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# Assessment in Practice: A Companion Guide to the ASK Standards

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# **Assessment in Practice:** A Companion Guide to the ASK Standards

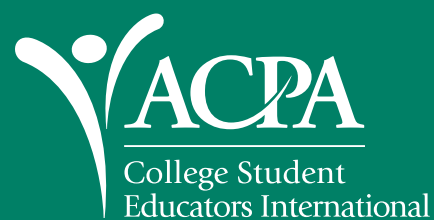
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# Abstract

COLLEGES TODAY ARE ASKED TO PROVIDE GREATER PROOF that they are providing quality educational experiences to their students. There has been a growing need for student affairs to provide documentation that their areas also impact learning and student experience. However, many student affairs professionals are overwhelmed by the idea of assessment and are looking for examples of best practices in this area. Several years ago the American College Personnel Association's Commission Directorate for Assessment and Evaluation developed the Assessment Skills and Knowledge Standards for practitioners. This document provides examples of these standards in practice.

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# Introduction: The Foundation

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## The Foundation

Through the years, the practice of assessment in student affairs has evolved. From the founding of the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in 1979, to the original CAS publication arguing for self-assessment in 1986, to Upcraft and Schuh's (1996) seminal book that established the rationale, need, and basic steps in the process, the profession has increasingly become one that recognizes the importance and value of assessment. Evidence of the importance of assessment in the field of student affairs work is clear. Professional preparation programs now include courses on assessment principles; professional organizations offer assessment-specific institutes and conferences, and organizations such as College Student Educators International - ACPA and Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education - NASPA have created philosophical documents that serve as a guide for practitioners (ACPA, 2006; NASPA, 2009). Further, there is an emergence of assessment related organizations such as Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL), the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE), the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), and the New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (the Alliance).

The increased presence of assessment within higher education has in turn dictated an increased need for assessment training. Practitioners are calling for assessment training to be demystified, grounded in the practical, and discussed within the context of multiple institutional types. Professional associations such as ACPA, NASPA and the American Association of College and Universities (AAC&U) have created assessment conferences to equip the membership and respond to the need for pragmatic assessment.

In 2006 the ACPA Commission on Assessment and Evaluation developed the Assessment Skills and Knowledge Standards (ASK Standards) (ACPA, 2006). "The ASK Standards seek to articulate the areas of content knowledge, skill and disposition [sic] that student affairs professionals need in order to perform as practitioner-scholars to assess the degree to which students are mastering the learning and development outcomes we intend as professionals" (ACPA, 2006, p.4). With the publication of the ASK Standards, the profession had, for the first time, clearly identified standards for professional practice regarding assessment, placing emphasis on the need to develop these skills. The curricular construct of the ASK Standards has been recognized as useful in the field and serves as an excellent framework for creating an assessment compendium.

The structure of this book complements the ASK Standards by presenting the theoretical principles of assessment. We have included chapters on the fundamentals of assessment, developing outcomes, data collection and analysis strategies, creating a culture of assessment, the ethics and politics of assessment, and reporting assessment results. Further, each chapter blends the theoretical concepts of assessment with practical case studies from various types of institutions. The illustrations are intended to provide useful examples that can guide practitioners at all levels of the organization in the creation of their own assessment initiatives.

One of the challenges in talking about student affairs assessment is the lack of a common language for the practice. Words such as *goal*, *objective*, and *outcome* may be used differently in different institutions; for practitioners who may already be hesitant about conducting assessment, the resulting confusion can be frustrating and discouraging. Before progressing to

other sections of this book, it is important to establish a common understanding of language. The following section presents terms that are typically misunderstood or confusing in nature. We review the multiple meanings of the terms and then recommend a clear definition. This book provides a glossary of commonly used terms associated with the practice of student affairs assessment.

## The Language of Assessment

Hippocrates once said, “*The chief virtue that language can have is clearness, and nothing detracts from it so much as the use of unfamiliar words.*” Unfamiliar, uncommon, and undefined words reveal a challenge many have with the practice of assessment. The words, just as the practice, are simply not understood, and as a result, embracing the practice of assessment becomes a daunting task that seems insurmountable.

Many professions operate within an agreed upon lexicon. In such instances, the social, political, and institutional context may result in a word being expressed with a “dialect” or slight modification, but the foundational meaning is intact, thus allowing for a common understanding in spite of the dialectic differences. Yet, to date, there is not an agreed upon presentation of assessment terminology in student affairs. To further complicate the matter, both higher education and student affairs have been relaxed with the use of assessment terms. For some, evaluation is the use of data for institutional improvement (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), while others refer to evaluation as the process of examining program effectiveness often referred to as program evaluation (Tuckman, 1979). With such discrepancies in our use of language, it is easy to understand why creating a culture of assessment has been challenging at some institutions.

An organization’s culture is defined by its commonly held beliefs, values, norms, behaviors and practices (Schein, 1997). If assessment is to become infused throughout our work, and routinely used to improve practice, it must become part of our cultural norms. A culture of assessment is one in which assessment is understood to be an element of good practice, part of the way that we conduct ourselves as ethical professionals. While the current focus on assessment in practice is heightened, we have been encouraged for decades to incorporate it into our work. The *Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1949) promoted “the continuous evaluation and improvement of current programs,” stating specifically that “the effectiveness of any personnel service lies in the differences it makes in the development

of individual students” (p. 33). The *Principles for Good Practice in Student Affairs* (ACPA & NASPA, 1997) similarly emphasized the use of “systematic inquiry to improve student and institutional performance” (p. 1). However, with the publication of the ASK Standards on which this book is based, the ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation noted that “there is no agreement and no clear articulation of the content areas and proficiencies needed to successfully assess student learning outcomes in the co-curriculum” (ACPA, 2006, p. 4). As there was no clear articulation of content areas and proficiencies needed, there has also been no common language of assessment. In order for a culture of assessment to be developed and the practice of assessment to be embraced either within a single institution or across the profession, there must be a common understanding of the words associated with the practice. The following section presents an overview of assessment terminology in categories reflecting *foundational constructs*, describing the broad concepts of assessment; *operational constructs*, describing elements important in assessment; and *process constructs*, describing stages and goals of assessment.

