

**AUTHORS:**

Carrie L. Zelna, Ph.D.  
North Carolina  
State University

Stephany Brett Dunstan,  
Ph.D. Candidate  
North Carolina  
State University

**CORRESPONDENCE**

*Email*  
clzelna@ncsu.edu

**AUTHORS' NOTE**

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## Finding the Right Fit: Choosing an Assessment Conference

**T**here was a time when it could be a challenge to gain the necessary training and skills to conduct quality learning assessment. Fortunately, this is no longer the case as formal educational programs are now available through some graduate schools and, in addition, there are many outstanding assessment conferences. Faculty, staff and administrators sometimes struggle when researching the options for continuing education. The following pages provide the choices to consider when selecting an event as well as an abbreviated list of regional and national conferences.

**Role of the Attendee**

Attendees at assessment conferences tend to vary greatly in terms of their roles and levels of responsibility. As such, faculty, staff, and administrators often attend assessment conferences for different reasons. While faculty are focused on learning more about academic course, degree program and general education assessment, staff in the co-curricular and academic support programs are grappling with how to assess the co-curricular and support activities they deliver. Administrators and assessment professionals are focused on how best to organize a process and provide education and support to those in the degree programs or co-curricular units.

**Scope of the Conference**

The scope of conferences can also vary significantly, so when choosing a conference, it is important to identify the target audience, content areas and important logistics, as they will be key elements in the final decision.

**Audience.** Many conferences, but certainly not all, have a target audience based on the role of the attendees. Many conferences are general enough to provide valuable information for anyone engaging in the assessment process but often lean toward either an academic or co-curricular focus.

**Content.** One method of organizing content is to use “tracks.” An assessment conference might have tracks associated with level of experience such as novice, intermediate and advanced. They might also have tracks associated with the area to be assessed such as Academic Programs, Student Affairs/Co-curricular programs, Academic Support and General Education. At times, tracks are associated with the type of institution, such as two- or four-year institutions. Some larger organizations have conferences where there are a variety of higher education topics and “assessment” itself is a track. In addition to tracks, most conferences offer pre-conference sessions and longer workshops that teach specific skills and/or allow you to work on a project or problem.

**Attendees at assessment conferences tend to vary greatly in terms of their roles and levels of responsibility.**

For guidance on what types of sessions you might want to attend, look to the various professional standards for assessment. The principles of assessment in Banta, Lund, Black & Oblander’s (1996) book *Assessment in Practice: Putting Principles to Work on College Campuses* and the ACPA/NASPA professional standards for assessment (NASPA, 2012) may help guide your decisions.

**Logistics.** For budgetary reasons you might need to consider the logistics when choosing a conference. Location, size, length, sponsoring organization and inclusion of meals will impact the cost of registration and travel. The larger national conferences offer access to some of the best experts in the field but smaller conferences, even one-day drive-ins, could offer time with other practitioners and provide very useful support and personalized guidance.

In an attempt to demonstrate the variety of options, we have highlighted a number of conferences for your consideration. This list is arranged alphabetically and is by no means comprehensive. There are other high quality conferences we were unable to describe here.

**American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Student Affairs Assessment Institute:**  
[www.myacpa.org/pd/assessment/](http://www.myacpa.org/pd/assessment/)

The ACPA Student Affairs Assessment Institute is a national conference that meets in the spring and is geared toward student affairs professionals but inclusive of administrators, faculty and graduate students. With roughly 100 participants, small-group sessions are highlighted as a facet allowing for the development of individual assessment plans. The conference offers training and development in assessment at the beginning and intermediate levels over two and a half days. Tracks are offered for assessment at the department, program and the divisional level.

**Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Annual Forum:**  
[www.airweb.org/EducationAndEvents/AnnualConference/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.airweb.org/EducationAndEvents/AnnualConference/Pages/default.aspx)

This national conference which meets in the spring touts itself on its website as being “the world’s largest gathering of higher education professionals working in institutional research, assessment, planning and related postsecondary education fields.” At the annual meeting over 400 presentations are offered in varying tracks, including at the 2012 meeting: Assessment: Accountability; Institutional Effectiveness, and Accreditation; Collaboration: Communicating Inside and Outside the Institution; Resources: Faculty, Finance and Facilities; Students: Enrollment and Experience; Technology: Data Management, Warehousing, and Internet and Computers.

**Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) Annual Conference:**  
[www.aalhe.org](http://www.aalhe.org)

A new national conference in its second year, the AALHE is focused purely on student learning assessment in higher education. The quickly growing conference (130 attendees in its first year, but over 200 early registrants at the time of publication) is “open to all who are engaged in learning assessment—the faculty, administrators, Student Affairs

staff, institutional researchers and others in higher education who collect, analyze and use assessment data to improve student learning.” The spring conference lasts roughly two and a half days, and the 2012 conference themes are Skills Necessary for Assessment Practice, Knowledge Necessary for Assessment Practice, Art of Assessment Practice, with strands at the beginning, intermediate and advanced level in: Teaching and Learning Theory; Curriculum Mapping and Development, Measurement of Learning, Data Analysis and Presentation, Communication/Documentation of Results. Special topics other than those listed here may also be included.

**Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis Assessment Institute:**  
[www.planning.iupui.edu/institute](http://www.planning.iupui.edu/institute)

Meeting annually in the fall, this national conference indicates on its website that it is open to “faculty, student affairs professionals and administrators who have an interest in or responsibility for assessment” and generally has between 950 and 1,000 attendees. The two and a half day institute is held annually in the fall in Indianapolis, and tracks for the 2012 include Capstone Experiences, Civic Engagement, ePortfolios, Faculty Development, First-Year Experience, and Student Development.

