessment systems. It puts forth a simple, yet effective, step-by-step assessment program that would be acceptable for accreditors and for the improvement of student learning. A series of case-studies and examples follow to show that the process can be basic and no-frills but still lead to actions for the improvement of student learning. The chapter concludes with an example of an effective departmental assessment report.

Chapter four is specific to general education curricular requirements. It assumes that the general education curriculum is taught by disparate departments throughout an institution. While this is the most common model for general education, it is not the one followed at my institution. Nonetheless, it is a helpful chapter in that it offers insights into the importance of defining assessment responsibilities, especially the digestion and decision aspects which are vital to having an assessment program that leads to improvement. It also emphasizes the importance of having faculty owning the assessment process. These are lessons that are applicable to an entire assessment program, not just a general education assessment program. To conclude, the chapter provides suggestions on how to have more of an impact through initiatives like rewarding departments for good assessment work and by having assessment as an integral component of the program review process.

The fifth section of the book, the appendices and resources, is quite worthwhile because of its practical nature. There are examples of a few key assessment documents such as a curriculum map, consent form, and rubrics. The resources list, while quite brief, suggests five of the leading resources in the field. The suggestions are quite informed and prevent the need for a burgeoning assessment person from having to delve through a myriad of possible sources to understand and work effectively in assessment.

Though the entire text is only 126 pages, its practical approach to assessment means that it is a tremendous value priced at approximately \$US 23. As I stated earlier, it is one of two books that should be on the shelf of everyone interested in assessment in higher education. It is certainly one of my main references as I guide assessment at my institution. The book can take an assessment novice and transition them towards a meaningful understanding in the field of assessment, while also serving as a refresher for those already working in assessment. The quality, value, and importance of this book cannot be overstated.

References

Blaich, C. F., & Wise, K. S. (2011). From Gathering to Using Assessment Results: Lessons from the Wabash National Study. *National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment Occasional Paper 8*. Retrieved from http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/documents/Wabash_000.pdf