

## Book Review

### *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*

George D. Kuh, Stanley O. Ikenberry,  
Natasha A. Jankowski, Timothy Reese Cain,  
Peter T. Ewell, Pat Hutchings, & Jillian Kinzie.  
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*Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education* is co-authored by an accomplished and influential group of scholars and practitioners, all of whom work with the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). Established in 2008, NILOA's mission is to "discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders" (NILOA, 2012, para. 3). The authors of this volume draw upon the sustained work of NILOA, as well as the authors' other extensive experiences working with assessment of student learning in a variety of institutional contexts.

The preface spells out the intent of the book clearly: "identifying what colleges and universities must do to move the assessment of student learning from an act of compliance to the use of assessment results to guide changes that foster stronger student and institutional performance" (p. x). We, at institutions of higher education, assess student learning in order to ensure our students' success and as a result of what we learn, we are able to make "wiser decisions and improve the learning experience of all students" (p. xii).

How to effectively and strategically gather and use evidence of student learning, then, is the volume's focus. The phrase, the *consequential use of assessment*, introduced in the first chapter by Stanley Ikenberry and George Kuh, and used throughout the book, argues that every assessment project should begin with the clear intention to translate what is learned into actions that make a difference in student learning. The phrase gives us a particularly useful way of framing the goals and intended outcomes of assessment—it reminds us that our assessment efforts need to be driven by the questions that really matter about student learning in the context of our institutions. If assessment is seen as truly consequential, we are more likely to find partners throughout the institution willing to engage in assessment and eager to act upon what is learned. And if we begin to experience assessment in these terms, we have successfully made the paradigm shift "from compliance to ownership," which is the first chapter's title.

The book is divided into three main parts. Part One, "What Works? Finding and Using Evidence," offers an overview of the characteristics of meaningful assessments. Pat Hutchings, Jillian Kinzie, and George Kuh, in "Evidence of Student Learning: What Counts and What Matters for Improvement," make a strong case for "methodological pluralism" in the gathering of evidence of student learning because what is seen as compelling evidence can vary by audience and context.

The two remaining chapters in Part One turn to how to use the results of assessment effectively, something that has proven even more challenging than the gathering of data. Drawing upon many examples of effective practice from a variety of institutions, Jillian Kinzie, Pat Hutchings, and Natasha Jankowski, in "Fostering Greater Use of Assessment Results," conclude with seven principles for fostering greater use of assessment results, a useful checklist for administrators and faculty involved with assessment to keep at hand when thinking broadly about assessment and before planning any specific assessment project.

The final chapter of Part One (co-authored by Jillian Kinzie and Natasha Jankowski) focuses on how assessment activities are organized on a campus and the implications of this organization. They address questions like "how should assessment be organized if improvement is the goal" and provide some insightful observations, ending the chapter with five principles for organizing consequential assessment.

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The second part of the book ("Who Cares? Engaging Key Stakeholders") explores the roles of the various stakeholders who have a vested interest in student learning assessment. Each chapter focuses on a different group: Faculty and students (Timothy Reese Cain and Pat Hutchings); administrative leadership (Peter Ewell and Stanley Ikenberry); regional accreditation agency standards (Peter Ewell and Natasha Jankowski); and external entities, including an examination of state and federal policy related to student learning assessment and the role of national organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities and others (Stanley Ikenberry, Jillian Kinzie, and Peter Ewell).

These chapters are very useful reading for both those new to assessment of student learning, as well as those with more experience. They thoughtfully contextualize the relevant history, responsibilities, cultures, and roles of

each group relative to the “assessment movement.” This analysis helps identify the main challenges when doing assessment, but also where there are opportunities to create collaborations and alliances in the assessment of student learning across the institution and the types of support needed to do effective work.

