

Book Review

***Assessing General Education Programs.* Mary J. Allen. Anker Publishing Company, Bolton, MA: 2006. 269 pages.**

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Institutional researchers at community colleges across the country have become increasingly engaged with assessing student learning. Indeed, many researchers are providing leadership for learning outcomes assessment under the umbrella of institutional effectiveness. Once primarily the purview of faculty, assessment of student learning has become an institutional topic, a result of the growing emphasis on student learning rather than faculty teaching, continuous improvement based on evidence by accrediting bodies, and accountability from the public and policy makers.

For institutional researchers tasked with assessing general education outcomes, Mary J. Allen's book is a great resource. A professor emeritus in psychology at California State University, Bakersfield, and former director of the California State University Institute for Teaching and Learning, Mary J. Allen has worked with colleges and universities through workshops at campuses and higher education conferences. In the preface to *Assessing General Education Programs*, she explains that her goal in writing the book was to provide "a compact, practical guide for busy professionals who want to assess their general education program in meaningful, manageable, and sustainable ways" (p. iv). The book is, indeed, a compact – 250 pages – and practical guide for developing a plan and strategies to assess whether students are meeting the learning outcomes stated in the general education program, the core of the undergraduate curriculum.

The author spends a few pages reviewing the history of general education assessment by briefly discussing constructivist learning paradigms, Chickering's and Gamson's "Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education," general education models, and the role of accreditation. The section on assessment vocabulary is supplemented by a comprehensive glossary at the back of the book. The author also suggests a set of six assessment steps in this chapter that provide the framework for the remaining chapters.

After providing this brief context, the author moves quickly to the nuts and bolts of general education assess-

ment. Chapter 2 provides examples of general education mission, goal and outcome statements from a variety of colleges and universities across the country. Examples are included for a comprehensive list of general education learning outcomes, including written communication, oral communication, mathematics, critical thinking and problem solving, American and world cultures, multicultural understanding and citizenship, ethics, information literacy, health, wellness and personal growth, technology, arts and humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and integration.

An important contribution of the book is Chapter 3 which addresses the often difficult task of aligning general education outcomes with other college goals and programs, particularly first-year programs. The author offers curricular maps, course planning grids and grading alignment matrices as examples of tools to aid the practitioner in promoting alignment. There is a comprehensive list of broad questions in this chapter to guide thinking about alignment. As she notes at the end of the chapter, any of the alignment questions she poses "could become the focus on an assessment study examining alignment in the general education program" (p. 120).

At the center of any successful assessment effort is a plan, and the author offers clear steps for developing and implementing an assessment plan in Chapter 4. "Developing an assessment plan for your general education program should save more time than it takes to create," she suggests, and "should lead to more effective assessment" (p. 121). A portion of the final chapter addresses writing the Assessment Report.

Probably the most relevant of the seven chapters in the book are the two chapters that examine direct and indirect measures of student learning. Whether the reader is a novice or veteran, these chapters provide a good overview (or review) of assessment basics. Chapter 5 discusses direct measures, including standardized tests, locally developed tests, embedded assessments, portfolios, and rubrics. The author's detailed advice for creating and using rubrics is particularly valuable. In chapter 6 the author tackles indi-

rect measures of student learning including national surveys, interviews, and focus groups. In both chapters the author presents an overview of the assessment tool followed by a discussion of the strengths and limitations of each tool. Two matrices – one for selecting direct measures and one for selecting indirect measures – are provided in chapter 7.

Chapter 7 begins with a discussion of what assessment means in a learning-centered institution where, the author suggests, among other things assessment is an essential part of the learning process, contributed to by faculty and staff working collegially to promote student success. Infrastructure considerations are examined in this chapter. This chapter also addresses ways to close the loop at multiple levels (i.e., course, program and institution).

This book is an essential hands-on guide for developing, aligning, and assessing general education outcomes. While many of the dozens of examples in the book are drawn from her vast experience in California higher education, Mary J. Allen's strategies for creating and implementing an assessment plan, selecting assessment measures, and navigating the campus issues surrounding learning outcomes assessment are applicable across institutional categories. Researchers who follow her insightful guidance are likely to be rewarded with a strong and successful assessment program.

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