

Why Assessment in Student Affairs?

ASSESSMENT SEEMS to be a pervasive issue in higher education. We may not know what we mean by assessment, or why we should assess, or what to assess, or how to assess, or how to use assessment, but we all feel the pressure to *assess*. This pressure is often more strongly felt in student affairs, which, in an era of increased competition for resources, may be questioned critically about its rationale, importance, and results. This chapter introduces some of the basic definitions surrounding the issue of assessment, provides some reasons to assess, and offers a comprehensive assessment model for student affairs.

Some Basic Definitions

One of the first problems we encounter is confusion over what we mean by assessment. Too often assessment is thought of as simply doing a survey or running a focus group. Some terms are used interchangeably (*assessment* and *evaluation*), some phrases are used incorrectly (*statistics show*), and some terms are so vague as to strip them of any commonly accepted meaning (*quality* or *excellence*).

Let us start with the term *assessment*. There are many definitions in the assessment and evaluation literature, with no conclusive consensus. We can make only an admittedly arbitrary, but we hope reasoned, judgment. Therefore, for the purposes of this book, "Assessment is any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or

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agency effectiveness" (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996, p. 18). Effectiveness includes not only assessing student learning outcomes, but assessing other important outcomes, such as cost effectiveness, clientele satisfaction, meeting clientele needs, complying with professional standards, and comparisons with other institutions. Assessment in student affairs is not restricted to students, but may include other constituents within the institution, such as the faculty, administration, and governing boards, and outside the institution, such as graduates, legislators, funding sources, and accreditation agencies.

One further clarification is that for the purposes of this book, we are not including the assessment of an individual for the purposes of providing that person feedback for personal development or improvement. Our emphasis is on program or service assessment, not individual assessment. Nevertheless, assessing individual student or other clientele outcomes, *taken together*, is consistent with our definition of assessment. For example, we may not want any information about why an individual student may persist to graduation, but we will want to know why, in the aggregate, students graduate.

We have purposely omitted staff performance evaluations from our definition of assessment. In our context, assessment is limited to student services, programs, and facilities only, and should never include staff performance evaluations. Of course, we may gather assessment information that has indirect implications for the personnel involved, but this information should be used in the context of program or service assessment, not personnel evaluation.

Assessment must be contrasted with but linked to *evaluation*. Here there is less agreement about the definition. We assert that "evaluation is any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional, or institutional effectiveness" (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996, p. 19). In other words, assessment describes effectiveness; evaluation uses these descriptions in order to improve effectiveness, however that might be defined by an institution. For example, determining whether admissions criteria predict subsequent persistence and degree completion is assessment. Using that assessment to change admissions requirements is evaluation.

Another term also must be defined: *measurement*. Measurement refers to the methods we use to gather information for the purposes of assessment. Typically measurement methods are divided into two discrete categories: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methodologies assign numbers to objects, events, or observations according to some rule (Rossmann and Eikhawas, 1987). Instruments with established psychometric properties are used to collect data, and statistical methods are used to analyze data and

draw conclusions. For example, the ability to predict college success might involve gathering all the quantifiable data about the variables that are thought to predict persistence and degree completion, such as high school grades, scores on standardized tests, involvement in high school activities, and parents' education and income. These data might then be correlated with subsequent student behavior (dropping out or persisting) to determine which ones, and in which combination, best predict college success. (For a fuller discussion of quantitative methods, see Upcraft and Schuh, 1996.)

Qualitative methodologies are the detailed description of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors; the use of direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts; and the analysis of excerpts or entire passages from documents, correspondence, records, and case histories (Patton, 1990). Using the admissions example again, admissions personnel might want to interview students who persisted and those who dropped out to determine the extent to which their backgrounds and experiences might have contributed to their success or lack thereof. Variables that seem to predict college success but are difficult to measure (for example, motivation) might be better understood through a qualitative approach. (For a fuller description of qualitative methods, see Upcraft and Schuh, 1996. For a discussion of how to do qualitative studies, see Chapter Three in this manual.) We should point out that the selection of an assessment methodology may not be an either-or decision; in fact, in many cases, the use of both methodologies is not only appropriate but also more powerful than a single one.

