

Book Review

Successful Assessment for Student Affairs: A How-to Guide
Kimberly Yousey-Elsener. Little Falls, NJ: PaperClip
Communications, 2013. 147 pp. ISBN: ASSESS.
Binder + CD, \$358.00.

REVIEWED BY:

Nathan Lindsay, Ph.D., Dan Stroud, M.A.,
& Ameshia Tubbs, M.S.E.
University of Missouri - Kansas City

Successful Assessment for Student Affairs: A How-to Guide is a comprehensive toolkit for student affairs professionals that provides a wealth of guidance, resources, and learning exercises. The book was written in 2013 by Dr. Kimberly Yousey-Elsener, a well-known expert in the field who is the Coordinator of Assessment and Evaluation for the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Buffalo (NY), as well as the past-chair of ACPA's Commission for Assessment and Evaluation. The book is published by Paperclip Communications and is fairly concise (147 pages), which makes for a quick and enjoyable read. The book's headings and sub-headings clearly outline the purpose, content, and connections between the various topics, which are sequenced in a logical and helpful manner.

This review provides an overview of the book, and then highlights the book's strengths, areas for improvement, and broader implications. This analysis of the book's pros and cons, along with its utility, situate this resource in the broader literature on student affairs assessment. The workbook is primarily intended for those who are new to student affairs assessment, and the text makes assessment in student affairs more approachable and rewarding. As outlined below, the book could easily serve as the foundational curriculum for a one or two-day assessment workshop in a division of student affairs.

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Book Overview

Successful Assessment for Student Affairs: A How-to Guide is organized as a hands-on work binder with abundant activities and ideas for engagement. The book also comes with a CD that contains all of the information in an electronic format. The author's goal is to take the reader through an assessment cycle that includes the following six components: (a) define purpose; (b) identify outcomes; (c) connect with programs or services; (d) gather data; (e) review, analyze, and interpret results; and (f) share and use information. A quote by Dan Bureau in the introduction sets the context for this work: "Assessment is a mindset, not just an activity. Student affairs professionals committed to their roles as adviser, helper, counselor, responder and

advocate should also be dedicated to using assessment as a framework for practice..." (p. 1).

In the second chapter, the inclusion of Steven Covey's second habit of "Begin with the End in Mind" brings immediate purpose to the book and its lessons (Covey, 1989). As with anything written within the self-help industry, especially something that seeks to improve higher education, there is a need for a dynamic mission and clear goals to ensure the necessary follow through from its readers. This section offers just such a sufficient mix by including helpful tips from Linda Suskie (2006), as well as information to help the reader answer questions related to the "why" and "where" of assessment.

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The next sections include strategies for identifying outcomes, gathering data, and planning assessment methods. The "Gathering Data" section opens with a clear definition of assessment that distinguishes methods used in assessment from those used in research. Citing Upcraft and Schuh (1996), Yousey-Elsener explains that assessment emphasizes good practice (instead of theory), and usually focuses on one institution (instead of broader implications for multiple contexts). There is a detailed checklist, guiding questions, and brainstorming activities to help readers ensure that the assessment method they select is a reflection of the learning they are seeking to assess.

Yousey-Elsener warns against the impulse to "just do a survey," and provides a detailed analysis of the strengths and challenges of ten different assessment methods: using existing data, surveys, rubrics, focus groups or interviews, portfolios, observation, document analysis, classroom assessment techniques, visual methods, and case studies. The "Things to Consider" section poses questions to prevent potential obstacles that could be easily overlooked in planning and developing an assessment mindset, and the "Learn More" section points to additional resources about each of the assessment methods referenced. Tips for ethical assessment practices, such as "protect anonymity and confidentiality of respondents" (p. 54) are provided alongside more detailed information about institutional review boards and ethics review boards. Yousey-Elsener makes effective use of case studies as a context for ethical considerations such as the integrity of results, the impact of results and the duty to participants. She shows that assessment can be fun by infusing humor in the character names of the case study such as Walter Worry, Director of Residence Life, and Dr. Amanda Assess, Vice President. Activities such as Human BINGO and Survey Design 101 allow the reader to have multiple opportunities to move from theory to practice.

