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ASSESSMENT AS AN ESSENTIAL DIMENSION OF CONTEMPORARY STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTICE

When Lee Upcraft and I wrote our first book about assessment (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), we asserted that conducting assessment projects was an essential element of student affairs practice. At the time, assessment in student affairs was a relatively recent phenomenon, although the concept of doing assessments had been around for several decades (see, for example, Aulepp & Delworth, 1976). We asserted that studies would have to be undertaken by student affairs practitioners because we thought that the stakeholders of their units would demand data that would confirm the important contributions of student affairs programs and services to student learning and growth.

Much of our thinking had a financial lens to it. We thought, for example, that institutions might choose to outsource programs and services that historically had been assigned to student affairs if they were not cost effective. We also thought that student affairs units had to be able to demonstrate that they contributed to student learning and development. If they could not, questions as to their efficacy would be raised, and they might be outsourced or eliminated.

We really did not have a crystal ball when we made these assertions, but if we were to look back over the past decade, it is clear that assessment has emerged as an activity of increasing significance in the work of student affairs practitioners, as well as faculty members. Moreover, studies conducted of institutions of higher education that have been successful in achieving their educational goals for students (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt,

2005) have shown that assessment has become an important element in student affairs practice.

In this chapter, we identify and discuss reasons that contribute to why accountability in student affairs has become an essential dimension of contemporary student affairs practice. We also describe how assessment is linked to other organizational functions in student affairs. We then provide suggestions about how to get started in conducting assessment projects and identify a number of different kinds of assessment projects that student affairs leaders might consider. We conclude with a few examples of institutions that are undertaking ongoing assessment projects in student affairs.

The Current Press for Accountability

As is the case in many elements of our society (medicine, K–12 schools, state government), the emphasis on accountability in higher education has accelerated in the past decade or two (Leveille, 2006). The Commission of the Secretary of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) made it clear that assessment of student learning outcomes needs to be central in the process of accountability. The Commission added, "Accreditation agencies should make performance outcomes, including completion rates and student learning, the core of their assessment as a priority over inputs or processes" (p. 25). Berger and Lyon describe the situation this way: "The past fifteen years have seen accountability become a more important mandate in higher education" (2005, p. 26). In addition, governing boards and legislatures are increasing influential in the priorities and operations of institutions (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association, 2004). Colleges and universities increasingly are being asked to demonstrate how they make a difference in the lives of students, how they contribute to the economic development of their communities and states, and how they contribute to the national welfare.

Although some institutions may have the luxury of ignoring this increasing pressure perhaps due to an extraordinary endowment or a unique niche in American higher education, the fact is that in contemporary higher education, the vast majority of institutions cannot afford to ignore the multidimensional contemporary press for accountability. In turn, various units of institutions of higher education, including student affairs, are being asked to demonstrate various forms of accountability. Several of these forms of accountability are discussed below.

Contributions to Student Learning

Certainly since the release of two reports, *Involvement in Learning* (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in Higher Education, 1984) and *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education* (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993), interest has focused in higher education on enriching the undergraduate experience. The Study Group's report recommended ways that institutions could provide experiences for undergraduates that would increase student involvement and raise expectations for student achievement. It also provided recommendations for assessment and feedback. Taking this work a step further, the Wingspread Group asserted, "society must hold higher education to much higher expectations or risk national decline" (p. 1). Other reports built on this report including *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1996) and *Learning Reconsidered* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association, 2004). All of these documents urged higher standards for higher education, better communication, and the production of evidence on the part of higher education that students were being held to rigorous standards. In short, higher education was being asked to demonstrate that students were learning what institutions said they were learning. Since student affairs units have asserted for decades that students learn from the experiences provided in out-of-class expediencies (see Baird, 2003), they, too, have to produce evidence to sustain their claims.