Another definition worth mentioning, although it will not be the focus of this manual, is *research*. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was fashionable to use the term *student affairs research* to refer to assessment and evaluation efforts. This term proved to be confusing, particularly to faculty, who had a much narrower definition of research. When comparing research and assessment, Erwin (1991) argues that although they share many processes in common, they differ in at least two important respects. First, assessment guides good practice, while research guides theory development and tests concepts. Second, assessment typically has implications for a single institution, while research typically has broader implications for student affairs and higher education.

The failure to understand the difference between research, on the one hand, and assessment and evaluation, on the other, can and often does lead to some strong differences of opinion between social science researchers and education assessors and evaluators. Chronbach (1982) was one of the first to distinguish between research and evaluation. He wrote:

Designing an evaluative investigation is an art. The central purpose of evaluation differs from that of basic social science research, and evaluations fit into different institutional and political contexts. The strategy of evaluative research therefore requires special consideration. Logic is necessarily the same in all disciplined inquiry, but the translation of logic into procedure should depend upon context, purpose, and the expected payoff. Many recommendations appropriate for long term programs of scientific research are ill suited to evaluation. Hence, general writings on design and scientific method are inadequate to guide the evaluator. For any evaluation many good designs can be proposed, but no perfect ones [pp.1-2].

Does this mean that by definition, assessments and evaluations are flawed and therefore not to be relied on? No. Assessment and evaluation studies are useful and should be done even when they do not adhere strictly to the canons of social science research. Rossi and Freeman (1993) make the distinction between "perfect" and "good enough" assessments: "In many circumstances, it is difficult or impossible to conduct impact evaluations using what are in ideal terms, the best possible designs" (p. 220). We assert that the "perfect" research study (an impossibility) always evolves into a "good enough" assessment study for many of the following reasons.

Resource limitations. Most student programs and services lack the human and financial resources to conduct "perfect" assessments. Often already busy student affairs personnel are asked to participate in assessment studies in addition to their other responsibilities. Further, assessments cost money, but seldom is enough money available to conduct the "perfect study." Thus, resource compromises are often made which affect assessment designs.

Time limitations. Often decisions must be made, or policies addressed, or a problem solved before the "perfect" design can be implemented. The best example in higher education may be retention studies. A well-controlled, longitudinal, five-year study is ideal, yet few, if any, institutions can afford to wait that long to address retention problems. Our experience is that the window of opportunity to influence policies and practices may be open for as little as a month, and rarely more than a year. Assessment designs must be compromised to fit more realistic time expectations.

Organizational contexts. Organizations are not static; they are in a constant state of change, and therefore their assessment needs may vary over time. For student affairs, assessment needs might drastically change as a result of new leadership that requires different evidence of effectiveness, or

sees new problems, or devalues old problems. In this changing environment, changes in initial assessment agendas must be made, perhaps further compromising the "perfect" design:

Implementation limitations. All assessment designs are based on certain assumptions that may or may not be correct. On the quantitative side, for example, a perfectly drawn random sample may yield a usable sample that is not representative of the population under study. Or the response rate may not be as high as desired, and thus the statistical analyses may be limited or the sampling error increased (or both). Or there may be problems with instruments that were poorly designed or failed to meet psychometric standards such as reliability ("the extent to which we are measuring some attribute in a systematic and therefore repeatable way"; Walsh and Betz, 1985) and validity (a test measures "what we intend to measure"; Walsh and Betz, 1985).

