

Intersection

July 2014



AALHE President Eric Riedel introducing a keynote speaker in Albuquerque.

Letter from the President

Dear AALHE Members,

I'm pleased to report that last month's conference at Albuquerque, NM was successful, with 183 attendees and 69 presentations. The theme, "Emergent Dialogues in Assessment," was well represented by our presenters and keynote speakers who addressed such areas as competency-based education (see page 5), new roles for outcomes assessment in higher education, and assessment of learning on different institutional levels (see page 4). We also had a full turnout for our annual business meeting held during the conference and were able to increase membership participation on key association committees as a result. I am also happy to report that the first [AALHE conference proceedings](#) are now available online.

We held our quarterly board meeting immediately prior to the conference. During that meeting, we bade farewell to two departing members. Dr. Ephraim Schechter and Linda Suskie, who were part of our founding board, stepped off the board as part of our initial rotation schedule. Their work on the board helped to advance the strategic and financial planning processes of our new organization and their contribution over the last several years was very much appreciated. In their place, I am pleased to announce that Drs. Monica Stitt-Bergh and Joan Hawthorne have agreed to join the board of the directors as our newest members.

In addition to welcoming new board members, the Board of Directors undertook a review of its planned activities in the coming year. We have a busy year as we anticipate continued member support through the webinar, newsletter, and website resources, as well as preparing for next year's conference in Lexington, KY. We will also undertake a review of our current by-laws and structure to ensure that they fit our maturing organization. Thanks to everyone who participated in last month's conference and other activities that support the growth of AALHE. I look forward to working with all of you in the coming year.

Sincerely,
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.
President, AALHE

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Q&A with Linda Suskie

The quarterly newsletter of the Association for Assessment of Learning in Higher Education
Editor: David Eubanks Reviewers: David Dirlam, Catherine Wehlburg, Susan Wood
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The AALHE Welcomes Two New Board Members

Joan Hawthorne is the Director of Assessment and Regional Accreditation at the University of North Dakota (UND), a position she has held since 2010. Prior to that, she served UND as Assistant Provost and as coordinator of the writing center and Writing Across the Curriculum program. She has taught classes for programs in Higher Education, Teaching and Learning, Honors, and English, and her recent scholarship is in the areas of assessment, faculty development, and general education. Her PhD, earned at UND, is in Secondary/Higher Education, while her MA in Education was completed at the University of Colorado and her BS in Sociology at South Dakota State University.

Monica Stitt-Bergh is an educational psychologist with twenty years of experience in higher education assessment and evaluation. In her current position as an Associate Specialist in the Assessment Office at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UHM), she serves as an internal consultant for and offers workshops on program-level assessment of student learning and program evaluation. Monica is passionate about finding ways to improve the quality of higher education and conducts research on adult learning and cognitive development. Previously, she worked as an educational specialist for the UHM Mānoa Writing Program and General Education Office. Monica was President (2008-2010) of the Hawai'i-Pacific Evaluation Association (H-PEA), the local affiliate of the American Evaluation Association, and continues her involvement as a member of the H-PEA conference planning committee. She is a member of the Editorial Review Board of *New Directions for Evaluation*, a quarterly academic journal. She holds a PhD in Educational Psychology (2008) and an MA in English Composition and Rhetoric (1993) from UHM. Her classroom experience includes teaching courses on writing and research methodology. She has published articles and book chapters and given conference presentations on program assessment in higher education, writing program evaluation, self-assessment, and writing-across-the-curriculum.

Conference Feedback

After each annual meeting, we ask attendees to give us feedback. The chart below shows one of the more interesting results, with more than ninety responses. The results suggest that respondents found value in the networking and mind-broadening aspects of the conference. There is also a hint that the conference is not seen as cutting-edge with regard to technology and innovation.



It could also be that these aspects are just irrelevant to doing the work of assessment.

Continue the Conversation

Tell us what you think about the importance of the role of technology and innovation in assessment on the [AALHE LinkedIn Group](#).

Membership Survey Results

Earlier this year, 558 emails were sent to invite the AALHE membership to participate in our annual survey, which is conducted in order to better understand current and former members. There were 198 responses from the 539 valid email addresses, for a 37% response rate. Of these, 56% were active members, and 44% inactive. Thanks to all of you who participated! If you would like to be involved with this project, contact Jeremy Penn at jeremy.penn@ndsu.edu.

Keeping Track of Membership

The most cited reason for lapsed memberships was not knowing it had lapsed. At the board meeting, there was much discussion devoted the general topic of membership management and the ease of use of the AALHE website. As a result, the organization is working toward upgrades in both. The outcome will be a web presence that is easier to use, provides more member services, as well as a back-end database that makes it easier for members to keep track of memberships.

