AALHE
Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education

Intersection

October 2014

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AALHE Website Redesign

By Tara Rose, AALHE President-Elect

Over the past few years AALHE has focused on its strategic priorities, including (1) member development and (2) website improvements. At its June 2014 meeting, the AALHE board of directors adopted a proposal to purchase a membership database and a full redesign of our website, pictured at left.

The new website will have a new modern look with roll-over sections, social media buttons, scrolling feed of new member names, RSS feeds, and revised main content pages. The main content page organization is shown in the graphic below.

The website redesign will go live in mid-November providing members with exclusive content that includes access to all prior newsletters, webinars, a membership directory, and more. Resources available to the public will include previous conference materials along with the most recently added conference proceedings. We anticipate more enhancements coming late 2015, including a job board and an online call for proposals.

Member Center (Members Only)	Event Calendar with Registration	Resource Room (Public)	About AALHE
•Member Directory •Get Involved •Self-Serve Member Profile •Pay an Invoice •Newletter Archive •Webinar Archive	•Conference •Webinars	•Assess Listerv •Internet Resources •Conference Materials •Conference Proceedings •PDF Content Search •Flickr Gallery •FAQ	•Mission Statement •Board of Directors •Committee Information •Legal Information •Contact Us Form

Organization of the new AALHE website, launching in November 2014.

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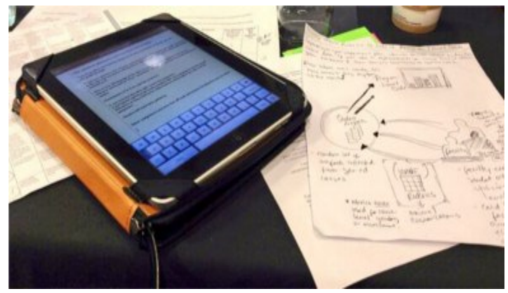
Taking Action to Improve Student Learning

By Tara Rose, AALHE President-Elect

The AALHE conference committee is hard at work preparing the Fifth Annual Conference to be held at the Lexington Hilton Downtown in Lexington, Kentucky, June 1-3, 2015. The 2015 conference theme, *Actionable Assessment* includes a variety of current topics relevant to student learning assessment. The purpose of assessment is to improve student learning, and this conference will focus on the "how." We will be seeking session proposals from assessment practitioners on how they have taken action, especially in these areas:

- *Academic Assessment*
- *Assessment Leadership*
- *Assessment relating to Program Review*
- *Co-curricular Assessment*
- *Making Sense of Multiple Data Sources*
- *New Curricular Models*

The call for proposals will go out in late November, 2014.



From the 2013 annual conference. Photo: Ruthie Cubas

The AALHE Assessment Conference connects and provides professional development for assessment practitioners in higher education. The conference is one of the best resources for advanced assessment professionals. Conference attendees attend small sessions and have multiple opportunities to interact with other professionals. AALHE is consistently heralded as the best opportunity for assessment networking. No matter their institution type – small, large, public, or private – attendees always leave the conference with many new assessment contacts. Presenters are also invited to publish their paper in a conference proceedings.

Please plan on joining us to connect with leading thinkers in higher education assessment!

Twitter Conversations

Wednesday, November 12 from 11:00am – 3:00pm CST – ***"Competency-Based Education – A Boon or a Boondoggle for Assessment?"*** – Will competency-based education be a good thing for higher education, or just another administrative hoop to jump through? *Inside Higher Ed* had a few recent articles on competency-based education (here and here) that might provide some food for thought. Share your insights, your ideas, and your resources with your assessment colleagues. Dr. Catherine Wehlburg, Texas Christian University, and Dr. David Eubanks, Eckerd College, will be the provocateurs/facilitators for this inaugural AALHE Twitter Chat.

Thursday, December 11 from 12:00pm – 4:00pm CST - ***"Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and Performance Based Funding: A Match Made In Heaven or a Horror Story?"*** – Should we reward colleges and universities that perform well? What about institutions that don't perform well – should they receive fewer resources? Who gets to decide what "good performance" looks like? An article from AAUP asks "Who funds performance based funding and why?" - Join your AALHE colleagues as we discuss this difficult issue in 140 characters or less.

