



# Effective Learning Outcomes Assessment in Smaller Institutions

2026 ABHE Annual Meeting

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# What is the best desired outcome of your outcomes assessment program?

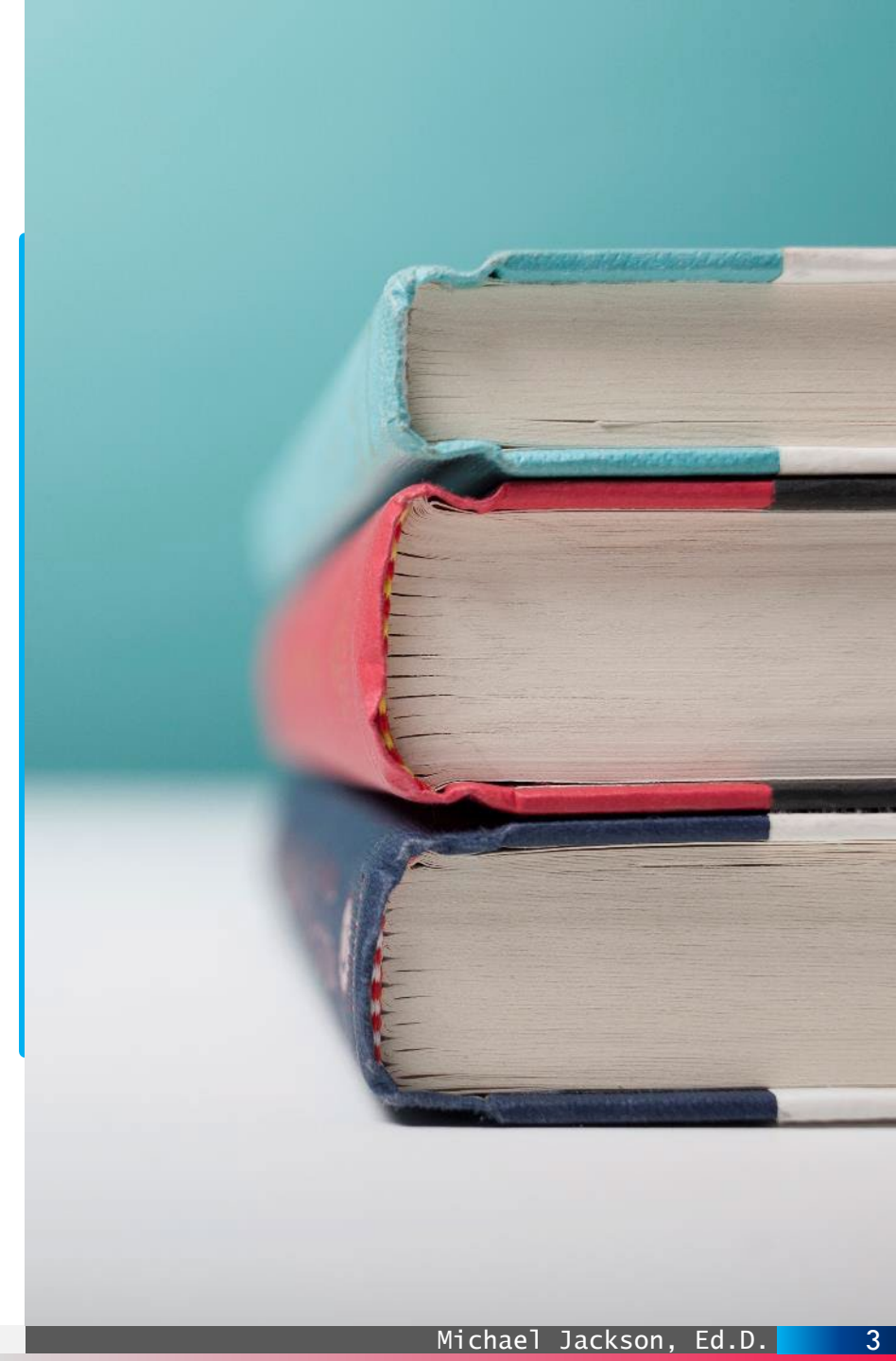
Defining a purpose (or purposes) for assessment may be the most critical step in assessment leadership.



# What is your purpose for assessment?

Potential Purpose #1 - “...to understand how educational programs are working and to determine whether they are contributing to student growth and development.” (Banta and Palomba, 2014)

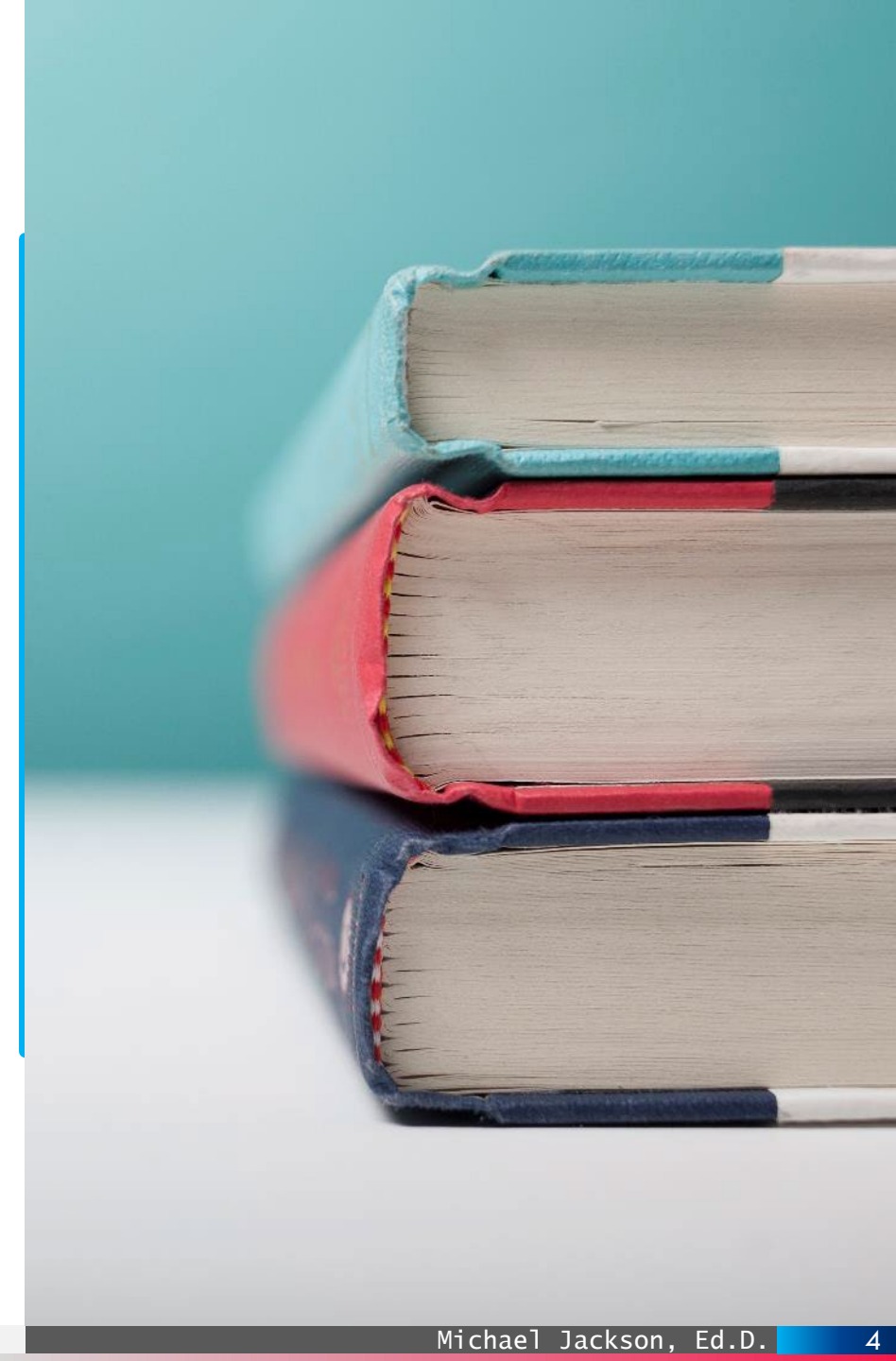
- Resulting Effects:
  - Focus is on programs and not individual students
  - Information must be aggregated and analyzed in the aggregate
  - Views curriculum as a holistic concept rather than in silos
  - Values coherency and integration
  - Curriculum maps assist demonstration of this philosophy



# What is your purpose for assessment?

Potential Purpose #2- **"The goal of assessment is information-based decision making. To put it another way, the end of assessment is action."** (Walvoord, 2009)