## Foundational Constructs

Assessment terminology at every level of the process could benefit from increased clarity and specificity; however, it is particularly important to communicate clearly about the characteristics of the foundational constructs themselves. The words assessment, evaluation, and research are often used loosely, or even interchangeably. Further, the field of assessment itself is evolving, and the way in which terms are used in the literature is changing. The definitions below reflect a shift from three very separate foundational constructs (i.e., assessment, evaluation, research) to more recent usage that focuses on just two broad areas: assessment and research. The distinction between the two can be especially important in student affairs/academic affairs collaborations, since on some campuses and in some disciplines, faculty may be more likely to use a research paradigm for their work.

### Assessment

The term assessment has evolved over time from one that solely entails the collection of information for institutional improvement (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996) to more recent definitions that include both the collection and the subsequent use of data (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Huba, & Freed, 2000; Suskie, 2009). The shift in how assessment is used in practice is

indicative of the philosophical shift of the field from a focus on simply collecting information to an emphasis on the use of data for institutional improvement. The definitions below represent this larger definition of assessment as a process in which data are gathered for the purpose of making decisions and improving practice.

- “Gathering information about a particular program or a group of programs in order to improve that program or programs all the while contributing to student development and learning...Assessment is putting into place a systematic process that will answer the following questions on a continuous, ongoing basis: (a) What are we trying to do and why?, (b) What is my program supposed to accomplish?, (c) How well are we doing it?, (d) How do we know?, (e) How do we use the information to improve or celebrate successes?, and (f) Do the improvements we make work?” (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004, p. 8-9).
- “Assessment is the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning” (Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 8).

### Evaluation

The understanding of evaluation has also evolved in the literature. In 1996, Upcraft and Schuh defined evaluation as “any effort to use assessment evidence to improve departmental, divisional, or institutional effectiveness” (p. 19). More recently, evaluation is presented as a construct within the assessment process and is no longer described as a stand-alone component.

- “Evaluation applies judgment to data that are gathered and interpreted through assessment” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4).

### Research

Research involves the collection of information for the purpose of gaining knowledge, developing theory, or testing concepts and constructs (Babbie, 1999; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). The information is used in ways to further the understanding of the phenomenon. Research differs from assessment in that assessment tends to focus on one institution (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001) and is aligned with the organizational mission and departmental goals (Davis Barham & Scott, 2006). Assessment should be directly linked to departmental mission and goals; it is intended to answer local questions. By contrast,

research is intended to answer larger questions or lead to understanding of broader phenomena. That said, some assessment initiatives may also be considered research if the design of the study is such that the information is generalizable beyond the local setting.

## Operational Constructs

Operational constructs are the words used to describe the various pieces of the assessment process, and differences in definitions can add to the confusion surrounding the assessment process. The majority of practitioners would agree on the definition for the word “mission.” However, consensus is not as clear when we talk about what constitutes a goal, and whether an objective is different from a goal, and how an outcome should be constructed.

While it is most important that working groups on the local level share common understandings, the definitions below are drawn from the literature and are offered as a starting place.

### Mission

“A mission clarifies an organization’s purpose, or why it should be doing what it does” (Bryson, 2004, p. 102). A mission statement can be at the institutional, divisional, departmental, or programmatic level. Ideally, mission statements at each of these levels can be mapped, or linked, to each other, so that common ideas are reflected and reach greater specificity moving from the institutional level to the smaller unit levels.

### Goal

A goal is a specific result articulated in broad terms (Henning, 2007). A goal makes an element of the mission statement more tangible, but it is still broad enough that there may be a number of steps or pathways to achieve it.

### Objective

An objective is the intended effect of a service or intervention, but is much more specific than a goal. It is facilitator or input centered (Henning, 2007).

### Outcome

In general, outcomes are the desired final product. The word *outcome* itself can be confusing, since it is typically used to refer to both the desired effect and the resulting effect. “Outcome assessments attempt to answer the most important question of all in student affairs: Is what we are doing having any effect, is that effect the intended one, and how do we know?” (Terenzini & Upcraft, 1996, p. 218). There are multiple types of outcomes, and dialectic differences on the types. Those most salient to student

affairs practice are program outcomes, learning outcomes and development outcomes (Davis Barham & Scott, 2006). Table 1.1 provides a summary of the different types as well as the dialectic variations.

It is important to note that in some recent discussions, *learning outcomes* have been intended to subsume *developmental outcomes*, e.g. “*Learning Reconsidered* defines *learning* as a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates *academic learning* and *student development*” (NASPA & ACPA, 2004, p. 2). However, some campuses still consider learning and development to be separate; therefore, understanding the uniqueness of each is important in advancing the understanding of assessment terminology.

## Process Constructs

There are a number of different processes related to conducting assessment. We make reference to assessment plans and assessment cycles, program review and program evaluation, and at the end of it all, “closing the loop.” As with the other constructs, it is important for effective working relationships that we use a common language when describing what we want to accomplish. The process constructs are often used at the institutional level to describe expectations of assessment practice across campus. It is particularly important to understand the use of these terms in a local context to ensure that the intended outcome is achieved.

**Table 1.1: Summary of Outcome Types**

Outcome Type (name variations)	Definition	Examples
Program Outcome <i>Name Variations</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service Outcome</li> <li>• Administrative Outcome</li> <li>• Operational Outcome</li> <li>• Process Outcome</li> </ul>	“...illustrate what you want your program to do....” (Bresciani, 2001, p. 3).	May involve tracking of users, patterns of office/facility use, or number of programs. Outcomes may also include satisfaction/opinion based data, shortening wait times, reducing vandalism in the residence halls, tracking retention and GPAs.
Learning Outcome	<i>Learning outcomes</i> are statements of what students will be able to do, know, or believe as a result of participating in a learning activity (a class, a project, an educational program, or an individual interaction) (Jenkins & Unwin, 1996).	May involve knowing procedures for: completing an incident report, doing a room inspection, managing an information desk, conducting a meeting, managing conflict, understanding social justice, etc.
Developmental Outcome	<i>“Developmental outcomes</i> illustrate the affective dimensions you desire to instill or enhance. Developmental outcomes assess affective dimensions or attitudes, not cognitive abilities”	Statements of how students are expected to grow, specifically in regard to key areas such as cognitive, psychosocial, ethical, moral, racial/ethnic, identity, social, or spiritual development.



The terms *assessment plan*, *assessment cycle*, *program review*, and *program evaluation* are often used but rarely defined in the literature. The definitions provided below reflect current usage and connotations for these terms.

### Assessment Plan

The assessment plan is the intentionally developed sequence of activities that ensures coherence from program planning through implementation and assessment of outcomes. In practice, many have used the Upcraft and Schuh (1996) steps in the assessment process as a guide in creating a plan (see future chapters for steps).

