

Book Review / Compte rendu

Dunn, D. S., McCarthy, M. A., Baker, S.C., & Halonen, J. S. (2011). *Using quality benchmarks for assessing and developing undergraduate programs*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Pages: 384. Price: \$54.00 CDN (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-470-40556-7

Reviewed by Jovan Groen, Curriculum Design Specialist, Centre for University Teaching, University of Ottawa.

“Although higher education has been grappling with accountability and assessment for decades, few topics produce such strong reactions among faculty and administrators as the need for a formal assessment structure and process” (p.46).

With the recent push on quality assurance, this book explores in a very timely fashion the aims, strengths and barriers of program assessment and extends to the examination of key factors to consider in the context of such an assessment. To make the task of assessing an entire program of study more feasible, the authors divide the seemingly overwhelming task into eight components, making the assessment process more manageable, efficient and relevant. This is important if faculty members are to adopt a continuous and progressive outlook to assessment, rather than simply see the process as a sporadic exercise, undertaken solely out of necessity.

The book is structured in two parts: the first part outlines a framework of eight key program domains which characterize the “health” of academic programs; the second part examines the practice of assessing the key program domains in different contexts and disciplines.

Each of the key program domains in the first part of the book is the feature of its own chapter and speaks to the most engaging issues in the field. The first few chapters outline the role and impact of program leadership, overcoming faculty resistance to assessment and developing a sustainable assessment culture, program level learning outcomes as a blueprint for curriculum and useful criteria to evaluate effective curriculum design. The last few chapters describe the role of student development beyond intellectual training, the evaluation of faculty characteristics and contributions, how to use program assessment results to make a case for additional resources and a framework for characterizing administrative support.

Each chapter contains an easy to read benchmark table with a list of attributes for which four progressive performance descriptors are outlined (underdeveloped, developing, effective, and distinguished). Descriptors for each attribute are subsequently explained and, often colourfully, illustrated by examples pulled from the considerable collective program assessment and development experience of the authors. This certainly aids in grounding the attributes and making more evident the spectrum of potential program realities. Authors are cautious to mention that benchmarks are not “one size fits all”. Seemingly designed with a larger research intensive university in mind, the benchmark tables are flexible and adaptable based on context. Each chapter concludes with a series of guiding questions which serve as catalyst for reflection on performance patterns in the context of each key program domain. The chapters in the second part of the book examine the use of the benchmarks in disciplines with largely differing outlooks on program assessment. Chapter 10 looks at benchmarking quality in the arts, humanities and interdisciplinary programs and chapter 11 investigates the same theme in the natural sciences. Chapters 12 and 13 conclude with an in-depth explanation of how to conduct a program self-study and practical tips.

A valuable feature that makes this book a practical resource is that most chapters can easily stand alone. This is useful for a potential faculty member or reviewer who might be interested in a specific component of a review, be it program level learning outcomes or the examination of program resources, instead of having to read the book in its entirety.

Other notable strengths include a description of assessment as having a formative purpose. The book emphasizes that the program assessment exercise is truly about program enhancement. The authors make explicit that the greatest value in undertaking the assessment exercise is to confirm what we want to do, identify what we do, describe how we do it, determine if it is done well, and reflect on how we can leverage, improve and plan for future. The authors continue by stressing that program assessments should not be summative in nature and used solely for decision making. In a general sense, the book also conveys a realistic perspective that all doesn't function as planned in academic programs. Higher education is a sector where resources are not abundant, the workload is high, and difficult decisions need to be made that do not always have favourable implications on the immediate welfare of the program.

While this book is comprehensive, a few elements could have been expanded. Firstly, mention is made of Centres for teaching and learning in the context of faculty development, but not in the context of curriculum development and evaluation. A brief examination of common support and resources offered by these Centres and/or other institutional offices may be helpful. Most Centres, particularly at Canadian institutions, support or even accompany programs through review processes and often have curriculum specialists hired for this specific purpose. Secondly, little information is given about common tools or strategies used to collect and analyse data in the context of program assessment. While useful information is provided in the appendices regarding a range of potential data sources for administrative support, curriculum, learning outcomes, program resources, etc; perhaps a chapter, directed toward those undertaking a program self-study exercise, could include content on the logistics of running multi-stakeholder focus groups to collect information on the key program domains mentioned earlier or tips regarding the development and administration of student and alumni surveys. In the context of “evaluating

curricula” in chapter 5, exercises such as curriculum mapping could be highlighted as a useful strategy to identify gaps and redundancies in program content and the achievement of program learning outcomes.

Overall, this book examines an increasingly important practice in higher education in a straightforward way. The key program domain framework fits relatively well in the Canadian higher education context, however, much of the information provided about program self-studies is very rudimentary and at times different to that presented in most institutional quality assurance processes (IQAPs). All institutions in Ontario now have prescribed structures for the cyclical program assessment process (OUCQA, 2012). Using the benchmarks presented in this book to reflect on elements associated with Ontario (and other) University IQAPs will certainly be an asset. As such, this book is helpful to three groups of people. Firstly, to department chairs or faculty members involved in the preparation of program assessment documents such as a self-study. Secondly, to educational developers or curriculum/evaluation specialists who support programs under review, particularly the chapters about dealing with resistance toward assessment. Thirdly, for external reviews new and experienced as well as members of internal evaluation committees tasked with the review of program assessment documents.

As alluded to at the outset, much like topics such as religion or politics around a dinner table, program assessment is a subject that often incurs robust reactions among faculty members. This book aids in promoting more constructive reactions - ones that reflect a better understanding of the merit and value of program assessment. ♣

Reference

Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA). (2012). *Quality Assurance Framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.oucqa.ca/resources-publications/quality-assurance-framework/>