
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.

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 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 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.

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