Intersection

Letter from the President

AALHE President Eric Riedel

Dear AALHE Members:

The proposals for this year's conference reflect the many avenues along which learning outcomes assessment has grown and, as a result, speak to the challenges facing higher education. While as assessment practitioners, we continue to expand our tool box and increase the familiarity of assessment techniques, we are now able to take the next logical step and ask ourselves which tool, where, why, and for whom? Examples include transitions between different techniques (e.g. comprehensive exams to portfolios), approaches for different types of learners (e.g. transfer students versus first time freshmen), and assessment for different degree levels (e.g. certificates versus doctoral programs). The conference theme itself also suggests great changes afoot in higher education and a particular place for the assessment practitioner to play in them. This is the center of what I believe is meant by our conference theme, "Emergent Dialogues in Assessment."

What are some of these "emergent dialogues"? Let me suggest a few of the most critical I see at this year's conference. One taps into our core strength as assessment practitioners – determining how to facilitate the most effective learning environment in an increasing array of educational settings. We are now starting to ask questions about the relative contributions of learning environments beyond specific factors of the traditional (or even traditional virtual) classroom. Examples of this are found in sessions that specifically address co-curricular learning, adaptive learning environments, and the use of new technologies.

Another "dialogue" is how we recognize student learning. By recognition, I mean not only to measure but to do so in a way that enables different institutions to value the same learning. By default, the common currency has been the course credit. While this will likely serve a role in the foreseeable future,

Letter from the President… *continued from page 1*

institutions must now negotiate how to consistently handle certifications of learning that are not based in seat time, but rather as in prior learning assessment or direct assessment. How can cross-institutional recognition of such learning be facilitated? How does assessment practice figure into this?

Yet a third dialogue takes place at a higher level. With the dramatic increase in the diversity of teaching and learning in higher education, there is a danger of fragmentation or losing the holistic vision of the student experience. Assessment practitioners have potentially a unique and powerful perspective. Charged with measuring and improving learning across the student's career, they will encounter diverse learning environments. By bringing together different stakeholders including students, faculty, administrators, etc., (and often having little formal authority to do so), they must build consensus visions of learning across and beyond an institution. It is these challenges which may drive the demand for assessment practitioners to be leaders in understanding student learning. Examples of this type of work can be found in several sessions on promoting institutional outcomes, integrating mission statements into assessment, and transforming institutional culture.

This year's conference promises to be a rich and dynamic one. I believe this conference will not only foster the expertise of practitioners in a maturing field but also support dialogues critical to healthy change in higher education. I look forward to seeing you in Albuquerque.

Overview of the Conference

The AALHE Annual Meeting, like the association itself, is focused on the practice of assessment as a way to improve student learning. You will connect with faculty members and administrators with many different roles who collect and analyze data and want to share ideas.

Upcoming Webinar
May 14, 2014

Building the Science of Learning Assessment: Strengthening Individuals, Programs, Institutions, and Communities.

This webinar will demonstrate some advanced assessment techniques. First, faculty interviews are used to identify levels of student achievement: beginning, fundamental, practical, and inspiring practices, resulting in a multiple-choice survey. Ratings of student work by faculty quickly produce a rich assessment database. A course design survey complements this by linking teaching to learning. Interpreting these links ecologically pinpoints strategies for helping individuals, programs, institutions, and communities support each other, compete, spread, and garner resources. The webinar provides many concrete examples of the practices.

David Dirlam, Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation, Virginia Wesleyan College

Summary versus Abstraction

David Eubanks
Associate Dean of Faculty for Institutional Research & Assessment, Eckerd College

David Eubanks, being abstract

Abstraction

The action of considering something in the abstract, independently of its associations or attributes; the process of isolating properties or characteristics common to a number of diverse objects, events, etc., without reference to the peculiar properties of particular examples or instances. Also: the state of being considered in this way; abstractness.

-Oxford English Dictionary

When we present assessment findings to others we make choices about how to condense that information in order to reveal meaning without overwhelming them with detail. We might summarize our findings with "The scores on the senior writing proficiency tests have increased steadily over the last three years." This could lead to a discussion about the characteristics of the test, the statistical confidence we have in the increases, and what confounding factors there might be.