On the qualitative side, perhaps fewer people than expected showed up to participate in focus groups. Or the interview protocol did not yield the desired information. Or the interviewers failed to perform effectively. Or something as simple as a malfunctioning tape recorder limited precise analyses of participant voices. So again, "compromises" must be made. The social science researcher may have the luxury to discard a study whose flaws result from implementation limitations; the assessment investigator is under more pressure to salvage a study and report results based on design implementation flaws.

Political contexts. Social scientists attempt to conduct research that is, to the extent possible, apolitical, and they often have the luxury of conducting studies that "search for the truth no matter where it leads." Assessment, on the other hand, always occurs in a political context that must be taken into account in assessment designs. We have asserted that "all assessment is political" (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996, p. 16), and assessment designs can and often do reflect political realities. For example, an assessment study under discussion may never be done, a study in progress may be discontinued, and in rare instances, a study already completed may be kept confidential because the results may be politically or ideologically unacceptable to policymakers.

So where does this leave us? When does a study become so compromised that it should never be done, or discarded even if implemented? Rossi and Freeman (1993), while defending the "good enough" principle of assessment, also argue that the investigator has the responsibility to "raise the question whether to undertake the assessment at all, especially if meaningful results are unlikely" (p. 220). These choices, they say, always involve

compromise; there is not a single, "always best" design that can be used. "The 'good enough' rule," they say, "is that the evaluator should choose the best possible design from a methodological standpoint, having taken into account the potential importance of the program, the practicality and feasibility of each design, and the probability that the design chosen will produce useful and credible results" (pp. 220-221).

The bottom line is that decisions will be made and policies developed regardless of the availability of assessment results. So the question becomes, "When it comes to the usefulness of a study for policy or practice, is a study with substantial limitations better than no study at all?" Our answer is that within reason, limited data are better than none at all, but bad data should never be used under any circumstances. Absence of data can sometimes lead to policies and practices based on intuition, prejudice, preconceived notions, or personal proclivities, none of them desirable bases for making decisions. That is a reality of the administrative and political world of student affairs and higher education administration.

So we come down on the side of the "good enough" rule, but with one important and major caveat: *all compromises made must be clearly identified when an assessment report is published, cautioning all prospective audiences to take into account the study's various limitations as they decide what credence to give to the study.* Failure to take this step is not only unethical; it leaves readers to assume that because the investigators did not identify limitations, they must not know them, and therefore both the investigators and the study itself lack credibility.

One other issue must be addressed in discussing the differences between research and assessment and evaluation. There is a fundamental, philosophical difference about the role of the researcher versus the role of the assessment investigator. Donald Campbell (1991), the highly respected social science research methodologist, stated that "the job of the methodologies for the experimenting society is not to say *what is to be done* but rather to say *what has been done.*" This is in sharp contrast to the role of the assessment investigator, who, in our opinion and in the opinions of several assessment experts (Palomba and Banta, 1999; Rossi and Freeman, 1993), is obligated not only to describe what has been done but what should be done, given the findings of the study. The very nature of assessment dictates an active role. **In** fact, most sponsors of assessment studies insist on such judgments, although they are not bound to follow them.

In summary, research and assessment and evaluation are two different but related fields of inquiry with similar tools, but different goals and philosophical underpinnings. As our colleague Patrick Terenzini once said, "In

assessment, you start with the 'perfect' research design,- and keep making compromises until you have a doable assessment study" (P. Terenzini, personal communication, 1996).

Why Assessment in Student Affairs?

National pressures on higher education institutions to demonstrate their effectiveness are continuing to mount. State legislatures and governors, the federal government, the general public, and students and their families are asking tough questions. What is your college's contribution to learning? Do your graduates know what you think they know, and can they do what your degrees imply? How do you ensure that? What do you intend for your students to learn? At what level are students learning what you are teaching? Is that the level you intend? What combination of institutional and student effort would it take to get to a higher level of student learning (Marchese, 1990)? Is your college accessible to all qualified students, regardless of gender, race, age, and demographic and background variables. And perhaps most important, as tuition increases at twice the rate of inflation, are students being shut out of education because they cannot afford it, and if they can, are they getting a reasonable return on their considerable financial investment (Up craft, 1999)? We can no longer ignore these questions. Assessment helps us answer them in more systematic and valid ways.