Retention

Closely related to learning is the extent to which various units on college campuses contribute to institutional retention efforts. Retention has several dimensions to it. Most important, retention data are linked to the extent to which students are able to achieve their educational goals. For example, over 95% of entering students planned to earn a bachelor's degree or higher in 2006 (Almanac Edition, 2007, p. A18), but the six-year graduation rate of students who entered college in 1999–2000 was 55.9% (Almanac Edition, 2007, p. A14). Also important are the financial implications of students' dropping out. Students incur debt and institutions suffer financial losses when students drop out. No one benefits from students' not being retained.

Tinto (2005) described the situation his way: "Today it is more important than ever for institutions to respond to the challenge of increasing student success. Forced to cope with tight, if not shrinking, budgets, institutions face mounting pressure to improve their rates of student retention and graduation" (p. ix). Consequently, student affairs practitioners might choose to explore the following questions. Does the first year experience program contribute to retention? If students live in residence halls are they more likely to be retained from the first year to the second and ultimately graduate? If the college has an extensive learning communities program, does participation in this program improve a student's chances for being retained and ultimately graduating?

Political Pressure

Not only is this pressure coming from study groups, think tanks, and the like, but the political environment, for various reasons, has also placed higher education under the microscope. At times this scrutiny is related to the cost of attendance (Boehner & McKeon, 2003); sometimes it reflects concerns about public accountability (Business-Higher Education Forum, n.d.) and the relationship between public institutions and the states in which they are located (American Council on Education, n.d.). Regardless of the presenting problem, greater controls over higher education, particularly in the public sector, have been applied (American Council on Education, n.d.). Institutions are being called upon to provide evidence of the success of their various operations, or they can expect more involvement of politicians and various governmental agencies and greater scrutiny of their operations.

Accreditation

For nearly a hundred years (Millard, 1994) regional associations have engaged in the accreditation of colleges and universities. Specialized accreditation of programs has developed during similar period of time. Until recently, this form of providing public assurance has been the accepted standard, but in recent years, calls for federal involvement in the accreditation of institutions have become more vigorous (Dickeson, 2006). The essence of the criticism is that higher education has not undergone appropriate scrutiny; more rigorous measures of evaluation are necessary, since institutional accreditation has been voluntary and is conducted by peers as opposed to governmental or other external bodies. At the time of this writing it is unknown how or whether this situation will be resolved.

What is known, however, is that the regional accreditation agencies have increasingly stressed that institutions provide solid, empirical data that illustrate what students are learning. The Middle States Commission, for example, provides a Web site that includes publications for assessing student learning and institutional effectiveness (Middle States Commission, 2005a), and exemplar programs including student affairs (Middle States Commission, 2005b). The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2004) in its resource manual on principles of accreditation identifies relevant questions for student support programs, services, and activities that include providing evidence for the effectiveness and adequacy of support programs and services, and evidence that student support services and programs meet the needs of students of all types and promote student learning and development. Requirements such as these are unambiguous; assessment data are needed or the questions cannot be answered satisfactorily.

Cost

The cost of attendance at institutions of higher education is an issue that has been explored widely in the literature on contemporary concerns in higher education (see, for example, Yeager, Nelson, Potter, Weidman & Zullo, 2001). The cost of attendance has been rising faster than the Consumer Price Index (see The College Board, 2007). For example, the cost of attendance at a four year public institution increased by 7.1% from the 2004–2005 academic year to the 2005–2006 academic year whereas the consumer price index increased by 3.4% from December 2004 to December 2005 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). Those students who rely on federal financial aid, especially Pell Grants, are finding that relief in this from the increasing cost of attendance has not kept pace (King, 2003). Moreover, students and their parents do not have a good sense of the cost of attendance, and they often overestimate the cost of going to college (Horn, Chen, & Chapman, 2003).

Student affairs units are not immune from price increases and in some cases contribute to the increasing cost of attendance. At public universities it is not uncommon for the cost of room and board to be greater than the cost of tuition and fees (Schuh & Shelley, 2001). In this environment, those who are responsible for units that charge special fees, or are supported substantially or perhaps entirely by student fees or fees for service, will have their operations and costs placed under the fiscal microscope. At this point a case has to be made for the level of the fees charged, and the extent to which students and other stakeholders are receiving value for their expenditure. Very, very few institutions can ignore the cost of attendance and its effect on students.

