

Book Review: Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education by Mary J. Allen (2004)

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Assessment is all the buzz in higher education. California State University Stanislaus, where I am the library Instruction Coordinator, is typical of this assessment push—we have recently created committees and mandated reports that assess how well each academic department meets identified learning goals. This data will in turn “complete the loop” by influencing improvements to instruction. Asking each individual faculty member to quantify student success in his or her own classroom may be contentious; asking a whole department to agree on common goals can be a bigger challenge. However, pedagogical freedom in the classroom notwithstanding, aligning our individual courses’ learning objectives with broader program goals undeniably contributes to everyone’s common goal of student success.

Although technically not in an “instructional” department, librarians at my library teach in many situations: workshops, research skills sessions (one-shot sessions), and credit courses. Because assessment is about measuring a program’s impact on students, it is a rich opportunity for me and my colleagues to rethink information literacy instruction, as well as join faculty across the disciplines in a conversation that knits us more closely together. We needed a good general guide to help us through the process.

In *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education*, Mary Allen focuses on how a department constructs an assessment process for its whole instruction program. In her words, it is “a framework for focusing attention on student learning and for provoking meaningful discussions of program objectives, curricular organization, pedagogy, and student development (Allen, 2004, p. 4).” Her first chapter discusses the contexts of assessment. On the one hand, assessment is driven by accreditation and the need to quantify results; on the other, it is a learning-centered best practice that finds common ground in an increasingly diverse mix of students and technologically-inspired teaching modes. It is also about working together to strengthen collegiality and should not be used to evaluate individual instructors.

Allen lays out the various components of assessment in simple terms designed to steer a department through the process. The first step is establishing broad department learning goals, from which are derived stu-

dent learning objectives--what knowledge students will attain or what skills they will demonstrate. Those can be collected from previous syllabi or relevant standards. This part was easy for me because our instruction uses ACRL’s *Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education* as a basis for the attitudes, values, and skills we expect students to receive from our instruction. Some other means of gathering benchmarks that Allen discusses, such as using accrediting agencies, did not apply to my department, but they may apply others. Allen also defines the necessary concepts, such as Bloom’s taxonomy, authentic assessment, and formative vs. summative testing. I knew about Bloom’s Taxonomy, but the other definitions helped me to enter more well-prepared into the assessment conversation.

Once departmental goals have been established, the next step is to align the program’s suite of courses to these goals in a matrix that shows how each course contributes with other courses in a progression from basic goals to more advanced. Then in a separate matrix, detail one course’s objectives and compare them to the program objectives - does the course promote those program goals? If this seems like a complex task, it is! One danger of taking on the assessment process is that it quickly seems overwhelming, so Allen suggests assessing only as many objectives as you can handle successfully the first year, and build on that. Unlike Suskie’s prescriptive guide to assessment (2004) or Walvoord’s brief bulleted lists (2004), Allen focuses on barriers in the process and offers solutions. For example, in order to get faculty buy-in, give them autonomy, tout the benefits of collaboration, and employ existing assignments as assessment measures.

Chapter 4 discusses various issues surrounding implementation of a successful assessment plan, including the importance of department dialogue, establishing the reasons for assessment, and naming someone to coordinate the data and write the report. Attention to these management issues helps to make the ongoing process sustainable over time. Relevant statistical terms and concepts are introduced in this chapter, including validity and reliability of the measure, and ethical issues related to collecting student data.

Chapters 5 and 6 describe various direct and indirect techniques to actually assess established learning objectives. Methods include published tests, locally developed tests, portfolios, assignments, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and reflective essays. Allen employs plenty of examples from other campuses and lists their strengths and weaknesses in tables for easy comparison. Some of these methods, such as portfolios, did not apply to me because they speak to more comprehensive programs, but my library is expanding its instructional offerings, so I may revisit those sections later.

In Chapter 7, Allen explains how to triangulate various methods to get a holistic view of student achievement and use scoring rubrics that are calibrated for inter-rater reliability, as well as other data analysis. In this way department members can assess what's necessary without getting bogged down in extraneous information. In the final chapter, Allen sums up several points for a successful program and reiterates that it can't be done by one person alone. Support has to come not only from within the department, but also from a learner-centered and improvement-oriented campus culture.

Although program assessment is a large task, Allen's practical approach convinced me of the benefits. First, I learned more about how students learn, and how to assess that learning. Also, it prompted a discussion among our librarians about what our most important learning objectives are, and how to align our instruction as a team. For example, my colleague's online research skills course is constructed quite differently than my traditional face-to-face course. In comparing learning goals and assignments, however, we discovered that there are nonetheless scoring rubrics that can be used in common because the learning goals matched.

Most importantly, joining the assessment dialogue on campus increases librarians' stature among the faculty in other departments. Librarians both at my university and throughout academia are realizing that one important way to evolve and survive is to integrate with instruction outside the library. Establishing our instructional bona fides gains their respect.

Whether you have been tasked with assessment or are just assessment curious, *Assessing Academic Programs in Higher Education* is a straightforward introduction to the concepts and process. I recommend it for beginners or for those who know something about assessment but

would like a step-by-step guide. Even if you have long had an assessment program in place, it likely would be worth your time to check your process against Allen's, especially if you have been halted by some of the many barriers that can stymie success.

References

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Walvoord, B. E. (2004). *Assessment clear and simple: A practical guide for institutions, departments, and general education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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