Survival

Student affairs is under considerable pressure to demonstrate its importance and worth. In an era of declining resources and increased competition for what precious few resources there are, student affairs has come under the institutional financial microscope. Questions range from quality and efficiency to the ultimate question: Do we really need this service or program? So the first answer to the question, "Why assessment in student affairs?" is *survival*. There is some evidence that student services have managed to avoid budget cuts over many years (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). That does not suggest that student affairs will be immune from budget cuts in the future, and there have been times when in order to shield academic programs from severe cuts, budgets of all other categories have suffered a disproportionate share of reductions (Cage, 1992).

One might easily respond, "Isn't there a substantial body of research that demonstrates that students' out-of-class experiences contribute to their learning, personal development, academic achievement and retention?" The

answer is yes (see Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Kuh, Branch Douglas, Lund, and Rarnin-G~ek, 1994), but this fact is limited in its application to practice, for two reasons. First, this research is often not well known among many higher education administrators and faculty, and second, even if it is, the question of local applicability always arises-for example, "OK, so the research evidence shows that students living in residence halls earn higher grades and are more likely to persist to graduation than students living elsewhere, but is that true at our institution?" National studies may be more elegant in design, more sophisticated in research techniques, and more lucid in the presentation and results, but locally produced studies, if done well, will have more impact on a particular campus. In this sense, all assessment is local.

In general, we believe that assessment efforts can and will demonstrate the effectiveness and worth of student services and programs, and show positive relationships between students' out-of-class experiences and use of student services and programs and student learning, including academic achievement and retention. However, local results may not be consistent with the findings of national studies, since students make their own environments based on interactions with their institutions. Further, even if local studies are consistent with national findings, local policymakers and decision makers may choose to ignore this evidence for other reasons. Thus, all assessment is a risk. We can never be certain that local assessment studies will have the desired impact of demonstrating the worth of student services and programs or ensuring their survival.

Quality

Although survival may be the primary motivator for assessment in student affairs, there are other equally valid reasons to assess. Even if it is demonstrated that student services and programs are essential and needed, a second question is, Are they of high quality? Assessment can be a powerful tool in linking goals to outcomes, helping define quality, and determining if quality exists in student affairs. We strongly believe that a fundamental responsibility of student affairs is to provide services, programs, and facilities that are of the highest quality. Assessment can help determine if we have been successful in fulfilling that responsibility.

Affordability

A third reason for assessment is to gauge afford ability and cost effectiveness. The question faced goes something like this: "Sure, this program [or that service] is needed, and there is evidence of its quality, but in an era of

declining resources, can we afford it? Can we continue to fund it at current levels? Can we afford it at all?" Decisions to eliminate services and programs based on their affordability may have to be made, but other affordability questions abound. Might it be less expensive to outsource this service or program? Are there other ways of providing the same service or program less expensively? Can this service or program generate income from fees? Can this service do more with less, or less with less? And how do we know? Unfortunately, these decisions are often made without adequate assessment, in part because there are few, if any, cost effectiveness models used in student affairs.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning, according to Baldrige (1983), examines the big issues of an organization: its mission, purpose, long-range goals, relationship to its environment, share of the market, interactions with other organizations. Since many higher education institutions are seriously committed to strategic planning, it is important for student affairs to be an active and effective participant in this process. Assessment contributes to strategic planning by helping to define goals and objectives and pointing to critical issues or problems that must be resolved successfully if the organization is to achieve its goals. Assessment is especially important in the early phases of strategic planning to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the future. It is also critical in the later stages of planning, when evaluation of policies and programs occurs.