### Assessment Cycle

Current usage of the term “assessment” implies both data collection and the use of data for evaluation and decision-making. “Assessment cycle” refers to the full sequence of assessment activities, beginning with needs assessment and the development of outcomes based on mission, goals, and objectives; moving through implementation of strategies and assessment of actual outcomes; to the use of the data gathered in preparing the next cycle of assessment.

### Program Review

Program review is generally used to describe an institutionally-mandated process of systematically studying units (e.g., academic programs, student affairs functional areas) to determine effectiveness, contribution to institutional mission and goals, and fiscal viability, often for the purpose of resource allocation and strategic planning or decision-making. The term “program review” is often associated with institutional effectiveness and with self-study efforts in preparation for accreditation review.

### Program Evaluation

Program evaluation includes any process or activities designed to determine whether a program has achieved its stated objectives and outcomes; evaluation implies a judgment of merit and effectiveness. In this context, “program” may describe a unit (e.g., the intramural program), a multiple-part intervention (e.g., intramural basketball league), or a specific event (e.g., intramural weekend tournament).

### Self-Study

The term *self-study* has multiple meanings depending on the audience. Self-study is most often described in the literature being associated with accreditation (Ratcliff, Lubinescu, & Gaffney, 2001). The Council for the Advancement of Standards (Dean, 2009) defines self-study as

*an internal process by which institutions and programs evaluate their quality and effectiveness in reference to established criteria such as the CAS standards. This process, often used for institutional and specialty accreditation purposes, results in a formal report presenting the findings of the internal evaluation implemented by institutional employees. For accreditation purposes, this report is then validated by a visiting, external committee of peers from comparable institutions or programs* (p. 406).

Inherent in the CAS definition is a delineation of institutional self-studies and departmental self-studies. However this distinction is not always clear in discussion.

A “self-study” within the accreditation context refers to the process through which an institution goes to demonstrate compliance with established standards. It is a formal process that involves many within the institution and attends to all components of the institution. The length of time spent on self-studies varies by institution and by accrediting body. The self-study process for individual units or departments focuses exclusively on the individual area, is less broad and more finite in focus, and is not inclusive of all components of the institution.

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Words can be slippery things; while slight differences in meaning and connotation may not interfere dramatically with our ability to work with others, clarity and shared understandings can enhance communication and simplify collaboration.

The truth is that people tend to use language as it has been heard and used, as people were taught to use it, or as role models used it. Given the diversity of backgrounds and experiences, and the fact that student affairs tends to be a mobile profession, this can lead to differences in usage that, in turn, can lead to differences in understanding and in practice. Developing a shared language around a process as central to our work as assessment is a vital part of the on-going development of assessment practice itself. It is time that student affairs professionals exert shared mastery over the words that are used and, in doing so, over the purposeful work together.

## Final Thoughts

Practical assessment has never been more important and integral to student affairs work. Staff members need to know how they contributed to learning and development, whether they achieved intended outcomes, whether they met service objectives, and to what extent they met the needs of students. Further, practitioners need to have the

ability to collect information in a way that is trustworthy and reliable, to implement assessment activities that are ethical in nature and are grounded within the political context of our institutions, and to analyze and report data in a meaningful way. Through the framework of the ASK Standards, and with the use of relevant case studies, we believe this book will demystify the assessment process, make assessment more practical and accessible, and ultimately enhance the success of student affairs practitioners.

# Chapter 1: Assessment Fundamentals – The ABC’s of Assessment

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**BEFORE GATHERING AND** using data it is important to have a strong foundation in assessment fundamentals. Assessment fundamentals are skills and knowledge that build capacity for carrying out successful assessment projects. This chapter introduces these fundamental concepts.

## What is Assessment?

What is assessment, or rather what is the meaning of the term assessment? While the question may seem overly fundamental, being able to understand and explain the concept of what assessment is and is not is essential to any assessment practice. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) define assessment as “any effort to gather, analyze and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional or agency effectiveness” (p. 18). However, as discussed in the introduction, assessment is no longer focused primarily on the gathering evidence. Interconnected with the collection of data is also the use of data. Michael Middaugh (2010) expresses this important distinction in his use of the words *information* and *data*. According to Middaugh, “the principle here is to convey information, not simply present data” (p. 79). In other words, assessment is as much about transforming collected data into information to be shared as it is about collecting the data in and of itself. That information, in turn should be used to make changes or decisions about programs, policies and services.

Closing of the loop or utilizing data for improving practice is one of the most challenging aspects of assessment.

*Any...accreditor will say that the problem is no longer one of getting institutions to engage in assessment of student*

*learning; rather, the difficulty is in getting institutions to close the loop and actually use the data for ...improvement. (Middaugh, 2010, p. 93)*

Therefore a full definition of assessment needs to include gathering and analyzing data in order to convey information that can be used to make changes and/or improvements to the institution, division, department or program.

Another way to understand assessment is to think about what assessment is not. Middaugh (2010) as well as Upcraft and Schuh (1996) point out that assessment is not determining an individual student or client’s progress. Assessment is looking at a group of students’ progress in aggregate, or combined, form. Middaugh explains that “assessment of student learning is about aggregate student performance, not the performance of an individual student. And it is about cognitive gains across course sections and across [academic and administrative units]” (p. 93).

Assessment is not research. Upcraft (2003) explains that “while assessments use research methods, the central purpose of assessment differs from that of basic social science research because assessment is designed to fit different institutional and political contexts” (p. 557). Assessment is meant to guide and change practice, research is meant to guide theory and conceptual frameworks. Assessment usually has implications for a specific institution, division, department or program while research is meant to have implications for all of higher education or student affairs. Practitioners conduct assessments to inform their practice, research is conducted by researchers often disconnected from the *subject* which they are studying. Assessment involves the here and now

and is meant to have immediate impact, while research focuses on long-range knowledge sharing. Assessment is context driven while research attempts to control the context. Research and assessment do share some common characteristics, but because of these distinctions assessment does not need to follow the same strict methodologies that researchers follow. This should be kept in mind when explaining assessment results to faculty and other research-focused individuals. A firm knowledge in what assessment “is” often leads to the next question, why do we do assessment?

