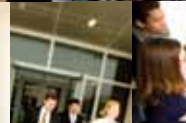# National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment

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The Role of Student Affairs in
Student Learning Assessment

John H. Schuh and Ann M. Gansemer-Topf

Foreword by George Kuh

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"We hope this well-reasoned and thoroughly documented paper by Schuh and Gansemer-Topf, two highly-experienced scholar-practitioners familiar with assessment in student affairs, will persuade faculty and institutional leaders that the perspectives of student affairs staff must be represented in institution-wide assessment."

George D. Kuh

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Abstract

The Role of Student Affairs in Student Learning Assessment

Assessment in student affairs has been around for nearly as long as student affairs has played a formal role in student learning. But as the student affairs role in and contributions to student learning have evolved, so too have the purposes of assessment in student affairs.

Student affairs professionals have much to offer to the assessment of student learning in the student experience, yet this potential is often overlooked and underutilized. Tracing the intersections of student affairs work with the efforts of broader institutional assessment, this paper describes the significant contributions student affairs professionals can make in campus-wide student learning outcomes assessment—by linking the student affairs mission to the institution's mission, purpose, and strategic plan; by forming partnerships with faculty and other administrators; and by sharing their expertise on student learning and development.

In order to accomplish this, however, leadership for assessment in student affairs needs to be more consistent, sufficient resources must be devoted to assessment, and assessment must be integrated into the work portfolio of all student affairs staff. Student affairs assessment that can lead to improved student learning asks penetrating questions about the student experience and gathers evidence of students learning and growing through the services provided by student affairs. Armed with such information, student affairs educators can measure as well as demonstrate how their work contributes to student learning.

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Foreword

Let's Make Sure Student Affairs Is Involved In Assessing Student Learning

Three findings from the college impact research are unequivocal (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). First, the impact of college on desired outcomes is cumulative, the result of many experiences inside and outside of class over a substantial period of time. Second, cognitive and affective development are inextricably intertwined, influencing one another in ways that are not immediately obvious or knowable. Finally, certain out-of-class activities have the potential to enrich student learning, especially with regard to practical competence. For example, managing the student government budget, writing for the campus newspaper, playing in the concert band or on an intercollegiate athletics team, and working on or off campus provide opportunities for students to practice skills and hone dispositions that employers value, such as teamwork, decision making, and time management. Thus, it follows that documenting what happens to students during college is a complex, multi-faceted process requiring multiple measures and cooperation by the two groups on campus that spend the most time with students -- faculty members and student affairs professionals.

In *The Role of Student Affairs in Student Learning Assessment*, John Schuh and Ann Gansemer-Topf describe the contributions that student affairs professionals can and should be expected to make to a campus assessment program. As Schuh and Gansemer-Topf indicate, the student affairs literature long has emphasized the importance of evaluating the efficacy of its programs and services. In recent years, the field has readily accepted its responsibility to determine not only the quality of its offerings but what students learn as a result of participating in a wide range of out-of-class experiences. Some student affairs units devote some or all of a staff member's time to assessment work. Two of the major student affairs national organizations, the American College Personnel Association and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, each sponsor an annual conference dedicated to assessment, separate from their large annual meetings where assessment is also featured. Specialty organizations for practitioners who work in residence life, academic advising, orientation, and campus unions devote sessions at their meetings to assessment. Included among the best selling books in the student affairs field are volumes on assessment.

Despite the expressed interest by student affairs professionals in assessing student learning and personal development, they are not always encouraged to participate or become directly involved in campus assessment efforts. At the same time, not every student affairs staff member is prepared to design and effectively conduct meaningful assessments of students' out-of-class experiences. We hope this well-reasoned and thoroughly documented paper by two highly-experienced scholar-practitioners familiar with assessment in student affairs will persuade faculty and institutional leaders that the perspectives of student affairs staff must be represented in institution-wide assessment. Assessment of student learning and institutional performance would both be strengthened by asking student affairs to take part in holistic, comprehensive approaches to amass and interpret evidence of the impact of college on desired outcomes and demonstrate how student affairs programs and services contribute to these outcomes.

