

Book Review

Coming to Terms with Student Outcomes Assessment: Faculty and Administrators' Journeys to Integrating Assessment in Their Work and Institutional Culture
 Edited by Peggy L. Maki. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, Inc., 2010. 227 pp. ISBN-13: 976-1-57922-435-6.

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Coming to Terms with Student Outcomes Assessment: Faculty and Administrators' Journeys to Integrating Assessment in Their Work and Institutional Culture provides evidence that others have travelled that road of implementing assessment on college campuses, and, in fact, found like-minded others and success. Maki gives a brief introduction to the 14 stories of assessment adventures. The focus of the book, however, is how 14 institutions and the drivers that led the charges each accomplished their goals of incorporating student outcomes assessment into a major, a program, general education, or campus-wide. The institutions represented are varied; they include community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and large research universities. Each chapter, written by people who were there on that rocky road to institutionalizing assessment, reflects the style and viewpoint of the authors. Chapter authors offer humorous slants, details of their programs, forms, or a general overview of their process.

Coming to Terms with Student Outcomes Assessment is not a how-to book. A reader starting an assessment program will not find lists of best practices or step-by-step directions. What the reader will find is general descriptions of 14 methods or processes used by others who were just starting out. There are ideas and procedures that look interesting throughout the chapters and may work on the reader's campus. The reader will also find encouragement in others' descriptions of the difficulties they had and how it worked out. My favorite chapters used humor in describing how they dealt with engaging faculty in student assessment. As I read about the typical faculty players and administrators on campus in chapter 5, it was easy to substitute the names and faces I work with at my university.

The authors from Eastern Kentucky University also used Kübler-Ross' five steps in the grieving process (i.e., denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) to describe the steps faculty go through in accepting the reality of assessment. The transtheoretical model of successful change (i.e., pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance) was used by the authors from the Rhode Island system to illustrate the successful implementation of assessment by faculty as part of the culture on their campuses. Another explanatory model portrayed assessment as a box of chocolates (chapter 1). A few authors described how they arrived at the positions wherein

they were in charge of assessment of a major or program. David Eubanks (chapter 3) even makes fun of his early views of assessment and gives examples of early department reports he wrote before he was "in charge."

What do these chapters have in common? The majority of the authors did not have formal degrees in program evaluation and assessment. They used resources such as books, conferences, accrediting agency workshops, national assessment workshops, and advice from others who had been in their shoes. Formalizing the student outcomes assessment was not a choice that many campuses had freely made. Most of the authors and their institutions found themselves on the assessment road because of external mandates such as regional accrediting bodies and state guidelines. This brought suspicion, ill-will, disbelief, and despair to faculty and administrators at their institutions. The authors not only had to deal with designing and implementing the nuts and bolts of an assessment program, they had to work with sometimes recalcitrant faculty and small budgets. Their initiatives competed with other campus needs for personnel and faculty time. The chapters give advice to get faculty involved – let them be part of the planning, let them speak their minds about assessment without taking it personally, and publically encourage and celebrate steps in the right direction. In addition, they advise that you not be discouraged by small numbers of faculty attending meetings or workshops.

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Readers may pick up ideas for committees or structures from several of the chapters. Authors report on faculty development efforts that focused on assessment, with some campuses having an assessment day for faculty discussion, training, dissemination of information, or to score assessment measures (e.g., chapters 8 and 14). There are also candid discussions about faculty time constraints and choosing to compensate them for time dedicated to assessment work. Practical highlights of the book include information about sources such as Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) in chapter 1 and Carnegie Foundation's free KEEP toolkit, a set of web-based tools in chapter 4. Various chapters discuss the pros and cons of using standardized measures developed by companies such as ETS (e.g., see chapter 13). Some campuses found these measures to be a fit for their needs while others opted for locally developed measures. A few chapters include forms, rubrics, and curriculum maps that readers might find helpful (e.g., chapters 2, 4, 7, and 13).

A less tangible benefit of this book is that readers can retell the stories of what other campuses have attained to their own faculty and administrators to assure these stakeholders that growing pains are common and that assessment is doable in diverse environments. Chapters offer responses to such complaints as assessment interfering with academic freedom, that course grades should be assessment enough, or that assessment is just a fad. Finally, these authors offer benefits of assessment that were witnessed on their campuses. Although assessment was usually externally driven, the naysayers were often convinced of its utility and worth for course, major, or program planning and improvement.

This well-written, easy to read book can be a source of encouragement and amusement. A seasoned assessment veteran might find this book useful in learning about the different approaches used at other institutions or to reminisce about their own beginnings in the field. But, for the newcomer, there are many ideas in the different chapters for organizing, persuading, encouraging, and successfully moving toward student outcomes assessment. And, lest anyone new to introducing assessment to a college campus thinks his or her road ahead is well-marked, has no pot holes, and will require no detours, these 14 campuses offer a reality check!

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