Benchmarking

One other form of accountability has to do with how institutions compare with each other, against industry standards, or against institutionally adopted standards. "[B]enchmarking and other strategies for assessing and improving quality have, and will continue to have, great value. . .The underlying concepts and goals are anything but new or revolutionary; they have a long tradition or application in our work in higher education" (Doerfel and Ruben, 2002, p. 23). Not only do institutions conduct studies of how they compare on various dimensions with other institutions, private consultants also are available to conduct those studies for institutional clients (see, for example, Educational Benchmarking, Inc.). In addition, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education provides functional standards that can be used for benchmarking purposes (http://www.cas.edu/).

Benchmarking may not answer all the questions that might arise related to providing evidence that various units are competitive when compared with similar units at other institutions of higher education or other sectors of our society, but they provide guidance as to whether industry standards are being met and whether the approach taken at the institution of interest is similar to that being taken at comparable institutions. At a minimum, the data resulting from benchmarking assessments can demonstrate that a unit or program is on track within a predetermined framework, that is, the standards used for the benchmarking exercise.

Linking Assessment to Organizational Functions in Student Affairs

Assessment activities are central elements in program planning and program development in student affairs. Brief descriptions of the role of assessment in these functions in student affairs are provided hereafter.

Strategic Planning

As with most organizational functions in higher education, assessment stands in relation to and has an influence on other organizational functions. In fact, assessment plays a central role in organizational renewal. Typically, organizations participate in strategic planning exercises that include a review of their mission statements and goals, and then adopt action steps that are designed to achieve their goals (Schuh, 2003). The action steps can include such activities as developing upgraded facilities for recreational sports, implementing leadership development programs in student activities, or raising external funds designed to provide scholarships that are more robust for students from modest economic backgrounds in financial aid. All of these planning activities require effort and resources; in the end they are designed to help student affairs units achieve their goals, thus moving these units in concert with the division's mission.

Assessment plays an important role in helping these units determine the extent to which their initiatives have achieved their desired intent. In the case of the illustrations above, questions such as the following need to be answered: Do the upgraded facilities result in increased satisfaction by the users of the recreation complex? Do the leadership development programs result in more effective leaders for student organizations? Do the scholarship initiatives contribute to the retention of the students who receive the enhanced scholarships? Each of these initiatives should be assessed to determine whether they had the desired effect. If the desired effect is achieved, the programs can be continued, but if the initiatives do not achieve their desired results, they should be modified or perhaps eliminated.

Organizational Effectiveness

Closely related to its role in strategic planning is how assessment can assist in measuring the effectiveness of various elements of departments in student affairs. For example, is the current theoretical framework for program development yielding the desired student learning in the residence halls? Is the student health service providing high-quality services for reasonable costs? Are tutoring programs having their desired effect? Is the matriculation rate of admitted students comparable to that in peer institutions?

Questions related to organizational effectiveness can be answered through a comprehensive assessment program. Without a systematic approach to gathering information and using that information to determine the effectiveness of student affairs units, initiatives, programs, and procedures, unit leaders will have difficulty determining whether organizational goals are being met, thus making their organizations vulnerable to reorganization, outsourcing, or even elimination.

Getting Started in Assessment

Assessment looks to be a complex, time- and resource-intensive process that at first blush might appear to be overwhelming. There is no question that student affairs practitioners are busy people. The crisis of the day can take precedence over long-term thinking, so to be able to step back and take the long view of what needs to be accomplished in the division of student affairs might appear to be a luxury. We find, however, that taking the long view is essential. Central to this long view is assessment, and central to developing an assessment program is knowing how to get started.

Although it might seem trite to claim that a long journey begins with the first step, the fact of the matter is that in taking a journey, a series of steps have to be accomplished for the journey to be completed successfully. This was what Karl Weick had in mind when he introduced the concept of "small wins" (1984). Weick's idea was that to bring about social change one needed to think in terms of effecting small changes before one could bring about a large change. "The massive scale on which social problems are conceived often precludes innovative action because the limits of bounded rationality are exceeded and arousal is raised to dysfunctionally high levels" (1984, p. 40). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) came to the same conclusion in writing about how to bring about change on a college campus. Their thinking is instructive on this point.

