Book Reviews

Assessing Organizational Performance in Higher Education

By Barbara A. Miller, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2007;
ISBN: 978-0-7879-8640-7; 258pp; US\$40

International Journal of Educational Advancement (2007) 7, 343–345.
doi:10.1057/palgrave.ijea.2150075

Miller (DePauw University) has created an excellent guide to organizational assessment, going beyond simple measurement techniques to address underlying philosophical questions of *what* should be assessed. The book uses systems thinking, which is “a way ... to understand organizations as a network of interdependent components that work together to accomplish a common purpose” (p. 36). Miller explains that using a systems approach means the processes and tasks performed by the organization are more important than the organizational chart. Changes in one area of an institution can cause changes (intended or not) in other areas, so an analyst who uses system thinking must look at the organization holistically. “[S]ystems thinking encourages leaders to recognize their organization’s purpose and direction, interrelated parts, interdependence on other organizations, needs and requirements of external and internal customers and stakeholders, resources required to perform work, and products and services created for

specific intended outcomes.” It becomes possible to see “patterns and events,” and to “view ... problems not as isolated or random events but as sets of antecedent conditions that can be predicted and controlled” (p. 37).

Different groups use assessment in very different ways. Miller discusses internal assessment users, including senior leaders, administrators and managers, and faculty/staff (p. 18). Each internal group uses assessment for different purposes and to support varying outcomes. Thus it is vital to understand—before you begin—why you are assessing, what you are assessing, and who will be using the assessment.

External groups are even more varied. For example, institutional governing boards and statewide governing boards use assessment information to answer different questions. Legislative bodies and governmental agencies often have different priorities than governing boards. Potential students and donors both have questions about institutional effectiveness. Accrediting bodies and

athletic associations use institutional assessment, as does the American Association of University Professors. Other schools may use assessment for benchmark comparisons. Classification groups such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and ranking organizations such as *US News & World Report* and the *Gourman Report* also make extensive use of organizational performance measurements. Miller explains to the reader the unique questions and uses made by each of these external assessment users.

When assessing organizations, it is important to understand the different types of inputs and outputs. Miller does an excellent job of explaining these concepts, comprehensively explaining the difference between inputs, stakeholders, customers, outputs, and outcomes. These distinctions are very important in the field of assessment. The terms are often used interchangeably, but they mean very different things. For example, current students enrolled in a class are inputs, potential applicants are external customers, and students who live in campus housing are internal customers. High schools are service partners, alumni are stakeholders, and state legislatures are constraining systems (pp. 94–105).

Miller uses students as an example of how the same group can fill different roles. For example, a student can simultaneously be an input, internal customer, and stakeholder. Similarly, faculty and staff can fill a variety of roles. Yet the questions one asks in assessment are different, depending upon which role is being measured. Thus it is vital to understand the differences and

similarities among roles, and to be clear about what you intend to measure.

Miller strikes a very delicate balance. She uses basic language that does not assume readers already know the topic without being too basic for advanced readers. If you have not previously learned assessment techniques, this book will teach you enough to get started, while providing a good review of shared definitions for those who have already learned the concepts. The one place where Miller loses her balance is in the section on data collection methods, which is too basic for advanced readers but not detailed enough for novices. For example, the discussion of qualitative methods is little more than a list of the types, and her discussion of quantitative reliability and validity is rather limited and not helpful. The methodology section could have been expanded by a few pages in order to at least get readers started; instead, it is not worthwhile to anyone. I would recommend that readers skip this section in favor of a good book on research methodology such as Earl Babbie's *Basics of Social Research* or Neil Salkind's *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics*.

On the other hand, Miller's discussion of the definition and measurement of organizational performance (pp. 129–217) is simply brilliant. By far the longest chapter in the book, this section really walks the reader through the entire process of determining what to measure. One important point is that effectiveness, productivity, quality, etc must be defined before they can be measured. This point is similar to the instructional design concept known

as “backwards design,” in which learning outcomes are determined first and the performance measures, lesson plans, etc are created to support the outcomes (G. Wiggins and J. McTighe (2005), *Understanding by Design*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA).

Miller’s book contains a wide variety of useful figures, exhibits, and worksheets, accessible via both the Table of Contents and the Index. The index itself is comprehensive and user-friendly and includes both subheadings

and cross-references. The writing is clear and easy to understand, and her examples are illustrative. Miller has done an excellent job of explaining what can be a difficult and sometimes dry topic. I recommend this book to administrators and program planners, as well as to professors who teach classes in program assessment.

Bryan M. Carson

*101 Helm Library, Western Kentucky
University, 1906 College Heights
Blvd. 11067, Bowling Green,
Kentucky 42101-1067, USA*