After the methods sections, the book then shifts to analyzing and interpreting qualitative and quantitative data. These sections give the reader a thorough grounding in analytical terminology, and provide a good overview for anyone new to these topics or a great refresher for anyone who has taken qualitative or quantitative research courses. The book also gives concrete examples of data to be coded or mathematically computed. The concluding chapters focus on sharing and using assessment results, as well as building a culture of assessment. There are also best practices listed from many universities, as well as suggestions for how to share data in a creative manner. The glossary at the end of the book outlines clear definitions of assessment lingo such as “internal variables,” “practical significance,” and “non-responsive methods.” Each of these features enhances the book and should be very useful to readers.

Strengths

By far the strongest element of the book is its exhaustive, step-by-step outline of how to design, implement, and analyze effective assessments, which is done in a supportive tone and style. What is most impressive about this informal style of instruction is that it offers an engaging roadmap that suggests that assessment is an intriguing mix of work and play, rather than a chore. This approach makes assessment far less grueling for student affairs professionals who are new to this area.

The layout of the book is particularly useful—each section provides a theoretical base and then practical applications to facilitate the assessment process. The author recommends resources such as *Learning Reconsidered* (2004), CAS standards (2012), and the AAC&U LEAP (2012) initiative to help readers strengthen their theoretical base. These resources can help student affairs professionals to define their purpose and ground their work in the “bigger picture,” in conjunction with an institutional guiding framework and foundational documents such as a strategic plan. Yousey-Elsener also includes words of wisdom from several assessment experts across the country, and these quote boxes help to illuminate the rationale behind many of the assessment principles.

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As noted earlier, the focus on application throughout the binder is very strong. Every section offers suggestions for “Campus Connections,” which are ways to collaborate with others at one’s institution (e.g., with faculty, students, the Institutional Review Board), as well as resources (e.g., statistics software and Institutional Research data) that should be explored. The worksheets containing questions for application are excellent. Yet another strong feature in the book is its use of tables, figures, and tip sheet worksheets throughout. These resources and tools for engagement

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Areas for Improvement

It is difficult to find any significant weaknesses with this binder, but this resource could be improved with a few additions. In some situations, the process for implementing the resources could be clarified. For example, the section on designing assessment using rubrics is presented in a very tangible checklist that uses a combination of statements and questions to guide thinking; this section could be improved with the addition of a completed holistic or analytic rubric to provide an example of how verbs change the descriptors.

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A stronger overview of validity and reliability could have been included, and some examples of whether an instrument is measuring what it is intended to measure would be helpful. For instance, it can be difficult to assess engagement and self-esteem among students. Schuh (2009) offers some concrete ideas about how to attain and develop strong evidence in order to enhance face validity. Similarly, the consideration of responsible sample size and the reliability or error it holds in a given population would be good to strengthen future works.

It is clear that this book/manual is intended as an introductory survey of the many facets of student affairs assessment available to higher education administrators. However, there should also be room for some cautionary advice as well. Higher education administrators need to be aware of the politics, pitfalls, and risks as well as the rewards that can be found in student affairs assessment. It may be that such information might muddy the waters for young assessors, but it is probably better to start with responsible and clean assessments.

As a last suggestion, in the book’s final section, it might be helpful to focus more on developing a “culture of learning” or a “culture of student development,” rather than a “culture of assessment.” This section speaks to the efforts to engage student affairs professionals more regularly in assessment, and this could probably be done more effectively and with more buy-in if the focus is on learning.

Implications

Successful Assessment for Student Affairs: A How-to Guide is a nice complement to other books on student affairs assessment (see Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Bresciani, Moore Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Schuh 2009; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). As a hands-on binder, Yousey-Elsener’s book is most similar to Schuh and Upcraft’s (2001) *Assessment Practice in Student Affairs: An Applications Manual*. In the 12 years since that

publication, the field of student affairs assessment has made some significant strides, and this book highlights many recent innovative practices from universities across the country.

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In recent years, it has been fairly common for a chief student affairs officer to want to lead his or her division in a day or two of “assessment boot camp” in order to get everyone up to speed. This book could provide a wonderful curriculum for such a seminar, serving as a resource to lead staff from assessment topics A to Z.

In summary, this was a very thorough and pleasurable read. We all enjoyed reading the book, which served as a helpful review for us and taught us new principles covering a broad range of best practices in student affairs assessment. There is little doubt that such a publication should take a prominent place alongside other assessment training literature. Now that this resource exists, it would behoove leaders in the assessment community to promote its value to the coming generation of student affairs professionals who need stronger competencies in assessment.

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