### Why is assessment important?

When practitioners are in the early stages of their assessment efforts, there is typically a conversation around the real reason “why” the assessment is needed. Why is assessment important? Why are time and resources

devoted to conducting the assessment? These are all fair questions and can be answered in multiple ways depending on the institution. Reasons for conducting assessment can be internal, such as determining resource allocation, informing strategic planning decisions, improving program quality, developing policies, sharing information with colleagues, learning about programs or students, finding out if students are learning, and retention (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Reasons for conducting assessment can also be external, such as accreditation, accountability to funding sources (grants, government, etc.), accountability to constituencies (parents, alumni, etc.), and political pressure. Regardless of the reason, conducting impactful assessment projects is the most important reason for conducting assessment.

Different types of assessment address different types of issues or challenges. Keeping the types of assessments

## ASK Content Standard #1:

Ability to articulate and execute an assessment plan at the program/service, unit or divisional level, depending on the practitioners needs.

Ability to “map” (Maki, 2004) or establish conceptual connections from institutional mission, to divisional missions, to program/unit mission such that program/unit goals for student learning are consistent with institution mission. The assessment plan should provide information on the manner and degree to which students are mastering the intended learning and developmental outcomes, programmatic outcomes, needs of a given population, or other intended focus of the assessment effort. Such a group also recognizes that “outcomes are not necessarily linearly related to practice” (Love & Estanek, 2005, p. 87).

Ability to design a quantitative assessment plan including learning objectives, measurement of student achievement of those objectives, selection of appropriate quantitative data collection techniques, and analysis plan.

Ability to design a qualitative assessment plan including learning objectives, conceptual approach (e.g., phenomenological, case study, and so on), selection of appropriate qualitative data collection techniques, and an analysis plan.

Ability to identify assumptions related to focus of the assessment as well as to articulate a professional opinion about what knowledge is and how it is constructed. As

outlined by Wilkinson and McNeil (1996) in commenting on multicultural research and assessment, these assumptions and opinions can include those that define normal behavior, the degree to which constructs may or may not be universal, and the degree to which those planning the assessment continually seek to improve their cultural knowledge and challenge their own perspective.

Ability to identify those who have a stake in the assessment results and to integrate their needs into a design and analysis of assessment(s) as well as the reporting of results.

Ability to determine the type of assessment desired or anticipated as being most useful by a specific audience. For example, the senior student affairs officer at a given institution may need summative assessment information for use in preparing accountability documents. By contrast a unit director may need in formative assessment information to guide her in further shaping or positioning her program or services to encourage student learning and development. This type of information could be used to track students’ progress toward outcomes in order to make immediate co-curricular changes.

Ability to formulate an assessment budget and to identify and manage funding resources to support ongoing assessment efforts.

in mind, and matching the type with the “why” of conducting the assessment can help keep projects focused. Schuh and Associates (2009) describe seven different types. Measuring participation is a technique that is often employed in student affairs; this type of assessment simply tracks numbers and types of students who participate in programs and services. Needs assessment is another technique that is used to gather information about student needs and how they change over time. Satisfaction or effectiveness assessments look at perceived quality of programs as well as level of satisfaction with programs and services. Outcomes assessments examine student learning and whether programs are meeting intended learning objectives or goals. Cost effectiveness assessments compare costs of programs and services. Benchmarking assessments focus on collecting data that can be compared to a group of peer institutions or programs. Environment or climate assessments attempt to gather information about perceptions related to a specific topic (e.g. diversity climate). Having a strong knowledge of why assessment is being conducted helps to begin the assessment cycle.

### What does an assessment process look like?

Assessment cycles create a sustainable assessment process by connecting the act of collecting data with a foundation in goals/outcomes and the process of reporting/using results. While many assessment projects begin at the assessment design phase, or the “let’s do a survey” phase, without a strong foundation rooted in an assessment cycle the project risks wasting resources and collecting data that is not useful. There are many different assessment cycles (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, Maki, 2004, Yousey, 2006). However, at the core of every assessment cycle is the mission of the institution, division or department that is conducting the assessment. For the purpose of this book, the following assessment cycle is outlined (Figure 1.1) and includes: (a) identifying outcomes, (b) determining methods, (c) planning assessment logistics, (d) gathering evidence, (e) analyzing or interpreting evidence, and (f) sharing results and implementing change.

**Figure 1.1: Assessment Cycle**





One important note is that the assessment cycle should not be disconnected from the program planning cycle. A typical program cycle is: identifying purpose, determining method of delivery, planning program logistics, implementing program, reflecting on program success/challenges, and review/revise program. This process should be integrated with the assessment process. The subsequent chapters in this book give details about various aspects of the assessment process, so what follows is a brief description of each element in the cycle.

### Identifying Outcomes

Both assessment and programming plans begin with identifying outcomes. Assessment outcomes should match the intended goal/outcome of the program or service. There are several types of outcomes in student affairs assessment. Most often these outcomes are described as program and learning outcomes. Program outcomes are also referred to as operational or process outcomes. Program outcomes measure the end result of what a **program or process** is to do, achieve, or accomplish. It can be as simple as completion of a task or activity or measuring program effectiveness, satisfaction and quality. Learning outcomes, in turn, measure the end result of what a **student** is to think, feel or do differently as a result of the program or service. While much of the focus is currently on assessment of learning outcomes, it should be noted that assessing only student learning outcomes provides a narrow view of the story of programs or services (Jacoby & Dean, 2010). Program or process outcomes are especially needed in strategic planning processes and ensuring that programs are providing for the basic needs of constituencies (e.g., students, parents, alumni, etc.). If writing an outcome is a challenge, consider creating an assessment question, often questions are easier to create and can easily be transformed into outcomes once they are written.

### Determining Methods

Just as deciding the best way to deliver a program or service follows identifying intended outcomes, deciding the best way to measure the outcome(s) is the next step in the assessment cycle. Deciding on the best method takes careful consideration of many factors. When considering these factors keep in mind the important distinction between assessment and research, mainly that assessment requires different considerations specific to the institution at which the data is being collected. Rigor is important and ensures the trustworthiness of the collected data; however there are other factors that must be factored

into an assessment design that are not as critical as with research initiatives. Factors that should be kept in mind when deciding on assessment methods are assessment context as well as assessment design and limitations. These factors are described in the determining options section of this chapter.

### Planning Assessment Logistics

Once the best method has been determined, the next stage in the cycle is to plan the logistics of the assessment project. Planning assessment logistics should be done in conjunction with planning the program or service including the who, what, where, when, why and how of the logistics required to gather data.

*Who* includes identifying the participants in the assessment and includes considering if sampling techniques are required and how to get access to the participants. *Who* also includes who is conducting the assessment project? It is important to know who is responsible for collecting data as well as program logistics so that proper coordination occurs.

