

Book Review

Assessment for Excellence: The Philosophy and Practice of Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (2nd ed.). Alexander W. Astin and Anthony Lising Antonio. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield and the American Council on Education, 2012. 380 pp. ISBN-13:978-1442213620, paperback, \$55.00

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Twenty years ago I was fortunate enough to have read the first edition of *Assessment for Excellence* (Astin, 1991) while enrolled in a graduate course on assessment taught by Alexander Astin. I recall appreciating the book's point of view, conversational tone, clear explication of methods, and thought-provoking commentary. I relied extensively on that book in order to learn the key conceptual and methodological issues surrounding assessment, and for the last eighteen years have used it as the primary textbook in my graduate courses on assessment and evaluation in higher education.

In recent years, however, I noticed that although the basic principles and methods detailed in the first edition were as relevant as they were when the book was first published, the assessment context had changed. The first edition was written just after the assessment movement gained steam in the 1980s, a time when colleges and universities were expanding their student assessment activities in response to mounting criticism of higher education's assessment efforts and growing state and federal demands on colleges to demonstrate student outcomes. In the original book, Astin noted that "although a great deal of assessment activity goes on in America's colleges and universities, much of it is of very little benefit to either students, faculty, administrators, or institutions. On the contrary, some of our assessment activities seem to conflict with our most basic educational mission" (Astin, 1991, p. ix).

In the book's second edition, co-written by Astin and Anthony Antonio, that very same argument is made. This alone is a statement on how little our philosophical approach to assessment has evolved (even as new methodological approaches have proliferated). The current edition of *Assessment for Excellence* is set in the contemporary context during which interest in student assessment has intensified, especially interest in accountability and assessment of learning outcomes (e.g., the Spellings Report [U.S. Department of Education, 2006]). Astin and Antonio argue that the current literature on assessment remains problematic both because it lacks coherence and because it is not useful in practice.

In many ways, this book offers an antidote to such deficiencies. Though heavy with critique (and even a hint of exasperation at how little has changed), the book makes

an important contribution to the literature by weaving the philosophy and psychology surrounding assessment together with actionable approaches for data collection, analysis and dissemination. Just like the first edition, the second edition is an invaluable resource for individuals who are involved in planning, conducting or utilizing college student assessment.

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In Chapter 1, Astin and Antonio argue that although "the basic purpose of assessing students is to enhance their educational development" (p. 5), this goal is generally not met by traditional assessment practice. Instead, they describe assessment as too often driven by narrow definitions of excellence that prioritize an institution's resources and reputation rather than the college's effectiveness at developing the talents of its students. As was a central message of the first edition, this edition calls for assessment practices that enable institutions to know how their specific curricula, practices, and programs make a difference in their students' cognitive and affective development.

Their recommended conceptual approach is the Input-Environment-Outcome model for assessment, which provides a framework for thinking about how college affects students. As detailed in Chapter 2, a central premise of the model is that one must consider the characteristics of students prior to their exposure to college (known as "inputs") before presuming that college environments or experiences have an effect on student outcomes. They emphasize that college "outcomes" include a wide variety of student characteristics ranging from cognitive to affective and from psychological to behavioral so that the multi-dimensional nature of college impact may be considered ("outcomes" elaborated in Chapter 3). They point out that the range of inputs also can be quite broad, including family background, pre-college skills, abilities, goals, aspirations, and values ("inputs" elaborated in Chapter 4). College "environments" also reflect a broad range, from structural characteristics of institutions (e.g., size, type and selectivity, or characteristics of the peer and faculty environment) to student-determined environments, such as academic engagement, interactions with family and friends,

employment, and extracurricular activities (“environments” elaborated in Chapter 5). Explication of the I-E-O model is especially useful for individuals involved in the design of assessment studies because they encourage the reader to think broadly and creatively about what constitutes an educational environment and which outcomes are (and ought to be) valued.

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A particularly useful section in Chapter 2 is the discussion of “Incomplete Designs.” These include: Outcome-Only Assessment (e.g., using a final exam to assess what students “know” as opposed to what they have “learned”); Environment-Outcome Assessment (e.g., presuming that between-institution variations in degree attainment are a reflection of each college’s “effectiveness” at retaining students); Input-Outcome Assessments (i.e., presuming that student change and growth during college is a function of college attendance); and Environment-Only Assessment (e.g., equating well-resourced colleges or highly productive faculty with “quality” learning environments). Discussion of these incomplete designs is instructive because all readers will presumably recognize these approaches at their own institutions, but perhaps do not realize the limitations they present.