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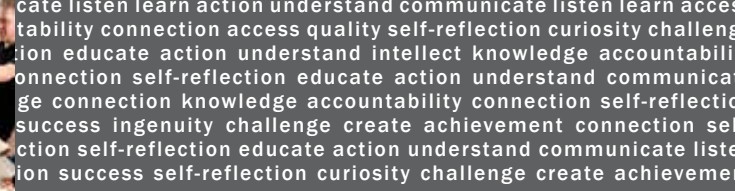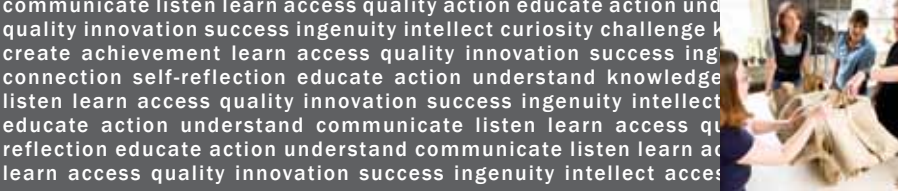
The Role of Student Affairs in
Student Learning Outcomes Assessment
John H. Schuh and Ann M. Gansemer-Topf

Early documents by student affairs professionals show that since the field's inception assessment has been an espoused part of student affairs practice. Over the past eight decades student affairs professionals have made significant progress incorporating the assessment of student learning into their work. The student affairs view of assessment and of the student affairs role in assessment, however, has evolved throughout the field's history. Early assessment activities, which initially focused on student participation and student satisfaction, have developed into efforts to assess what students learn from their experiences outside the classroom and from programs and services provided by student affairs.

Student affairs assessment activities, unfortunately, are often not well integrated with other campus assessment activities—in part, because academic affairs still conducts much of the work on student learning outcomes. While a significant amount of student learning occurs outside of the classroom (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and student affairs professionals often help create and coordinate these out-of-class experiences (Cuyjet & Weitz, 2009), the student affairs perspective and experience too often is absent in campus-wide discussions of student learning assessment.

This paper highlights the substantive contributions that student affairs can make to campus-wide student learning outcomes assessment efforts and identifies factors that may prevent student affairs professionals from making such contributions. Following a brief description of the evolution of the student affairs understanding of and role in the student learning experience, the paper focuses on the role of student affairs in assessing student learning—outlining the challenges in doing so and suggesting how these challenges can be turned into opportunities to promote higher levels of student achievement.

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The Evolving Role of the Contributions of Student Affairs to Student Learning

As broadly defined, student affairs work has existed on American college campuses since 1636, at Harvard College. The establishment and evolution of the student affairs field is chronicled in a series of seminal documents, among them, *The Student Personnel Point of View, 1937* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 1989), *The Second Student Personnel Point of View, 1949* (NASPA, 1989), *A Perspective on Student Affairs* (NASPA, 1987), *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1996) and *Learning Reconsidered* (NASPA & ACPA, 2004). An analysis of these documents yields two broad conclusions. First, the role and contribution of the services, programs, and experiences developed by student affairs practitioners have moved from the periphery

to the center of students' learning at college. Second, student affairs practice in assessing and evaluating student experiences, at least conceptually, has moved from evaluating students' use of and participation in services and programs to measuring how programs and experiences contribute to students' learning—a topic further elaborated in the paper's endnote. The balance of this paper outlines the present role of student affairs in assessing student learning and describes how student affairs professionals can realize their potential for making significant contributions in campus-wide student learning outcomes assessment.

The Student Affairs Role in the Assessment of Student Learning: Contributions and Challenges

At many institutions, campus-wide discussions of student learning focus primarily on students' in-class activities—failing to take into account what they learn beyond the classroom. For this reason it is incumbent on student affairs to systematically assess the contributions to student learning outcomes of students' out-of-class experiences and of student affairs to these outcomes. Student affairs professionals should also be involved in the discussions that lead to the design and implementation of campus-wide efforts to assess student learning and personal development and to use the results to improve the quality of the student experience. The following sections of the paper highlight ways that student affairs can more effectively improve and implement student learning assessment initiatives—both within student affairs departments and at the institution level. Some of the more common challenges facing student affairs practitioners are also identified, as well as opportunities available to them to enhance student achievement through assessment.

