

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. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2015. 304pp. ISBN-13: 978-1118903391. Hardcover, \$36.00.

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Few topics have permeated the higher education landscape in the past several years more than academic assessment and the issue of how colleges can better assess student learning. From legislators and politicians, to the general public and the media, there are seemingly endless calls for colleges and universities to share evidence of their effectiveness. George Kuh, the founding director and senior scholar at the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, joins Ikenberry, Jankowski, Cain, Ewell, Hutchings, and Kenzie (2015) to outline approaches to the assessment process in *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*.

The authors describe the catalyst for this work, noting that “[t]his volume grows out of a deep concern that the practical value of otherwise well-conceived efforts to assess student learning in American higher education is often diminished by deeply nested misconceptions” (p. ix). Academic assessment is seen primarily as a compliance task for accreditors or administration, rather than as a tool that can be used to inform or improve student learning. The book endeavors to refute this conventional view, which is examined more thoroughly in Chapter 1. Although compliance requirements are real and must be fulfilled, the authors strive to demonstrate the use of assessment of student learning as a catalyst for continuous improvement and as a barometer of student success and institutional health (p. x).

Chapters 2 through 4 focus on the fundamental task of finding and using evidence of student learning. These chapters establish a foundation for the remainder of the text by providing an overview of what we may think of as more traditional academic assessment, noting succinctly that “evidence is essential to improving student learning and responding to accountability expectations” (p. 27). Throughout these chapters, however, the authors go beyond the traditional view of assessment and evidence gathering.

Chapter 2 focuses on three primary questions about assessment evidence: “1. What are the different sources and properties of assessment evidence now in use and what can be said of their respective strengths and limitations for stimulating improvement? 2. What are the obstacles to the effective use of evidence? 3. What counts as evidence for different audiences and purposes?” (p. 29). The responses to question one will be familiar to most assessment practitioners;

surveys, general knowledge and skills tests, classroom assignments, portfolios, rubrics, and student analytics are discussed as potential sources of evidence.

The authors note a common concern when they write, “Also, a nagging question persists: Does the availability and use of evidence of student learning make a material difference to improving student learning and institutional performance?” (p. 53). Chapters 3 and 4 address in greater detail how to encourage use of assessment results to promote effective practice, and how to make assessment consequential. The book provides several examples of effective use of assessment results in Chapter 3, including practices at Texas A&M International University, Carnegie Mellon University, Augustana College, Richland College of the Dallas County Community College District, Georgia State University, and others. In addition to these illustrative practices, the authors provide tangible guidance, such as linking assessment to both internal and external processes (e.g., academic department and program review) and keeping the ultimate intended use of the assessment in mind as practices are designed. Chapter 4 focuses on the practical challenge of organizing for assessment and how to design an effective assessment function.

As many seasoned practitioners can attest, the more difficult part of an effective assessment regimen can often be the engagement of key stakeholders, which is the primary focus of Chapters 5 through 8. These chapters progress through internal and external stakeholders, focusing first on faculty and students, and then institutional leadership, accreditors, and other external entities. In Chapter 5, the authors note that both faculty and students have a role to play in assessment, and that “[e]xplicitly bringing students into assessment activities strengthens that partnership and underscores the fact that assessment is about learning, not about reporting” (p. 107). As in earlier chapters, the authors provide several examples of successful institutional models that involve both faculty and staff in the assessment process.

Chapter 6 emphasizes the role of the institution’s governing board, president or chancellor, provost or chief academic officer, and deans or department chairs in assessment processes. The authors discuss the necessity of consistent and aligned support from leaders throughout the institution to move from a compliance orientation toward a culture that uses assessment to facilitate continuous improvement. Chapter 7 addresses this shift further, noting that “assessment at its best contributes to both accreditation and internal institutional processes” (p. 157). The need to reframe the culture of compliance is again mentioned in Chapter 8, which notes that an effective assessment system that focuses on continuous institutional improvement will largely satisfy accountability demands by virtue of its existence: “External needs for evidence of student learning will not diminish, but they can be met more rationally and efficiently by focusing first on the needs of students and the campus itself” (p. 180).