Expertise among AALHE Members

The survey included the item "How would you rate your knowledge/skill level in the following areas related to Learning Outcomes Assessment?" There were between 156 and 159 responses. The highest and lowest rated items are shown in the table below.

Most Skilled	Least Skilled
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping programs produce plans for improvement Reviewing assessment plans and reports Use of rubrics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integration of teaching and assessment Producing generalizable findings for publication Working with accreditation learning outcomes requirements

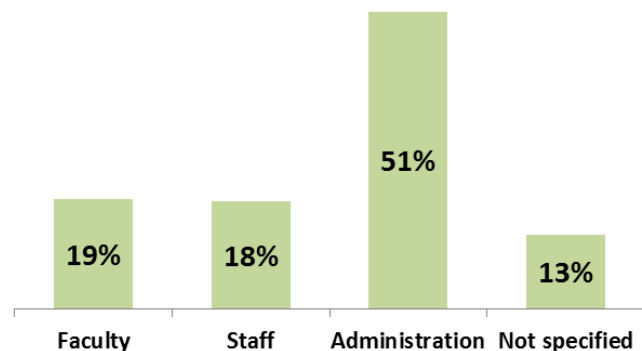
These findings were reinforced in another section of the survey that asks how frequently members lead projects related to assessment. The table below contrasts the highest and lowest ranking items.

More Likely to Lead	Less Likely to Lead
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program and institutional outcome assessment Gathering and analyzing data Engaging faculty in assessment activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program review Credit hour determinations

Use of Results

The survey helps the organization decide what services will be of most benefit to members. The information shown above will help select topics for webinars and other professional opportunities. We hope that the publication of [conference proceedings](#) is a step in the direction of facilitating publications by members as well as disseminating conference presentations to a wider audience.

Current Role of Survey Respondents



A convenience sample of AALHE members at the annual conference overwhelmingly indicated food and friendship as two reasons to attend. Photo by Monica Stitt-Bergh.

Making a Commitment to Quality: Assessment As Scholarship

by Donna L. Sundre



Donna L. Sundre

My plenary address to the AALHE was an attempt to reaffirm the importance of our mutual work and to inspire all of us to return to our campuses to make a REAL commitment to quality. It has been my observation that institutions enter into assessment work with the wrong purpose: accountability (external mandate), instead of program improvement and learning (internal motivation). When we begin with accountability and accreditation as the driving force, it often results in compliance mode behavior, revving up for a review, and watching everything gather dust when the reaffirmation has been achieved. This builds legitimate cynicism that is difficult to overcome. Conducting assessment toward enhanced student learning is an internal motivation that has integrity. Faculty, our key stakeholders, must be involved in all stages of the assessment process. They care about student learning; it is generally why they enter and stay in academe; further, it is central to every institution's mission statement. So, let's make a commitment to quality.

How do we achieve quality? Think of your assessment work as a form of scholarship. Faculty honor scholarly work. I would recommend paying attention to the scientific method. Over the last 25 years at JMU we have learned that there are THREE prerequisites to obtaining quality assessment data: 1) Representative samples (or a census) of students; 2) Excellence in assessment instruments, with a demonstrated linkage to objectives, curriculum, and student opportunities to learn and practice; and 3) students who are motivated to engage in assessment tasks. All three are necessary; think of this as a tripod—if one leg is faulty, the entire structure cannot stand. Anything less will result in faculty legitimately dismissing the findings.

Most campuses sabotage their own assessment efforts—thereby wasting all the time, effort, and resources of the campus, assessment practitioners, and the students who attempt to complete the assessment tasks. Examples include: top-down decision making (anything that does not include faculty); convenience samples; weak instrumentation; no concern for examinee engagement; and seasonal (accreditation or accountability) based activities.

What are we to do? The way forward is to make assessment meaningful! I recommended the following: 1) assure faculty involvement in all stages of the process; 2) involve students in the process (faculty behave much better with students at the table too); 3) share and discuss the results; and 4) emphasize student learning improvement instead of accountability. Collectively, assessment practitioners are the future of higher education. When we engage in quality assessment practice: 1) we conduct scholarship, which faculty honor; 2) we present and publish our work in collaboration with faculty; 3) we increase our visibility to campuses and our programs, which campus administrators NEED in an increasingly competitive landscape. Quality assessment is scholarship, and scholarly work exceeds all external accountability mandates. More importantly, scholarly assessment practice attains the more demanding requirements of our faculty to have information they can actually meaningfully use for improved curriculum development and instructional delivery. Our work forms critical partnerships with our faculty across our campuses. Our work should help articulate the very mission of our institution. I hope you have as much fun as I have conducting this mission critical work.