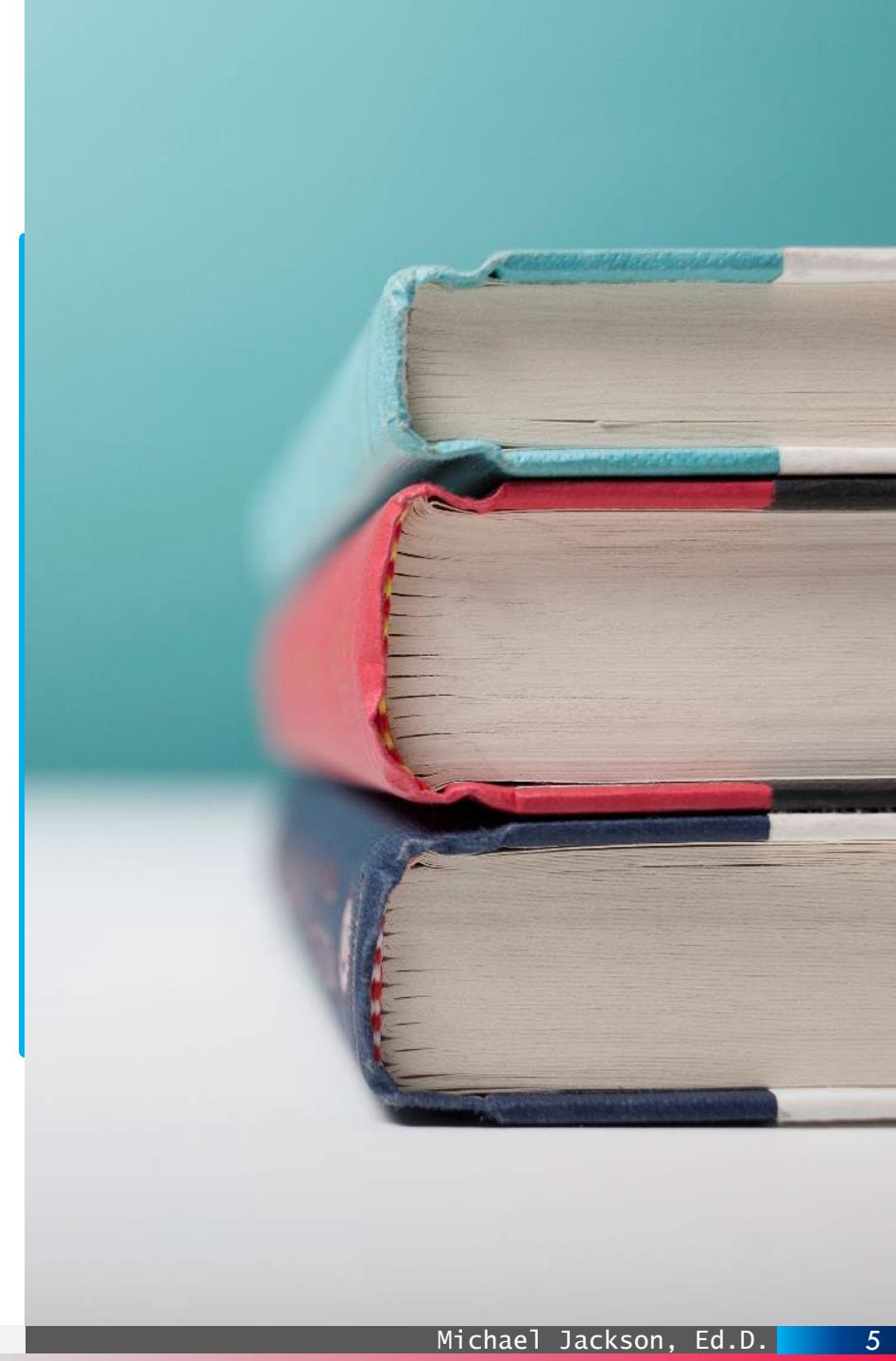
- **Resulting Effects:**
  - Focus is on the ends (what was implemented?)
  - Change is not only expected, but is the goal of the exercise
  - Finding weakness is a good thing
  - Data is not enough
  - Data collected and not used is poor ethics
  - Research design less important than reasonable decision and resulting changes



# What is your purpose for assessment?

Potential Purpose #3- " **Assessment can validate current programs, services, and teaching and learning efforts and thereby secure continued support for them by demonstrating their effectiveness to concerned audiences. In other words, assessment can demonstrate accountability to these audiences.**" (Suskie, 2010)

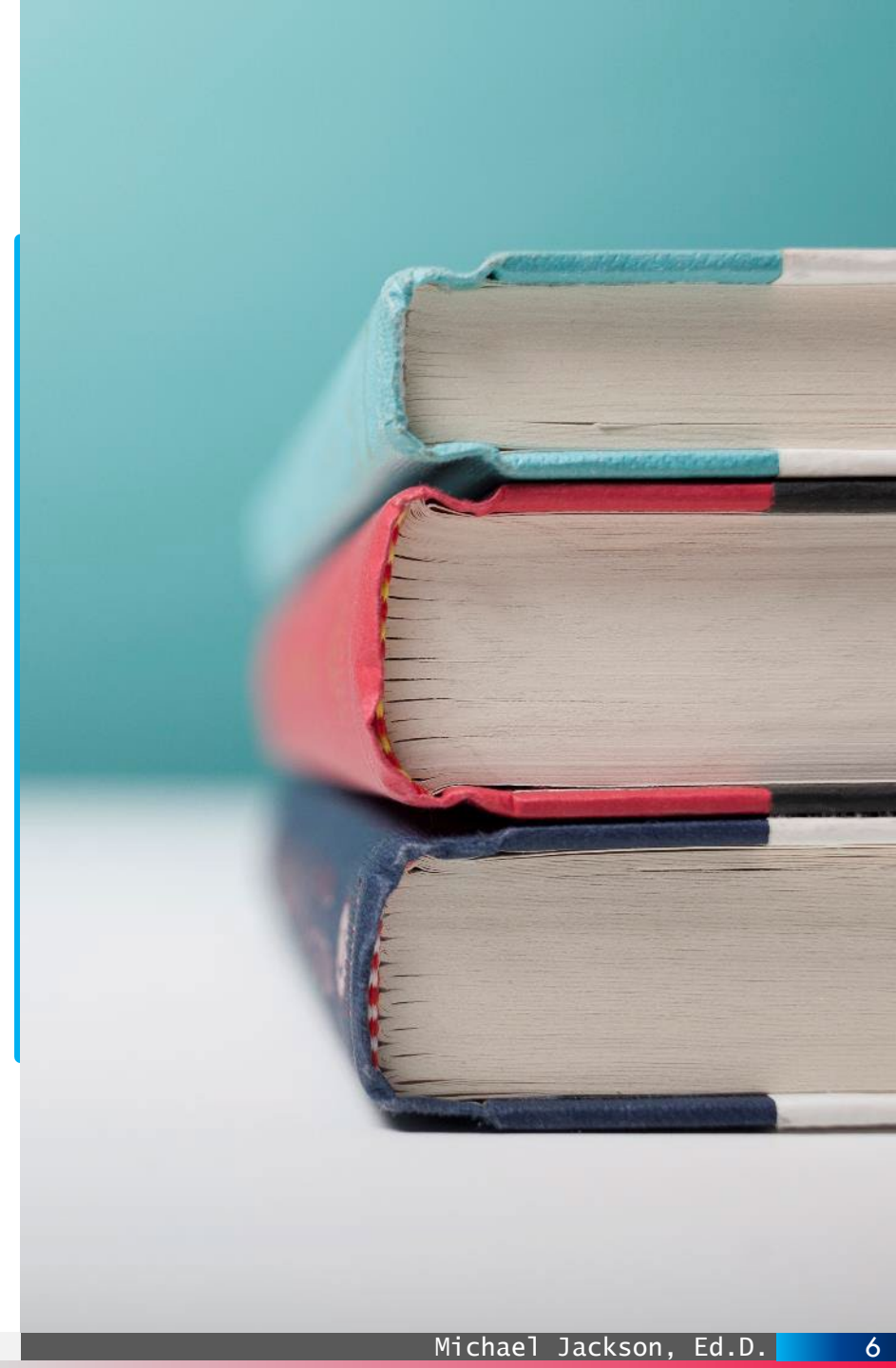
- **Resulting Effects:**
  - Focus is on positive demonstration
  - Success criteria are important
  - External entities frame the conversation
  - Reporting and communication are of primary significance
  - Validity and reliability, including research designs take on added significance in addition
  - Improvement, if needed, must be demonstrable, effective, and timely



# What is your purpose for assessment?

Other, less common potential purposes:

- Academic Introspection – making a college or university more self-conscious through metacognition
- Creater of conversation among students, faculty, and administration (a dialogue in which all participants learn from each other)
- Way to tell an institution's story – including attracting prospective students and donors
- What other purposes of outcomes assessment have you observed?



