
FOREWORD

In our respective travels around the country talking with faculty about assessment, Barbara Walvoord and I have heard this question many times: “How do we get started in assessment?” That is often followed with a plea, “Isn’t there a simple step-by-step guide we can follow?” Until this point we have had to say no to that entreaty. But now Barbara has stepped forward to present *Assessment Clear and Simple*, and all of us—the novices who seek help and experienced practitioners who try to provide it—are indebted to her.

In clear, persuasive prose that reflects her grounding in the discipline of English, Barbara brings us a straightforward definition of assessment that emphasizes the use of carefully considered evidence to improve learning. True to her promise in the subtitle to keep her message short, Barbara defines her audience narrowly and then tells each of three groups that they need to read just two of the book’s four chapters! There is an introductory chapter for everyone, then a special chapter each for institution-wide planners and administrators, faculty concerned with assessment at the department or program level, and faculty and staff charged with the responsibility of assessing the general education experience.

Despite promising to keep things simple, Barbara Walvoord is never simplistic in her presentation. She acknowledges the complexity of learning and of the assessment that must match its features. While endeavoring to keep assessment “simple, cost efficient, and useful,” she encourages faculty to set ambitious goals for student learning, even if they may seem ambiguous in terms of their measurement potential. She urges that we not fall into the trap of discarding goals like preparing students to become ethical decision makers and good citizens just because these abilities seem difficult to measure. Even today we can employ questionnaires and interviews to ask current students and recent graduates if they perceive

that they have experienced growth in these areas as a result of their college experiences, and in future years we can operationalize these concepts and develop more direct measures of associated behaviors.

When faculty are confronted with the necessity of creating an assessment initiative to satisfy a state or board of trustees mandate or the requirements of an accreditor, they often respond—quite rightly—“Aren’t we already assessing student learning? After all, we evaluate student work and give grades.” One of the many features of this work that I admire is Barbara Walvoord’s willingness to identify and respond to legitimate concerns about outcomes assessment. In this case, she not only acknowledges that faculty and student affairs staff on every campus are engaged in assessment, but includes in every chapter the vital step of completing an audit of all the assessment activities already in place and asking how the use of the data from these activities to improve student learning could be enhanced. In her prior presentations and publications Barbara has become well known for her advocacy of the use of rubrics to make meaning of grades in the outcomes assessment process. In this volume we are treated to new examples of rubric construction and of the use of classroom assessment techniques in the quest for data that can help us improve instruction and ultimately learning.

In reviewing such a brief work, my greatest concern was related to the limited ability to provide context for the steps to be taken in inaugurating and sustaining an assessment initiative. Assessment approaches are unique, due primarily to the diverse organizational structures and background experiences, expertise, and personalities of instructors and student affairs staff that constitute the environments on different campuses. Barbara has addressed this concern by providing examples and options for proceeding in a variety of contexts, and in the appendices, specific illustrations designed for a variety of institutions.

Barbara Walvoord gives us detailed examples of reporting formats applicable at department and institution-wide levels. She urges that responses to assessment findings be based on the best current theories of student and organizational growth and development, then cites references that can be helpful in the search for such theories.

I could say more, but I am reminded of Barbara’s emphasis on brevity. My overview, then, is designed simply to whet your appetite for the rich educational experience that lies in the pages ahead. Happy reading!

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