

## Book Review

*Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education (2nd ed.).*

Trudy W. Banta & Catherine A. Palomba.  
San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2015. 368 pp.  
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The newly updated edition of *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*, the classic text by Trudy Banta and Catherine Palomba, made it to the top of a short list of reading recommendations compiled online recently in response to a query on an assessment listserv. And that should be no surprise, given that there are a number of reasons why this book and these authors might come readily to mind for such readers: The first edition of the authors' text served as an introduction to and overview of the assessment field for many current practitioners. *Assessment Update* (a well-read publication providing an overview of trends in higher education assessment) continues to be edited by Banta, and the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis—under the leadership of Banta—is among the best-known and best-attended of all conferences in the assessment field. The authors are among the leaders in the field of assessment, and a new edition of *Assessment Essentials* was certain to garner attention.

The book does not disappoint. The authors describe themselves as having produced a “practical guide to assessment practice” (p. xix) with their first edition, providing information about and examples of institutional practice that could inform the work of practitioners, both novice and experienced. That basic structure remains intact in the second edition, as does their commitment to providing numerous examples of institutional practice that demonstrate various approaches to every topic addressed in the book. New in this edition are updated examples, additional discussion of how technology supports assessment practice, the inclusion of capstone courses as primary assessment venues, a chapter on assessment in student affairs, and greater emphasis on linkages between assessment findings and other institutional processes.

The more basic chapters cover—as they should—all the assessment topics that a novice practitioner (or a typical member of the faculty) should know something about. The opening chapter sets the stage by defining assessment and articulating its purposes, noting that the primary aim of assessment should be to understand how (and how well) our educational programs are working in terms of helping students achieve the necessary learning. In this era of ever-growing demands for accountability, however, the need for reporting, both internally and externally, cannot be ignored and Banta and Palomba acknowledge that. The second

chapter provides an overview of “assessment essentials,” including stakeholder engagement, developing assessment plans, providing leadership for assessment work, selecting methods, sharing findings, and using the information that's collected. Subsequent chapters (3-6) explore those topics in more detail.

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For the experienced assessment practitioner, it is the second half of the book, beginning with chapter 7, that is likely to be of most interest. Chapter 7, on assessing learning outcomes in the major, includes substantial focus on capstones as plausible venues for generating student work products, assessment of experiential learning such as service learning and internships, and assessment of what are often termed “soft skills” (e.g., group work, team-building), many of which are especially valued by employers. As the authors explain, this kind of assessment can and perhaps should include employers in the process.

The chapter on assessing general education addresses the choice commonly made between purchasing from a growing array of commercially available instruments and relying on home-grown strategies for assessment. The authors' criticisms of “standardized tests of generic skills” are clearly noted. They cite “the inability of these measures to test more than a ‘tiny slice of what a student knows and can do’ (Banta, 2012, p.4)” (p. 176), the charge that much of what such tests measure is skills and knowledge accrued prior to college attendance, and the concern that differences in sampling processes across institutions can undermine what should be the primary benefit of such assessments, i.e., the ability to compare across institutions. While the authors seem to favor the use of locally-developed assessment strategies that rely on faculty judgment, they are also quick to note that there are real costs in terms of institutional resources (especially faculty time) for developing home-grown tools as well. Chapter 7 also includes a discussion of the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP), developed with the support of the Lumina Foundation, and now serving as a framework for many discussions of both assessment and the college curriculum itself. The chapter concludes with comments about the potential for alignment of general education assessment with both the DQP and assessment in the major.

Other chapters in the second half of the book address assessment in student affairs programs, the challenges of ensuring assessment findings are analyzed

and used appropriately (including serving as the basis for both program improvement and institutional reporting), and situating assessment within a comprehensive institutional effectiveness program. The concluding chapter looks forward, citing challenges and issues likely to drive discussions of assessment in future years. Included in that chapter are brief discussions of the controversy surrounding accreditation and accrediting agencies as “stewards of federal financial aid” (p. 264), trends in preferred methods and approaches, the challenge of broadening engagement and participation among both faculty and student affairs staff, and a reference to the ways in which technology can be harmful—as well as helpful—to assessment practice. Among the future challenges noted are the need to pay more attention to ways assessment can serve individual students while remaining focused on providing information needed for program oversight and improvement, competency-based education and the assessment challenges that result, demands for greater transparency regarding assessment results, and the need (in this belt-tightening era) to ensure that costs of assessment yield sufficient and measurable benefits.

As the breadth of coverage indicates, Banta and Palomba more than fulfill their aim of providing practitioners, novice or experienced, with a summary of “assessment essentials.” The coverage is comprehensive and the discussions are readable, even for those not versed in field-specific jargon. The authors also deliver, as promised, a multitude of examples that are quite current and could be used by an interested reader to find and scan various institutional websites providing more detail on actual practice related to any topic of specific interest. Of course, that multitude means that a significant percentage of each chapter is devoted to summarizing the practices of various institutions, a potential disadvantage for readers seeking a briefer overview and with no desire for extensive examples. In the chapter on indirect assessments, for example, a reader finds references to the University of Utah’s use of questionnaire cover letters, Washington State University’s process for managing anonymity in online surveys, University of Maryland Baltimore County’s use of prizes to increase survey response rates, and Oregon State University’s practice of involving faculty in the recruitment of student survey participants. And all of those examples come from two pages of the chapter (pp. 127-128).

If there is a criticism to be made of this book, it might be that the writers—very occasionally—allow their own perspectives to overshadow the dispassionately informative tone that generally dominates. Readers might perceive a bias against standardized assessments of “generic skills,” for example, when reading the chapter on assessment of general education (chapter 7). Another case in point is the extensive discussion of institutional practices at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) in the chapter focused on assessing institutional practices (chapter 11), which may seem surprising given the great breadth of institutional examples cited in other chapters. However,

most readers are likely to be aware of Banta’s own work at IUPUI in institutional effectiveness, resulting in practices there that are especially good examples of the approach that Banta and Palomba recommend. Furthermore, part of the value in reading a book by noted experts in the assessment field is the expertise they bring. Many readers may pick up this book precisely because they hope to find some of the wisdom about the field, both regarding current practice and future trends, that Banta and Palomba are uniquely well-situated to impart. Such readers likely will not be surprised by the perspectives that occasionally surface, and, in fact, may particularly appreciate seeing the authors’ “take” on a thorny question—and might even wish for more of that “situating themselves” by the authors.

The updated edition of *Assessment Essentials* seems destined to end up on the bookshelves of practitioners across the country. Assessment experts will find themselves dipping into it when searching for more effective strategies for collecting survey data, incorporating assessment into capstone classes, or carrying out assessment of general education programs. The plethora of institutional examples alone will make the book invaluable for the practitioner seeking inspiration or ideas from “how assessment gets done” at other institutions, making it possible to go directly from the book to the website of an institution where a particular practice is in use.

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In many ways, though, this is a text meant for use by faculty at large. It could be a loaner book for passing along to a colleague who wants to learn more about a particular aspect of assessment, a shared reading for a group of faculty in a learning community on the subject, or a primary text in a class on assessment in higher education taken by would-be faculty. When used in such a class, an ideal supplemental reading would perhaps be a book of case studies or examples of practice—something that delves more deeply into individual institutional examples and provides students with opportunities for hands-on experience developing assessment plans or proposing strategies for improvements in practice. *Assessment Essentials* would also be appropriately used as “the assessment book” for participants in a future faculty training program or for students in a class on classroom practices or issues and trends in higher education.

## References

- Banta, T. W., & Palomba, C. A. (2014). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing, and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.