# What definitions do you use for assessment?

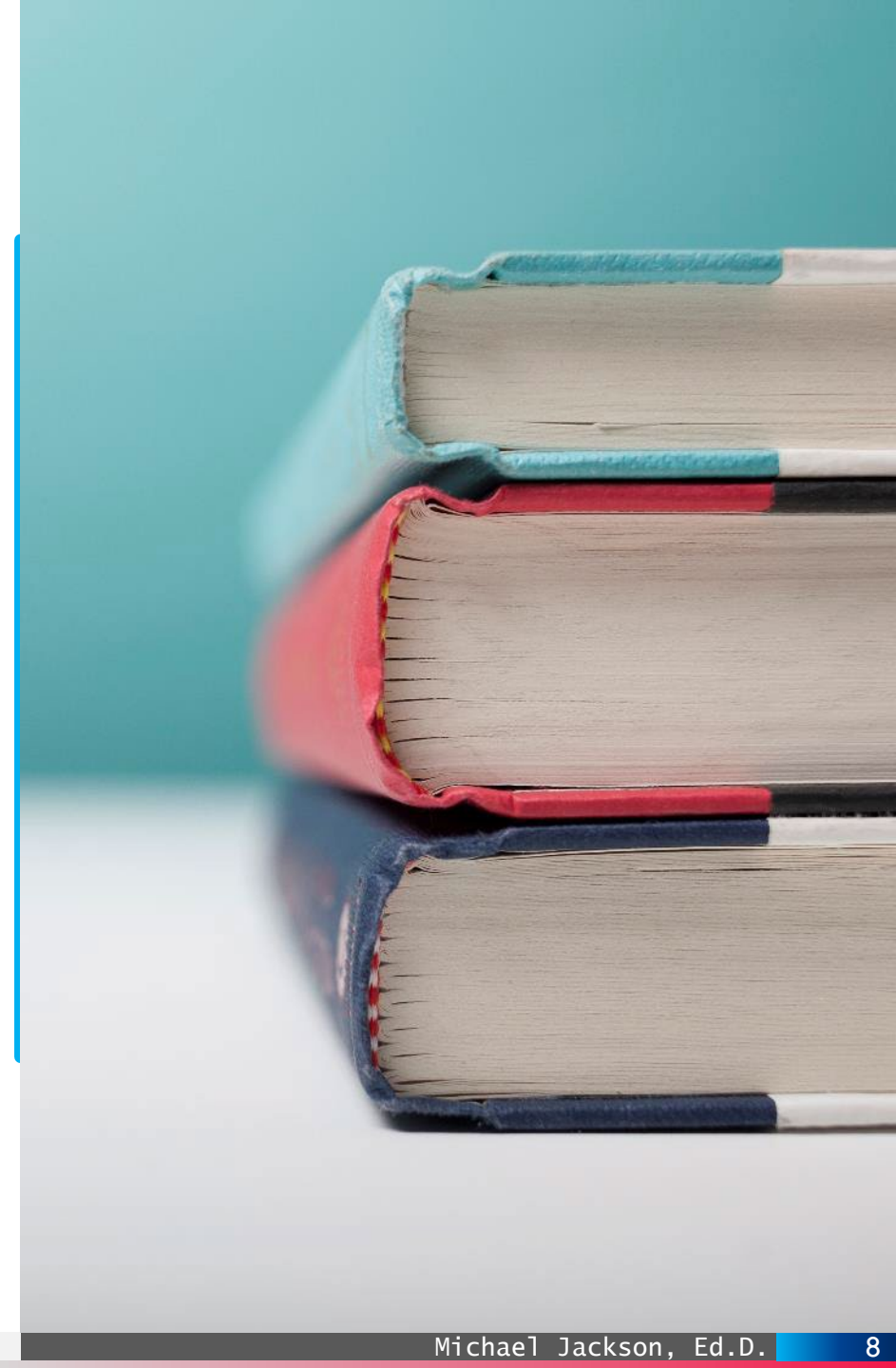
Quibbling over semantics is futile.  
Ignoring them is more futile still.



# What are your definitions?

Also, where do people find your definitions?

- Assessment
- Goals (also, if different, Institutional Goals)
- Objectives
- Outcomes
- Outcomes Assessment
- Programs
- Institutional Effectiveness



# What are the core elements of your outcomes assessment process?

The building blocks must exist regardless of the template or software, and are more important than the template or software.



# Some statements of the core elements of assessment:

## **Walvoord (2009)**

- Outcomes
- Information
- Action

## **Banta and Palomba (2014)**

- Planning
- Implementing
- Improving and Sustaining

# 10-Column Template Overlaid on These Core Elements:

## Walvoord (2009)

- Outcomes
  1. Mission > Institutional Goal
  2. Student Learning Outcome
- Information
  3. Means of Assessment
  4. Criteria for Success
  5. Results
  6. Analysis of Results (DL/Campus)
- Action
  7. Use of Results/Planned Changes
  8. Persons Responsible
  9. Due Date
  10. Budget Impact

## Banta and Palomba (2014)

- Planning
  1. Mission > Institutional Goal
  2. Student Learning Outcome
  3. Means of Assessment
  4. Criteria for Success
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The important point here to remember is that the core elements are what is important in assessment, not which template you use.

I often get the sense that institutions (especially those just starting out) are seduced by the template and never get to the understanding that stands behind the template.

What may be even more surprising is that assessment templates rarely speak to the most significant issues for making assessment valid, reliable, meaningful, and informative for change.

# What is the research design for each of your outcomes?

A terminal degree isn't necessary to make good outcomes assessment designs (but sometimes it feels that way).

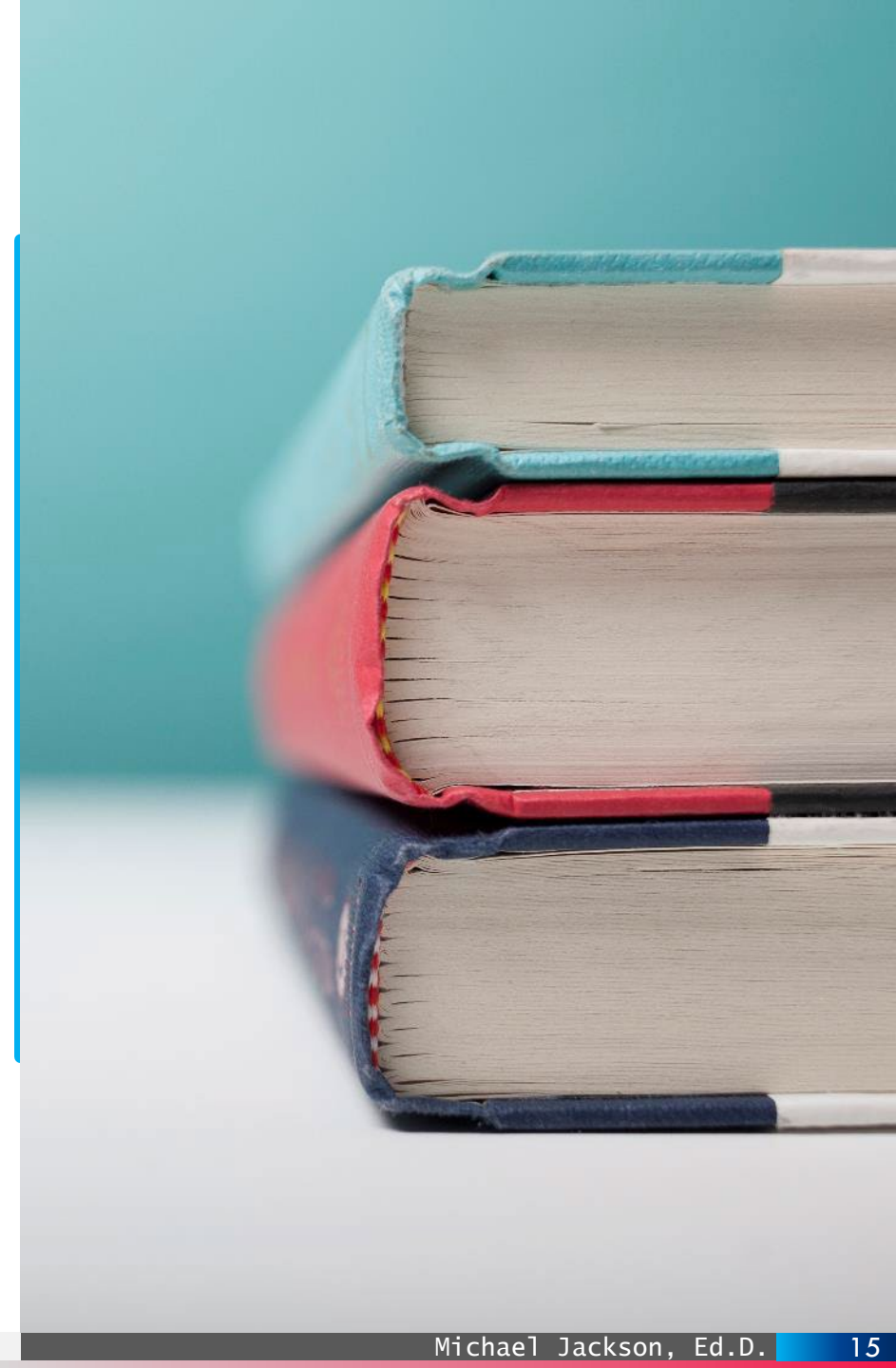


# What are your research designs?

Institutions are often most concerned with “what kind of tool” they will use for a particular outcome. Tools exist in all varieties:

- Direct (Course Embedded and/or Standardized and/or Locally Developed)
  - Tests
  - Projects
  - Oral Presentations
  - Demonstrations
  - Case Studies
  - Essays
  - Portfolios

(Many of these are typically scored with the holy grail of outcomes assessment – the rubric – of which there are MANY types)

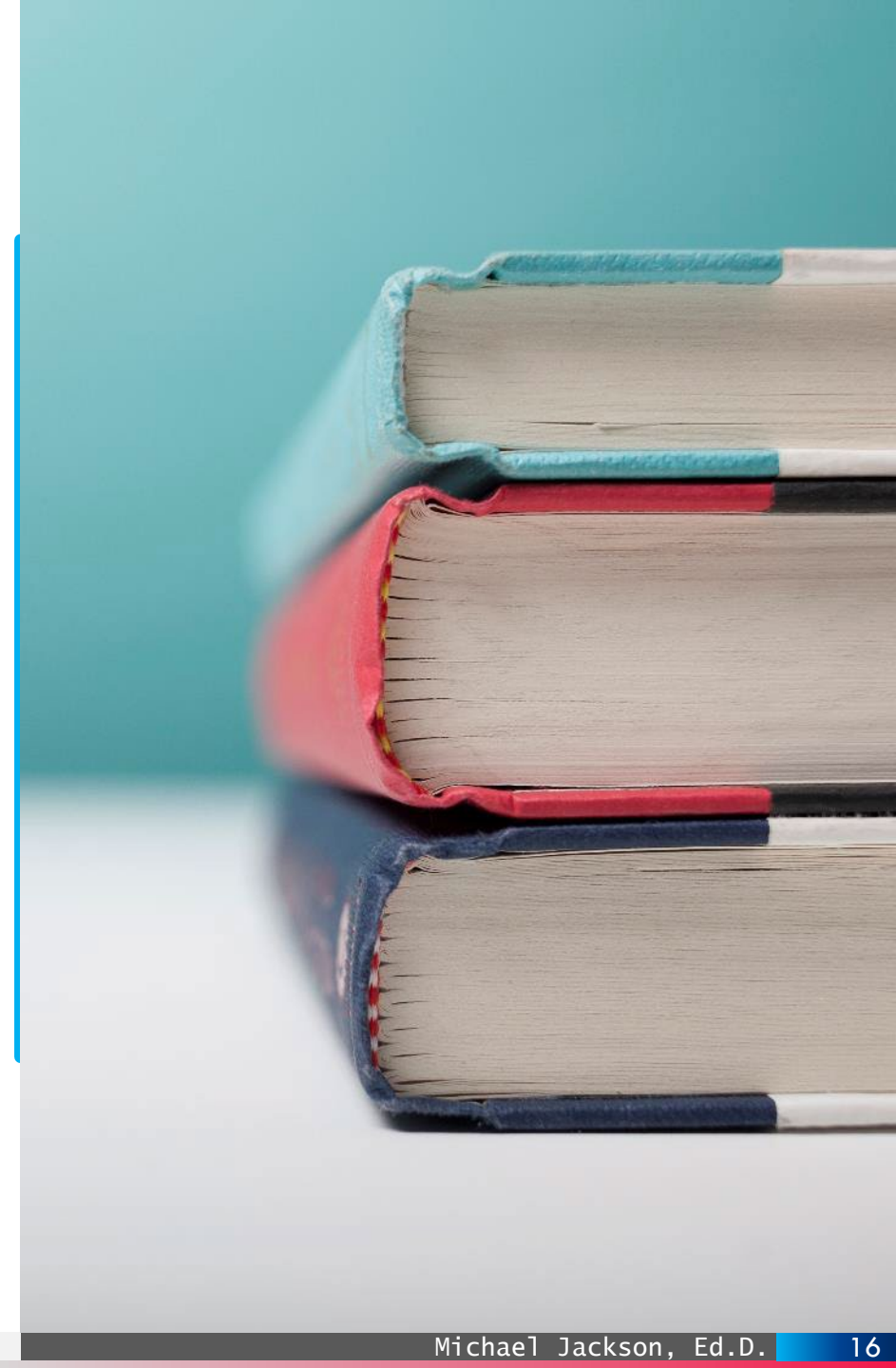


# What are your research designs?

Institutions are often most concerned with “what kind of tool” they will use for a particular outcome. Tools exist in all varieties:

- Indirect
  - Reflections
  - Journals
  - Interviews
  - Focus Groups
  - Surveys

(Surveys are typically scored with the holy grail of survey response-types – the Likert scale – of which there are MANY types)

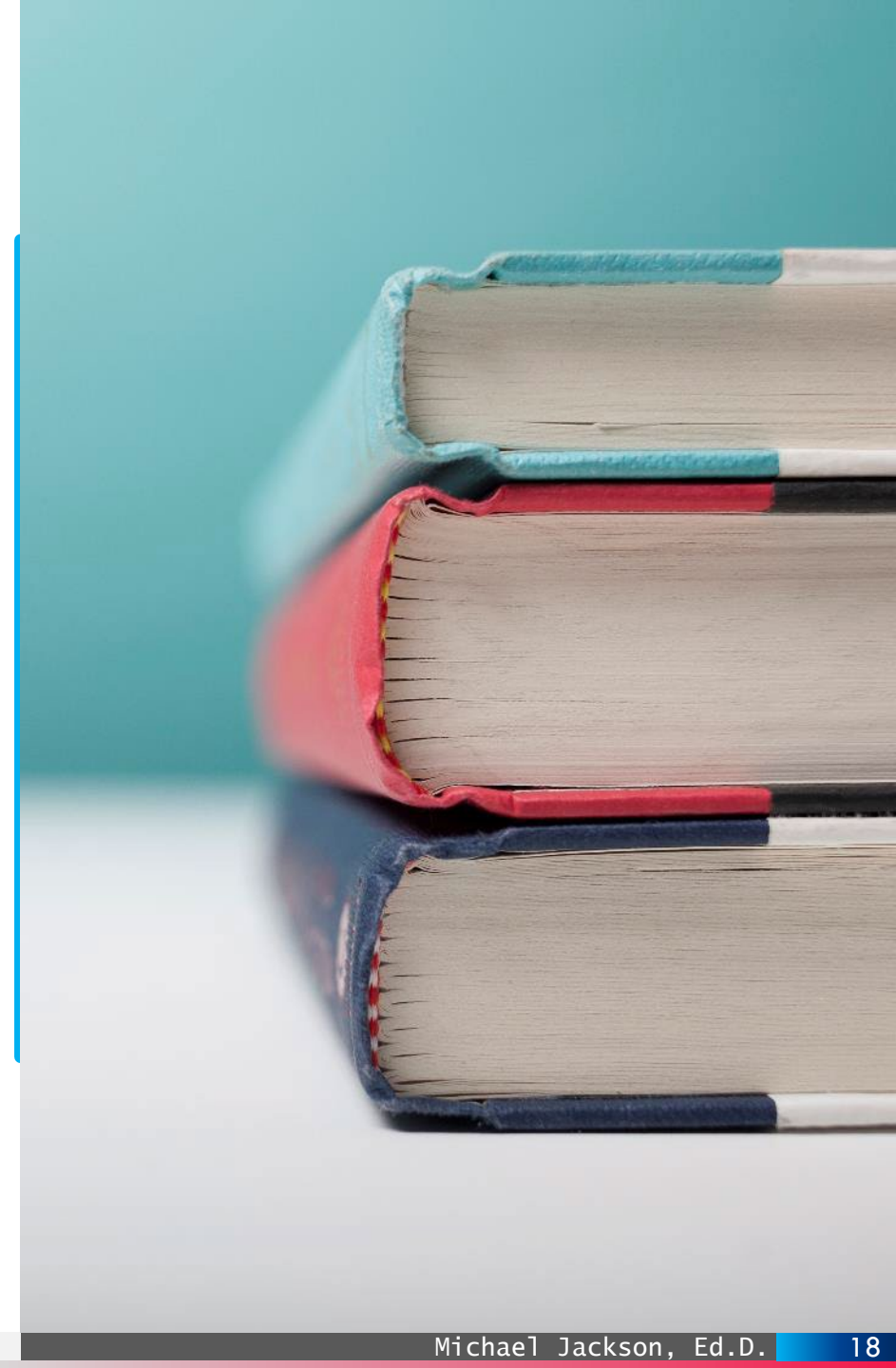


However, there are many other design related concerns that must be addressed. Rather than list them all, I thought I'd share a list of common missteps.