Policy Development and Decision Making

What evidence do we have to help us make a decision or develop or revise a policy? Assessment can provide systematic information that can be critical in helping policymakers and decision makers make valid judgments about policy, decide on important issues, and make decisions about resource allocations. Making these kind of judgments based on systematic information is important not only within students affairs; it is also important to help student affairs influence policies and decisions within the institution and with stakeholders outside the institution, such as boards of control, legislatures, graduates, and the general public.

Politics

Assessment may be necessary for political reasons. Sometimes we must do assessment because someone or some institution of importance wants some information, which makes it politically important to produce. It may be the

president of the institution, a faculty governing group, an influential board of control member, an outspoken legislator, or an influential graduate. We must also be concerned about the political impact of assessment findings. As we stated earlier, all assessment is political; thus, assessment investigators must be attuned to the impact of their studies from the moment an assessment idea emerges. If one of the purposes of assessment is to influence policy and practice, then the political context within which decisions are made must be accounted for in the assessment process.

Accreditation

According to the Commission on Higher Education's *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* (1994), one of the criteria for accreditation is outcomes or institutional effectiveness: "The deciding factor in assessing the effectiveness of any institution is evidence of the extent to which it achieves its goals and objectives. The process of seeking such evidence and its subsequent use helps to cultivate educational excellence. One of the primary indications of the effectiveness of faculty, administration, and governing boards is the skill with which they raise questions about institutional effectiveness, seek answers, and significantly improve procedures in the light of their findings" (p. 16). This moves assessment from the "nice to have if you can afford it" category to the "you better have it if you want to stay accredited" category. Student affairs is expected to be an active participant in the accreditation process and therefore is required to contribute assessment evidence to this process.

These are among the many reasons for assessment in student affairs. They are important because we believe that the first step in the assessment process (see Chapter Two) is to determine why you are doing a particular study, because what you do will in large part be determined by why you are doing it. We also believe these questions are best answered within the context of a comprehensive assessment program.

A Comprehensive Assessment Model

Too often assessment is done piecemeal, without any real planning or consistency, in response to a crisis--or it is not done at all. Often we do not do anything because we do not know how to start or what to do. This comprehensive assessment model describes various types of assessment and offers advice about which assessments are appropriate.

Tracking

The first component of this model is *keeping track of who uses student services, programs, and facilities*. How many clients use services, programs, and facilities, and how are they described by gender, race, ethnicity, age, class standing, residence, and other demographic variables? For example, if we analyze the patient census in health services and discover that African Americans are underrepresented compared to their percentage of the student population, then we must uncover why this is so and make necessary changes.

This component is very important, because if the intended clientele do not use service~, programs, or facilities, then our intended purposes cannot be achieved. However, sheer numbers do not tell the whole story, especially if users or participants are not representative of the clientele. The quantity and distribution of users have important implications for policy and practice and must be assessed.

Needs Assessment

The second component of this model is *assessing student and other clientele needs*. The basic principle that we should meet the needs of our clientele is a good one and well supported in the literature, but often it is not easy to accomplish. There are many questions to be answered. What kinds of services, programs, and facilities do students and other clientele need, based on student and staff perceptions, institutional expectations, and research on student needs? How do we distinguish between wants and needs? How do we know if what we offer fits our clientele? Assessing student and other clientele needs can provide answers to these questions. For example, a needs assessment could help determine if the educational programs offered in residence halls are consistent with residents' needs and what kinds of educational programs to conduct in residence halls (see Chapter Nine).

Satisfaction Assessment

The third component of this model is *assessing student and other clientele satisfaction*. Of those persons who use our services, programs, and facilities, what is their level of satisfaction? What strengths and suggestions for improvement do they identify? Clientele satisfaction is important because if users are not satisfied, they will not use what we offer again, and they will not recommend our services and programs to friends and colleagues. We are also interested in clientele satisfaction because it provides valuable information about how to improve our services, programs, and facilities. For example, a satisfaction study of users of recreational facilities may tell if the

hours the facilities are open are consistent with students' available discretionary time (see Chapter Ten).

