Three Assessment Tenors Look Back and to the Future

Trudy W. Banta, Linda Suskie, Barbara E. Walvoord

In recent months a virtual torrent of books on outcomes assessment in higher education has been released. A sample of titles and authors appears at the end of this article. What does the publication of all these resources in such a brief period say about the current status of assessment? What may we expect for the future of this field?

Three of these books were published in quick succession between July and October 2014. The authors know each other well, but we have approached our writing about assessment from different angles. Barbara Walvoord's book focuses on student writing (Walvoord 2014). Linda Suskie's interest is in accreditation and accountability (Suskie 2014). Trudy Banta, with co-author Catherine Palomba, has revised and updated an overview of assessment basics first published in 1999 (Banta and Palomba 2015). We came together at the 2014 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis on October 21. Would there be harmony or discord as we looked back at all our experiences on campuses and at conferences and national meetings, as well as in writing our books, in the past year, and attempted to see into the future? Would we be singing new songs or adding new verses to old songs?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite our diverse career experiences, we three tenors share many common perceptions about the past, present, and future of the assessment of student learning in higher education.

A Move from Denial to Acceptance

Suskie likens the decades-long process of coming to terms with assessment to Kubler-Ross's five stages of grieving: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In our travels, we three see far more acceptance these days. More and more of our colleagues are recognizing that assessment is essential and are continuing to strengthen their efforts year after year. As we visit campuses, the question "Why do we have to do assessment?" has often become "How can we do assessment more effectively?" or even "Can evaluation of our practice help us cut costs?" Faculty and student affairs professionals alike want to know how they can demonstrate that student learning is a result of their instructional efforts in and outside the classroom.

Ongoing Calls for Accountability

Pressures to demonstrate the accountability of higher education have increased dramatically over the past thirty years. We believe that most of our colleagues now realize that this pressure is not going away. College and university faculty and administrators must continue to find appropriate ways to collect and present evidence of their effectiveness and of their willingness to make improvements where warranted. Suskie worries, however, that higher education quality continues to be defined by reputation rather than effectiveness—witness college rating systems that give significant weight to peer assessments.

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Increasing Experience with Assessment

Banta notes that in 2006, 56 percent of the participants in the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis said when they registered that their institutions were just beginning to discuss assessment or were in their first or second year of implementation. In 2014, this figure had dropped to 31 percent. With widespread interest in conducting assessment more effectively, many now understand the basics and are ready to find more sophisticated tools and technologies to advance their practice.

Growing and Maturing Assessment Resources

We agree that research is contributing to our knowledge base, and experienced assessment practitioners are eager to learn from that trove and contribute to it. Banta notes that many disciplines now have their own assessment tracks at annual conferences, their own scholars and practitioners, and their own literature [see Deardorff (in press) on global learning, for

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clean." Another student stated, "I think of it as mindless work." Had we only relied on the questionnaires, we would not have gained this valuable information. The focus group gleaned information above and beyond the questionnaire content, underscoring the usefulness of a mixed-methods approach.

Finally, another set of questions was added in order to provide an implementation fidelity check. The student learning objectives for the program were read to the students and they were asked to provide examples of ways in which they are or are not gaining the experiences specified within the learning objective. When reading the first objective, "Students will develop professional relationships in the workplace, including communication, integrity, employee and employer relationships, and punctuality," students acknowledged that they had already addressed this objective during the DEAL portion of the focus group. Students responded to the second objective, "Students will develop ethical reasoning in the workplace," by describing situations in which they have applied ethical reasoning while at their job.

Benefits of Mixed Methods

Although our personal background is in quantitative methods, our experiences have led to an appreciation for the strengths of a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative data that we obtain from students and employers help us succinctly summarize student learning and examine change over time. However, the rich qualitative data obtained through focus groups permits us to enhance our assessments and evaluate whether or not we are making accurate inferences from our quantitative data. Use of mixed methods has contributed to the development of program objectives and has enabled evaluation of the accuracy of our inferences and the alignment of our assessment plan with programming.

In addition to the assessment-related benefits of mixed methods, the focus groups have enhanced the program in additional ways. Students report that they find the focus groups enjoyable, and that they provide a way to hear about what other students are doing. In this sense, the focus groups have actively involved students in the assessment process and have strengthened the community of FWS employees.

