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Assessment Methods for Student Affairs

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John H. Schuh and Associates; Assessment Methods for Student Affairs. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009)

Reviewed by Robert C. Pepper

We are all well aware of the importance of assessment in the work on our campuses. We read articles, attend conference presentations, and speak with peers on the topic in an effort to improve our skills and answer the question, “How are you assessing student learning in your area?” or “Are the programs and services your department provides effectively meeting the needs of students?” These are just two examples of the many questions that stakeholders ask in this age of tight budgets and increased accountability. In this climate, we no longer need to be convinced of the benefits of assessment; what we need is additional education, training, and effective models that will inform student affairs administrators how to conduct assessment.

In response to this growing demand, the literature on assessment in higher education and more specifically on student affairs is growing. John H. Schuh and Associates (2009) provide student affairs practitioners with an excellent resource with their volume *Assessment Methods for Student Affairs*.

This is the third book that Schuh has contributed to on this important topic (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). While Upcraft is not a contributor to this book, he did write the Foreword and Schuh credits him with contributing many of the ideas in the book. Schuh called on five of his colleagues at Iowa State to serve as contributors to the work. It is obvious to the reader that they were not only selected for their respective areas of expertise, but also for their ability to communicate in very clear terms as the book is both insightful and easy to follow.

Unlike other resources on assessment, this book is not theoretical as the authors assume that the readers agree that assessment is important if not necessary. It is also not written for statisticians or qualitative methodologists. It does not argue for specific methodologies or methods; rather, it is a resource for practitioners. The authors make an important distinction that readers should keep in mind when reading this book. They do not use the terms “assessment” and “evaluation” interchangeably. Building on previous publications, they define assessment as “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 18). This is different from evaluation, which is defined as “any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 19).

Chapter 1 provides the theoretical framework for the remainder of the book. The authors state that the following six factors have contributed to an increased focus on accountability and assessment: student learning, retention, political pressure, accreditation, cost, and benchmarking. With these factors in mind, the authors remind administrators of the value of assessment in strategic planning and measuring organizational effectiveness. Chapter 1 continues with advice on how to begin assessment and describes several kinds of assessment including measuring participation, needs, satisfaction, student outcomes, and cost. Finally, the authors provide a list

of questions to consider prior to beginning assessment and several illustrations of institutions that are conducting assessment in student affairs.

Chapter 2 examines how student affairs practitioners can use existing data sources in their assessment efforts. They remind readers of the data that is already available that may fit the needs of their project. This may be internal data collected by others at the institution (for example, admissions or the National Study for Student Engagement, NSSE) or data that is external and more generally describes higher education trends (for example, National Center for Education Statistics, NCES). The point they make is that data may already be available for the student affairs administrator that answers the question they are asking.

Chapters 3-6 focus on defining the purpose of the assessment, collecting data, assessment types, the selection of the sample, instrumentation, the benefits of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and a review of data analysis. These chapters provide the reader with very straightforward and brief descriptions of these complex terms and concepts. In addition, the authors include several checklists, tables, and examples that assist the reader in very practical ways.

Chapter 7 provides specific details and suggestions about preparing written reports and presentations. The emphasis is on presenting the findings and capturing the attention of the readers, most of whom will be stakeholders. As in previous chapters, the authors provide some actual examples that take their recommendations from the theoretical to the practical. This chapter is rather basic and is in many ways common-sense for those who have prepared these types of documents. For example, do we need to be reminded to check the LCD projector and microphone prior to giving a presentation? This chapter would be very helpful for those who have not prepared reports or presented findings, but for the seasoned professional it is little more than a refresher of best practices.

The authors address ethical considerations in Chapter 8. They remind readers to work within federal, state, and institutional guidelines when conducting assessment. As was the case for Chapter 7, much of Chapter 8 is little more than a review for those who have conducted social science research. This chapter does include a few case studies that bring the ethical issues to life, but the authors do not present any new concepts or ideas.

Chapter 9 reminds those conducting assessment that the goals, purpose, and question being studied should dictate the methodology used in the assessment. Specifically, this chapter argues that in some cases a mixed methodology is the most effective way to address the question. A single case study is used throughout the chapter to demonstrate the value in mixed methodologies.

The book concludes with Chapter 10 and the author's best guess for the future of assessment. They include a continued emphasis on accountability, assessment, and transparency. They further contend that there will be an increase in the use of comparative data, the use of data in decision-making, and more sophistication in assessment studies. If their predictions come to fruition, then it behooves those of us working in Christian higher education to continue in our assessment efforts so that we have better data for benchmarking, comparative studies, and long-range planning.

Perhaps the most helpful part of the book for me was the invaluable resources in the Appendices. I found Appendix 3, a listing of commonly used assessment instruments, and their purpose as well as information collected to be the most helpful. I plan on

referring to this chart and adding more instruments to the list as I come across them for easy referencing in assessment meetings and long-range planning sessions.

In *Assessment Methods for Student Affairs*, John Schuh and Associates provide an excellent resource for student affairs administrators and those who are responsible for assessment. Given the increased emphasis on assessment, this book is timely while at the same time practical and easy to follow. I would recommend this book for those who have never conducted assessment and to anyone planning on conducting assessment prior to beginning a new project.

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