

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Shavelson, Richard J. (2010). *Measuring college learning responsibly: Accountability in a new era*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Pages: 238. Price: 25.50 CAD (paper).

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In his book, *Measuring college learning responsibly: Accountability in a new era*, Shavelson sets out to provide a summary and critical evaluation of creating learning assessment and accountability systems that support the improvement of teaching and learning and at the same time systems that will provide external accountability. He claims that this book presents alternatives to existing methods of learning assessment and accountability systems that aim to significantly improve college teaching and learning and for delivering information to external audiences. He has been developing the ideas for this book with targeted groups such as policy makers in educational, governmental, and public institutions, for almost 20 years. The history of learning assessment and its development is chronologically organized and smoothly transitions into the topic of accountability. A summary of each of the book's chapters follows.

In Chapter 1, the policies regarding post-secondary learning assessment are discussed, followed by Chapter 2 where Shavelson explores measuring learning in post-secondary education. In Chapter 3, readers are provided with a history of learning assessment from the 19th century to the present. Here, the author refers the College Learning Assessment (CLA), which he helped to develop. All of chapter 4 is devoted to a more in-depth discussion of CLA. Chapter 5 provides what the author calls "two exemplary campus assessment-of-learning programs". Here, readers are introduced to these programs along with the post-secondary institutions (Alverno College and Truman State College) that host them. The chapter also provides a case study of four universities. Chapters 6 through 10 expand the discussion of the topic of learning assessments and their accountability in post-secondary institutions. Chapter 6 stresses the importance and urgency of increasing the accountability of information in post-secondary institutions. Chapter 7 explains what

accountability is and as suggested by the chapter title, “State Higher Education Accountability and Learning Assessment”, Chapter 8 explores state universities and assessment policies. Finally, Chapters 9 and 10 deal with post-secondary institutions’ accountability outside of, and within, the United States. Here, the author presents the importance of measurement tools to evaluate teaching effectiveness due to the need for assessing post-secondary institutions’ accountabilities.

For some time now, there has been a serious need to develop instruments that assess the quality of learning and teaching. However, the questions of who should be held accountable for such developments and how should they be held accountable serve as roadblocks to quality assessment instruments and accountable conductors. We also know that learning is a quality that is intangible. Consequently, what parts of learning should be assessed has been a question rather than “what learning should be assessed and in what ways” (p.133). Moreover, those accountability measurement instruments currently available are at times overused and in some cases, deemed as inadequate. Thus, Shavelson takes this historical background as his opportunity to provide some possibilities for previously unanswered questions.

The author is considered extremely credible in this field; however, since the author was involved closely with the development of CLA, his vision and opinion regarding CLA could be considered biased. Therefore, additional assessments of CLA would likely add to the assessment of the accountability and validity of the instrument.

As the author states, this book does not focus on the differences or similarities among public, private, Carnegie classified, community college, and for-profit institutions. Instead, Shalveson believes that what he presents in this book can be applied to public or private four-year institutions, regardless of whether or not they meet the Carnegie classification. At the same time, he states that the cases of community colleges and for-profit institutions are simply beyond the scope of this book. Nevertheless, the author’s reasoning behind his decision not to include these institutions could have been discussed relative to other research in the area. This would have added much for readers.

The strongest point presented in this book was the brief yet broad historical overview of the development of learning assessment in post-secondary institutions. As well, the extensive introduction of CLA and its developmental history should not be ignored especially since the author helped develop the instrument. CLA is an instrument that captures the current complexity of post-secondary institutions, and informs external stakeholders whereas many of currently available accountability measures are overly used and often deemed inadequate.

The choice of the four universities picked for the case study presented in Chapter 5 is not clear. However, the case study was still a great example of a cross university compare-contrast study of assessment of learning.

As for weaknesses in this book, several points need to be raised. As is the case with many publications in the area of post-secondary education, this book was written from the U.S. perspective and is mostly U.S. post-secondary institutions by a professor who has established his career in that system. Next, given that we often refer to our current context as an era of globalization/internationalization, Chapter 9’s title; “Higher-Education Accountability Outside the United States,” is misleading since the only communities represented outside of the U.S. were “England, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, and Hong

Kong.” I personally imagined from the chapter title that the author would perhaps have introduced post-secondary education accountability perspectives from South America, Europe, Africa, Eurasia, Asia, and Oceania. I was left wondering why these particular countries were selected to discuss a global perspective.

In Chapter 5, the author compared and contrasted Alverno College and Truman State University for their learning assessment practices, and the four university case study was discussed. Here too, it is unclear how and why these universities were picked and for what purposes. Without a clearer explanation, it was assumed that Alverno College and Truman State University were simply introduced as having outstanding assessment systems without any explanation other than a choice made by the author. Although the purpose of the case study was not intended to be generalizable, the methods of the study are unclear.

Overall, for those who are interested in post-secondary learning assessment and institutional accountability, this book provides an excellent introduction as well as critical and extensive overviews of the topic. It also offers questions with respect to the next steps such as how to use CLA, and the types of instruments that are utilized in the United States and elsewhere. In summary, I highly recommend this book to those interested generally in post-secondary education and student services in particular. ♣

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