



Assessment Tips for Student Affairs Professionals

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In late September, Drs. Bauer and Hanson conducted two NASPA workshops on the principles of assessment and student learning outcomes. Both the participants and the faculty learned valuable lessons about assessment and how it works on college campuses today. During the workshop, the presenters introduced participants to the foundations of assessment by sharing critical questions they should discuss on campus. They asked: "What is assessment?", "Why do assessment?", "How do you get started?", "How do you conduct good assessment?" Throughout the three days, experiences, frustrations, and successes were shared by all. The following article summarizes some highlights from the principles of assessment workshop.

Recently, assessment of educational programs and services has witnessed a renewed emphasis in postsecondary education. Like other college and university administrators, this heightened emphasis has required student affairs practitioners to apportion some of their time to assessment tasks. Assessment of educational programs and services that support the teaching, learning, and service mission of our institutions is an important and necessary task, but one that can be rewarding as well.

What is assessment?

We repeatedly hear discussions about assessment, but many educators hold different interpretations of what is meant. Boyer and Ewell (1988) approach assessment broadly, noting that it provides information about students, curricula or programs, institutions, or about entire systems of institutions. Professor Thomas Angelo (1993) cogently sums up the many facets of assessment as:

"a means for focusing our collective attention... examining assumptions and creating a shared academic culture dedicated to continuously improving the quality of higher education learning. Assessment requires making expectations and standards for quality explicit and public. Systematically gathering evidence on how well performance matches those expectations and standards. Analyzing and interpreting the evidence, and using the resulting information to document, explain, and improve performance."

Assessment, then, is not simply a one-time survey of student mastery of a concept, a simple series of tests, or a single measure of program satisfaction. A good assessment plan requires dedicated effort to ensure the articulation of measurable goals and objectives, the systematic gathering of performance evidence (multiple measures over a specified period of time), the interpretation of findings in the context of your specific

campus and student body, using the results to change the curriculum and educational programs, and then beginning the assessment-improvement cycle again.

There are many good references available to assist in understanding the nuances of assessment, aspects that are appropriate for your campus, and how you can contribute to your institution's overall assessment plan. The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) has several web and print-based resources that can assist in your understanding of assessment. From AAHE's home page (<http://www.aahe.org/>) you can find good online readings about assessment, (http://www.aahe.org/assessment/assess_links.htm#readings), assessment policies (<http://www.aahe.org/bulletin/may2.htm#policies>), and specific articles such as *Fair Assessment Practices* (Suskie, 2000), and two sets of *Principles of Good Practice: the Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) and the *AAHE Nine Principles of Good Practice in Assessing Student Learning* (AAHE, 1992). These principles bring together ideas about effective assessment practice and can act as a guide for future assessment plans and implementation. In addition, North Carolina State University has an excellent web site with many good links to general assessment resources (<http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm>). A good general understanding of assessment leads to the next question, "Why do it?"

Why do assessment?

Assessment in higher education serves several important internal and external needs. First, every institution should plan and then monitor activities that fulfill its mission. Consequently, institutions must develop and evaluate programs and services that offer students learning environments that maximize their chances to learn. As the *raison d'être*, assessment can help us revise and improve programs and services. Better programs lead to higher levels of student satisfaction as well as improved retention and graduation rates.

Ongoing assessment also enables us to focus on faculty and staff development. Very importantly, it can encourage collaboration between faculty and student affairs staff. Further, assessment can establish comparative markers for strategic planning and thus assist administrative policy development. When assessment becomes an integral part of the organization, it can have many positive and long-lasting benefits; having strong, measurable goals and objectives enables the institution to really 'know' its mission therefore increasing its market advantage with peer institutions. This can, in turn, enrich development and external funding initiatives, and enable educators to demonstrate success in attaining the institution's mission and goals, and thus improve institutional effectiveness.