*What* includes what methods are being used, and what needs to get done in order to implement that method? Considerations include whether a survey, focus group protocol, rubric or other instrument needs to be created.

*Where* addresses the logistical concept of location(s), or where the assessment is being conducted. Whether it is in virtual space (e.g., an on-line survey) or physical space, arrangements need to be made so that the space is ready and available for collecting assessment data. If data is being collected after an event or after a point of service (e.g., after a health services appointment), ensuring that system and processes are in place to collect data is important. If using on-line tools, are there resources for paying for services? What type of service is needed? If physical space is needed, is there a neutral space where participants will feel comfortable? Or how does data collection fit with traffic flow patterns?

*When* is often a question of the best time to conduct the assessment project. Considerations should be given to timing during the semester, planning around breaks, finals/midterms, and other busy times of the year.

The *why* of the assessment project is one of the most important considerations at the outset of an assessment project. Connecting the projects with strong learning or program outcomes based on mission, goals or strategic priorities ensures that the why has already been examined.

*How* relates to the logistics of how to complete the project and what tools and resources are needed for the project to be successful. How will the tool be administered? Is there a need for trained facilitators? Are resources needed for incentives, purchasing software or other data collection devices? Will paper copies be needed? Just as a program or service has many logistical considerations so do assessment projects. Keeping these considerations in mind and planning them simultaneously with the program prevents assessment from being an afterthought.

### **Gathering Evidence**

Perhaps the simplest stage of the assessment cycle is gathering evidence. If a strong foundation is established in identifying outcomes, determining methods and planning assessment logistics, gathering evidence is a smooth process. During this phase, special attention should be given to the limitations of the project. As Upcraft (2003) points out “problems can arise as the project proceeds. Low response rates, usable samples that do not reflect the characteristics of the population or poor attendance... may dictate modifications in an original assessment” (p. 557). Limitations that occur during this stage of the cycle should be noted and small adjustments made if necessary.

### **Analyzing and Interpreting Evidence**

Analysis of data focuses on how to transform the data collected into information that can be shared and used. In quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics (means, counts, percentages, etc.) are most often used (Middaugh, 2010). Qualitative data should be analyzed to tell a story or demonstrate key themes. During the analysis stage of the cycle keep in mind that “data are not, in and of themselves, equivalent to information. Data have to be massaged, manipulated, and interpreted to render them into a form of information that is readily digestible and is used for planning, decision making and the allocation of resources” (Middaugh, 2001, p. 173).

### **Sharing and Implementing Change**

Once data is transformed into information it is time to clearly communicate that information to constituencies and implement change. It is important to keep in mind that change can look very different depending on the project’s results. Changes may happen at the program level, at the departmental or divisional level, in changing policy or in learning that the assessment process needs to change in order to gather better evidence. No matter what this looks like, the essential element is using the data collected. If data is collected and never used, not only was the collection process a waste of resources, but

it is also a sign that the project should not have been conducted at all. Middaugh (2010) reminds professionals to translate assessment information into charts, graphs and interesting visuals in order to capture attention and effectively communicate data. Remember the intended audience and present assessment information in a format and language that is appropriate for that audience. Finally, include the “so what”, “now what” and “then what” of the assessment project. “So what” addresses the reasons why the assessment project was started (many times this is the outcomes expressed in a language the audience understands). “Now what” is what was learned from the assessment or, in other words, it is a summary of the assessment results. “Then what” serves as a discussion of the *implications or actions* that need to be taken based on the assessment information. Without these important implications or recommended actions, most assessment information is forgotten and never used, so remember to always include this vital piece when sharing assessment information. After sharing and using results, keep in mind this is a cycle, so the next step is to go back to your outcomes and decide whether a follow-up assessment is needed or if it is time to move on to assessing a different outcome.

As assessment efforts progress through the assessment cycle, there are many options that need to be kept in mind in order to ensure assessment success. Becoming familiar with these options helps to be proactive in planning thorough assessment projects.

### **What else should be considered?**

When planning assessment projects there are a variety of considerations or choices to make along the way. **Assessment context** is the first thing to consider. Because projects are being conducting among our day-to-day context it is important to consider politics, resource limitations and audience. Because information holds considerable weight in higher education, assessment should always be viewed in a political context. Upcraft (2003) suggests several ways to help negotiate these politics with the ultimate goal to “plan and conduct a study and report the results in ways that build support for its recommendations” (p. 570). One simple thing to consider in the politics of assessment is to never collect data on a topic on which no one is interested in hearing the results, or if they fear the results. Essentially if no one wants to hear the answer, do not ask the question. Also, consider whether there are key people or constituents that need to be involved to establish buy in and support for

the results. Identify who should be involved and include them from the beginning of the assessment cycle so that they are supportive of assessment methods and results.

In addition to politics, resource limitations should also be taken into consideration. Limited resources are usually found in three areas: time, money and knowledge. Assessment takes time to complete and is often conducted in short timelines. Ensuring that there is enough staff time and support to complete the assessment is essential. In addition to time, having enough knowledge to complete the assessment project is also needed. If the knowledge base is not available in a particular area, determine if it can be found elsewhere on campus through another department, faculty member or graduate student support. If not, are there resources available off-campus? Ultimately, if time and knowledge resources are limited, keeping assessment simple and manageable is essential. Monetary resources should also be a consideration. While there are some low-cost ways to collect data, incentives and other cost considerations should be addressed when designing an assessment budget.

Considering the audience that is meant to receive the assessment information is essential when determining the correct method. Is the audience internal or external? Do they need broad overview information or are they seeking details? What is important for them to know and how will that information be communicated to that audience? The answer to these questions assists in assessment design.

**Assessment design** is an additional consideration and includes the best way to measure the outcome, what tools are available, if the audience is expecting information in the form of words or numbers, whether indirect or direct measures are needed, if the data are being used for formative or summative information and if comparison data are needed.

The best way to measure an outcome is often most evident in the language used when writing the outcome. If the outcome is phrased as a question, “who” “what” and “where” questions tend to be best measured through quantitative methods such as surveys, while “why” and “how” questions tend to be best measured through more qualitative measures such as open-ended survey questions, focus groups and document analysis. If a learning outcome is being measured, consider Bloom’s taxonomy (Maki, 2004) which describes different levels of learning. Learning outcomes that measure the lower end of Bloom’s taxonomy (knowledge and comprehension) fit best with quantitative measures such as surveys while the higher

end (application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) tend to need more in-depth assessment methods such as rubrics, interviews or focus groups. Keep in mind Terenzini’s (as cited in Upcraft and Schuh, 1996, Chapter 10) advice, once the ideal method for assessing the outcome is identified, work backwards until the most manageable method is found.