# What are your research designs?

Some common missteps in the scientific side of outcomes assessment:

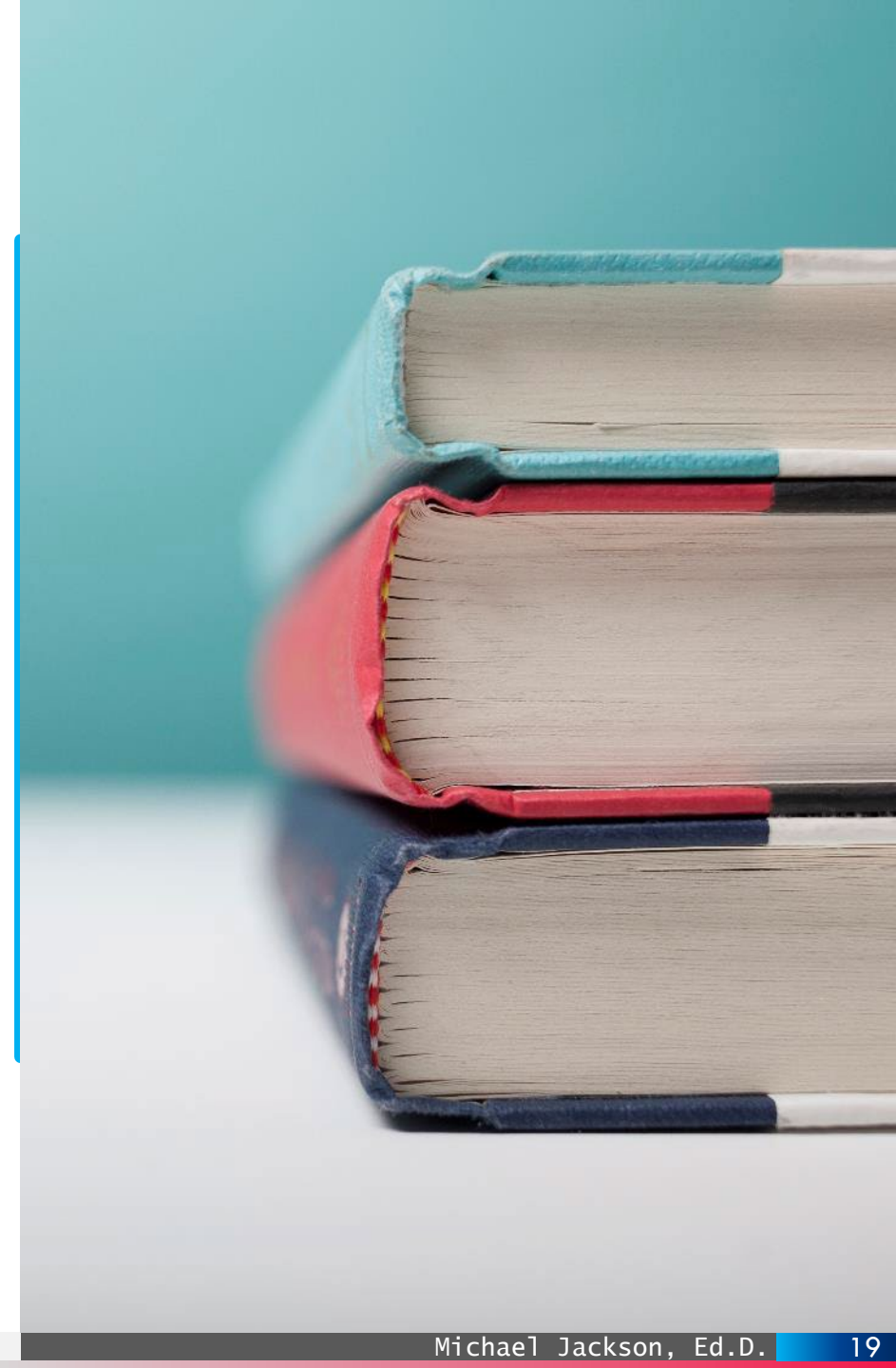
- Using course grades
- Avoiding qualitative methods (believing only numbers matter)
- Not understanding the principles of assessment as action research. Empirical research tests theories and relies heavily on random sampling, etc. Outcomes assessment is called “action research” and is more focused on decision-making.
- Lazy designs that assume that because it is “action research” that principles like credibility/validity are unimportant



# What are your research designs?

Some common missteps in the scientific side of outcomes assessment:

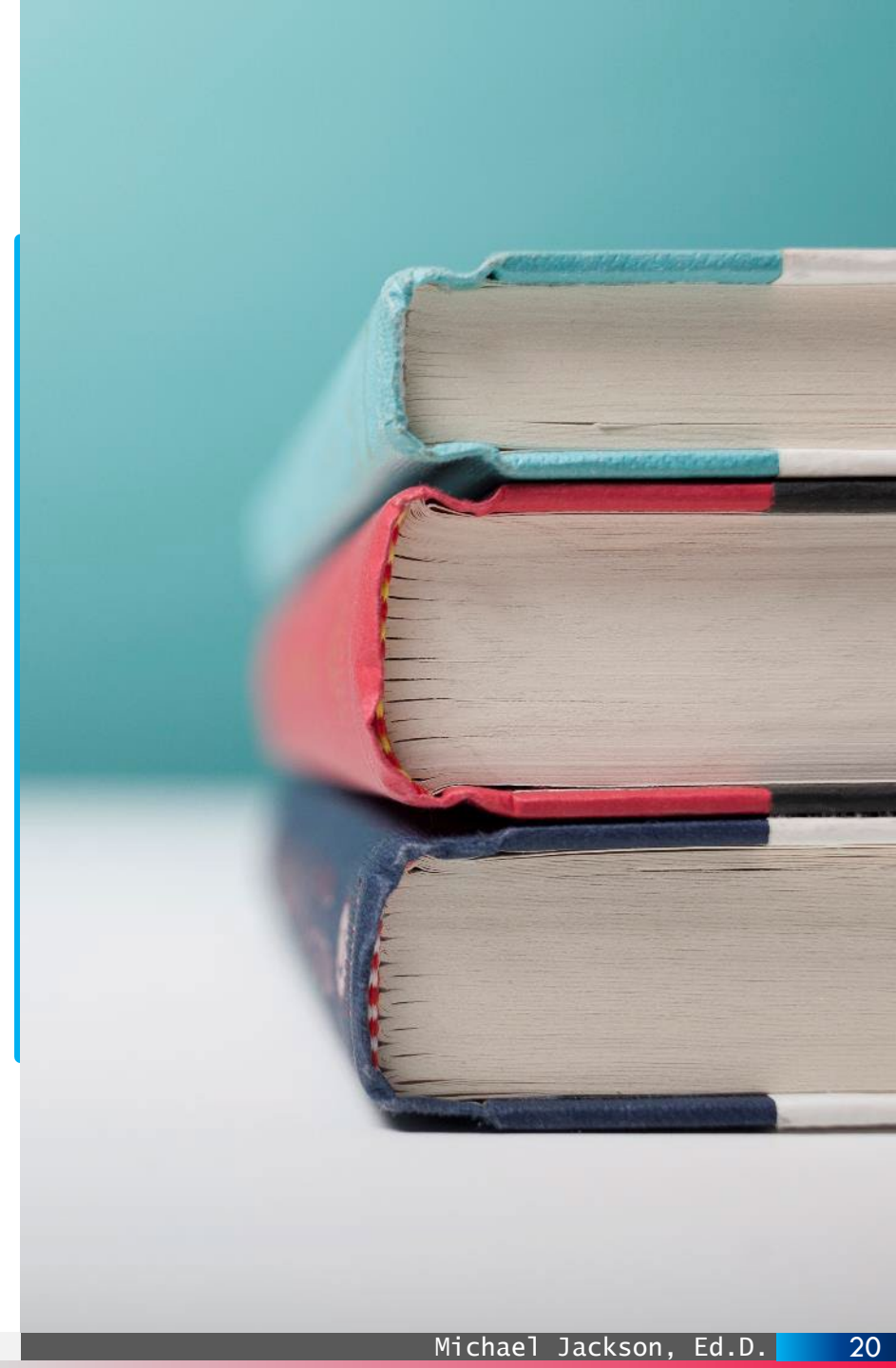
- Validity/Credibility Problems
  - Invalid Samples (or most of the time samples that simply aren't described at all)
  - Overgeneralization
  - Poorly developed instruments
  - Content/Construct Validity issues
  - Reliability
  - Process Bias (the compilation of all of these together)
  - Confirmation Bias (convenience samples of students and courses and instruments, etc.)