Part Three of the book focuses on the next steps in the evolution of assessment and reiterates the necessity of maintaining an assessment program that is acutely focused on student learning. The common problem across campuses of assessment and initiative fatigue is explored in Chapter 9. While many assessment tomes focus on implementation of assessment and creation of effective practices, the important issue of acceptance on campus is often skirted or dismissed. In this book, Kuh et al. (2015) address directly the familiar reluctance and cynicism on campus. The authors outline several factors that can contribute to initiative fatigue, and explicitly address the heightened likelihood of assessment to exacerbate this phenomenon. Several strategies are then provided as potential ways to diffuse and diminish initiative fatigue.

Chapter 10 rehashes and further examines the transition from compliance reporting to effective communication, with a particular focus on transparency. Importantly, the chapter distinguishes between the traditional disclosure and making data available as transparency and a more coherent system of transparency. Data and information must be shared with context and interpretation in order to foster true transparency. As the authors note in their summarization of the chapter, “[t]o be transparent about student learning outcomes... institutions need to consider how best to tell the story, to present relevant contextual information, and to help the target audiences grasp the implications” (p. 219).

The constant theme of converting assessment from a compliance burden to a value-added activity permeates the book. It is fitting, then, that the concluding chapter takes a macro-level view of assessment through this theme, asking the central question: “What can be done to help colleges and universities supplant the compliance culture that has dampened the productive use of assessment results?” (pp. 220-221). The authors reflect briefly on the last century of higher education, and what the next several years may hold in academia. As with many other works across the higher education canon, the authors give great credence to technology and technology-enhanced platforms and strategies, as well as learning analytics. Technology-based educational alternatives and economic realities also threaten the higher education landscape. The appropriate response, the authors contend, is to create an assessment environment that can clearly demonstrate the impact of higher education on student learning and enhance institutional effectiveness.

Kuh et al. (2015) provide assessment practitioners and academic administrators with a thorough overview of assessment. The overview of assessment evidence and programs in the opening chapters coupled the discussions of organizing for assessment and assessment leadership summarize effectively both current assessment practices and the challenges that assessment – and more broadly, higher education accountability – face. The book provides an accessible discussion of not only these challenges, but also practical advice on how these challenges might be addressed.

Throughout the book, the central tenant for effective assessment remains the need to shift from a compliance-based assessment mentality to one focused on continuous improvement and evidence that can be used to inform efforts to improve teaching and learning. The authors provide clear and convincing evidence from the research that assessment matters. Indeed, this is an important observation, though by the later chapters it grows a bit tedious. This work is also unique in that it strives to address both the *why* of assessment and the practical realities (and frustrations) that arise on campuses when assessment is discussed.

The book itself promises a major reframing of how to develop and implement strategies to assess student learning, and it is on this point that the text falls short. Although the authors offer tangible examples from universities and colleges across the country of effective assessment programs, there is often not sufficient exploration of how these programs were developed. The authors make a strong case, buffeted by these examples, that assessment is most effective when it is used to inform the forward progress of an institution, but they provide less clarity on how these assessment data and practices might be used to achieve these aims. It is likely, however, that detailed prescriptions would be difficult to provide at scale due to differing political views, appetite for innovation, and levels of assessment maturity across individual campuses.

Regardless of these criticisms, the authors clearly illustrate that the current compliance-based culture of assessment is not working, and that it is alienating faculty, administration, and external constituents. The effective use of assessment activities and findings is critical to move an institution forward, and the continuous improvement environment informed by assessment outlined by Kuh et al. (2015) is a worthy goal for many, if not all, institutions.

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This text will resonate strongly with assessment administrators and provosts, many of whom have been making these arguments for years, and may provide useful guideposts and research to engage in these conversations. Faculty at large would also benefit from the discussion provided in this book and from an understanding of the broader necessary purposes of assessment. Higher education administration and assessment programs would also benefit from this work, both as an introduction to the current assessment climate and as a potential catalyst for further research.

References

- Kuh, G. D., Ikenberry, S. O., Jankowski, N. A., Cain, T. R., Dwell, P. T., Hutchins, P., & Kinzie, J. (2015). *Using evidence of student learning to improve higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.