On the other hand, if we reported simply that "Our seniors' writing skills have increased over the last three years," we have gone beyond summary into abstraction. We have severed the link from [how we know] to [what we conclude] and left it to the imagination to fill in the gap.

Abstracting findings doesn't add new information. It is a rhetorical technique for glossing over the details of context, data, and methods. For example, in Arum and Roksa's Academically Adrift , the authors are careful to use a summary on page 30 (emphasis added): "We focus in particular on the extent to which [students] are improving their skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing **as measured by the CLA** during the first two years of college." The "as measured by…" tells us they are dealing with test scores, of which we are free to question the validity. However, the subtitle of the book is "Limited learning on college campuses," an abstraction that encompasses all the types of learning we might imagine and how these might be limited. It was the abstraction rather than the summary that became headlines. "Test scores fail to show much improvement" raises questions about the test. "Students aren't learning" is a naked assertion.

There is, however, a way to have the cake and enjoy the sweet sticky crumbs too. Many of our faculty members will observe student writing and form subjective holistic opinions about individual student abilities. We can survey the course instructors and summarize the results of these abstractions. See the reference below for an example of how this can be an efficient and effective type of assessment.

Another possibility is to engage students themselves to find out what they think good writing or critical thinking comprises: a translation from abstract to concrete. The next article describes one such project, and is followed by an interview with the author.

References:

Arum, R., & Roksa, J. (2011). *Academically adrift: Limited learning on college campuses.* University of Chicago Press.

Eubanks, D. A. (2008). *Assessing the General Education Elephant.* Assessment Update, 20(4), 4-5.

Student Focus Groups and General Education Assessment

Monica Stitt-Bergh
Associate Specialist, Assessment Office, University of Hawai'i

Assessment results can identify students' strengths and weaknesses, but the results do not tell the faculty which specific actions may improve student performance. Below I describe two student focus groups we conducted at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa to help us interpret results and to explore whether general education learning was reinforced in students' junior year. To increase student engagement and have actionable products, we developed focus-group formats that included small group work, creative activities, oral presentations, votes on main themes, and facilitated discussion.

Generally, our students were attaining some general education outcomes (e.g. global and multicultural perspectives), but many struggled to reach goals in symbolic reasoning (e.g., proofs, algorithms), information literacy, and written communication outcomes. To help target faculty action, we facilitated ten focus group sessions; a total of eighty-three sophomores attended. In each session, students worked in small groups to design a course and timeline in which they specified pedagogical approaches, assignments, exams, etc., that would help students attain a set of general education outcomes like written communication. Each small group presented their course to others in that session for further discussion and refinement. The themes that emerged across the ten focus groups included the following: small class size promotes higher-order cognitive development; student-to-student assistance is more valued than professor assistance in symbolic reasoning classes; students want structure and frequent feedback. While these themes may seem obvious and common practice for good teaching, having these results in student-generated, graphic timelines helped focus faculty attention and moved them to consider concrete suggestions for improvement, such as the creation of more recitation/lab sections and more frequent formative feedback to students.

> When describing how learning was being reinforced, students were more likely to say that assignments in junior year were more of the same and application and less likely to say more complex or in-depth.

Our university's general education program spans four years. We used student focus groups to explore whether and how learning was being reinforced in students' junior year. Sixty-five students in their third year participated in one of eight focus groups. To stimulate their thinking and to provide us with actionable products, students worked in pairs to create a visual representation (like a concept map) of learning from their first two years and how it connected (or not) to assignments in their third year. Each pair orally presented to others in the session and then everyone voted so that we generated some numbers associated with each general education goal. The focus group results revealed that written and oral communication outcomes were repeatedly reinforced during their junior year. Student learning regarding symbolic reasoning and Hawaiian/Asian/Pacific content was not being reinforced except in certain majors. When describing how learning was being reinforced, students were more likely to say that assignments in junior year were *more of the same* and *application* and less likely to say *more complex* or *in-depth.* The themes that emerged from these focus groups suggested that (a) the campus needs to pay more attention to symbolic reasoning and Hawaiian/Asian/Pacific issues in upper-division courses and (b) faculty should discuss whether more complex, in-depth assignments can and should occur in upper-division courses.