# What are your research designs?

Simple questions to ask for each outcome you are measuring to make sure you understand what you are doing:

1. Does your design clearly describe what data is being collected, (ex. Faculty-graded rubrics from an assignment from OT301 [graded by 3 graders])? (if rubrics are used, they should be available)
2. Does your design clearly describe the instrument being used (to use the example above, is there a clear description of the assignment from OT301)?
3. Does your instrument collect data that truly relates to your student learning outcome (don't skip this question!)?
4. Do you clearly describe the sample of students who participated in the assessment?  $n = 5$  doesn't count (ex. 18 Bachelor of Arts students, all on campus, all from the Fall 2016 version of the course)



It is very helpful to match direct assessments with indirect assessments (measuring the same constructs of your outcome). It isn't required, but I highly recommend it.

# How do you know your program was successful?

Setting success criteria is tricky business.



# Purposes in tension that affect success criteria:

## **Accountability**

- Must meet benchmarks
- Must communicate successful achievement by students of the learning outcome

## **Improvement**

- Must show weaknesses
- Must communicate vulnerability to create impetus for change

You must choose your primary purposes for assessment at the outset. A valid consideration might be to have an accountability benchmark and a “standard of excellence” benchmark.

# What did your faculty think about the results?

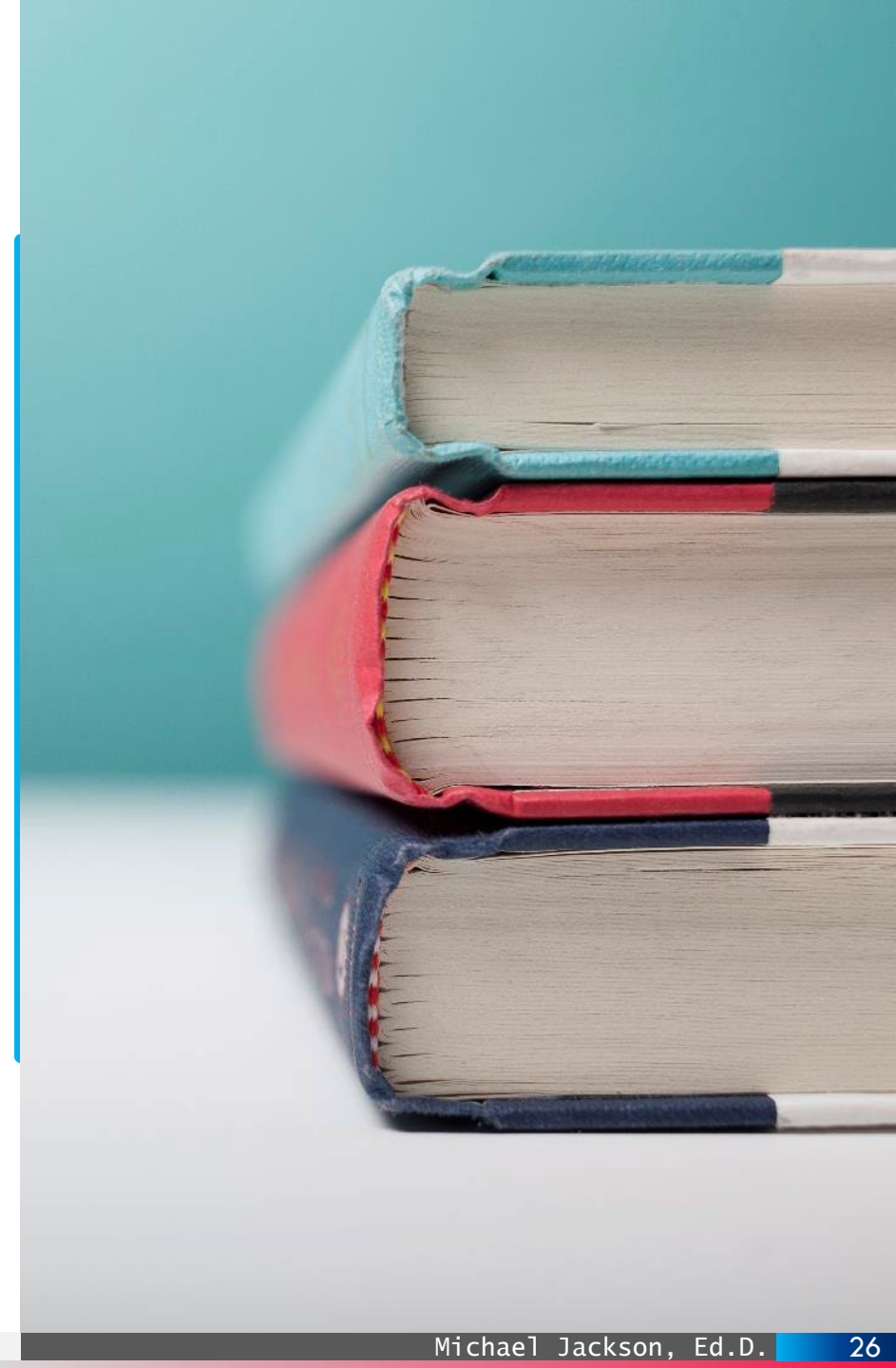
Reflection on results is an absolute necessity in outcomes assessment. It matters as much as what they do about the results.



# What did faculty think of the results?

Points in the assessment process where faculty buy-in is absolutely critical in order to have a “workable” system:

- Developing the Outcomes
- Selecting the Means of Assessment
- Creating Any Rubrics or Scoring Guides That Will Be Used
- Grading With Any Rubrics or Scoring Guides That Will Be Used
- Reflecting On the Results
- Deciding How the Results Will Change Teaching and Learning



I've found that faculty do best with this in our context if it is separated from a decision-making meeting.

The results should be presented to faculty in a way that they can understand, and the assessment leader should prompt good reflection with a few good questions.