**International Association for Education Assessment Conference:**  
[www.iaea.info/](http://www.iaea.info/)

This international conference which meets annually in the fall has a mission to “help advance, through professional interchange, the science and practice of educational assessment by organizations around the world.” The association’s annual conference has been held in numerous locations around the globe including, in recent years, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and the United Kingdom. Assessment topics included at the annual conference are broad, and range from literacy assessment in the classroom to national testing systems. Varying levels of education from elementary to higher education are included.

**NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Assessment & Persistence Conference:** [www.naspa.org/programs/apc/default.cfm](http://www.naspa.org/programs/apc/default.cfm)

The NASPA Assessment & Persistence Conference is a national conference held annually in the spring with a mission to “promote student learning and success by strengthening assessment, quality improvement and intentional persistence and retention programs.” The two and a half day conference generally hosts around 400 attendees and conference tracks are offered at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels to accommodate attendees of varying backgrounds and levels of assessment experience, from faculty and student affairs professionals to assessment practitioners.

**Many conferences are general enough to provide valuable information for anyone engaging in the assessment process but often lean toward either an academic or curricular focus.**

**New England Educational Assessment Network:**  
[www.neean.org/](http://www.neean.org/)

This regional organization hosts both a fall forum and a summer institute and states on its website that its mission is “to promote quality assessment of student learning and development, and thus to enhance the effectiveness of institutions of higher education.” Membership is open to faculty, staff, and administrators and the fall forum generally has roughly 150 attendees. The topics of presentations at the fall forum range from assessing student affairs and general education to graduate programs. The summer institute offers informational sessions as well a venue for working teams to craft assessment plans with the assistance of an NEAN consultant. The New England Educational Assessment Network also maintains a publication, the Journal of Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness.

**Texas A&M Assessment Conference:**  
[www.assessment.tamu.edu/conference/](http://www.assessment.tamu.edu/conference/)

The Texas A&M Assessment Conference is a national conference meeting annually in the spring with a focus on student learning in higher education. The topics covered range from course-level assessment to general education and special interests. As such, the variety of topics is attractive to a wide audience in higher education from graduate students

to faculty and administrators, drawing roughly 600 participants. The two and a half day conference in 2012 offers the following tracks for concurrent sessions: Assessing Academic Programs & Projects; Faculty Assessing Student Learning at the Course Level; Strategic Planning and Assessment in Accreditation; Assessing General Education; Special Interest Topics: Assessing Student Affairs & Student Development; and Assessing Distance Learning.

**Virginia Assessment Group Annual Conference:**

[www.virginiaassessment.org/conferences\\_and\\_workshops.html](http://www.virginiaassessment.org/conferences_and_workshops.html)

A regional conference now in its 25th year, the Virginia Assessment Group Annual Conference is held in the fall and is host to roughly 125-175 assessment practitioners, faculty and administrators with interests in assessment. The size of the conference offers ample opportunity for networking with practitioners. The 2012 meeting will feature sessions on best practices, research on assessment, and new and creative assessment practices.

**Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges Assessment Teaching and Learning Conference:** [www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/\\_e-assesspacnwteachinglearningconf.aspx](http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/_e-assesspacnwteachinglearningconf.aspx)

This regional conference is held annually in the spring and is geared toward community college educators. The conference generally has an audience of faculty from the community college system in Washington (as well as some from surrounding states) and the 2012 conference is expected to have roughly 400 attendees. Conference sessions are interactive and workshop-like with presentations by faculty for faculty to aid improving assessment practices in the classroom and beyond. Though there are no specifically designated themes or strands, topics at the 2012 meeting include writing course outcomes, aligning course outcomes with institutional learning outcomes, assessment practices in inverted classrooms, and electronic assessment management systems.

**Western New York Assessment Consortium for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management:** [www.rit.edu/studentaffairs/assessment/consortium.php](http://www.rit.edu/studentaffairs/assessment/consortium.php)

A regional conference in its first year, the Western New York Assessment Consortium for Student Affairs and Enrollment Management serves student affairs and enrollment management professionals in higher education. This spring conference hosts roughly 100-150 participants and the website notes that “the consortium is designed to connect regional student affairs and enrollment management professionals to share and discuss assessment practices and knowledge.” The day-long meeting include sessions highlighting best practices and Applied Assessment Sessions which include such topics as Residence life, Financial Aid, Career Services, Enrollment Services, Campus Life, and Orientation & Transition Programs.

**Regional Accrediting Institutions’ Annual Meetings**

The regional accrediting agencies support assessment through conference sessions during the annual meetings, and in some cases, special assessment workshops throughout the year.

- New England Association for Schools and Colleges: <http://www.neasc.org/>
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools: [www.sacs.org/](http://www.sacs.org/)
- The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools: [www.ncahlc.org/](http://www.ncahlc.org/)
- The Middle States Commission on Higher Education: [www.msche.org/](http://www.msche.org/)
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges: <http://wascarc.org/>

As you search for the right conference, keep in mind that this list is abbreviated and in addition to these types of conferences, academic disciplines and co-curricular and academic support programs often have organizations that host national conferences. These conferences often include an assessment component. More information regarding conferences can be found online or through your professional association.

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## References

- Banta, T.W., Lund, J.P., Black, K.E., & Oblander, F.W. (1996). *Assessment in practice: Putting principles to work on college campuses*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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