Student Focus Groups as Part of General Education Assessment… *continued from page 4*

We value these focus group projects for several reasons. They gave faculty members concrete suggestions to consider. They helped us make sense of other assessment results from embedded-assignment projects and data on course grades. They involved students in a meaningful way that allowed them to reflect and interact. Students commented that the focus group formats sustained their interest and made them more aware of their own learning. Although qualitative methods such as focus groups are more resource-intensive than quantitative methods, the benefits of deep discovery by both students and faculty made them worthwhile. The method revealed subtleties (e.g., the circumstances when peer feedback was less valued) that can be glossed over in survey projects. Combining focus group projects with direct assessment projects gave us the *how* and the *why* behind learning in our general education program.

Slides for a presentation on this topic can be found at bit.ly/1kgJBSh.

Interview with Monica Stitt-Bergh

David Eubanks

I interviewed Monica by Google chat while on a business trip to Atlanta. It has been edited for brevity and clarity.

University of Hawai'i, Mānoa

Me: Good morning! [4pm in Atlanta is 10am in Hawai'i]

Monica: Hi Dave. Hope Atlanta is beautiful this morning.

Me: It's gorgeous here, thanks. You have done some interesting assessment work. How did you get started in this profession?

Monica: My interest in education assessment started when I got a bad grade on a research paper in an undergraduate course. I became interested in how writing and argument were different across the academic disciplines. That led to a MA in composition and rhetoric. My first graduate researcher job was to help evaluate a writing-across-the-curriculum program, which turned into a full-time job with the WAC program, and I also ran the writing placement exam. In that job I worked with faculty from all disciplines. I enjoy thinking about how to communicate with faculty across the curriculum, how to evaluate student learning, and how to help student learning. So when the opportunity to start an assessment office on campus came about, I excitedly turned in my letter and CV and was fortunate to be selected.

Me: Started with a bad grade! That's a great story. It seems to me that assessment of writing is not the easiest place to start. What did you learn right away?

Monica: I immediately learned that I preferred measuring student learning using authentic or performance-based evidence. I believe in the power of a good tool to promote good teaching and learning. It's okay to teach to a test if it's a really good test.

Me: This is similar to the point of the first sentence in your article, about having measurements versus knowing what to do. Would you like to elaborate on the usefulness of authentic and performance-based evidence?

Monica: The results don't speak for themselves. Although it's more time-consuming for the faculty to evaluate performance-based evidence (e.g., research paper, music recital), I've found that the process of evaluating helps them understand the results in a more comprehensive way. It's usually the faculty who've participated in the scoring sessions who provide the first interpretations of the results, and their insights are based on what they saw, read, and discussed during the scoring sessions.

Interview with Monica Stitt–Bergh… *continued from page 5*

Me: In your article you describe getting students directly involved in assessing their own learning. Did you find that they easily understood the idea of "student learning outcomes"?

Monica: It was no work at all to get them to understand the concept of student learning outcomes. The students in our longitudinal study are traditional students--started college at 17 or 18, straight out of high school. They are the millennial generation, and they fit what's been written about this generation in terms of needing structure and being goal-oriented.

Me: As a math teacher I found it fascinating that they preferred peer interaction for learning symbolic reasoning.

Monica: In hindsight the finding does make some sense: there is a correct answer to math and symbolic reasoning problems and so students have confidence with help they receive from peers. On the other hand, it's difficult to teach students to give good feedback on peer's writing because there are many ways to write a good essay.

Me: That's a great point. It seems from your description that these focus groups, beyond an exercise in assessment, also became learning experiences for the students involved. Did you get that sense?

Monica: Definitely. I have found that good qualitative research has an effect on the researcher as well as the participant. That's a terrific side benefit! We ask the students in a survey question about the effect participation has had on them, if any. Students write things like this, "[participation] allowed me to intermittently reflect on what my education means to me and what I'm getting specifically out of attending a University in Hawaii" and "discussion groups are enlightening" and "I've somehow learned to better study and prepare for different courses and pick certain courses that would better help me in my college career."

> I always try to remember to have fun, remain focused on the students, and thank students, faculty, and administrators for their willingness to engage in assessment.

Me: Are you continuing these focus groups routinely? I imagine it's a lot of work.