Student Cultures and Campus Environments Assessment The fourth component is assessing *campus environments and student cultures*. It is critical to take a look at collective perceptions of campus environments and student cultures within which individuals conduct their day-to-day lives. This component of the assessment model can help answer such questions as, What is the climate for women on this campus? What is the academic environment, both inside and outside the classroom? What is the overall quality of life in residence halls? Is the campus environment receptive to and confirming of students of color (see Chapter Twelve)?

Outcomes Assessment

A fifth component is *assessing outcomes*. Of those who use our services, programs, and facilities, is there any effect on their learning, development, academic success, or other intended student learning outcomes, particularly when compared with nonusers? Can programmatic interventions be isolated from other variables that may influence outcomes, such as background, characteristics, and other experiences? For example, can we isolate living in residence halls as a unique, positive factor in students' grades and persistence to graduation? Do students who seek help from the counseling center for depression become less depressed as a result of receiving treatment?

Assessing outcomes, however, is not restricted to student learning outcomes. There may be other outcomes important to effective student services and programs, but not directly related to student learning outcomes. For example, a counseling center may determine that an important outcome is a reasonable wait time between when clients first seek treatment and when they actually receive treatment. Or an important outcome for a financial aid office is to ensure that students have access to the amount and types of financial aid consistent with institutional, state, and federal regulations.

These kinds of studies are very difficult to design, implement, and interpret, but in some ways they attempt to answer the most fundamental question of all: Is what we are doing having any effect, and, if so, is that effect the intended one? These studies are at once the most important we do yet most difficult to conduct (see Chapter Eleven).

Comparable Institution Assessment

A sixth component is *comparable institution assessment*. How does the quality of services, programs, and facilities compare with "best-in-class" com-

comparable institutions? An important way of assessing quality is to compare one's own institution to other institutions that appear to be doing a better job with a particular service, program, or facility, often described as benchmarking. A particularly strong example of this approach is the work conducted by Taylor and Massy (1996); as a result of studying one thousand institutions, they developed over one hundred benchmarks for these institutions.

One purpose of comparable institution assessment would be to discover how others achieve their results and then to translate their processes to one's own environment. For example, if very few first-year students use the institution's career development services, can we look at another institution that has some success in getting those students to seek out career services and learn how it was done? The key to this assessment component is to select comparable institutions that have good assessment programs rather than relying on anecdotal or reputational information.

National Standards Assessment

A seventh component of this model is *using nationally accepted standards to assess*. How do our services, programs, and facilities compare to accepted national standards, such as those developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) for Student Services/Development Programs, various national and regional accrediting agencies, and professional organizations? For example, we might want to know from the CAS self-assessment instrument if our Center for Women Students is meeting minimal standards for women's centers in terms of its mission, goals, policies, funding, programs, services, and other dimensions.

Cost Effectiveness Assessment

The final component, added to the model since the publication of *Assessment in Student Affairs*, is *assessing cost effectiveness*. Are the benefits students derive from what we offer worth the cost, and how do we know that? For example, can we outsource health services and maintain the same level of quality and service at less cost to the institution and to students? There is very little guidance offered from current student affairs literature, except at the most basic level of analysis: divide the cost of a service by the number of students using the service. Such an "analysis" is often fraught with so many methodological problems that its conclusions may be meaningless. Cost-benefit analysis is difficult and somewhat imprecise in a nonprofit, service-oriented organization, but it should be attempted nevertheless (see Chapter Thirteen).

Conclusion

Assessment is not another educational fad that will disappear when newer fads emerge. For the many reasons discussed in this chapter, external pressures to assess, from accountability to accreditation, will continue for the near future. But even without these pressures, assessment must be done because if it is conducted properly, it is the best way to ensure our commitment to high-quality student services, programs, and facilities.

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