

BOOK REVIEW:

Higher Education Assessments: Leadership Matters. Edited by Gary L. Kramer and Randy L. Swing. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010. 288 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-4422-0620-5. Cloth, \$49.95

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Higher Education Assessments: Leadership Matters, edited by Gary L. Kramer and Randy L. Swing (2010) is a compilation of landmark assessment research from multiple higher education assessment scholars: Angelo, Banta, Ewell, Kuh, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Tinto. Each chapter in *Higher Education Assessments* summarizes assessment research and best practices, thus providing higher education leadership with what they “need to know and do to lead assessment successfully on campus” (Kramer & Swing, 2010, p. XV). Although the book focuses on what senior leadership needs to know about assessment practices, different types of leaders, such as assessment professionals and faculty, will benefit from reading this book.

Book Summary

Higher Education Assessments is divided into three parts: (a) Leading Assessments on the Campus, (b) Bridging Learner Outcomes: Finding Common Ground, and (c) Assessments That Transform the Learning Culture. The first part, Leading Assessments on the Campus, sets the tone for the book by focusing on what senior leaders need to know about assessment, ultimately providing leaders with a broad assessment primer. The first section of Chapter 1 provides leaders with a common definition and background of assessment as well as a broad overview of assessment methodologies. The last part of the chapter discusses the challenges leaders may face and suggests ways to foster a culture of assessment. Bers and Swing (2010) assert that when assessments are carried out just to say an assessment was performed, then assessments become unusable and unjustifiable. They suggest that campus leaders continually guide assessment efforts and focus the campus on using assessment results for improvement. To achieve a sustainable assessment program, Bers and Swing list six imperatives that must occur. From setting expectations to building and sustaining an infrastructure in which assessment professionals “serve as mentors, coaches, and consultants” (Bers & Swing, 2010, p. 22) to using the results and celebrating the success, each imperative guides senior leaders through the process of developing a sustainable assessment program. Without all of these components, Bers and Swing suggest that leaders

will have a difficult time establishing a quality assessment program.

Chapter 2, “Assessment Frameworks That Can Make a Difference in Achieving Institutional Outcomes,” builds upon Chapter 1 by discussing areas in which senior leadership should concentrate, such as identifying components of an institution-wide assessment plan and building a culture of evidence that reinforces institutional goals and mission. A common theme throughout chapter is that building a systematic, contiguous, and purposeful assessment program requires long-term commitment and buy-in from all institutional stakeholders. The last section of this chapter is dedicated to providing senior leaders with a framework to create a culture of evidence by incorporating factors and principles of assessment plans into a model for the institution.

The next section in *Higher Education Assessments*, Bridging Learner Outcomes: Finding Common Ground, concentrates on student-centered assessment practices that account for a diverse student body, incorporate out-of-class experiences, and lead to program improvements. Chapter 3, “Assessment and Student Diversity” starts out with an overview of the historical changes to the U.S. higher education system that created opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to enroll in colleges and universities. Torres (2010) asserts that diversity incorporates more than race

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and gender and assessment practices should consider students’ multifaceted background. Different types of diversity assessments, such as structural diversity, curricular and co-curricular activities that influence attitudes, and assessment of campus climate are outlined. The last section of this chapter focuses on the disaggregation of data by different groups (i.e. gender, race, first-generation) so campus leaders can focus on students who are succeeding and those who need assistance. Torres (2010) states the importance of focusing intervention efforts:

When institutions take on the attitude that an intervention for all students will eventually help those who actually need the help, the situation that results has the student who needs the intervention looking for the needle in the haystack. Focusing interventions on the population of students who need the assistance is the more direct manner in which an institution can truly improve success rates of students; well-intentioned interventions

that are not focused on the problem will likely produce marginal gains in student success. (pp. 67-68)

The second chapter in this section, “Assessment in Student Services That Foster Student and Program Successes” (Chapter 4), starts out with the assertion that assessment initiatives in student affairs have grown to produce valuable information on programs and services that lead to student success. An overview of student involvement and engagement theories provides the reader with a basic understanding of how student experiences can lead to student success. Lastly, the chapter examines assessment models for student services which provide the reader with best assessment practices in student affairs.

The main argument in the next chapter, “Documenting Student Learning: Valuing the Process” (Chapter 5), is the notion that when or if leaders only perform assessment functions because of external pressures, then student learning is lost and improvements cannot be made. Smith and Barclay (2010) assert that assessments designed to elicit cognitive and metacognitive processes from students increases the likelihood that students will learn concepts presented to them. They discuss cognitive engagement, a concept in which students are exposed to complex learning environments that promote deeper levels of learning, such as synthesizing and integrating knowledge (Smith & Barclay, 2010). After assessment for learning concepts are explored, Smith and Barclay discuss assessment projects, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ (AAC&U) VALUE (Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education) project and University of South Florida’s Cognitive Level and Quality of Writing Assessment (CLAQWA) program as examples of best practices that elicit deeper learning from students.

Lastly, Chapter 6 “Learning Outcomes, Assessment, and Program Improvement,” focuses on what faculty need to know about creating assessment plans that improve what students learn in their courses (Osguthorpe, Bradley, & Johnson, 2010). The chapter reviews common questions faculty should ask when they are creating learning outcomes, developing assessments of the outcomes, and evaluating possible changes. At the end of the chapter, a set of principles designed to help faculty and administrators evaluate the quality of their assessment plan is presented.