A second, and increasingly important reason for involvement in assessment is the requirement for discipline and regional accreditation. External accreditation encourages college and university educators to articulate a set of goals and objectives (set forth in the institution's mission) and provide evidence of how they are meeting their goals. Evidence must be provided from student affairs offices as well as academic departments on campus. Although not specifically required for accreditation, many institutions also

include benchmarking or peer comparison as a way to gauge their current status and/or progress. Selecting a reference group offers the added benefit of a focused discussion on the characteristics that best define your institution's current status and/or future aspirations.

Strategies for Beginning an Assessment Project

Taking time to fully understand the problem at hand, as well as thinking through all phases, are important to the success of your assessment task. According to Upcraft & Schuh (1995) there are several important questions to ask when beginning an assessment task:

- Why are we doing this assessment?
- What/who will be assessed?
- How will they/it be assessed?
- Who will do the assessment?
- How will the results be analyzed?
- How will the results be communicated and to whom?
- How will the results be used?

How do we do assessment?

There are five important steps to most any assessment project:

1. Specify the purposes, goals, and audiences
2. Design methods and measures
3. Carry out the data collection and analysis
4. Communicate the findings to the audience
5. Obtain feedback, follow-up, redesign, improve

Specify purposes, goals, and audiences. As you begin a new assessment project, identify the reason for undertaking the assessment as well as the audience(s) for whom this information is important. Knowing, for example, that the assessment is requested by a student activities office for program improvement demands different methods and measures than if you were assessing your institution's general education curriculum. You must also identify and involve stakeholders in the assessment plan. To ensure success as well as to distribute the workload, you may want to form a committee of campus faculty and staff (and perhaps students, too, depending on the project). Collaborative efforts offer the benefits of group brainstorming, a larger set of possible strategies, and psychological investment in the project. Today's emphasis on such skills as effective citizenship, leadership, and motivation for lifelong learning have helped many college educators see the value in combining classroom and out-of-classroom learning. This knowledge can generate creative and effective collaborations between faculty and student affairs professionals who seek to assess these skills and abilities.

Design the methods and measures. Once you understand the purpose, goals, and audience, the next step is determining the methods and measures. Keep in mind a variety of sources for campus assessment information: campus information systems, cohort tracking studies, department/program reviews, and data collected from current students, faculty and staff, alumni, and employers.

If you don't have the data needed from a campus database and must collect the data, you must also choose the method: paper-pencil instrument, web-based survey, personal interview, focus groups, or telephone survey. Resources (time, technology, person power, and your expertise in areas such as focus group facilitation or web survey development) may guide your decision. The list of instruments and publishers at the end of this article offers a starting point for guiding your thoughts.

If you plan to collect data through a web-based or paper-pencil survey, you must decide whether you will create an institution-specific instrument or purchase one from a publisher. Advantages and disadvantages must be weighed before reaching a decision, and you may want to ask your campus Institutional Research office for help. Developing your own instrument may cost less and generate a greater sense of commitment for the project. However, developing clear questions, designing a professional-looking format, pilot-testing and establishing the reliability and validity of the questionnaire can be a very time-consuming and expensive process. If you wish to purchase an instrument, determine if the items are relevant for your population of students, check out the instrument's advertised reliability and validity, and determine if the norm groups are appropriate for your institution. Published instruments can be expensive (on average \$3-\$10 per student to purchase the instrument and scoring service), but can save time and effort that may be better devoted to other tasks. In addition, for some colleagues, a purchased instrument is the preferred choice simply because it 'looks good;' this increases its face validity and may likely add credibility to your assessment project.

Along with determining whether you will purchase or create your own measure, you must also decide who to assess and how many to include in your sample. In most cases, it is not necessary nor cost-effective to sample your entire population, just make sure your sample is representative. If response rates are high, you can receive reliable data with a smaller number. Most often, a random sample is used, however, depending on the assessment project, you may choose to oversample certain subpopulations (e.g., minority students) to ensure accurate representation from all subgroups.