Whereas Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 give readers a framework for thinking about assessment, Chapter 6 helps readers understand how assessment data can be analyzed. Astin and Antonio describe the purpose and application of basic statistical methods, both descriptive (e.g., two-way cross-tabulations, correlations) and causal (e.g., cross-tabulations with three or more variables, regression analysis). All concepts are presented in a manner that can be understood by people with little or no prior knowledge of statistics. Further, this edition incorporates a new section that distinguishes among five statistical techniques that can be used to conduct I-E-O based analyses: simple multiple regression, hierarchical blocked multiple regression, stepwise blocked multiple regression, structural equation modeling, and multilevel modeling. As an instructor who incorporates all of these methods into teaching about assessment, this new section is invaluable.

Chapter 7 shifts gears by moving away from a technical presentation of methods and into a discussion of how assessment results can be made useful. Astin and Antonio emphasize that in order to be useful, assessment results should inform practitioners about the connections between what they are doing in practice and how that relates to student outcomes. In other words, it is not enough to know that students rate favorably on achievement, satisfaction or other college outcomes without understanding whether

(and how) such outcomes are the result of anything the college has done to facilitate such positive results. They caution, however, that even when such knowledge is communicated—whether to faculty, administrators or students—it does not always translate directly into practice because of the resistance that may surface within these campus constituencies. As such, they describe eight different strategies (referred to as “academic games”) that faculty and administrators use as a means of dismissing assessment results. Whether readers practice assessment or not, they will likely be amused by some of these descriptions since they have probably witnessed one or more such tactics in their own professional lives. Who among us has not witnessed “passing the buck” on an issue by establishing a committee to examine it further? And we have probably all experienced colleagues who effectively discredit results by raising questions about validity and reliability. These are such astute observations of academic life which, although presented in the context of assessment, are transferable to all academic contexts.

Once previous chapters have set the stage for how assessment can be conceptualized, conducted, and made useful, Chapter 8 provides readers with concrete examples of what might be contained in a student assessment database. Though some readers might be tempted to skip this chapter if they are not directly involved in the technical aspects of assessment, Astin and Antonio caution that all parties should understand how these databases are constructed so that they can appreciate the challenges and possibilities of assessment. Importantly, this edition includes a substantial new section that reviews five major assessment programs: the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE), the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Progress (CAAP). Further, they discuss the usefulness of each of these survey programs in the context of talent development and the I-E-O model.

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The next two chapters go into greater depth on key points made in Chapter 1, with Chapter 9 expanding on the ways in which assessment can provide direct feedback to the learner (whether students or faculty), and Chapter 10 focusing on how our current educational system reinforces socioeconomic inequities among students by emphasizing resources and reputations over talent development. Astin and Antonio make a strong argument for a shift in our collective thinking about the purpose of higher education by encouraging us to consider who it is designed to benefit most. Readers familiar with the first edition may notice that little

has changed in terms of the book's argument that assessment practices have the potential to promote educational equity if they focus on maximizing talent development, but that current practices tend to reinforce inequitable conditions by giving institutions little incentive to admit students who may have the most to gain from college.

As mentioned above, this revised edition is important because it places the discussion about assessment in contemporary context. This is especially evident in Chapter 11, which argues that the assessment movement's growing emphasis on accountability places too much emphasis on student learning outcomes as opposed to the processes that might facilitate learning. Astin and Antonio argue that "the true test of any state assessment policy is not whether it makes institutions more accountable but whether it serves to enhance the talent development function of its higher education institutions" (p. 238). Institutional leaders and state-level policy makers will be especially interested in this chapter's description of five assessment approaches and their potential for enhancing talent development. Astin and Antonio propose an alternative approach which incentivizes state higher education systems to work cooperatively to maximize student learning and development in all sectors of the system, rather than competing against each other and compromising talent development.

If readers want an abridged version of the major points covered in all chapters, it is recommended that they read the summary contained in Chapter 12. This chapter reiterates the central messages of the book—that longitudinal assessment of students is essential if institutions are to take seriously their commitment to talent development, and that assessment practice must be designed so that students are better informed about what and how they learn, and educators and administrators are better informed about how their teaching practices and educational programming affect students. Though this chapter (and the entire book) is strong on critique, it also conveys hope. It reminds the reader that the future of assessment is in the hands of people who have the power to alter its course: "The capacity for higher education to be a positive change agent in the U.S. society will depend on our ability to transcend our institutional egos, our narcissism, and our self-interest, and to concern ourselves more directly with the impact we are having on our students and communities" (p. 275).

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One of the most valuable features of the book is the appendix, which provides readers with the building blocks for understanding regression, beginning with basic statistics and correlations, then moving through various regression-based techniques, and also offering more sophisticated

concepts such as interaction effects and stepwise fluctuations in regression coefficients.

Now that the book is updated, those of us teaching graduate courses in assessment and evaluation have a vital instructional resource for many years to come. The book also remains invaluable for all individuals who will benefit from a philosophical understanding of assessment. Ultimately, this second edition of *Assessment for Excellence*, like the first, encourages us to think about student assessment—What should be assessed? What do we value?—and also gives readers the tools to engage in assessment that is grounded in the talent development perspective.

References

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