The last section in the book *Higher Education Assessment*, Assessments That Transform the Learning Culture, is focused on assessments that transform the

culture. The first chapter in this section, “Student Engagement and a Culture of Assessment” (Chapter 7), provides a student engagement framework and outlines nine characteristics of assessments that are associated with improving student learning (Kinzie, 2010). These nine characteristics direct leaders through the process of developing an assessment culture that promotes student learning and success. Kinzie (2010) suggests that institutions that want to enhance student experiences and student learning need to focus on assessing student engagement and that the “information gained through student engagement data is useful in all institutional assessment agendas intent on improving student learning” (p. 138).

Chapter 8, “Assessment in the Disciplines” changes the focus of the book, shifting to assessments at the college, department, and unit/program level (Muffo, 2010). The author suggests that senior leaders should know about disciplinary-level assessment, paying particular attention to disciplines with accreditation organizations, in order to understand what programs and disciplines are doing to assess student learning and why they do it. After a brief explanation of accreditation organizations, Muffo (2010) spends some time explaining engineering’s accrediting body – Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). He suggests that ABET’s model can be used by many other disciplines because they outline student learning outcomes that are transferable (i.e. functioning on multidisciplinary teams, communicating effectively, and engaging in lifelong learning). The last section of this chapter discusses future trends in federal and state-level accountability, and it is suggested that higher education institutions need to provide leadership and directions to federal and state governments by adopting accreditation-like models of assessment where applicable.

The next chapter of the book, “Assessment That Transforms an Institution” (Chapter 9), provides the reader with a guide on how to create an assessment culture that “becomes embedded in the culture as a systematic and continuous process of improvement and as a way to provide valid and reliable information for accountability” (Gray, 2010, p. 180). Gray (2010) emphasizes that by making assessment meaningful and manageable to faculty, leaders can provide a sustainable institution-wide assessment structure. Throughout the chapter, the author presents a clear and compressive plan that will make assessment transformative. At the end of the chapter, the question “why read this chapter?” is asked. As a response, a letter from an academic dean and provost is presented. Dr. Andrew Phillips details how he came to value assessment and suggests how assessment should be framed as “a vehicle for BETTER education, for BETTER learning, for BETTER program design” (p. 209) by leadership in

order to gain faculty acceptance of assessment initiatives.

Chapter 10, “Putting Student First as Partners in the Learning Experience” discusses how institutions can partner with students and engage them in the learning process. Kramer and Miller (2010) suggest that by engaging students as partners in the learning process, institutions will be able to align student expectations and experiences with institutional outcomes, create assessment measures that are intentional and useful, and make certain that changes to experiences or programs will affect student success. The authors provide several examples of how to engage students in the assessment process and give readers an overview of a few best practices from various institutions. At the end of the chapter the authors ask the question Randy Pausch proposed to his students: “If we were to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?” (Kramer & Miller, 2010, p. 233). Their hope is that, after reading their chapter, our answer will be “put students first as partners in the learning enterprise” (Kramer & Miller, 2010, p. 233).

Finally, *Higher Education Assessments* concludes with an epilogue from Gary L. Kramer and Randy L. Swing. They start out asking the question “what can senior leaders do to rally assessments around improving student success, learning, and development?” (Kramer & Swing, 2010, p. 237). Throughout the book, the chapter contributors have given the reader several ways to answer this question, but all agree on one factor that has a significant impact on building an assessment culture centered around improving student learning – leadership. Without a leader who monitors assessment practices and uses assessment data to drive decisions, the campus will not adopt a sustainable assessment culture. Kramer and Swing (2010) conclude with several strategies for senior leadership that will help them build a culture of assessment, all of which support the idea that assessment practices must be “purposeful, integrated, and built on and reinforced by one another” (p. 240).

Review

Higher Education Assessments is a good basic resource for senior leadership and new and seasoned assessment professionals. The book provides a comprehensive compilation of best practices in assessment research. One of the main strengths of this book is that most of the chapters rely on seminal assessment research studies and scholarly endeavors. Using assessment concepts from leaders in the assessment field, such as Anglo, Banta, and Kuh, provides a complete assessment resource that is ground in researched best practices. Additionally, although chapter authors acknowledge that there is no *one size fits*

all assessment program, examples from other institutions provide the reader with a guide for implementing the assessment concepts discussed in the book.

A limitation of this book is that the intended audience is campus presidents, vice presidents, provosts, and deans. With the exception of a few chapters, many of the concepts and ideas discussed are more for assessment directors and coordinators to implement, not senior leadership. *Higher Education Assessments* gives senior leaders a road map on how to make assessment transformative on their campuses; however, deans and provosts will not be the people directly helping faculty with assessment practices within the major. To truly transform a campus, all levels of professionals involved with assessment need to be involved and knowledgeable about assessment practices.

Finally, although a seasoned assessment professional may have extensive knowledge of many of the concepts offered in *Higher Education Assessments*, there are some ideas that will help assessment professionals gain the support of senior leadership at their institutions. Assessment professionals can utilize some of the suggestions in the book to revitalize their campus-wide assessment program. Ultimately *Higher Education Assessment: Leadership Matters* is a welcomed addition to assessment literature and is another good assessment resource for assessment professionals.

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