My motto is: If you're not having fun, you're doing it wrong.

Donna Sundre is Professor of Graduate Psychology, and Executive Director of the Center for Assessment and Research Studies (CARS) at James Madison University. She can be reached at sundredl@jmu.edu.

Addressing Disruptions in the Assessment of Quality Learning

by Pamela Tate



Pamela Tate

All of us are facing an increasingly complicated landscape—the rapid expansion of technology and the pressure to make college more affordable and graduate students more quickly. It is essential that colleges and universities respond to this new landscape in a creative and forward-thinking way.

In Clayton Christensen’s work on “disruptive innovations” he states, “An innovation that is disruptive allows a whole new population of consumers at the bottom of a market access to a product or service that was historically only accessible to consumers with a lot of money or a lot of skill.”



The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) links learning and work. CAEL works at all levels within the higher education, public, and private sectors to make it easier for people to get the education and training they need to attain meaningful, secure employment.

On-line learning—both credit and non-credit (including MOOCs) —has especially opened the door to change—and the new technologies for assessment of learning outcomes have as well. Traditional universities in the U.S. weren’t originally designed to assess learning that comes from so many sources outside the academy. But now those expectations have changed. The proliferation in the sources of knowledge and the needs of employers have been major drivers for innovation and change. Colleges must not only move more students to degree completion more affordably, but be successful in preparing them for employability in a world where employers need increasingly higher skill levels.

This requires colleges to take more seriously what the workplace needs from their students, and rethink their curricula and assessments accordingly. We need to demonstrate not only to ourselves, but to employers, that an employee is competent and skilled in certain areas. Competency-based education programs are working to address this. These programs are designed to assess what students know and can do, instead of evaluating success based on courses taken, credits earned and time spent. And already nearly 300 colleges and universities are launching or expanding their competency-based education programs to address this needed bridge between learning and work.

Related to competency-based assessment is Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), which is a process by which colleges award credit for college-level learning that students gain from their life, work and community services experiences—but it must be done in an academically rigorous way. Concerns about whether it could be done with validity and rigor were addressed a long time ago through CAEL’s Validation Study at ETS in 1974, which proved that multiple faculty could assess an adult’s learning—whether through a competency approach or in relationship to the credit hour—and could agree on the level and amount of learning. Our research showed that adults who go through any kind of PLA are 2½ times more likely to graduate than those who do not. PLA accelerates degree completion, increases persistence rates and reduces cost.

The future of the country depends on all of us plunging into this new world. And we must do it with a holistic vision of what an educated person should know and be able to do – and a desire to help them attain education and whatever credentials they need to find meaningful work and careers. College assessment leaders can play an important role in fostering this kind of innovation on their campuses.

Pamela Tate is President and CEO of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. She can be reached at ptate@cael.org.

Q&A with Linda Suskie

by David Eubanks



Linda Suskie

Linda Suskie, a founding member of the AALHE and a well-known figure in the assessment world, has a new book forthcoming this fall from Jossey-Bass: *Five Dimensions of Quality: A Common Sense Guide to Accreditation and Accountability*. She describes it as “a book about quality in higher education, with assessment as one dimension of quality. It's not a long or comprehensive book; it's designed to provide an easy-to-read overview and suggest other resources that readers can turn to for more information. It will help assessment practitioners and institutional leaders see the value of assessment work beyond accreditation.” She was kind enough to send me a detailed outline and selections from the manuscript and answer a few questions.

Q: We are inundated by messages that higher education is too expensive and students aren't learning. How does *Five Dimensions of Quality* help us respond to these challenges?

A: It addresses both by calling for a focus on stewardship. Every college in the country runs on other people's money: tuition and fees paid by students and their families, student grants and loans paid by others, gifts and grants from foundations, philanthropies, and others, government appropriations, earnings from endowments that were originally funded by others. We have an obligation to ensure that all this money is used prudently--in ways designed to achieve important goals--effectively--in ways that work--and efficiently. It's not enough to say that we're throwing money at a program or issue. We need to show that the money has been deployed after careful thought and planning, that we are paying attention to cost/benefit, and that we are making sure the funds and program are having the desired impact or outcome.

Q: You devote two chapters to the state of higher education and accreditation. Would you like to speculate on near-term challenges that may be coming around the bend for higher education or assessment in particular?