As an assessment director who works closely with our institution’s faculty development program and its teaching and learning initiatives, I particularly appreciated the nuanced and respectful analysis of faculty concerns about assessment and the recommendations offered in the chapter on “Faculty and Students: Assessment at the Intersection of Teaching and Learning” on how to establish or further faculty participation and ownership in assessment. Returning to the point made about the need for methodological pluralism in the type of assessment data collected, the authors argue that the more “informal practices” in assessment by faculty were sometimes disregarded as too subjective, but validate these efforts—which can be documented and built on—as part of a holistic view of assessment. For assessment of student learning to be done well and to be of consequence, faculty members are both necessary guides and participants (as are others who are in co-curricular instructional roles). Furthermore, as the authors point out, all too often we have neglected to bring students into partnership in assessment activities, but note that “explicitly bringing students into assessment activities strengthens that partnership and underscores the fact that assessment is about learning, not about reporting” (p. 107).

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Throughout the chapters in Part Two, there is a recurrent theme about the importance of institutional agency in assessing student learning. In the chapter on accreditation (aptly titled “Accreditation as an Opportunity”), Ewell and Jankowski conclude that “...institutions that engage in assessment because they genuinely see value in understanding student experiences and student learning are able to satisfy accreditation requirements *without* sacrificing internal improvement efforts” (p. 158). On the other hand, “institutions that begin with accreditation in mind do not usually get information that is useful for improvement” (p. 158).

The final part of the book is titled, “What Now? Focusing Assessment on Learning,” and addresses how to keep assessment focused on student learning and consequential. As Kuh and Hutchings identify in their chapter on “Assessment and Initiative Fatigue,” one threat to this can be the number of new initiatives or improvement efforts coming from multiple directions, sometimes

overlapping, and each with an assessment component. Faculty and staff can find themselves overwhelmed and without the resources to engage meaningfully with an assessment process that would benefit from—and needs—their thoughtful engagement. Anticipating this, institutions must engage in careful and thoughtful planning, innovative approaches like “short-cycle” project assessment (where a series of small, quickly turned-around assessments can answer immediate questions), and keeping the focus on the authentic questions about student achievement.

It is welcome to see an entire chapter devoted to effective communication about student learning assessment as this is a common challenge on many university campuses for many reasons—including the rush to get to the next project. Jankowski and Cain in their chapter, “From Compliance Reporting to Effective Communication: Assessment and Transparency” argue for sharing information internally and externally in a way that provides attention to audience and context, including the core institutional mission, and the ways or actions the institution is taking to foster student learning. The latter approach constitutes “transparency, a form of communication that goes well beyond mere access to information.”

The final chapter (“Making Assessment Matter”) provides a succinct summary of the characteristics of consequential assessment, a thoughtful analysis of emerging trends in higher education that underscore the ongoing need for student learning assessment, and suggestions for *how to mobilize* for effective use of evidence of student learning that synthesize the key ideas of the book into a focused set of recommendations for institutions.

The authors provide a realistic and informed appraisal of the current political and social context surrounding higher education throughout the book. One of the most important contributions of the volume is its summary of, and critical reflection on, the current practices in assessment growing out of two decades of developing and implementing assessment tools and strategies. Drawing upon the surveys and other research efforts conducted by NILOA, the authors are able to

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provide current data and case studies from multiple types of institutions to both illustrate effective practices and the kinds of challenges that many institutions still need to overcome.

This is the kind of assessment book that one goes to for a systemic view of assessment. Reading this can invigorate or sharpen one’s current assessment practices or lead to a resetting of an institutional assessment approach—

especially if that approach is leaning more compliance-than student learning-centered. The authors make a strong and compelling case against a compliance approach to assessment: it does not tend to provide meaningful evidence, it does not lead to improvements in student learning, and it is not sustainable. They also present an equally compelling case for a student-learning centered assessment approach, and offer a blueprint for how to achieve this through an informed and thoughtful analysis with examples from institutions of many different types.

The book is not a how-to guide to assessment like many other fine volumes in the assessment area, but it is an immensely practical book and one that should be read and discussed by multiple individuals in various roles throughout an institution. It gives an unparalleled view of where we are nationally two decades into institutional-level assessment and how to translate this big picture view into on-the-ground strategies that will provide institutions with critical information about how to improve educational experiences for all students.

### Reference

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