New to Twitter? To participate in the conversations, you will need a Twitter account. Use the hashtag #aalhechat to see what others are saying and to contribute your own thoughts. You can find out more about how to participate at http://support.twitter.com/articles/215585-getting-started-with-twitter# or search for "Getting Started with Twitter."

Assessment Drama


David Eubanks

Coaching faculty members through the creation of an assessment report can be daunting. Headings like LEARNING OBJECTIVES, ASSESSMENT RESULTS AND ANALYSIS and ACTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT seem designed to make our intelligent and creative colleagues run for the exits. To prevent this exodus, I find it useful to compare the assessment report to a Hollywood movie in three acts. This has been surprisingly useful in quickly communicating the purpose and structure of assessment reports and establishes a useful metaphor for follow-up conversations. Here's how it goes.

ACT I (GOALS)
We meet the characters, learn something about them, and (most importantly) discover their motivations. Perhaps the plucky understaffed Zen Cheerleading department has an ambitious goal of increasing student cranial illumination. Will they succeed? Stay tuned.

ACT II (ASSESSMENT RESULTS AND ANALYSIS)
Things get complicated in Act II, focusing on the obstacles that lie between the characters and their objectives. The unfolding story will include assessments of the situation (e.g. the Death Star has just appeared out of hyperspace), with graphs and numbers where appropriate. Much head-scratching and internal torment of the main characters will be evident as they try to understand what it all means. Maybe the Zen Cheerleaders have discovered that cranial illumination peaks at the end of the freshman year, and no attempts yet have succeeded in rekindling this flame. What to do? At the end of ACT II, we should be on the edges of our seats waiting to see how the beleaguered protagonists will ever come out on top.

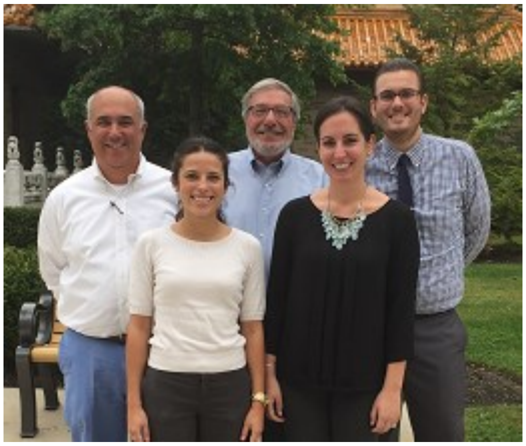
ACT III (ACTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT)
Here we require a satisfying ending, hinging on actions taken by the characters. To illustrate how important this is, imagine that the movie *Star Wars* had led us up to the moment where the rebels are considering how to save their base, and instead of the climactic final battle, the film ends with scrolling text: THE REBELS DECIDED THAT CONSIDERING THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THEY HAD TO OPERATE, THINGS WERE PRETTY GOOD—ESPECIALLY WHEN COMPARED TO OTHER SMALL AND UNDER-BUDGETED REBELLIONS. Or perhaps LUKE AND FRIENDS PLANNED TO DEVELOP A NEW RUBRIC THAT MIGHT GIVE BETTER RESULTS IN ASSESSING IMPERIAL WAR AIMS. Not satisfying, right? The key is that, as with any good drama, the characters *have to do something*, and the *actions should flow from everything we've seen before this point*. In the end it may be an uplifting victory, a tragic failure, or even a comedy, but something happens.

My father has a strange habit. When picking up a new novel, he will flip to the last chapter to see if he likes the end. If he is satisfied, he will start again at page one. I now do this too, but only when reading assessment reports. If ACT III (the section on actions for improvement) contains only vague pronouncements of future actions, or "actions" so general as to be meaningless, or actions only to change assessments, the report isn't ready for the silver screen.