A: Well, one thing I tell college boards is, "Don't build any more lecture halls"—lectures are going the way of the dinosaur. Generally what I see is a future not of challenges but opportunities. Faculty are gradually implementing research-informed teaching methods and using rubrics to evaluate student work more fairly and consistently. Institutions of higher education are becoming more prudent and systematic in planning and budgeting. Tools to help us understand and improve student learning are getting better. Students are seeing more options for completing a degree. Whatever you want to learn, wherever you want to learn it, however you want to learn it, you can. One of the great strengths of U.S. higher education is its diversity, and that diversity will continue.

Q: Looking through the materials you sent me on the book, I was particularly intrigued by the "culture of focus and aspiration", which is attractive as a more philosophical (and less bureaucratic) view of assessment activity. Would you like to elaborate?

A: It's all about goals. Goals define (or should define) what we do, what we teach, what accreditors are looking for. If I see an institution struggling with assessment, most of the time the problem is not with assessment but with fuzzy goals...or perhaps a curriculum that's not designed to help students achieve those goals, or both.

Q&A with Linda Suskie continued from page 6

Q: With regard to transparency (chapter 16), there are obvious benefits, but few of us do it. Why is that and how can we fix it?

A: Would you want your annual performance review made public? Only if it's glowing--and that's the way many of us in higher ed view transparency. Very few if any institutions have glowing results and, if we do, we're suspicious that something must be wrong--the results *can't* be that good! I think the answer is to move the transparency focus from reporting numbers to telling the story: not that our students' math skills are mediocre, but that we're doing these really cool things to try to improve their math skills.

Q: This is a great point. Do you have any advice on how to get from numbers to narratives?

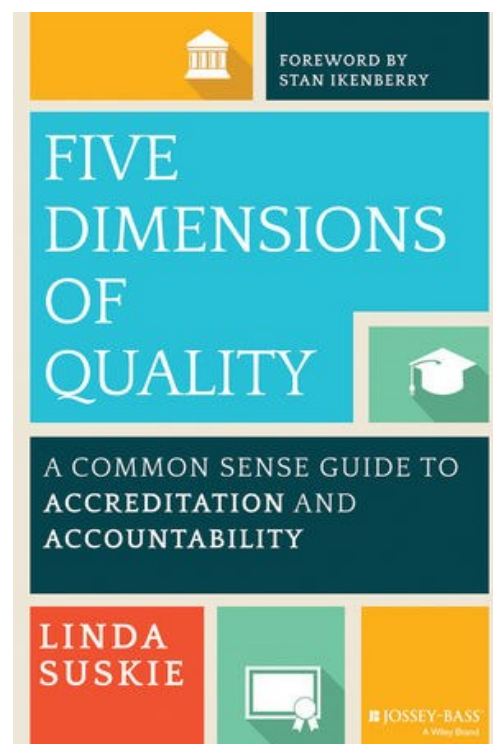
A: Numbers have meaning only when they're compared against other numbers, perhaps a standard we've set for ourselves, or results at peer programs or institutions, or how we did a few years ago. So one of the keys is to take the time to set meaningful targets against which to compare your numbers. This makes it much easier to find and tell the most important stories in the numbers--what is good news, what is not-so-good news, and what you're doing to address the not-so-good news.

Q: Results from the AALHE membership survey suggest that assessment reporting for regional or specialized accreditation is a challenge for many people. Do you have any advice?

A: First, read the directions! Read the accreditation standard or criterion carefully, and also read your accreditor's directions for the report you're submitting. If your accreditor offers a workshop, conference session, or webinar, attend it--you'll pick up lots of helpful tips. Second, think about why the accreditor requires that particular standard or criterion. Accreditation standards are intended to be principles of good practice. How does complying with this standard help ensure your institution's quality? Once you understand the intent behind the standard, it's easier to figure out how to demonstrate compliance with it. Third, remember that all accreditors need to see evidence of pervasive, sustainable compliance, so one or two samples may not suffice. They need to ensure that all your students, no matter where or how they're taught, are achieving the goals you've articulated. Submitting evidence only for your professional programs, or only for your main campus students, for example, can raise a red flag.

Q: When and where will the book be available?

A: Jossey-Bass is releasing the book in October. You can pre-order a copy by visiting www.wiley.com or any major book retailer such as amazon.com.



Give us feedback!

If you are reading this electronically, click the link below to fill out an anonymous TWO QUESTION survey to tell us what you liked or didn't like about this issue of Intersection.

[LINK TO SURVEY](#)