> Thus, instead of singular, large, specially designed, and campuswide programs to achieve a particular institutional goal, efforts might more profitably focus on ways to embed the pursuit of that goal in all appropriate institutional activities. . .In short, rather than seeking single large levers to pull in order to promote change on a large scale, it may well be more effective to pull more small levers more often. [1991, p. 655]

The approach advocated by Pascarella and Terenzini also can be applied to starting assessment programs. On the one hand, if one conceptualizes getting started on assessment programs as a massive effort, involving virtually all the activities of a division of student affairs, ranging from keeping track of who uses facilities to measuring the student learning outcomes of all the experiences and activities in a single year, it is likely that the process will not get off the ground. On the other hand, using the advice of Weick and Pascarella and Terenzini, a division should start modestly and attempt to conduct a few assessment projects rather than undertake a study of massive proportions. The chances of success are much greater if the division starts with a manageable project with modest but important goals rather than with a highly complex project. In fact, success will build upon success. Our advice is for student affairs practitioners to think about various assessments in this way:

> Small wins are not a matter of decoration but a matter of structure, an integral part of work. They fit perfectly into larger strategies because they are understandable, doable, and generally nonthreatening. [Rhatigan & Schuh, 2003, p. 19]

Assessment needs to start with reasonable projects that are not necessarily complex and that can be completed in a reasonable time. The surest way to dampen enthusiasm for conducting assessments is to conceptualize projects that are time consuming, technically complex, and beyond the expertise of the staff who are available to conduct them. But if assessments require a manageable amount of time, are simple in design, and demand nothing more than the skills already possessed by the staff that will conduct them, a recipe for success is in place. Let us suggest a few kinds of assessments that can be conducted within the already established calendar of events in student affairs.

Measuring Participation

Measuring participation is an assessment technique that should be done on annual basis and probably is being done already at your institution. This approach is designed to keep track of who uses the various services and who participates in the programs offered by the units in the division, as well as those students who do not. Certainly, student housing can produce basic numbers about who lives in the residence halls and their identifiable characteristics, financial aid staff can develop a profile of who receives how much and what kinds of aid in an academic year, career services can develop a profile of the companies that interview on campus and the students who have received help from the staff in preparing their credentials or have attended workshops, the counseling center should have a profile of the various clients who come to the office for assistance, and so on. Publishing these data and distributing them widely is a wonderful start. It begins to get the word to various stakeholders on and off campus about who is served by the various units of student affairs. The units themselves can develop the strategies for collecting and analyzing the data, but it makes good sense to have material available on a Web site to begin to tell the story of the contributions of the division of student affairs to student life.

Needs Assessment

The population of a typical four-year institution will turn over by around 50 percent every two years or so and obviously much more frequently than that at a two-year college. Conducting a needs assessment approximately every other year will fit the concept of trying to stay abreast of the needs of the student body. It is important to remember, however, that needs are not the same as wants, so needs can be framed by the institution's mission and academic program. For example, just because some people want to develop graduate programs at a baccalaureate college does not mean that it is a good idea to develop them. But it is good idea to understand how students' needs change over time, and a very good strategy is to conduct a needs assessment when over 50 percent of the student body has turned over.

For example, once upon a time a strategy was developed to build a large of number of computer labs at a university so that students would have access to computing facilities. That approach became obsolete when it was discovered that over 90 percent of the students attending the institution brought their own laptops; what they really needed was wireless access, not the computing hardware. The consequence was that the institution's strategy for providing computing access had to be altered. That is an example of how students' needs will change over time.

Satisfaction Assessment

After an institution develops strategies to meet student needs, the next step is to measure the extent to which students and others are satisfied. This can be accomplished through an assessment conducted the year after a needs assessment is conducted. So if a needs assessment is conducted in year two, a satisfaction assessment can be conducted in year three. This is the perfect follow-up to institutional change and an appropriate way of checking on whether changes have their desired effect.