In conclusion, a summary of this article should be provided after careful consideration of the foregoing, with the intent of conveying additional meaning to readers. We anticipate that a scheduling meeting to begin this process could happen as early as spring 2015.

David Eubanks is Associate Dean of Faculty for Institutional Research and Assessment at Eckerd College. He can be reached at eubankda@eckerd.edu.

The Mobile Survey Lab



Authors, left to right: Marc E. Gillespie, Carla D. Hernandez, S. William Zito, Gina M. LaPan-Dennis, Anthony C. Marziliano. Photo: Laura Gianni-Augusto

“No time!”, “Maybe later.”, “Sorry, too busy!” – these are common reactions to survey requests. Ubiquitous technology seems to make the problem worse with constant demands on our time, but in this case technology came to our rescue.

In higher education, we routinely survey students, alumni, faculty, and administrators. Assessment data collected allows us to interpret how our stakeholders feel about any number of important aspects of the higher education landscape. In examining our survey methods we noted that we often ask stakeholders to come to us: to respond to our emails, to fill-out our surveys and to return them to us. We asked ourselves if it might be better if we brought the survey to them instead. So we created the Mobile Survey Lab (MSL). The MSL can collect survey data in person at any event attended by a population of interest. Rather than waiting for survey responses, we bring the survey *to* the respondent.

The lab consists of twelve wirelessly networked Nexus 7 tablets. Data is collected using SurveyMonkey. The tablets run in a kiosk mode (Kiosk Browser App, ProCo Apps) allowing users to only access the survey being administered, blocking access to other tablet functions. Online analysis tools provide staff with a rapid way of assessing group responses and providing live progress updates. Data is collected in real-time, and can be seen as responses come in. We find that by collecting survey responses in person, we can greatly improve our response rates while simultaneously completing a survey in a shorter time period (compared with one that takes days or weeks, and multiple e-mail reminders). In one of our first uses of the MSL, we surveyed students about their taking an optional exam. We designed two surveys: one for students who attended the optional exam (to be taken in person on tablets) and one for students who chose not to attend the optional exam (to be completed on their own via email). The response rate for the emailed survey among students who did not attend the exam was 7% (12/166). Our Mobile Survey Lab, utilizing our new tablets, garnered a 100% response rate among students who attended the optional exam (28/28). This highlights the benefits of direct administration, though participation rates for non-volunteer events may be different.

The mobile nature of the project allows us to quickly deploy the lab at any event, having a table at which participants stop by to take the survey, or less formally, where we simply pass the tablets around to an audience. This provides instant results that can be viewed at the event, allowing us to provide feedback for improvement *as the event occurs*.

The mobility of the survey lab also delivers an increased point of service - visibility. By bringing assessment surveys out of the back office and directly into event environments, we increase the interaction between stakeholders and assessment professionals and staff. This increase in visibility naturally leads to an increase in transparency as well. We anticipate using new software tools to share response trends with participants as the data is collected. All too often, we conduct surveys without distributing data back to those who are surveyed. Our assessment staff can provide snapshots to allow participants to see how their responses compare to the rest of the group. We see the MSL as an example of how well-utilized technology can help us not only achieve our survey goals, but improve the transparency of the entire process. The MSL model can be easily adopted by other programs, using relatively inexpensive hardware, and commercial off-the-shelf software.

At the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences at St. John's University: Anthony C. Marziliano, Assistant to the Dean, Assessment, Marc E. Gillespie, Professor of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Chair-Committee on Assessment and Outcomes, Gina LaPan-Dennis, Assistant to the Dean, Assessment, Carla D. Hernandez, Data Administrator, Assessment, S. William Zito, Senior Associate Dean for Assessment, Professor of Pharmaceutical Sciences

Student Involvement in Data Gathering

Mark Salisbury

Assessment leaders are often painfully aware that the data we collect from students is only as good as their willingness to provide it. Whether it is low online survey response rates or “connect-the-dots” art on bubble-in paper course evaluations: if students choose to decline our invitations for authentic feedback, the results are suspect. However, at Augustana College we have found that we are not powerless to affect this situation. Perhaps surprisingly, students can also play a key role in shaping the quality of the data we gather. Here are two examples of recent projects where student involvement substantially impacted our data gathering efforts and helped us provide better evidence-based guidance to faculty and senior administrators.