Linking Assessment to Institutional Mission and Purpose

Student learning that is especially valued at a particular college or university is often showcased in the institution's mission statement (for example, see Macalester College's mission statement at http://www.macalester.edu/academic/catalog/mhra1.html), in its vision statement (for example, see the vision statement of California State University, Monterey Bay, at http://about.csumb.edu/vision-statement), and in its strategic plan (for example, see Longwood University's strategic plan at http://www.longwood.edu/president/4735.htm). Institutions differ, of course, in their missions, goals, and purposes. Some institutions emphasize educating students in the liberal arts; others focus on preparing students for specific professions; and still others have a special purpose, such as tribal colleges or single-sex colleges, or have a specific curricular focus, such as schools of fine arts or engineering.

Whatever the mission or emphasis of the institution, its student affairs program needs to be developed to support and complement it (Hirt, 2009; NASPA, 1989). It is imperative that student affairs professionals develop programs, services, and experiences that contribute to student learning experiences that are valued at their institution and, moreover, that are empirically verified as adding value to the student experience at their institution. Some activities of student affairs professionals and some things that are measured in student affairs assessments are not aligned with the institution's mission or goals. As a check against these tendencies, any student affairs assessment should start from the following question: How does this program or experience contribute to the institution's mission or goals, and what evidence can be gathered to demonstrate this?

Student learning that is especially valued at a particular college or university is often showcased in the institution's mission statement, in its vision statement, and in its strategic plan.

The University of Georgia, as a positive example, clearly articulates the link between the mission of the institution and that of the division of student affairs "to enhance the learning environment for students" (http://www.uga.edu/studentaffairs/about.htm) and, in doing so, to support the larger institutional mission "to promote high levels of student achievement and to provide appropriate academic support services" (http://www.uga.edu/profile/mission.html). Good assessment is purposeful, and, as in the case of the University of Georgia, it is framed by a logical, systematic link between the mission of student affairs and the teaching and learning mission of the institution. The alignment of student affairs assessment with the missions of student affairs and of the institution has the potential to shape an assessment program that will provide an enriched learning environment for students.

Understanding the Broader Environment

Student affairs practitioners are often focused inwardly on meeting the needs of the students attending their institution. While this focus is essential, the profession must not ignore or underestimate the influence of external pressures on student behavior and institutional policies and practices. Colleges and universities are increasingly expected to provide evidence of their student learning outcomes (see, for example, Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2006, and National Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2006). As Ewell (2009) has observed,

> Colleges and universities are being asked to disclose more and more about academic results and are responding in kind. Most now realize that it will be impossible to sit out the latest round of pressure for accountability with the hope that it will eventually go away (p. 6).

External stakeholders can benefit from knowing that student learning, consistent with institutional mission and purpose, occurs both in and outside the classroom. Student affairs practitioners—with their knowledge about student learning—must take the lead in documenting how their services enhance student learning outside the classroom and how their services support academic-specific and institution-wide assessment efforts (Seagraves & Dean, 2010).

Bridging Accountability and Continuous Improvement

Ewell (2009) maintains that there are two primary goals of assessment—accountability and continuous improvement, that these two goals are constantly in tension, and that given the increased attention on assessment "[t]he conflicting imperatives of accountability and improvement that formed the basis of [his] argument two decades ago remain substantially intact" (p. 7). Student affairs professionals are often well positioned to ease this tension and to help bridge these seemingly parallel goals. For example, although institutional research offices typically provide data on overall student persistence and graduation rates, the work of student affairs offices with various subpopulations on campus can inform a more detailed picture. Staff members who work with historically underrepresented groups (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005)—such as students of color, women, and returning adult learners—can help examine and interpret information about retention and graduation rates of these groups. Student affairs professionals are also among the most knowledgeable people on campus for designing and implementing programs to enhance the student learning and success of these students. For example, Grinnell College, a small, highly selective liberal arts insti-

Student affairs professionals are also among the most knowledgeable people on campus for designing and implementing programs to enhance the student learning and success of these students.

tution, discovered that student attrition was greater between the second and third year of college than between the first and second year. To better understand the second-year student experience and the factors that may have contributed to student attrition, staff members from Grinnell's student affairs and institutional research offices conducted focus groups (Gansemer-Topf, Stern, & Benjamin, 2007). The results from this study led to the development of a second-year student retreat designed to address many of the challenges identified by the student participants. Initiatives such as these can both improve campus programs as well as positively impact the overall accountability measures of persistence and graduation.