Suppose that the institution, after doing an exhaustive study, makes a change in its approach to food service. In this example, the institution has gone from being a traditional food service to one in which students can eat at any food service on campus through the use of a declining-balance system to improve customer convenience; the desired result is improved satisfaction with the food service. Since this is a major change for the institution, it is important to determine whether the change had the desired effect and that students and other stakeholders' expectations for the new food service were satisfied.

Outcomes

An argument can be made that the reason that campuses offer many programs and activities is that these can be framed by the institution's objectives for student learning and that they contribute to student learning and growth (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators and American College Personnel Association, 2004). But for various units to claim that they contribute to the student experience (for example, living in the residence halls contributes to the institution's retention rate), data are required. The various experiences and learning opportunities that typically are available on most campuses are numerous, so it is impractical to assess the educational potency of each one of them, every year. So, our advice is that on a periodic basis, a few programs be selected for assessment. This could be intramural football one year, a speaker series the next, the volunteer services bureau the next, and so on.

Any time a major commitment is made to a new program, such as implementing a leadership development program, it is a good idea to have an assessment component, because those providing the funding will want to know whether their investment was fruitful. Outcomes assessments are challenging to conduct, but they are essential in making the case for value that is contributed to student learning by specific programs and other student experiences.

Cost Effectiveness

Can a private, off-campus vendor provide services more cheaply than what is being provided on-campus? This is a typical question that student affairs administrators face in the course of their work. Off-campus challenges come from apartments, bookstores, child-care centers, computer vendors, and so on. Probably on an annual basis an environmental scan should be conducted to determine how costs compare for various services that are provided off-campus with those that are provided on-campus. The time that is required to conduct such a scan is minimal, but the data are very useful in answering questions such as the following: Are our costs competitive? Are our services comparable to what is available off-campus? It should also be noted that the definition of *off-campus* has evolved over the years. Although it might be important to recognize that the bookstore down the street from the campus may provide competition for selling books and supplies, so will online book providers that can have a student's order delivered the next day.

Determining cost effectiveness with local vendors is an approach that is a cousin to the process of conducting benchmarking surveys with other institutions of higher education. Various approaches are available to conducting benchmarking, and these can be done on a periodic basis, say every three or four years.

Some data will be relatively easy to identify (for example, room and board rates) but other data are more difficult to discern (such as how training programs for resident assistants compare across institutions).

Other Assessments

Other assessments can be conducted on a periodic, but certainly not annual, basis; for example, conducting a campus culture assessment or an environmental assessment. These forms of assessment are very complex, can be expensive, and may even require the use of external consultants. We do not have a specific formula for when to conduct these forms of assessment other than to suggest that every few years, meaning every five years or so, might be the right interval to conduct them. They can provide very useful information, but the utility of the information has to be balanced with the effort that it takes to conduct this type of study.

Framing Questions

We have written this volume to help student affairs staff members integrate assessment into their administrative practice. But a number of aspects of the assessment process must be reviewed and considered before making methodological decisions. Specifically the following questions must be answered before moving into other aspects of assessment:

1. What is the issue at hand? That is, is the proposed assessment part of a routine, ongoing process, the result of a special request (by the governing board or senior officers, for example), the consequence of a specific event (such as a tragedy) or data that suggest that further analysis is needed (such as a graduation rate that has declined for two consecutive years)?

2. What is the purpose of the assessment? Defining the issue at hand will generate a second question. If, for example, a declining graduation rate triggers an assessment, the purpose of the assessment might be to delineate the variation of graduation rates of specific groups of students (such as commuter students or residential students), or it might be to determine whether the graduation rates of all students have declined. In this case, the assessment takes on a diagnostic dimension, since it will help clarify the nature of the decline in graduation rates.
3. Who should be studied? Will the assessment involve all students, a subset of them, or others associated with the institution, such as graduates? In the example described in number 2, if we learn that the decline in graduation rates has been especially pronounced for commuter students, the next step would be to initiate a study of them and their experiences and eliminate residential students from further study. Selecting participants is the focus of Chapter Four.
4. What is the best assessment method? At this point, we begin to consider various designs that are available to us. If the population is particularly large, we might want to start with a study designed to generate baseline data. This process might be conducted with a database available on campus. Chapter Two describes how existing databases can be used for assessment purposes. Alternatively, we might think about developing a qualitative study that would include conducting focus groups with commuting students to understand how they describe their experiences on campus. If time and other resources permit, we advocate the development of mixed methods assessment, an example of which is the focus of Chapter Nine.
5. How should we collect our data? Do we want to use a telephone survey or a Web-based survey; do we conduct focus groups or use another approach to collecting our

