



Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education

Kuh, George D.; Ikenberry Stanley O.; Jankowski, Natasha A.; Cain, Timothy Reese; Ewell, Peter T.; Hutchings, Pat; and Kinzie, Jillian

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Book Review

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Reviewed by: Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen, *Pacific Lutheran University*

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Increasing skepticism regarding the value of traditional grading, mounting student debt, and low degree completion rates has led to escalating pressure on North American universities to provide evidence of assessment of student learning. Beyond standard letter grades, it is claimed, there are methods that can provide tangible proof that students are – or are not – learning (Astin, “The Promise and Peril of Outcomes Assessment,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*). Ideally this information assists universities in shaping the “new normal” of higher education (2). This new normal, the authors argue, often imposes assessment from above; as a result, many university faculty are either apart from assessment-measuring or are excluded from the conversation regarding why additional assessment measures might be needed and how to use the information once it is gained. This latter point is the focus of this collection of essays, *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*. Written with various assessors in mind – from faculty to governing boards (12-17) – the essays are all rooted in the authors’ collective desire to make assessments consequential (20); only by putting assessment data to work for the institution will the data be made meaningful.

Kuh and Ikenberry, the principle co-investigators of the project (xiv), organize the topic of student assessment as a tool for the advancement of higher education into three helpful modules. After an introductory chapter that highlights the need for university campuses to move from compliance to active ownership in the assessment process (1-26), the collection is divided into three parts, each of which contains articles that pertain specifically to the various constituencies. “Part One: Making Assessment Work” (27-96) is comprised of three chapters.

Hutchings, Kinzie, and Kuh's "Evidence of Student Learning: What Counts and What Matters for Improvement" (27-50) highlights the variety of assessment methods as well as their respective strengths and limitations. This chapter reminds the reader that whether or not the vocabulary of "assessment" is employed, faculty are always engaged in the process of assessing student learning through assignments, surveys, exams, rubrics, and portfolios, even if not all recipients of this data consider it as such. This is a helpful chapter for religion faculty who might struggle with questions about how to assess student learning in a subject often fraught with individual meaning and significance and that stands quite far, by comparison, from a student's relationship with other subjects (such as algebra or physical education). According to Kinzie, Hutchings, and Jankowski, an essential – and often neglected – second step in the assessment process is making use of the data. In "Fostering Greater Use of Assessment Results: Principles for Effective Practice" (51-72) and "Making Assessment Consequential: Organizing to Yield Results" (73-91), the authors carefully distinguish between "doing" assessment and "using" assessment; beginning with a brief history of the process, they trace effective use from the microcosm of a single course to the macrocosm of an entire institution. In particular, they emphasize that the collection of assessment data and its use must ultimately fold back on itself, closing the continuous loop of evaluation that ends with the next question: "What was the impact of the change?" (71).

Methodically similar to the first section, "Part Two: Who Cares? Key Stakeholders" (95-182), draws a valuable line in assessment-use analysis through four chapters. Casting their net quite widely, authors Cain, Hutchings, Ewell, Ikenberry, Jankowski, and Kinzie collectively affirm that faculty assessment is at the heart of educational development, assessment impetus must shift from exterior motivation to interior, and that assessment must be supported at all levels of the institution. For the past three decades, Kinzie, Ikenberry, and Ewell conclude in "The Bigger Picture: Student Learning Outcomes, Assessment and External Entities" (160-82), external bodies have been imposing assessment data collection, much of which has consisted of a bare minimum of electronic catalogues; while this external interest is warranted, those who benefit most by harnessing evidence of student learning are those who stand closest to those being assessed: faculty.

The final section, "Part Three: What Now? Focusing Assessment on Learning" (183-236), addresses two noteworthy elements of assessment projects: the weariness that plagues faculty who often face overwhelming demands for greater and more evaluation of their profession, and ways in which assessment results can be shared with appropriate constituencies. While Kuh and Hutchings' "Assessment and Initiative Fatigue: Keeping the Focus on Learning" (183-200) highlights strategies to avoiding the inevitable fatigue by suggesting that faculty share the burden of assessment, that short-term projects be considered, that clear links to campus

learning goals be identified prior to the work beginning, and that the work of assessment be balanced by scaling back other tasks. While the final chapter, Jankowski and Cain's "From Compliance Reporting to Effective Communication" (201-19), focuses on the definitions and use of transparency in the successful relation of assessment data, the multi-authored conclusion, "Making Assessment Matter" (220-36), both summarizes the current context of assessment in North America, and offers thoughts regarding emerging trends and forces in higher education.

The American Academy of Religion White Paper, "The Religion Major and Liberal Education," rightly claims that assessment in religion, religious studies, and theology is challenging due to a variety of important factors, including the constantly evolving nature of the discipline, the interdisciplinarity of religious studies, the lack of accrediting bodies to supervise content, and the ambiguity regarding career paths for graduates in the field (<https://www.aarweb.org/AARMBR/AARMBR/Publications-and-News/Data-and-Studies/Teagle-Study.aspx>). Nevertheless, religion, religious studies, and theology departments must face the challenge of assessment initiatives the same as any department; on a purely pragmatic level, it would be helpful to face the challenge of assessment with the valuable essays provided in Kuh and Ikenberry's collection.

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