

# Professional Development Report: AAHE Assessment Conference

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## INTRODUCTION

A \$500 professional development grant from PNAIRP covered the registration fees and two preconference workshops at the annual assessment conference of the American Association for Higher Education in Seattle. My institution covered the travel costs and three nights of accommodation.

While many of the concepts and techniques associated with the assessment of student learning are evident in British Columbia, the overall umbrella of “assessment” or even of “institutional effectiveness” are not as prominent as in the USA (partly, perhaps, because Canadian institutions do not undergo overall accreditation by regional accrediting bodies, as distinct from program accreditation by professional bodies. “Assessment” at my institution generally refers to placement testing for entering students.) I was thus interested in attending the assessment conference not so much to learn specifics as to develop an overview of how the movement has evolved in the USA and of its current status.

Unlike many of the fads that have come and gone in postsecondary education over the past generation, I’m left with the impression that assessment is here to stay – and that this is a good thing. Assessment of learning outcomes encourages us to focus on the primary education mission of institutions, helps us move beyond curricular issues to consider the efficacy of various pedagogies in particular contexts, and has the potential to be a unifying and collaborative influence for campus personnel.

What follow are some personal reactions and reflections on the conference.

## REACTIONS TO THE CONFERENCE

- It’s good to be with faculty and focus on teaching and learning. I spend so much time with other institutional researchers and administrators that it’s easy to get so caught up in administrative issues and perspectives that I lose touch with what is happening in classrooms and its impact on the lives of students.
- I made a point of attending preconference workshops because I guessed this was where I was most likely to gain an overview of the current state of the assessment movement. The first half-day workshop was helpful and pleasant, but a little long for the content provided. The second was cancelled because the presenter had airline delays. I was shuffled into another workshop at the last minute, and was delighted to find it was probably the most substantive session I attended during the entire conference.
- The presenters in larger sessions generally tried to incorporate some small group discussion. This made for a welcome change of pace, but unfortunately the level of discussion was often low because many in the group had either a low level or narrow knowledge of assessment. Postsecondary education is such an odd mixture of disciplinary expertise and pedagogical and

administrative amateurishness (I include institutional researchers, and myself, in this description).

- In addition to attending the conference, several PNAIRPers were also presenting, e.g. Kathi Ketcheson. I was on my way to Dan Weinstein's session when I noticed a session that both intrigued me and which met one of my goals in attending conferences, i.e. to be exposed to topics that are brand new to me. I thus veered into a session about a new survey UCLA is developing about spirituality and the impact of college on the inner lives of students.
- I attended a couple of sessions on the scholarship of teaching, one from Syracuse University and one from Portland State University. It's a topic I'd like to see promoted at my institution, particularly as it may be a vehicle for promoting a stronger commitment to the assessment of student learning.
- I heard almost nothing about grading and the learning of course modules. Rather, as I had hoped, the focus was on the ability to integrate and use broad sets of skills, knowledge and abilities in authentic situations outside the classroom.
- I missed having a list of conference registrants. I'm always curious to know what institutions and jurisdictions are well represented.
- I feel I have "arrived" in that I attended a session about Alverno College, a lighthouse institution that was a generation ahead of its time with respect to assessment. While I had heard about Alverno practices before, hearing two instructors and two students in the flesh may help me to remember the information in a more readily retrievable form. Incidentally, the retiring Alverno president was honored during a plenary session; she served an amazing 35 years as president.
- Regional accrediting bodies have been important in furthering the assessment agenda. They see themselves not as asking institutions to prove themselves so much as to apply particular frameworks for improvement purposes. Student learning is apparently now the most frequent topic chosen for improvement, and the accreditors see accountability as emerging as a byproduct of this focus (at least, that's what we were told by their representatives.)