Developing and Maintaining Collaborative Partnerships

Effective campus-wide student learning assessment activities require collaboration among various campus units, but given differences in the values, reward structures, and socialization patterns between academic and student affairs units, collaborative partnerships can be difficult to create and sustain (Magolda, 2005; Manning, Kinzie, & Schuh, 2006). To a degree this is understandable. Academic units are primarily concerned with discipline-based in-class learning, while student affairs departments focus on out-of-class experiences. In assessment, faculty members tend to focus on measuring student learning that occurs within their academic major or in the general education component of the curriculum, while student affairs staff members tend to focus on measuring the learning and personal development associated with participating in student affairs programs and services. Consequently, the assessment activities of these different units can easily be siloed. Therefore, it is important to find opportunities where faculty and student affairs can work together in assessing student learning so that the students' total learning experience can be understood for both accountability and improvement purposes.

Student learning is not the result of discrete experiences but rather the product of many different kinds of experiences in and outside the classroom over an extended period of time. Indeed "students' social and extracurricular involvements have important implications for what is learned in college" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 120). Thus, assessment activities should be designed to discover how various combinations of experiences both in and outside the classroom impact student learning.

Outcomes assessment, as Kuh and Banta (2000) have suggested, may be one area where academic affairs and student affairs can contribute equally. Student affairs staff have expertise in the area of student development and student learning as well as understanding of student characteristics, values, and outside-of-class experiences. Whereas faculty naturally focus on students within their academic departments, student affairs professionals serve a broader range of students. While faculty assess learning within an academic discipline, student affairs can assess learning that results from participating in a club or organization, from living in a residence hall or fraternity or sorority, or from participating in a leadership development program. Compiling and synthesizing the results from these various assessments can provide useful information to the institution, the student, and the public through a broader perspective on the entire student learning experience.

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Campus initiatives such as learning communities, service learning, and study-abroad trips often feature both an in-class and out-of-class experience and frequently require coordination from both faculty members and student affairs practitioners. These activities lend themselves to collaborations between faculty and student affairs professionals with the potential to improve student learning and its assessment. Through such collaborations, student affairs practitioners can better understand and appreciate faculty objectives and perspectives, and faculty members can learn firsthand how out-of-class experiences contribute to student learning and personal development—while, perhaps, also getting an informed view of the contributions of student affairs toward attaining the institution's mission. Tinto (2003)'s research on learning communities discovered this advantage: "One of the many benefits of such collaboration, where all voices are heard, is that the academic staff come to 'discover' the wealth of knowledge that student affairs professionals bring to the discourse of teaching and learning" (p. 5). Such collaborative efforts reaffirm the role and the importance of student affairs professionals in student learning and its assessment.

Through their assessment work as well as through their daily interaction with students, student affairs practitioners become campus experts on student characteristics, interests, and attitudes.

Sharing Expertise

The expertise of student affairs professionals is often underutilized in campus-wide assessments. Many student affairs professionals—through educational preparation and training in graduate school or through professional development—are very knowledgeable about how students learn and develop throughout college and about the type and scope of experiences that can enhance students' learning and development (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). Moreover, through their assessment work as well as through their daily interaction with students, student affairs practitioners become campus experts on student characteristics, interests, and attitudes. Student affairs professionals working in counseling, disability services, and student judicial offices are able to observe student behavior patterns and can be among the first on campus to note changes in such patterns. Student affairs professionals are also well positioned to help the institution reach a deeper understanding of the student learning experience through the interpretation of local data in the context of findings from national surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (see http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm) or the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) (see http://www.heri.ucla.edu/abtcirp.php). Although student affairs professionals may engage in these assessment activities, they unfortunately often lack the means to communicate their results to the broader university community; they must find mechanisms through which they can communicate their knowledge of student learning and the results of their efforts to enhance student learning.