Monica: Focus groups are a lot of work. I'll continue with this group of students for two more years. Given the benefits of having a safe space for students to reflect on their experiences and contribute to university's knowledge, I recommend them. If they could be incorporated into advising or the major, that might make them easier to do at large campuses such as ours.

Me: Last question. Do you have any recommendations for those who may be getting started in learning outcomes assessment?

Monica: I always try to remember to have fun, remain focused on the students, and thank students, faculty, and administrators for their willingness to engage in assessment. Assessment can scare people; the terminology can confuse people; the use of results is hard because it requires change and typically collaboration. It's definitely difficult on both personal and technical levels. So, when I remember that I'm doing it for the students and the future, that people have helped me along the way, and I can make at least part of it fun and rewarding, I can enter meetings and approach the day with a smile and enthusiasm for the hard work involved.

Me: That's a wonderful note to end on! I look forward to seeing you in Albuquerque for the AALHE meeting.

Monica: I'm bringing my tent and camping gear for a vacation on the continent. I look forward to being able to drive for an hour without going in a circle.

Monica will conduct a workshop entitled "What's Good Enough? Setting Standards" at the June conference.

AALHE 2014 CONFERENCE
Emergent Dialogues in Assessment
SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE *(Tentative)*

SUNDAY, JUNE 1st

12:00pm	Registration desk opens
3:00pm	Registration desk closes

MONDAY, JUNE 2nd

9:00am	Registration desk opens
12:00pm	Keynote Address with Dr. Pamela Tate, President and CEO, The Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL)
1:45pm	Concurrent sessions
2:15pm	Snacks and discussions
2:45pm	Concurrent sessions
4:00pm	Concurrent sessions
5:00pm	Registration desk closes
5:30pm	Reception

TUESDAY, JUNE 3rd

7:00am	Breakfast and Business Meeting/Registration desk opens
8:15am	Concurrent workshops
10:30am	Concurrent sessions
11:45am	Lunch and Plenary with Dr. Robert Mundhenk, Co-Founder and Past President, AALHE and Visiting Scholar for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association
2:00pm	Concurrent sessions
2:45pm	Conversations with assessment experts/snacks
3:45pm	Concurrent sessions
5:00pm	Registration desk closes

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 4th

7:00am	Breakfast/Registration desk opens
8:00am	Plenary with Dr. Donna Sundre, Executive Director, Center for Assessment and Research Studies at James Madison University
9:30am	Concurrent sessions
10:45am	Concurrent sessions
12:00pm	Registration desk closes/Conference ends

All events are held at the Hotel Albuquerque.

Get involved!

There are many opportunities for members to get involved in AALHE!

Here are a list of current committees and contact information if you would like to volunteer:

Member Development: This committee focuses on developing recommendations for managing expansions and retention of membership. Contacts: Jeremy Penn jeremy.penn@ndsu.edu and Shari Jorissen shari.jorissen@waldenu.edu

Member Services: AALHE conductions various evaluative processes at its conferences which provide member-driven suggestions for services. This committee analyzes feedback against the AALHE Strategic Plan and selects the most useful suggestions to develop into member service initiatives. Contacts: Catherine Wehlburg c.wehlburg@tcu.edu and David Eubanks eubankda@eckerd.edu

Grants (sub-committee of Strategic Planning & Budget): This subcommittee develops recommendations for grant projects that arise from the AALHE Strategic Plan. Contacts: David Jordan david.m.jordan@emory.edu and Robert Pacheco rpacheco@miracosta.edu

Conference Event & Planning: Members of this subcommittee will work in concert with the Conference and Events Committee to provide logistical support before, during, and after the Annual Conference. This may include preparing the conference schedule, program and other materials, staffing the registration desk during the conference, acting as participant liaisons with the hotel, distributing and collecting materials and evaluations, and so on. Contact: Susan Wood sandrusw@nmsu.edu

In addition, we welcome assistance in the following areas:

The **newsletter** is always looking for volunteers to assist with writing articles and editing. Please contact David Eubanks if you are interested in assisting with the newsletter: eubankda@eckerd.edu

Webinars: Our quarterly webinars are archived and are available on the AALHE website at: aalhe.org/resource-room/webinars. If you have ideas about possible webinar topics and/or would like to be a presenter, please contact the Member Services committee.

AALHE

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Comments? Questions? Ideas?

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