



### **Assessment Methods for Student Affairs**

by John H. Schuh and Associates, Jossey-Bass, 2008

Reviewed by Cara Meixner, Asst. Professor, Graduate Psychology and Faculty Consultant, Center for Faculty Innovation at James Madison University.

Do not allow the title of this text to turn you away! While editor and primary author John Schuh targets *Assessment Methods for Student Affairs* to its namesakes - those practitioners in the milieu of Student Affairs and Student Services- the text bears universal applications to Academic Affairs faculty and administrators. At the heart of *Assessment Methods* is the robust, unabated call for faculty, practitioners, and administrators across academe to engage in comprehensive, empirical assessments that document student needs and satisfaction, organizational effectiveness, and learning outcomes. At 279 pages, the text is laden with useful checklists, and detailed case studies. Chapters can be scanned for 'how to' information or read thoroughly for philosophy, context, and next steps.

Schuh, a paragon assessment educator, begins by situating the reader in broader discourse on assessment driven by the press for universal accountability: “Colleges and universities increasingly are being asked to demonstrate how they make a difference in the lives of students, how they contribute to the economic development of their communities and states, and how they contribute to the national welfare” (p. 2). Informing, influencing, and directing the movement are accreditation bodies, retention work groups, consumers, and politicians among others.

In *Assessment Methods*, Schuh and his contributors guide the reader through the philosophy and pragmatics of doing assessment well – thoroughly, ethically, and with methodological soundness. Recommending an incremental approach, the authors broach a range of assessment-related topics, rendering the text useful to both novices and experts alike.

What I found useful was the organization of the book, grounded in a list of ‘framing questions’ explored in chapter one. These include: (1) What is the issue at hand? (2) What is the purpose of the assessment? (3) Who should be studied? (4) What is the best assessment method? (5) How should data be collected? (6) What instrument(s) should be utilized? (7) How should data be analyzed? And (8) How should results be reported? Each of the eight questions corresponds with a chapter or subsection of the text. For instance, question #3 (i.e., Who should be studied?) is addressed in chapter four (i.e., selecting, sampling, and soliciting subjects).

With respect to organization and content, *Assessment Methods* is well-structured and thorough. The text complements others (e.g., *Assessment in Student Affairs*, *Assessment Practice in Student Affairs*) with explicit focus on the technical – or ‘how to’ – aspects of doing assessment well. A basic understanding of statistics is helpful but not necessary to navigate chapters.

Contributors Saunders and Wohlgemuth address the use of existing data sources in chapter two, challenging educators to turn to extant data at the outset of an assessment initiative. The writers further encourage educators to seek data outside of their immediate purview, collaborating with campus constituents outside of researchers’ departments or domains. Likewise, educators might consider external data for triangulation, informative, or benchmarking purposes. The National Center for Education Statistics, for instance, provides a digest of national and state trend data of potential interest to university faculty and administrators.

In chapter three, Cooper presents the reader with options and opportunities for planning and implementing data collection. The contributor discusses the importance of aligning methods (e.g., surveys and questionnaires) with assessment objectives, reveals how different methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, observations, and document reviews) are carried out, and details the pros and cons of each method. This chapter is particularly useful for faculty and administrators searching for a cursory review of data collection procedures.

Gansemer-Topf and Wohlegemuth follow with a chapter on selecting, sampling, and soliciting subjects. While the authors turn their attention to identifying students for assessment studies, their strategies are broadly applicable – especially to faculty centers sampling educators across academic disciplines. Germane to this chapter are topics on developing an appropriate sample, selecting the sample, ensuring sampling rigor in quantitative studies, devising sampling strategies for qualitative approaches, and dealing with various sampling biases. Especially helpful were the authors' comments on three incentive mechanisms – reward, cost, and trust.

Chapter five, written by Saunders and Cooper, outlines instrumentation decisions in the context of a Student Affairs case study. This chapter could be read prior to or in tandem with chapter four, as it assists the reader in determining whether to apply a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach. Also, the authors discuss the merits and drawbacks of utilizing published instruments versus those idiosyncratic to an institution, department, or academic unit. In addition to reminding the readers of quality assurance mechanisms for quantitative research (i.e., validity, reliability), Saunders and Cooper present a brief framework for qualitative assessment augmented by a nuanced contribution on focus groups to the text's appendices.

As the reader might surmise, chapter six – authored by Cooper and Shelley – presents the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods paths to data analyses. The contributors attend to those techniques appropriate for non-statistician audiences without diluting the rigor of a study or integrity of the data. In relatively few pages, the authors do an excellent job of previewing useful inferential statistics (e.g., regression, MANOVA, etc.) without overloading the novice reader or boring a psychometrical expert. I further appreciated Cooper and Shelley's review of software (e.g., NVivo, SPSS) that faculty and administrators might utilize to code qualitative data, test hypotheses and so on.

The final four chapters, authored by Schuh, respectively cover writing reports and conducting briefings, dealing with ethics, using a mixed methodological approach, and looking to the future of assessment. The former provides a primer on drafting and delivering effective, impactful written and oral briefings. The chapter on ethics grounds the reader in IRB procedures and a set of guidelines for ethical decision-making.

Chapter nine employs a case study to orient the reader to the use of mixed methodological approaches in assessment. While helpful, those considering the use of qualitative and quantitative methods might also consult readers focused exclusively on mixed methods. The author points the reader to several useful references.

Schuh concludes with a chapter laden with “hunches, prognostications, musings, and guesses as to what the future might hold for assessment in student affairs” (p. 231). Considered are demands for increased accountability to politicians, foundations, and funding agencies; heightened scrutiny on student learning outcomes; increased accountability for both degree and non degree-granting departments and units; greater demand for transparency between and among universities and their consumers; and other contemplations.

Overall, I was surprised to find *Assessment Methods for Student Affairs* such a useful, applicable read for those outside of Student Affairs. I would recommend this text to any educator or administrator who is conceptualizing plans for comprehensive assessment of programs, participants and learning. S/he who heeds the advice laid out by Schuh and associates will be poised to deal well with internally influenced and externally induced expectations for accountability.