On some campuses, administrators and faculty members invite the involvement of members of their student affairs division to participate in interpreting assessment results with an eye toward modifying institutional policies and practices. The University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) provides a good example of how changes resulted from the careful analysis—by the collaboration of academic affairs and student affairs—of the UMF student experience (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005/2010). As a result of this study, which is ongoing, UMF expanded its annual spring celebration of student research projects to include a showcase of works by students in fine arts when the study revealed that the important contributions of these students had been overlooked.

Because regional and specialized accrediting bodies require institutions to document student learning outcomes and what the institution is doing or plans to do to enhance student learning, the role of student affairs in the self-study process should be clarified. Are representatives from student affairs included in the institutional self-study committees? While providing data for the report, are student affairs representatives involved in the larger discussions that involve the institution's role in what, where, and how students learn? The self-study process can be one mechanism for student affairs to communicate its role in campus-wide student learning.

Valuing and Providing Leadership

Successful assessment efforts require strong leadership at many levels. It is unrealistic to expect entry and midlevel professionals to conduct assessments when the senior leaders of the organization do not value them. More critically, as Seagraves and Dean (2010) found, it is important for senior leaders not only to support assessment activities but also to be involved in assessment activities on their campuses.

If strong working relationships have not been developed between student affairs leaders and other senior administrators on campus, it is difficult for staff to connect and collaborate with individuals in other areas of the campus. Thus, senior leaders who can collaboratively take a holistic view of the student experience need to provide leadership for staff members who actually may do the work of conducting the assessments. This leadership can take many forms: providing adequate training and resources to conduct assessment, incorporating expectations for assessment into job descriptions and performance evaluations, and, perhaps most important, using the data produced by assessment. Conducting an assessment can be frustrating when it appears as though nothing is done as a result of assessment. Leaders who value assessment data and make decisions based on this data demonstrate the value of assessment and ultimately advance the mission and goals of their institution (Kuh et al., 2005/2010).

Devoting Resources to Assessment

As with all successful campus initiatives, assessment efforts need to be supported by adequate resources—including time, personnel, funding, and training. Assessment studies need not be tremendously resource intensive, but they do require staff time and adequate financial resources (Swing & Coogan, 2010). In cases in which the resources for assessment are perceived to be lacking, the critical question to pose may be "Can we afford not to do assessment?" Good studies may require extra effort on the part of staff or a reallocation of financial resources to purchase instruments, hire consultants, or acquire technical support. While resources on college campuses are in short supply, student affairs units function in a high-stakes environment— where assessment must be viewed as an investment in the future, not as a diversion or misappropriation of financial and personnel resources.

A lack of training—especially among student affairs practitioners—hinders assessment efforts at many institutions (Seagraves & Dean, 2010). Virtually all faculty and many student affairs staff are trained in various areas of research. Yet, while similar to research, assessment is different in significant ways (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002), and providing the tools and training that practitioners need to conduct assessments is vital for their success. Graduate preparation programs for prospective student affairs practitioners provide one way to develop these skills. There are also numerous professional development opportunities that faculty and staff can access. Student affairs

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professional organizations such as NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and ACPA—College Student Educators International provide conferences focusing on assessment. The Assessment Institute (http://planning.iupui.edu/conferences/national/nationalconf.html), the Association for Institutional Research, and the regional accreditation agencies provide resources and workshops for faculty, staff, and administrators who wish to learn more about designing and conducting effective assessments.

Designing and Completing Activities for Sustainable Assessment

At some institutions, assessment activity surges with the arrival of the accreditation self-study process. If an institution is being considered for renewed accreditation, for example, the senior student affairs officer may decide to conduct a couple of studies to have results available for the institution's self-study and accreditation team's visit. Once the self-study has been completed and the team has visited the campus and submitted its report, the pressure is off and, typically, assessment is set aside for seven or eight years until it is time for the next accreditation visit. This short-sighted approach to assessment—a response to the accreditation cycle—is not taken by an institution with an ongoing commitment to improvement.