data? The methodology we have selected will help us determine our data collection process. Chapter Three provides an in-depth discussion of data collection.

6. What instrument should we use? This question has to do with developing our own questionnaire, or purchasing a commercial instrument if we plan a Web-based survey. If we choose to conduct focus groups, what will our interview protocol look like? Should we develop several protocols based on the groups we plan to interview? Instrumentation is discussed in Chapter Five.
7. How should we analyze the data? The different assessment designs identified above will demand different approaches to data analysis. Chapter Six provides more information on data analysis.
8. How should we report the results? Results can be reported through executive summaries, short reports, targeted reports, oral briefings, Web sites, or a combination of these. The report needs to be more than a rendition of findings, however. Reports should also include action steps for reasons that are enumerated in Chapter Seven.

These questions provide a map for thinking about the assessment process, as well as offering a framework for how to structure the design of an assessment. Implicit in the process is the protection of and respect for the participants. More details about the requirements for working with participants are provided in Chapter Eight.

Some Illustrations of Assessment in Student Affairs

Examples in student affairs assessment are available on institutional Web sites. Those that are particularly well known include student affairs assessment at Penn State University, the

University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Syracuse University, and many others that are available on the World Wide Web. What is so encouraging about these Web sites is that they reflect that the culture of evidence that we referenced in the introduction to this chapter has developed at many institutions of higher education.

North Dakota State University has developed a wonderful student involvement transcript that is designed to help students assess the skills they have developed by participating in a variety of out-of-class programs (NDSU Student Life, 2006). Oregon State University similarly has identified learning goals for students and provides information about how various student affairs units can contribute to student learning (Oregon State University, 2008) Syracuse University has published a detailed plan related to assessment projects that cut across the units of the division. Guiding questions have been identified for assessment projects (Syracuse University Division of Student Affairs, 2006). Assessment reports are then made available to the campus community and other stakeholders through postings on Web sites (Syracuse University Office of Residence Life, 2005). Penn State University has published 149 studies as of May, 2007 related to student life under the umbrella of the *Penn State Pulse* program. "Penn State Pulse was initiated in Spring of 1995 by Student Affairs to gather feedback on student issues, expectations, usage, and satisfaction" (Research and Assessment, 2007, n.p.).

After reading this discussion as to how to get started and examining a couple of illustrations, we hope it becomes clear that one does not have to do every assessment every year. We recommend that institutions start with keeping track of those who use the various services and move into more complex assessments, which do not have be conducted every year. We think this approach will result in a more manageable strategy to conducting assessments successfully.

Conclusion

In this chapter we presented the case for why assessment in student affairs is an essential dimension of contemporary practice in student affairs. Stakeholders, many of whom are external to our institutions of higher education, expect and demand accountability on the part of our colleges and universities. We then introduced ideas about how to get started in assessment and discussed various types of assessment projects. Finally, we presented a few examples from institutions that do an especially good job of conducting assessments. These exemplars are important because they illustrate not only how to do assessment but also that assessment can be done well in the context of the myriad responsibilities that fall to student affairs officers.

In the next chapters we look at the elements of the methods of assessment. Our authors will review mining existing databases, collecting data, soliciting participants, making decisions about instruments, and analyzing data. Then we bring this process together with a discussion about presenting results to various stakeholders. The book concludes with a discussion of the ethical dimensions that frame assessment, a presentation of a hypothetical mixed methods assessment project, and our vision for the future of assessment projects.

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