

Reclaiming Accountability: Improving Writing Programs through Accreditation and Large-Scale Assessments, edited by Wendy Sharer, Tracy Ann Morse, Michelle F. Eble, and William P. Banks. Logan: Utah SUP, 2016. 335 pp.

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Higher education's interest in standardized assessment and big data has continuously increased since the mid- to late-twentieth century. With writing programs currently responding to national and higher learning institutions' "current desire for more comparability of results across college campuses," Wendy Sharer, Tracy Ann Morse, Michelle F. Eble, and William P. Banks assembled *Reclaiming Accountability: Improving Writing Programs through Accreditation and Large-Scale Assessments* to encourage writing scholars to take advantage of the opportunities accreditation and assessment present (25). Following the intellectual tradition of assessment scholars such as Chris Gallagher, Bob Broad et al., and Edward White, Irvin Peckham, and Norbert Elliot, this collection is successful because it fills a gap within assessment research, beginning the needed conversation about writing programs' productive and rewarding approaches to assessment and accreditation opportunities. Highlighting collaboration between accrediting entities, writing instructors, and WPAs, the collection offers an important twist on assessment narratives, inspiring change in how such work is managed and how writing programs evaluate their students.

Each of the three sections focuses on how assessment and accreditation can support writing programs and enhance writing studies scholarship. Part one contains three chapters that consider the benefits and limitations of large-scale assessment from the perspectives of the accreditors, writing instructors, and WPAs. In the first article—Cindy Moore, Peggy O'Neill, and Angela Crow's "Assessing for Learning in an Age of Comparability: Remembering the Importance of Context"—the authors argue that comparability is sought across all college campuses, which has inspired companies to capitalize on transparency by making big data programs, and that writing professionals should be involved in the process of deciding goals of their assessment and how companies collect data. Susan Miller-Cochran and Rochelle Rodrigo as well as Shirley K. Rose extend this discussion in their respective chapters, "QEP Evaluation as Opportunity: Teaching and Learning through the Accreditation Process" and "Understanding Accreditation's History and Role in Higher Education: How it Matters to College Writing Programs." They inform readers about popular assessment methods, like Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), complicate their use, and then share how accrediting institutions

have influenced higher education and why it is important to work with these entities to improve student learning.

Following this section, parts two and three include case studies that employ various methods to approach accreditation and large-scale assessment. Part two furthers the possible outcomes of assessment by providing “a toolkit of methods” for enhancing curricula and adding cost-effective programmatic support (65). Consisting of seven articles, this toolkit overviews topics including QEP reaccreditation, general studies assessment, curricular standardization, programmatic assessment at two-year colleges, accountability and expertise, writing mentors, and ePortfolios. Several writers address programmatic assessment, problematize “top-down” standardization, and involve faculty in assessment through dynamic criteria mapping. Here, the authors continue the conversation started in *Organic Writing Assessment: Dynamic Criteria Mapping in Action* (Broad, Adler-Kassner, Alford, Detweiler, Estrem, and Harrington) by narrowly examining large-scale assessments and dynamic criteria mapping while also introducing methods to readers for their localized contexts. This is shown in David Weed, Tulora Roeckers, and Melanie Burdick’s “Making Peace with a ‘Regrettable Necessity’: Composition Instructors Negotiate Curricular Standardization,” in which they assert that assessment and standardization as “‘top-down’ mandates are likely to be more harmful than helpful because they disregard all local needs and considerations,” making assessment less reliable and valid (109). Using dynamic criteria mapping to acknowledge everyone’s voices and identify themes in participant responses, their study revealed that instructors liked having a standardized curriculum.

Part two emphasizes the idea that successful assessment occurs because of faculty involvement in the process, as Malkiel Choseed’s “A Tool for Program Building: Programmatic Assessment and the English Department at Onondaga Community College” argues. Using authentic programmatic assessment, Choseed discovered that instructors were concerned about how assessment could lead to programmatic change that would affect their workload and create surveillance of their teaching methods; however, he concluded by noting that all faculty “need to take control of the assessment process” so that it reflects the localized context, an important feature of assessment discussed at length in *Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs* (White, Norbert, and Peckham, 137).

The final part of this collection presents additional case studies focusing on faculty mandates that may result from accreditation mandates. The five chapters center around writing across the curriculum and how writing demonstrates disciplinary knowledge. Because writing (and accreditation) occurs across campus, the authors of these chapters found they needed to collaborate with faculty in other fields. For example, “‘Everybody Writes’: Accreditation-Based

Assessment as Professional Development at a Research Intensive University,” by Linda Adler-Kassner and Lorna Gonzalez, recounts a faculty workshop that began a conversation about writing across disciplines. This exercise showed faculty what terms like *thesis* could mean to other fields, clarifying the need for all faculty to address writing in their classrooms and thereby provide students with the disciplinary knowledge required to succeed.

Disciplinary specialties also open networks to improve assessment, as Maggie Debelius argues in “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Assessment: Lessons from a Threshold-Based Approach.” To make disciplinary knowledge visible, Debelius utilized threshold concepts to create a “flexible and organic assessment approach” (265). Her approach sought to leverage instances of top-down accreditation to analyze student learning as well as remove accountability regarding assessment from accrediting associations by “highlight[ing] inquiry driven by scholarly expertise” through threshold concept theory (273). This approach shifts the focus from writing-to-test to writing-to-demonstrate-disciplinary-knowledge, signaling how faculty development opportunities can increase writing knowledge across the disciplines and improve its visibility among campuses.

As a result of case studies, *Reclaiming Accountability* shines through its use of detailed examples: there are multiple reports, survey examples, data points, budgets, rubrics, and workshop heuristics that help readers examine their approaches to assessment and accreditation. Readers can then adapt these examples to fit their local contexts or use them as inspiration to articulate their own needs. This information is important as little scholarship of this kind has been published. However, in some of the chapters, like those by Karen Nulton and Rebecca Ingalls as well as Jim Henry, I desired more quantitative data so that I could see to what degree student writing or faculty practices improved following the studies. This information would have helped me, as someone new to assessment, discover which methods could create data that would be useful during conversations with internal and external writing program stakeholders.

This criticism acknowledged, the book helped me recognize my role in assessment, even though I am not heavily involved in writing assessment as an adjunct instructor. The collection highlighted my importance in this process, showing that—to improve student learning—assessment must be a program-wide venture, not a practice solely for WPAs or accreditation bodies. With a strong emphasis on collaboration, *Reclaiming Accountability* fills a gap in assessment research, providing possible methods to use accreditation for institutional or programmatic revision, as well as raises new questions about what best practices will look like when working with the recent trend of comparability. *Reclaiming Accountability*, then, begins a conversation surrounding assessment that all writing scholars should be involved in.

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Works Cited

- Broad, Bob, Linda Adler-Kassner, Barry Alford, Jane Detweiler, Heidi Estrem, and Susanmarie Harrington. *Organic Writing Assessment: Dynamic Criteria Mapping in Action*. Logan: Utah SUP, 2009. Print.
- Gallagher, Chris. *Reclaiming Assessment: A Better Alternative to the Accountability Agenda*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2007. Print.
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