Carry Out Data Collection and Analysis. Now that you've carefully worked to understand the purpose, outline your goals, and determine your methods and measures, the fun begins! Keep in mind there are advantages and disadvantages to every data collection method. Data collected through a mailed survey may enable you to reach a larger population with minimal effort in survey distribution. Web-based data collection eliminates separate data entry and minimizes data coding errors, but can offer a biased respondent population and can be intimidating to those students who do not feel comfortable using the computer. Surveys administered in a classroom setting will require you to schedule each session such that you (or your designee) can reach each classroom

on time. Individual interviews or focus groups require extra effort prior to the interview or focus group to schedule the respondent or group as well as time needed to transcribe the discussion afterward, but can offer high quality information that may not be possible from typical paper and pencil measures. You must also attend to the content, format, and professional look of the cover letter. You will achieve higher response rates when you customize your letter (insert the individual's name as opposed to 'dear student') be clear and concise in your request, and have the letter signed by an individual who is important to the respondent (perhaps the program director or college president).

Once your data is collected, data analysis begins. In your planning stages, you will have already decided if you (or someone on your campus) will complete data entry or if you will send the instruments to a company for scoring. Even if you receive a summary report from the company, you may want to do additional analyses for your specific population. Such analyses are easily achieved through your use of a statistical package such as SPSS or SAS. Basic analyses, as well as the creation of charts and graphs, can also be achieved in Excel or Access.

Data analysis is an exciting part of any assessment project! Let your research questions that you developed in Step 1 guide your analyses. Be inquisitive and analytical; think about *what* your data means and/or *why* the responses follow certain patterns or trends.

Communicate the findings to your audience. This may be the most important step in the entire assessment process. How you communicate (e.g., written report, oral presentation, powerpoint) and the level of detail included in the report will be determined by the target audience. At this stage you must translate your data to meaningful information. Most decision-makers will not want the technical statistical analyses, but want to know what meaning you attach to the results. You must sift the data for the important "story" and use simple charts, graphs, tables and executive summaries to deliver your message.

Obtain feedback, follow up, redesign, improve. A critical step in any assessment project is to use your findings to redesign and improve previous programs, services, or other processes. This feedback loop is the real key in making your institution's assessment plan a success. Nearly all accrediting associations look for a feedback loop. That is, how well do you use your assessment information to improve your institution's programs and services?

Specific plans on how to incorporate feedback in future program planning is a challenge and if you are asked to contribute suggestions, you will need to use your creativity and analytical skills. Since each institution is unique, there are no cookie-cutter assessment designs that fit all departments or campuses. What may work in one office may not be the best solution for another. Similarly, definitions and methods for determining institutional effectiveness at one institution may not be the right combination at another. Familiarity with other campus or department models can be helpful as you assist colleagues in planning follow-up and redesign for improvement.

Summary We started this article by stating that the reason we do assessment is to improve our institution's educational programs and services. Assessment provides a focal point for collaboration between student affairs professionals and faculty for discussing important educational outcomes. Hopefully, this discussion will generate important questions that guide and direct the assessment effort. Working together to find the answers will not only help us evaluate individual programs and services, but it will provide a benchmark for how well the institution is accomplishing its mission. If done well, assessment should illustrate the contributions both faculty and student affairs staff make to the learning, growth, and development of students. Now is an excellent time to get started!

Helpful Websites (alphabetical order)

American College Personnel Association Clearinghouse for Assessment Measures
<http://garnet.indstate.edu/wbarratt/dragon/ix/home.htm>

American College Testing Program, Inc. (ACT)
<http://www.act.org/>

College Student Experiences Questionnaire
<http://www.iu.edu/~cseq>

ERIC/AE Test Locator
<http://ericae.net/testcol.htm>

ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/ERIC/eric.html>

ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education
<http://www.eriche.org/>

Educational Testing Service (ETS)
<http://www.ets.org/>

National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS)
<http://www.nchems.org/>

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)
<http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse>

UCLA Higher Education Research Institute
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri>

USA Group Noel-Levitz
<http://www.noellevitz.com/>

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