Book Review

Building a Culture of Evidence in Student Affairs:
A Guide for Leaders and Practitioners.
Marguerite McGann Culp and Gwendolyn Jordan Dungy
(Eds.). Washington, DC: National Association
of Student Personnel Administrators,
2012. 259 pp. ASIN: B00A7B2SIY

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The main argument of *Building a Culture of Evidence in Student Affairs*, edited by Marguerite McGann Culp and Gwendolyn Jordan Dungy, revolves around the evolutionary, not revolutionary, process of establishing a culture of evidence. They advocate that the change be one of gradual development, not sudden upheaval. Throughout the book, the main discussion reinforces the point that designing and creating a culture of evidence is an ongoing process. As Kuh, Gonyea, and Rodriguez (2002) point out, assessments that use evidence-based data tend to provide information that can be reliably used by administrators to inform their decisions. Therefore, building a culture of evidence should not be seen as a one-time initiative, but is part of the regular business process of the student affairs division. This book's design supports this premise and helps practitioners by offering tutorials that guide the development of evidence-based assessment.

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The book also emphasizes the importance of building assessment capacity. A culture cannot be sustained if the members of that culture have not had the opportunity to learn the skills necessary to collect, analyze, and effectively use evidence. *Building a Culture of Evidence in Student Affairs* clearly identifies, with specific detail, how a student affairs division can accomplish the building of assessment capacity.

Overview

Building a Culture of Evidence in Student Affairs: A Guide for Leaders and Practitioners is written as a tutorial with a series of modules for the reader to use as a guide for topics related to the process of building a culture. The modules move in a thoughtful way from beginning the process through design and implementation, to more complex considerations and can be done in order; however, the meta-design allows readers to take an a-la-carte approach to the content, to use a module that best aligns with their professional needs and situation.

The book is divided into eight modules. The first four modules provide a primer to creating a culture of evidence:

Module one provides an introduction to the topic; module two is an introduction to culture of evidence topics; module three provides guidance to senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) on how to develop a culture of evidence on their campus; module four covers the roles of various types of learning, developmental and program outcomes in building a culture of evidence. The latter four modules provide a practical guide for how to implement a culture of evidence: Module five discusses various methods to collect data; module six provides a case study on how one institution built a culture of evidence; module seven gives an overview of how Council for the Advancement of Standards in higher education (CAS standards) can guide culture of evidence initiatives; and module eight provides a wrap-up to the book and a helpful tutorial covering essential topics for practitioners to build a culture of evidence.

A major strength of the book is its design; the book is clearly intended for practitioners. Each module contains quick tips from experts in the field, spotlights best practices, and includes extensive lists of print and electronic resources. The exercises at the end of the modules are likely to benefit readers by providing opportunities to apply the concepts that are covered in the module. Thus, the modules provide a practical approach to building a culture of evidence; but they do not insist on a strict theoretical framework.

Analysis

The book is unlike other texts that cover the topics of student affairs assessment and data. Unlike most books with multiple authors, the editors ensure that this book has one consistent voice. The consistency in style and format is refreshing. As a result, the reader does not have the sense of reading eight distinct essays on one broad topic, rather, the unity of voice emphasizes that each module relates to and compliments the other modules.

When compared to similar texts, this book is more practitioner-focused. The exercises at the end of each module are helpful for planning purposes. This book could be used to guide group meetings around the topic of developing a culture of evidence. It will provide valuable, concrete guidance to taskforces and committees charged with developing cultures of evidence.

The development of the book is one of its strengths. It is evident by the exercises and tips that the input gathered at an annual NASPA Assessment and Persistence Conference strongly influenced the editors. In particular, the strategies in module two for helping a student affairs leadership team build a culture of assessment are enlightening. The strategies speak to the current culture in student affairs. The discussion that contrasts differences between leading and managing was helpful. It provided the reader with a discussion of the theoretical aspects that inform leadership as it contrasts with the practical realities of managing a complex organization. Module 3 offered an unusual twist to the often-cited SMART goal definition. The focus on goals being assignable and

resource-conscious is an important factor that is often overlooked when organizational goals are developed. Module five provides a focused and comprehensive discussion of various methods for conducting assessment. This module could be a great resource in multiple settings beyond discussions around cultures of evidence. Assessment will be a key component of student affairs work. As student affairs professionals develop programs and services guided by outcomes, sound methods to assess those will be necessary.

 The authors do a good job of focusing on the major audience, practitioners and chief student affairs officers, and writing for their perspective. This is not a text to be used in graduate level courses; it is a field guide for practitioners and leaders as they develop evidence-supported programs and services. Senior student affairs administrators will likely provide this book as required reading within their organization. Another strength is that the modules can, and should be used a-la-carte. Readers are not likely to peruse it from beginning to end, but will find it a strong resource and guide for specific situations. Not all organizations are in the same place when it comes to developing a culture of evidence and this book takes those differences into account.

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While this is a strong addition to the student affairs assessment and culture of evidence literature, there are four changes that could strengthen this book. First, the modules tend to cover too much material. In particular, module four would benefit from being split into two or three modules as the amount of material covered becomes overwhelmingly complex. Conversely, some of the topics in the modules could have used further development and extended discussion. For example, the role of faculty, discussed in module seven, could have been expanded to include methods for collaboration. Collaboration across an institution is an important aspect to developing a culture of evidence. This module would have been an opportunity to expand on that concept, which is mentioned in module one. Finally, there is some redundancy and slight inconsistencies around discussions of creating a culture of evidence. At least three of the modules (two, three, and six) define a culture of evidence; but while the definitions seem consistent from conceptual perspectives, there are slight contradictions regarding how a culture of evidence is defined and attained. If there is a second volume of this book, a deeper focus on how strong cultures of evidence in student affairs can have broader institutional implications is recommended.

This book has significant implications for the field of student affairs assessment. The accountability movement is a reality for student affairs and is a major concern when it comes to our programs and services. The editors tackled the crucial question "how do we know we are doing what we say we are doing?" This books provides student affairs professionals with tools to help them use data and evidence

to demonstrate how their programs and services contribute to student success and the attainment of institutional goals.

This book will be a pivotal resource for administrators who value data-informed decision-making. It provides a clear blueprint for how to develop an infrastructure to make this possible. Specifically, the editors and contributors advocate building assessment capacity at all levels of the organization. As student affairs professionals become actively involved in institutio higher education become scarcer, the need for development dollars will increase. This book provides

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methods for demonstrating how student affairs units are good resource stewards; module six lays out the steps an organization can implement to demonstrate success in relation to national and organizational standards.

Finally, this book can be used to help practitioners learn how to develop evidence to demonstrate the role they play in creating meaningful and extraordinary educational experiences for students. The role of assessment and evidence gathering in higher education is to improve programs and services for students. I recommend this book to student affairs practitioners at all levels of the organization. Editors Marguerite McGann Culp and Gwendolyn Jordan Dungy have created an excellent resource for student affairs professionals.

Reference

Kuh, G. D., Gonyea, R. M., & Rodríguez, D. P. (2002). The scholarly assessment of student development. In T. W. Banta (Ed.), *Building a scholarship of assessment* (pp. 100-128). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.