Assessment ought to be part of the annual administrative cycle, providing ongoing data collection for reports that outline assessment activities, their results, and the changes based on the results for dissemination on a yearly basis. This approach demonstrates an institutional commitment to accountability and improvement. Conversely, institutional claims of commitment to improving student learning may ring hollow if assessment activities flourish only when an accreditation visit is on the horizon.

Sustainability of assessment is most at risk when it is the sole responsibility of one person. While one person can have a significant impact on assessment at an institution, if this person leaves, the assessment very well may stop. The momentum developed by a series of assessments can come to a halt because the leader's successor is not interested in assessment, has other priorities, or simply does not support the staff's work in assessment.

Implementing Assessment Plans

In some cases of campus assessment, a significant amount of time is dedicated to developing assessment plans and activities, but disappointingly too few plans actually are fully implemented to the point of using assessment findings to guide changes in policies and practices that are subsequently evaluated. In other cases, data have been collected but no time has been spent on analyzing the results and making changes based on the information generated by the study. In still other cases, assessments have been conducted, but the results and changes based on the results are never communicated or distributed. Kuh and Ikenberry (2009) and Jankowski and Makela (2010) illustrate this point: Campus leaders are able to articulate the assessment activities being conducted on their campuses, but information about the results and implications of the assessment activities often are not available.

Very few student affairs divisions outline their assessment activities and report the results. California State University, Sacramento, is an exception. The Division of Student Affairs at Sacramento State has developed a comprehensive assessment plan for many units in the division. The plan (retrievable at http://saweb.csus.edu/students/assessment.aspx) incorporates the departmental mission, planning goals, objectives, measures, and results of assessment initiatives within their division. The Sacramento State plan provides an excellent example of an approach that articulates assessment activities and results.

Assessment ought to be part of the annual administrative cycle, providing ongoing data collection for reports that outline assessment activities, their results, and the changes based on the results for dissemination on a yearly basis.

Presenting plans, of course, is not enough. Results also need to be shared widely in accessible language. One of the best examples of routinely collecting and reporting assessment findings is found in the *Penn State Pulse Program* (see http://studentaffairs.psu.edu/assessment/pulse/), which since 1995 has provided insights into student perceptions and experiences to the larger community through short, well-crafted reports that are timely and attractive.

Asking Tough—or Tougher—Questions

Many assessment activities focus on issues that, while interesting, do not provide information about student learning. The reader will recall that the historical section of this paper identified assessments of student usage of facilities, participation in programs, or satisfaction as being central to assessment practice of the earlier era of student affairs. Campuses that are just beginning assessment may need to start by examining what data already exist or, if data are not available, collecting these preliminary data. Once this information has been collected, assessment efforts need to ask more difficult questions. Unfortunately, many student affairs assessment activities do not progress to this next level. For example, the number of recreational opportunities on campus may be well publicized, but likely to be less available are data describing who uses the facilities and what students gain from participating in recreation programs. Similarly, surveying students to assess if they were satisfied with their tutoring may be somewhat helpful, but assessing student performance after tutoring provides data more relevant to the institutional mission. Thus, the emphasis in assessment changes from "How many students participated in the campus-wide event?" to "What did students learn by participating in the campus-wide event?"

Student affairs staff members need to have more than programs, activities, and experiences they think would contribute to student learning. They need to have the empirical evidence to be confident that these programs, activities, and experiences actually do contribute to student learning. This is the point in student affairs practice where assessment is vital.

Conclusion

Concluding this paper where it began, we note the progress that student affairs practitioners have made in incorporating student learning outcomes assessment into their professional practice. Through their knowledge of student characteristics and attitudes, through their ability to design services aligned with the academic mission of the institution, and with their understanding of student learning outside the classroom, student affairs practitioners bring a distinctive, informed perspective to their institution's assessment program. On too many campuses, however, for various reasons, these potentials and such contributions have not been valued or utilized. Fully understanding and documenting what and how students learn both in and outside of class requires collaboration between the two groups on campus who know the most about students—faculty and student affairs professionals. We are confident that student affairs practitioners are ready, willing, and prepared to embrace these challenges in a manner consistent with their field's historical trajectory and will continue to make progress in assessing how student affairs activities and the out-of-class experience contribute to student learning.