# How did you change your program as a result of what you learned?

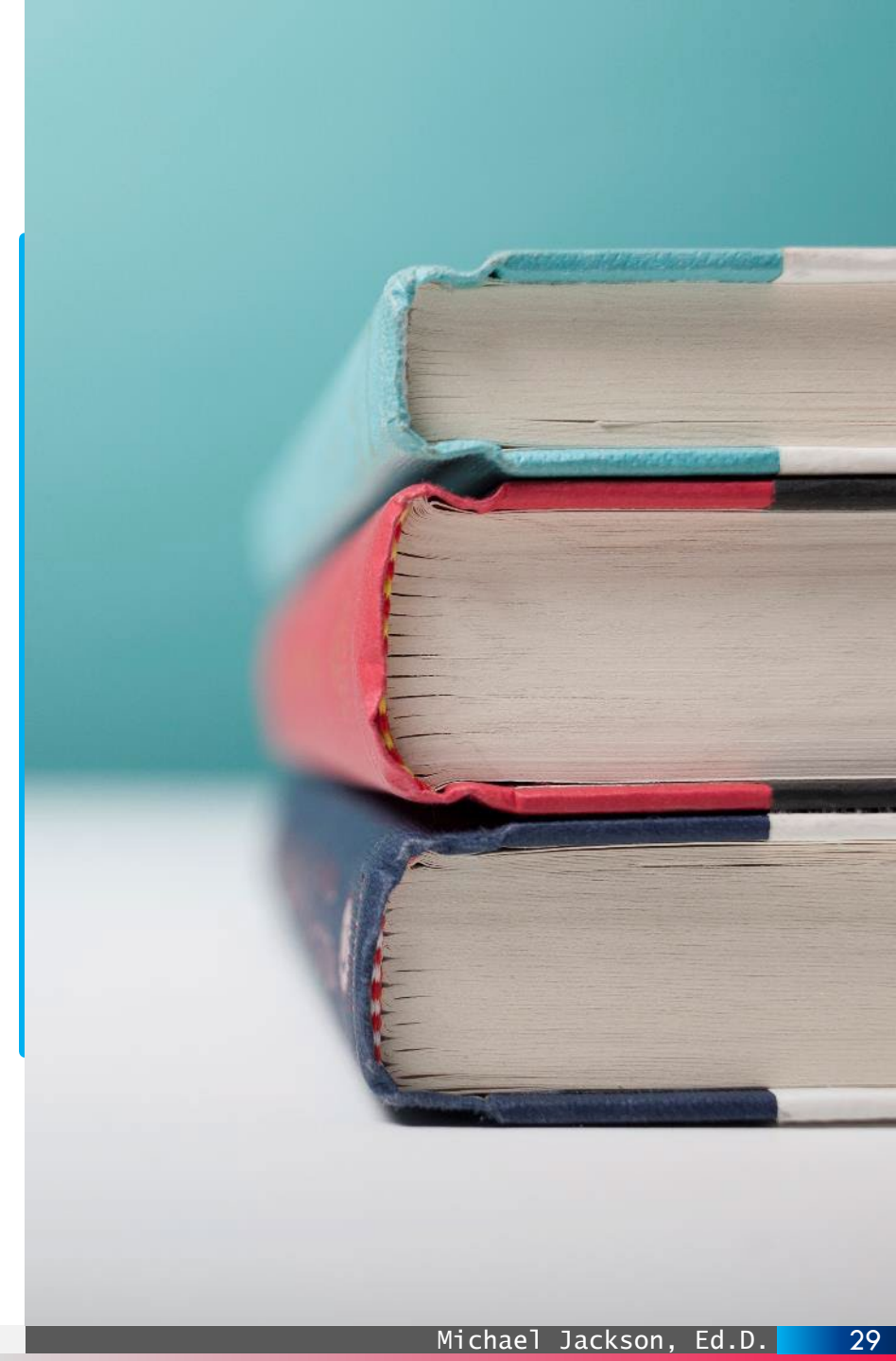
Outcomes assessment assumes that  
change will happen.



# How did you change your program?

Walvoord (2009) lists the following as the most common changes that come from outcomes assessment:

- Changes to curriculum, requirements, programmatic structures, or other aspects of the students' course of study.
- Changes to the policies, funding, and planning that support learning.
- Faculty development
- Sometimes the first action from an assessment is to gather additional information (*please don't ignore this possibility!*)
- (*To this list I would add*) Changes to the outcomes themselves, including faculty explorations of what those outcomes mean and whether they accurately reflect the current faculty's desired outcomes.



It is imperative to list a person or faculty committee that is responsible for the follow-up, a due date, and a budget/resource impact, or else plans simply become “good ideas.”

I believe the “art” of  
outcomes assessment is  
in how you do all of  
these things.



the art of leadership: liberating  
people to do what is required of  
them in the most effective and  
humane way possible

-Max DePree, *Leadership is an Art*

# How are you liberating people to accomplish what is needed in outcomes assessment?

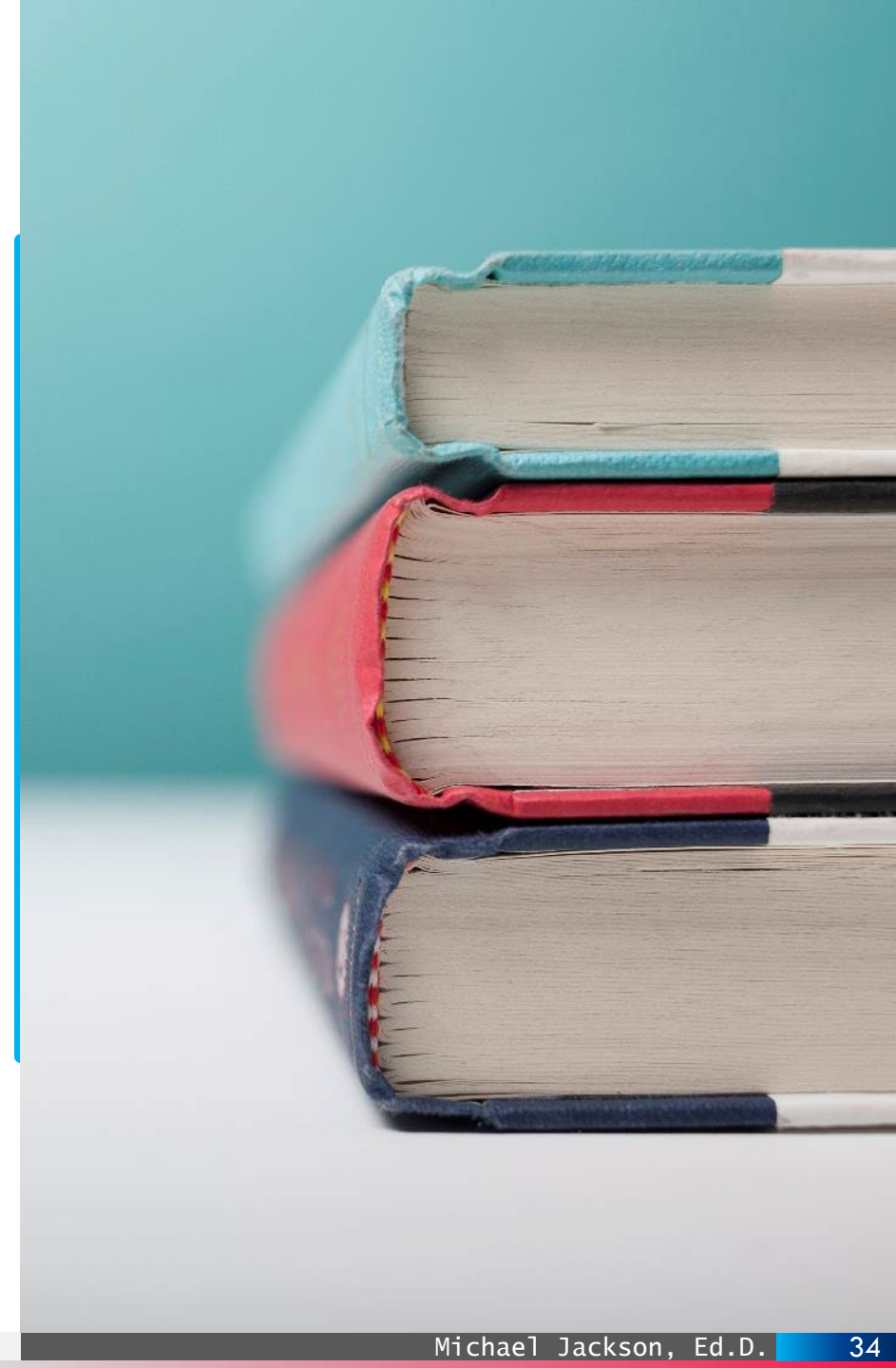
It takes a village.



# How are you leading outcomes assessment?

The following are some things that “lock down” people and processes when it comes to outcomes assessment:

- Fear of Change
- Feelings of Self-inadequacy
- Time pressures
- Lack of clear authority in the process
- Lack of training, knowledge, and skills
- Questions of whose responsibility it is
- Poor organizational systems (dysfunction)
- Discomfort with introspection/defensiveness
- Assessment being used for purposes for which it was not designed (HR, etc.)