When deciding which methods are most manageable, it is good to consider what assessment tools are available. Consider: (a) What tools do you have in your toolbox; (b) With which assessment methods are you most familiar; (c) What new assessment methods would you consider learning, and (d) What other resources (experts) on your campus can assist you? Surveys are the assessment tool most often chosen, but it is important to explore other options such as rubrics, portfolios, document analysis, existing data, tracking information, interviews, focus groups and visual methods. If these tools are not in the tool box, it will be important to seek out professional development opportunities at conferences or on-campus that can expand one’s toolbox.

Once the tools in one’s assessment toolbox have been identified, it is important to weigh qualitative and quantitative data options. “Quantitative assessments use structured, predetermined response options that can be summarized into meaningful numbers and analyzed statistically” (Suskie, 2009, p. 32). If the intended audience of the assessment is expecting statistical analysis or broad information about a topic, then a quantitative data option is appropriate. Examples of assessment tools that produce quantitative data include test scores, rubric scores, survey ratings, and performance indicators.

“Qualitative assessments use flexible, naturalistic methods and are usually analyzed by looking for recurring patterns and themes” (Suskie, 2009, p. 32). If the intended audience for the assessment information is looking for deeper information exploring the why and how of something, qualitative data may better meet the project’s needs. Examples of assessment tools that produce qualitative data include reflective writing, online class discussion threads, notes from interviews, focus group transcripts and observations.

In addition to the type (qualitative or quantitative) of data the audience may be expecting, it is also important to consider if there is an expectation of gathering indirect or direct measures. These two types of measures apply specifically to student learning outcomes. “Direct evidence of student learning is tangible, visible, self-explanatory



and compelling evidence of exactly what students have and have not learned” (Suskie, 2009, p. 20). An example of a direct measure in student affairs may be asking a student the survey question “Who would you contact if you had questions about registering for fall classes?” “Indirect evidence of student learning consists of proxy signs that students are probably learning.” (Suskie, 2009, p. 20). Using the same example, an indirect measure might ask “Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statement: I know who to contact if I have a question about registering for fall courses” with an agreement scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. A direct measure asks students to show their knowledge, an indirect measure asks students to reflect on their knowledge. Both types of measures are useful in assessment, but knowing the expectations of the audience is important when deciding what type of measure to use. For example, accrediting agencies are often more interested in direct measures, while the colleagues in your office may be more interested in the indirect measure. In student affairs it is important to balance indirect and direct measures, keeping in mind that direct measures are best reserved for specific knowledge and skills while indirect measures are useful when looking at changes in attitudes and perceptions.

It is also important to consider whether the assessment is intended to be formative, summative or both. These two types of assessments may look the same; the difference is in the intended use of the results. “Results from formative assessment provide useful information... that can stimulate immediate change” (Maki, 2004, p. 89). In turn, results from summative assessments provide an overall culmination of a program, process or student learning. A popular analogy is that formative assessment is like a chef tasting the soup while it is simmering, adding ingredients and making changes. Summative assessment is when the chef hands the soup to a critic and a review is written. Determining if the assessment is formative or summative helps make decisions about the timing and timeline of the assessment project.

A final consideration is whether the assessment needs comparison data at the national level or local level. Assessment data are compared through benchmarking. Benchmarks in their most basic definition compare data between two groups. Benchmarks can be internal, comparing data with other institutional data (e.g., first year students vs. senior) or external, comparing data with national or peer groups. Suskie (2009) mentions seven types of benchmarking:

External peer benchmarking	How do our students compare to peers at other institutions?
Best practices benchmarking	How do our students compare to the best of their peers? OR How does our program compare to other high-quality programs?
Value-added benchmark	Are our students improving over time?
Historical trends benchmarking	Is our program improving over time?
Strengths-and-weaknesses perspective	What are our students'/programs' relative strengths and weaknesses?
Capability benchmark	Are our students/programs doing as well as they can?
Productivity benchmark	Are we getting the most from our investment? How do programs/services compare relative to cost?

If comparison data are needed, consider which benchmarking option best fits your need and know that additional resources may be necessary to purchase a nationally benchmarked survey tool or acquire software that allows for internal comparisons.

Once each of these factors is taken into consideration a method becomes apparent. It is important to take stock

at this point of what compromises or decisions were made about gathering data as these may become limitations to the assessment project. When reporting assessment results, it is always important to include the limitations of the project because addressing limitations in the project early on leaves less room for critics of the data when the results are ready to share.

## Building a culture of assessment

In order for assessment to be truly pervasive and integrated on a campus, everyone must engage in a culture of assessment. Ongoing assessment happens when leaders are actively committed to using assessment results and when student affairs professionals are empowered as assessment users (Suskie, 2009). As Suskie (2009) states “there is no magical formula to create a culture of assessment. What works on any campus depends on its culture, history and values” (p. 69). Bresciani, Moore Gardner and Hickmott (2009), identify eight common barriers in student affairs assessment: time, resources, knowledge and skills, coordination of processes. These barriers are not prohibitive if campuses are proactive in minimizing their effect. The authors suggest the following strategies to overcome these barriers: educate, clarify, collaborate, celebrate, be flexible, and keep it simple (Bresciani, Moore Gardner and Hickmott, 2009, p. 139). Organizational leaders can begin by clearly articulating expectations for assessment, prominently using assessment data in decision making, as well as publicly and frequently rewarding those who participate in assessment. Leaders can also create safe environments where assessment data (both positive and negative) are shared and learned from by campus constituencies. Hiring or appointing the right people to help champion and move assessment efforts forward is an important factor. And finally, encouraging assessments that start simple and lead to successful projects, rather than larger projects that put a strain on resources, moves assessment efforts forward.

Providing assessment resources both in time, money and support is an important part of the assessment process. Resources should include having human resources on campus with a solid knowledge base in assessment to help provide guidance to others when needed, purchasing assessment software that can save time and money when gathering and analyzing data, and creating assessment reporting systems that are easy to complete and capture important information without taking up unnecessary time and effort.