Employing Students to Conduct Focus Groups
Like many other small residential liberal arts colleges, we emphasize intercultural competence (ICC) as a fundamental learning outcome. We have spent many hours trying to come up with effective diversity programming with little to show for it. Moreover, when various administrators and interested faculty have spoken with students about these issues (especially white students), the students’ comments have often sounded vaguely sanitized – as if they were trying to say what they thought we wanted to hear. A few years ago we tried a new approach. We solicited a small group of students who were willing to host focus groups. After some training and research design planning, we let these students take charge of data collection. Unlike previous efforts, focus group participants shared amazingly honest and insightful information about the nature of their interactions with students from different backgrounds, including the anxieties this provoked. These findings painted a different and much more nuanced picture than prior efforts. We attribute this in large part to the elimination of the “power divide” between students and staff or faculty facilitators. Another positive effect was that the student facilitators became our best public advocates for approaching diversity programming differently and helped Augustana College take a big step toward improving our students’ development of ICC learning outcomes.

Partnering with Students to Solicit Better Course Evaluation Data
Faculty opinions of course evaluations may be negative, but student opinions about them are far worse. Students have to repeatedly fill out these surveys, and often fail to see the relevance of it. My office helps to process course evaluations, and I have been surprised by the number of forms where the darkened circles form a straight vertical line, or a perfect geometric shape – showing a lack a genuine effort to provide useful feedback. I arranged to meet with our student government association to ask them why they thought so many students appear to be so flippant in filling out course evaluations. This conversation was eye-opening for all of us. I didn’t realize how many students thought the completed forms were simply discarded at the end of the term. The students had no idea how course evaluations are used by faculty to improve their teaching, and by administrators to improve other policies or programming. After this conversation, our Student Government agreed to partner with my office in a public and continuing campaign to tell students more about how course evaluation data works, how it has been used, and how student input matters to the college. I then met with faculty members to share the ways that student involvement could help the situation. Many faculty members agreed to make a point of sharing with students how findings from prior course evaluations had shaped the way that they now taught the course. Following these discussions I’ve seen a substantial drop in the number of useless course evaluation forms and an increase in faculty taking the time to talk to students honestly about the importance of good feedback.

Both of these projects would have been impossible without a student partnership. If learning occurs at the interaction between the teacher and the student, then the quality of that learning is inescapably tied to the investment of both parties in that interaction. Engaging students directly in the process of gathering assessment data increases the quality of their investment, which in turn fosters deeper investment from faculty – ultimately contributing to better teaching and learning.

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Q&A with Mike Johnson

by David Eubanks

Mike Johnson

Michael S. Johnson is Senior Vice President/Chief of Staff for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, the regional accreditor of degree-granting higher education institutions in the Southern states. We corresponded by email.

Q: Demonstrating assessment of learning outcomes is often a problem area for institutions seeking reaffirmation of accreditation. What are the characteristics of successful institutions in this area?

A: You are right that this is a problem. In the 2013 reaffirmation class, 64% of the 75 institutions reviewed were cited at the off-site stage of our 3-step process for non-compliance with our standard calling for assessment of educational programs (Comprehensive Standard 3.3.1.1). After an on-site review, the percentage was still a very high 36% not meeting the standard. And almost a quarter of the reviewed institutions (23%) were asked for an additional follow-up after review by our Board of Trustees.

Successful institutions are able to establish that for a very broad cross-section of educational programs, all parts of CS 3.3.1.1 are met. This is a three-part standard and meeting some of it is not success. The institution must: one, have established that it has defined expected outcomes (programmatic outcomes and student learning outcomes) that are program-specific; two, have assessed the extent that these outcomes have been achieved; and three, have analyzed its assessment results and then applied the findings to undertake improvements in its programs.