It should be noted that focus groups are only one method that could be used to enhance traditional quantitative means of collecting assessment data. Student reflection essays, work portfolios, or interviews with employers could potentially add components to the FWS assessment plan. Strategically taking advantage of the ways in which findings gained through quantitative and qualitative methods complement one another enhances our assessment plans. ■

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S. Jeanne Horst is assistant professor and assistant assessment specialist and Walter A. Ghant is associate director of Community Service-Learning at James Madison University. Devon H. Whetstone is director of assessment at Stephens College.

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example]. Exciting work is emerging on the assessment of high-impact practices like service-learning, first-year seminars, undergraduate research, and study abroad.

We also have more assessment tools and resources. We have more diverse assessment methods to share: e-portfolios, rubrics, and digital badges. We have more conferences, workshops on campuses offered by experienced colleagues, webinars, consultants willing to make campus visits, and graduate courses on assessment for master's and doctoral students. And we have a score or more of vendors eager to offer us technologies to help us collect, store, and analyze our assessment data.

All these resources, we agree, will continue to grow and evolve. Indeed, we agree with Banta's prediction of far more use of technology to store and manage assessment information and to supply the masses of data needed for analytics that will help us individualize learning as we find out which approaches work best for each student.

Balancing Standardization with Individualization

Today's wealth of resources enables colleges, universities, and programs to customize their approaches to assessment, focusing on particular outcomes or actions. Accreditors offer increasing opportunities to do so, but are also moving toward more explicit instructions, common formats, and insistence on institutional accountability for *all* learning outcomes. Software packages, increasingly adopted on campuses, offer flexibility but also impose common frameworks.

Combining narrow focus with broad accountability, Walvoord, for example, suggests that, instead of adopting a rigid sequence assessing one or two student learning outcomes per year, programs, colleges, and universities can conduct an opening survey of all learning outcomes, using available evidence from student performance and other surveys, and then focus on the learning outcomes that most clearly need work. Suskie suggests that providing professional development through one-on-one personalized assistance with specific assessment challenges can help more than general guidelines or an institution-wide workshop.

The dissemination of research that identifies "high-impact practices" is helping institutions and programs to profit from research they themselves do not have the funds or personnel to conduct, and is leading to a rush of new high-impact programs on campuses. However, as Walvoord explains, institutions must consult the emerging literature that identifies the best ways of implementing an individual high-impact practice, and they must use strong local assessment to discover "what works best for us."

Measures of institutional effectiveness continue to balance standardization with flexibility. We share Banta's appreciation of the higher education community's enhanced understanding of the inadequacies of standardized testing and value-added measures for comparing the quality of institutions. But we also share her worry about the many practical and political problems associated with other proposed measures such as time to degree, graduation rate, percentage employed, and earnings of graduates.

Move from Silos to Integration

We all see the need to continue to transform campus culture from one of silos to one of integration. Banta, for example, foresees increased cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration leading to better rubrics and higher standards for student achievement. Among faculty, staff, and institutional leaders, we must have strong, supportive, and informed leadership to advance our work.

Closing the Loop Remains a Challenge

While more and better assessment is taking place, with colleges "sitting on piles of data," as Suskie puts it, making good use of those data to improve practice remains a challenge. Our colleagues still need assistance to interpret and use the information they have. One challenge is embodied in an observation by Blaich and Wise (2011) that change is not part of the tradition of scholarly research. We concur with Blaich and Wise's advice to build forecasts about *use* into *plans* for assessment: Who will review the results? What will interest them? What resources can be devoted to changes suggested by the results?

Altogether, the three tenors find themselves in close to perfect harmony. These are exciting and rewarding times to be working on the assessment of student learning. We have come a long way in the past decade and are now moving to a new level of maturation and sophistication in assessment practices. ■

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Trudy W. Banta is a professor of higher education and senior advisor to the chancellor for academic planning and evaluation at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Linda Suskie is an assessment and accreditation consultant. Barbara E. Walvoord is professor emerita, University of Notre Dame, Indiana.

Assessment of a Small Group Semester-Long Project

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Students enjoy hearing about problem areas groups have worked on in the past, what they have determined about the problems, and their resolutions. Parking is one issue that is chosen every semester, and many times by more than one of the eight groups. Students feel either that there is not enough parking or that it is inconveniently located. A common solution proposed for this is to erect a parking garage. Housing on campus was addressed by one group, noting that only freshmen and sophomores were guaranteed housing, with upperclassmen participating in a lottery system to see who would get on-campus housing. The suggested solution was to put more freshmen and sophomores in dorms by putting three in a room so space would be available for upperclassmen.