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Endnote

A Historical Review of Assessment in Student Affairs Through Selected Seminal Documents

Over a period of nearly eight decades, the contributions of student affairs to student learning have evolved from a peripheral to a central role. Similarly, assessment in student affairs has evolved, with changing perspectives about how student affairs offices and programs contribute to student life and how that contribution can best be assessed. While the first student personnel dean was appointed in 1890 (Rhatigan, 2009, citing Cowley, 1937), it was not until 1937 that student affairs became a more permanent, formal feature of higher education in the United States (see *The Student Personnel Point of View, 1937* [NASPA, 1989]). The student affairs profession has shifted from 1937 to now, so as to critically address not only the student's intellectual development but the student's personal development as well. Student affairs professionals take various roles on campuses, among them advising, career counseling, and orienting students to their colleges. While assessment has not been among the functions of student affairs for the entirety of the profession, evaluating and understanding programs and their usefulness to students has been a foundational element of the student affairs purpose, as shown in seminal professional statements.

Not until around 1949 did student affairs offices begin to be acknowledged for their role in student learning (see *The Student Personnel Point of View, 1949* [NASPA, 1989]). Learning experiences provided by student affairs were considered to be extracurricular—meaning outside of the formal course of study in which students were engaged—and student affairs staff began to connect these experiences with the total experience of the students' collegiate life through a focus on evaluation and continuous improvement (p. 44).

In 1987 student affairs professionals reflecting on their role in colleges and universities released a document to publicize what should be expected of student affairs offices on campuses, placing their role in student learning as central to the purpose of student affairs (NASPA, 1987). The field was challenged to go beyond providing services for students and supervising the social activities of students by becoming collaborators with academic affairs in providing learning experiences for students. In addition to the major publications that document the shifting trends in student affairs, scholars began to support the assertion that student affairs plays a major role in students' development on campuses, with cocurricular activities having significant meaning (Kuh et al., 2005/2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Professional organizations also supported the changing role of student affairs and its importance to the student collegiate experience, as expressed in the ACPA publication, *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs* (1996), and the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), NASPA, and ACPA publication, *Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Student Learning* (1998). Advocating assessment as the important function in advancing student learning, these documents reflected the common conceptions of student affairs at the time.

By 1999, conceptualizations of the roles and contributions of student affairs included learning and assessment of learning—with "[g]ood practice in student affairs [occurring] when student affairs educators ask, 'What are students learning from our programs and services, and how can their learning be enhanced?'" (Blimling, Whitt, & Associates, 1999, pp. 206–207). By taking this question seriously, student affairs educators were encouraged to assess students' learning and to use this assessment information to revise programs for both student and institutional improvement.

Another principle, articulated in *Good Practice in Student Affairs: Principles to Foster Student Learning* (Blimling et al., 1999), had to do with measuring the effectiveness of programs and services: "Good practice in student affairs occurs when student affairs educators ask, 'What are students learning from our programs and services, and how can their learning be enhanced?'" (pp. 206–207). Moreover, in defining the role of student affairs staff, the authors assert, "Student affairs educators who are skilled in using assessment methods acquire high-quality information; effective application of this information to practice results in programs and change strategies that improve institutional and student achievement" (p. 207). The publication of this seminal document advanced student affairs practice to where it is today: focusing on how to develop programs, experiences, and activities that contribute to student learning—and also providing evidence of this contribution.

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NILOA Mission

NILOA's primary objective is to discover and disseminate ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families and other stakeholders.

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NILOA Occasional Papers are commissioned to examine contemporary issues that will inform the academic community of the current state-of-the art of assessing learning outcomes in American higher education. The authors are asked to write for a general audience in order to provide comprehensive, accurate information about how institutions and other organizations can become more proficient at assessing and reporting student learning outcomes for the purposes of improving student learning and responsibly fulfilling expectations for transparency and accountability to policy makers and other external audiences.

Comments and questions about this paper should be sent to sprovez2@illinois.edu.

About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA web site went live on February 11, 2009. www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and 2009 to 2010. He also served as president of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.
- Peter Ewell joined NILOA as a senior scholar in November 2009.

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