A successful program does not simply have evidence that it 1) has expected outcomes, 2) undertakes assessments, and 3) makes changes to programs (e.g., curricula, staffing, course content, mode of delivery). A successful program explicitly shows that these stages are linked. For example, the assessment instruments used are appropriate ways to measure the expected outcomes mentioned. And then the improvements that are undertaken logically follow from a reasoned analysis of the assessment findings. Success does not depend on computer software. It depends on a belief that data-based decisions are desirable. It also depends on a process where someone actually reads the generated reports. If the leadership is not dedicated to the process, it is rarely successful.

Q: What are some of the more common mistakes institutions make with regard to the learning outcomes standard?

A: We allow institutions to use sampling in terms of presenting information. A common mistake is to offer a sample of programs that is not well explained, and that looks to be insufficient to give a fair overview of institutional practices. For example, only programs with specialized accreditation are given (nursing is everyone's favorite to be in the sample), only undergraduate programs are given, not graduate (master's and if offered, doctoral), or some divisions/schools are not included at all. Samples need to be very robust and justified.

The bigger mistake, however, is to give too little attention to one or more of the five elements mentioned above. It is not uncommon to have no "use of results" even though the rest of the standard may be met.

Another type of problem occurs with institutions that use some computer-driven process for standardizing the institutional effectiveness process, yet the process is not explained and the generated reports are full of undefined and unexplained codes and abbreviations. I call this the "tyranny of the software" problem.

Q&A with Mike Johnson, continued

Q: When presenting materials for the learning outcomes standards--academic program assessment reports, for example--is there any advice you could pass along to make them more readable and convincing to reviewers?

A: I have seen some institutions work through a sample "report" (annotations, circles and arrows, and the like) to help reviewers understand what it is that they are looking at. This is especially helpful when a standardized format is used for reporting. Another thing is to change reports from having a "planned improvements" section to an "actual improvements undertaken" section. Dave, I remember you had a report format where you made clear that some columns are done at the start of the process (stating expected outcomes, identifying specific ways that these will be assessed); these might appear in future tense but the rest of the final report form is to be LEFT BLANK. Then at the end of the reporting cycle, the actual findings are presented (PAST TENSE since the measurements have occurred). If there are planned improvements, they are future tense but not part of what we ask for; actual improvements would appear in PAST TENSE.

Finally, I urge report writers to NEVER present an effectiveness narrative in the future tense; the reports themselves will have future tense in the expected outcomes section, but when explaining the process, you are explaining a process that is already in use and has results that have already been generated and effectively used. You are reporting out your recent past efforts, not what you hope to be able to demonstrate in the future.

Q: Do you anticipate any regulatory changes that will affect how we think about and report assessment activities? For example, more calls for accountability that have to be answered quantitatively.

A: The main change will probably be an expectation of more disclosure to the public of evidence related to learning outcomes. But this will probably be in terms of licensure, completion rates, and the like. In fact, our new policy statement on "Institutional Obligations for Public Disclosure" already calls for this type of information to be made public.

Q: Is it difficult to become a peer reviewer for accreditation reports? What are the benefits?

A: Reviewers are nominated by the SACSCOC institution's president, then placed into our evaluator registry. We try to balance experienced and new evaluators on a committee – you probably would like some experienced evaluators on a committee visit to your institution, so you can understand why. But we use an institutional effectiveness evaluator on almost every committee, so we could certainly use more names in our registry. The benefits are many. First, you gain experience about our processes which help you in developing reports for your own institution. Second, you always take home useful ideas gained from the institution under review or from your committee colleagues. Third, you spend a few days with a great bunch of people. Fourth, your get the satisfaction of doing something that is a service to the entire academic community. I could add more, I'm sure! If a person is interested, try this link from our webpage: http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/commres/How%20to%20Become%20an%20Evaluator.pdf

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?

A: The purpose of an institutional effectiveness process is to help the institution evaluate its performance and improve itself. If the perceived purpose is simply to "get through accreditation," then the process is probably a great waste of time and energy. Successful institutional effectiveness starts with a state of mind.

Feedback

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this issue of *Intersection* at intersection@aahle.org