# Some critical competencies for the assessment leader:

## Science

- Educational Outcomes
- Action Research
- Research Methods/Designs
- Accreditation
- Accountability
- Basic Statistics

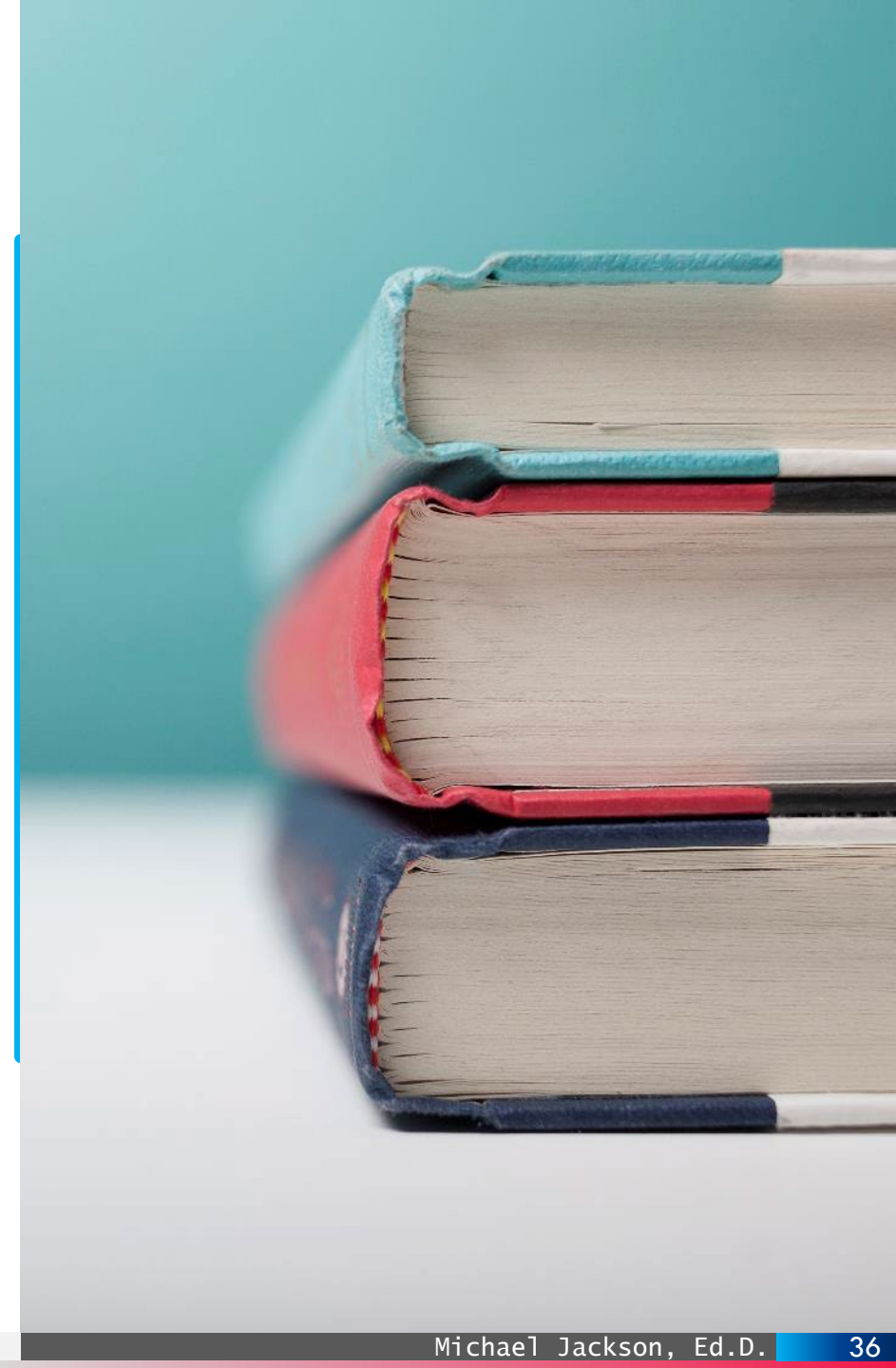
## Art

- Leadership
- Leading Change
- Mentoring and Coaching
- Team Development
- Low Ego
- Politically Adept

# How are you leading outcomes assessment?

The following are some common missteps I've seen in institutions:

- Outsourcing understanding of outcomes assessment
- Improper placement of outcomes assessment on the org chart
  - The poor IE guy
- Avoiding proper input into outcomes assessment because it is easier to just “do it yourself”
- Fear of fear and inadequacy in faculty
- Unwillingness to be vulnerable and open to changing something about the process of outcomes assessment
- What other missteps have you seen?



# BACKGROUND

- Applied research project completed as part of requirements for EdD in Higher Education Administration at Liberty University
- Purpose
  - Solve a problem or improve a practice
  - Specific educational site or organization
  - Not generalizable beyond the site
  - Multi-method

# INTRODUCTION

- Problem Statement:
  - The problem was that 37% of smaller institutions recognized by the ABHE COA that were eligible for a status change and cited for Standard 2 assessment and planning had a 2022 fall enrollment headcount of less than 150.
- Purpose Statement:
  - The purpose of this study was to provide recommendations to improve the practice for assessment for small institutions recognized by the ABHE COA.
- Central Research Question:
  - How can the practice of assessment for small institutions recognized by the ABHE COA be improved?

# LITERATURE REVIEW

- History of Assessment
- 5 Reasons for Assessment
- Creating a Culture of Assessment
- Assessment Leaders
- Faculty Involvement
- Assessment Practices at Small Institutions

# DATA COLLECTION METHOD 1: INTERVIEWS

- Qualitative Data Collection:
  - Semi-Structured with 11 questions
  - 1 applicant, 2 candidate, 2 accredited
  - 2 small, 3 large
  - 2 institutional effectiveness, 2 CAOs, 1 academic office manager
- Qualitative Data Analysis:
  - Transcribed, highlighted
  - Codes and themes developed

# DATA COLLECTION METHOD 2: SURVEY

- Quantitative Data Collection:
  - 7 demographic questions, 10 assessment questions
  - 54 participants, 39 institutions
  - 2 applicant, 2 candidate, 35 accredited
  - 24 presidents, 19 CAOs, 10 institutional effectiveness
- Quantitative Data Analysis:
  - 5-point Likert scale
  - Frequency and mean table created

# DATA COLLECTION METHOD 3: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Qualitative Data Collection:
  - SS, EVR, RVR, Action Letter
  - Nine institutions that also completed survey
- Qualitative Data Analysis:
  - Descriptive notes
  - Codes and themes developed

# FINDINGS: INTERVIEW



- Interview Themes
  - Purpose of Assessment
  - Tools Used for Assessment
  - Ways to Improve

| Themes                    | Code                | Occurrences Across Data |
|---------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Purpose of Assessment     | Support Mission     | 17                      |
|                           | Improvement         | 16                      |
|                           | Comprehensive       | 22                      |
|                           | Accreditation       | 24                      |
|                           | Public              | 14                      |
| Tools Used for Assessment | Nichols model       | 7                       |
|                           | Institution Created | 19                      |
| Ways to Improve           | Faculty Buy In      | 45                      |
|                           | Training            | 41                      |

# FINDINGS SURVEY

| Questions                                                                                                     | Frequency |    |    |    |    | Mean |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----|----|----|----|------|
|                                                                                                               | 5         | 4  | 3  | 2  | 1  |      |
| 1. Faculty are consistently involved in the entire assessment process at your institution.                    | 11        | 26 | 8  | 8  | 1  | 3.7  |
| 1. The institution's intended student learning outcomes are created by your administration.                   | 1         | 7  | 6  | 25 | 15 | 2.1  |
| 1. The intended learning outcomes align with the mission statement at your institution.                       | 43        | 9  | 1  | 1  | 0  | 4.7  |
| 1. Assessment data inform decisions at your institution.                                                      | 15        | 28 | 8  | 3  | 0  | 4.0  |
| 1. Findings from assessment data inform the budgeting process at your institution.                            | 14        | 17 | 18 | 4  | 1  | 3.7  |
| 1. There is an intentional effort to create a positive culture of assessment at your institution.             | 29        | 19 | 3  | 3  | 0  | 4.4  |
| 1. There is an assessment plan that dictates the collection of data at your institution.                      | 22        | 28 | 3  | 1  | 0  | 4.3  |
| 1. Institutional leaders support assessment at your institution.                                              | 30        | 22 | 1  | 1  | 0  | 4.5  |
| 1. Areas other than student learning and effective teaching are assessed for improvement at your institution. | 27        | 24 | 2  | 1  | 0  | 4.4  |
| 1. Assessment data are analyzed, looking for trends at your institution.                                      | 18        | 30 | 4  | 2  | 0  | 4.2  |

# FINDINGS: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Document Analysis
  - Themes
    - Types of Assessment
    - Consistency
    - Institutional Review
    - Challenges

| Themes               | Codes                   | Occurrences Across Data |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Types of Assessment  | Portfolios/capstone     | 27                      |
|                      | ABHE Bible Exam         | 15                      |
|                      |                         |                         |
| Consistency          | Lack of Experience      | 14                      |
|                      | Personnel               | 17                      |
|                      | Documents               | 24                      |
|                      | Collaboration           | 24                      |
| Institutional Review | Intensive Times         | 24                      |
|                      | Annual Report           | 24                      |
| Challenges           | Use of results          | 46                      |
|                      | Allocation of resources | 32                      |

# COMPARISON OF FINDINGS

- Allocation of Resources
- Consistency
- Use of assessment results

# SUGGESTIONS

- Focus specifically on the assessment data informing a sound budgeting process, in alignment with institutional planning (Standard 2:EE7)
- Find ways to train new assessment directors through conferences and networking
- Have multiple people informed in assessment practices



# Thank You

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