Finally, helping to reduce fear and lack of understanding of assessment involves understanding the history of assessment on a campus as well as a firm understanding of faculty and student affairs professionals’ skill sets in assessment. Fear in assessment is often rooted in two areas: the organization’s experience with assessment

in the past, and a lack of confidence in assessment skills. A common misconception is that assessment and research require the same amount of training and technical skills. The reality is that assessment does not require the in-depth knowledge of methodology and data analysis that most research requires. Providing professional development opportunities on campus as well as through conferences helps people understand and gain confidence in their assessment skills and abilities, making assessment easier and reducing the fear of the unknown.

## Case Studies

The rest of this monograph goes through the assessment process, highlighting various stages, giving more detail about considerations and sharing case studies of assessment in practices from campuses across the nation. To see the assessment cycle in action we begin with two case studies, one from Miami University, and the other from the University of Texas at Arlington.

### The University of Texas at Arlington<sup>1</sup>

The University of Texas at Arlington is a public, co-educational institution with an enrollment of over 25,000 students located in Arlington, Texas in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Following the assessment cycle, the University of Texas at Arlington sought to measure a learning outcome related to Alternative Spring Break trips. They first determined their outcome: participants will be able to articulate how participation in community service influences themselves and social issues. After exploring pre/post surveys and other method options, a rubric was determined to be the most effective measurement tool because it allowed for student reflection and gathering evidence about deeper learning than a survey tool would allow.

The logistics of the assessment were planned ahead of time in order to be embedded in the Alternative Spring Break program. To gather the evidence, trip leaders designed reflections and journal prompts in line with the outcomes to be assessed. Students participated in three reflection activities and completed a journal during the trips that were assessed using a rubric tool.

The data were analyzed and interpreted through a three person review panel that used the rubric to rate students’ reflections and journals. Once each individual reflection was rated on the rubric the scores were combined in aggregate form to assess the program’s overall

<sup>1</sup> PK Kelly, Director of University Events from the University of Texas at Arlington was the contributing author on this case study.

achievement of the outcome. The results of the assessment showed that overall students were not achieving as high on the proficiency scale as expected.

These results were immediately used to make positive changes to the Alternative Spring Break program, most importantly in the ways they were asking students to reflect on the experience. They found that more attention needed to be given to explaining journaling and the rubric to the students in order to elicit the type of thoughtful response that they were hoping for. Therefore, a section on journaling and reflection was added to the training session for future trips. They also used the information to reassess the original learning outcome and set more clear expectations for students going on future trips. Results were shared outside of the department by including information in the Student Learning Outcomes and Goals and Objectives Annual Report as well as in a presentation to the Division of Student Affairs.

### **Miami University of Ohio<sup>2</sup>**

Miami University of Ohio is located in Oxford, Ohio. It is a public, co-educational institution with an enrollment of over 14,600 undergraduate students. Miami University of Ohio identified four key learning areas for their summer orientation program. They refer to these areas as the “Four C’s”: Confident, Comfortable, Connected, and Curious. These “4Cs” are the elements that Miami University seeks to develop in new students. Staff in New Student Programs began significant changes to Miami Orientation in 2008, when they created the 4Cs competencies and introduced practices of written reflection, student goal-setting, and individual advising in each of sixteen day-and-a-half long summer sessions with around 3500 students participating.

In order to assess whether they were meeting their intended outcomes as well as the effectiveness of the changes they had made, the orientation program used surveys for both students and parents/family members. The surveys were sent to each student and family member shortly after they completed their orientation experience and used both closed-ended and open-ended questions that focused on such indicators as students comfort approaching faculty members during the school year, intentions for campus involvement, decision-making regarding student safety and conduct, and identifying helpful campus resources.

Data were analyzed with both quantitative and qualitative tools. With over 1100 open-ended responses to some questions, considerable time and resources were dedicated to coding for common themes and pulling exemplary quotes in order to help convey a deeper understanding than could be gained through the quantitative information alone. Using and sharing the results has been key to the success of Miami’s orientation assessment efforts. Internally, assessment results are used to make changes and improvements to the program each year. Sessions that were perceived not to be meeting students’ and parents’ needs were examined through the data to determine what changes could be made to improve the program, and to refocus programs around the 4Cs learning areas. Both quantitative results and open-ended responses were filtered by academic area, program presenter and specific orientation leader and shared with those parties to provide specific feedback. In addition, the orientation program invited everyone who helped during orientation (from the person who set up the chairs every morning to the academic deans and faculty advisors) to a thank you reception where they shared a presentation of the assessment findings and quotes from open-ended questions. This not only shared what they learned, but gave those involved the best thank you of all which was evidence of their impact. Using assessment results in these types of forums, as well as with faculty advisors and other audiences during orientation planning has led to considerable buy-in for the program and enabled staff to make decisions informed directly by assessment data to improve the program. Results were also used externally to apply for regional and national awards and conference presentations.

### **Chapter Highlights**

- When preparing to conduct assessment activities, professionals should consider the who, what, where, when, how, and why.
- The utilization of an assessment cycle will assist in keeping professionals on track and help break down the various parts of the overall assessment process.
- Professionals in student affairs need to make assessment a priority in their everyday work.
- When engaging in assessment activities professionals need to remember to close the loop and not only share their results but use the results to make changes and improvements as necessary.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Stoll, Director of New Student Programs from Miami University of Ohio was the contributing author on this case study.

**Points to Ponder**

- What current assessment information is available on campus that could help inform current practice?
- Does my department have an assessment cycle and how can I utilize this process to conduct assessments in my area?
- What sort of professional development should I engage in to increase my assessment toolbox?

**For Further Consideration**

Suskie, L. (2009). *Assessing student learning: A common sense guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (Chapters: 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 15)

Middaugh, M.F. (2010). *Planning and assessment in higher education: Demonstrating institutional effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. (Chapters 2, 8, 9)

Bresciani, M.J., Moore Gardner, M., Hickmott, J. (2009). *Demonstrating student success: A practical guide to outcomes-based assessment of learning and development in student affairs*. Sterling, VA: Stylus. (Chapters 3, 8)

# Chapter 2: Developing Outcomes

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**THE PROCESS OF** drafting student learning and development outcomes is addressed in ASK (ACPA, 2006) content standard number two. In this standard, student affairs professionals are encouraged to (a) articulate intentional student learning and development goals and outcomes, (b) identify philosophical/research underpinnings, (c) design programs to foster outcomes, (d) gather formative and summative evidence, and (e) determine efficacy of practice to foster learning and development. This chapter will introduce some practical considerations to meeting the components of ASK content standard number two.

Many books have been written about “how-to-do” assessment (Bresciani, Zelna & Anderson, 2004; Suskie, 2009; Bresciani, Moore Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), so this chapter will not focus so much on the “how-tos,” rather, this chapter will share key points of consideration in identifying, writing, and evaluating student learning and development outcomes. The chapter will highlight the process for designing the opportunity for students to learn the expected outcome. In addition, identifying the appropriate method for data collection, with emphasis on the ways in which one can identify the efficacy of practice designed to foster student learning, will also be discussed. Finally, the chapter also includes specific examples, via institutional case studies, of how student affairs professionals identified outcomes based on cognitive and psychosocial theory and connected these to services and programs provided.

## Student Learning and Development Outcomes

*The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1996) stated that student learning and development are inextricably intertwined and

## ASK Content Standard #2:

Ability to articulate intentional student learning and development goals and their related outcomes. In establishing those goals, the ability to use cognitive and psychosocial development theories germane to the student populations (e.g., traditional age, cultural background, adult education, and so on) as well as an awareness that different subpopulations may have different patterns of development (Love and Guthrie, 1999).

Ability to identify the appropriate philosophical or research underpinnings (such as positivist, constructivist, critical theory, and so on) for the articulation of outcomes, dependent on the outcomes themselves.

Ability to design programs and services likely to foster the proposed outcomes.

Ability to gather evidence through formative and summative assessment of the degree to which students demonstrate the projected outcomes.

Ability to determine the degree to which the educational practice contributes to the intended learning outcome.

Ability to determine the efficacy of educational practices used to foster learning and development.

inseparable. Therefore, when one articulates outcomes, be they student learning or development, the need to differentiate between the two (e.g. student learning vs. student development outcomes) may not be as relevant as simply ensuring that learning and development outcomes exist and that they are clearly articulated and tied to



underlying theory and epistemology for professional practice. To emphasize this point further, consider that neuroscientists are not consistently able to differentiate the part of the brain that contributes to affect and the part that contributes to knowledge generation. If neuroscientists have such difficulty in consistently differentiating where affect and cognition originate, why should professionals work so diligently to attempt this same differentiation in evaluation of learning and development? Consider that it may simply just not be necessary.

Thus, for purposes of this chapter, student learning and development outcomes are defined similarly; they are defined as detailed statements, derived from program goals and/or professional theory, epistemology, and research that specifically describe what one wants the student to be able to know and do as a result of a one-hour workshop, one-hour individual meeting, or professional development curriculum. Outcomes do not delineate what will be done to the student as part of the program, rather they describe fairly specifically how one wants the student to demonstrate what he or she knows or can do as a result of participating in a program (Bresciani, in press; Bresciani, et al., 2009; Bresciani, et al., 2004; Suskie, 2009).

The intended articulation of these learning and development outcomes is two-fold. First, when one articulates identifiable and meaningful learning outcomes, the student becomes very clear about what is expected of him or her after his or her participation in a program. Second, the program professionals can more intentionally and purposefully design the learning opportunity so that the learning and development outcomes can be realized. Herein lies the direct connection of articulated outcomes with the action planning that creates the opportunities for the students to achieve the intended outcomes.

Before drafting learning outcomes, it is important to distinguish between the different levels of learning outcomes. For purposes of this discussion, consider that there may be three different levels of expressed outcomes: (a) institutional, (b) divisional, and (c) programmatic. Institutional learning outcomes refer to what institutional leadership expects all students, regardless of discipline, to be able to know and do upon graduation. These are often quite broad as they refer to the entire collegiate experience and thus they may actually be considered learning goals more so than learning outcomes. For example, institutional leadership may want students who graduate from their institutions to be globally competent citizens. However, identifying what being globally competent

looks like and how it will be evaluated typically resides at the program level where the actual learning is provided.

Institutional leadership may also opt to have divisional level learning outcomes. If divisional outcomes are articulated, they will most likely be articulated rather broadly as well (see the example case study below from Weber State University). The divisional outcomes or goals may be similar to institutional outcomes such as those that desire students to demonstrate global citizenship, sound critical thinking skills, and excellent communication. Such statements are clear expectations of student learning, yet they remain rather broad and general.

Programmatic learning outcomes will often be more specific than institutional or divisional outcomes. For example, a programmatic level learning outcome may state that students will identify the steps and strategies involved in resolving conflicts for various scenarios in specific cultural settings. In this example, this program outcome may align with the division or institutional goal of global citizenship. However, this programmatic outcome illustrates much more specificity as it must represent the expected learning from the opportunities that are presented in the program.

As previously mentioned, institutional and divisional outcomes are often quite broad, so while they are articulated at the institutional or divisional level, they are operationalized and often assessed at the department and/or program levels. If data for the institutional and divisional level outcomes is gathered at the institutional or divisional level (often through surveys), the data gathered is typically not used to inform specific programmatic improvements because it is not directly aligned with specific program outcomes. Rather, findings generated from data collected at the divisional or institutional level may inform where more refined assessment is needed in a program. Findings may even help leadership identify where problems may exist, but findings gathered at levels where the actual learning opportunity is not operationalized typically do not inform detailed decisions that will improve programmatic offerings and thus improve the expected learning and development outcomes.

Department and programmatic outcomes are much more specific than institutional or divisional learning outcomes as they are written in a format that allows them to be identified in the particular situation in which they are delivered. The data gathered to measure specifically worded outcomes will also allow for decisions to be made for improvement within the department or a particular program. Due to smaller populations participating in the

learning opportunity, the specificity of the outcomes, and the way in which the learning is situationally constructed (Papert & Harel, 1991), “data collected from department and program level outcomes assessment are often not generalizable to a larger population” (Bresciani, et al. 2009, p.43).

The theories and epistemologies that inform the design of institutional, divisional, or programmatic learning and development outcomes can come from a number of places. One such place is from the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) *Frameworks for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes* (FALDO) (Strayhorn, 2006). FALDO provides a plethora of ideas for student affairs professionals on the theories that inform practice and thus, FALDO provides a number of great ideas for crafting learning and development outcomes as well as identifying ways in which they can be assessed. See the University of Georgia case study below for an example of how FALDO can be used to write learning outcomes (Strayhorn, 2006). Further, CAS (Dean, 2009) has developed a set of learning and development domains and dimensions that can also provide a foundation (<http://www.cas.edu/index.php/learning-and-developmental-outcomes/>).

If one desires to ensure the connection of divisional outcomes with institutional outcomes as Widener University did (see case study below), one can draw upon individual disciplinary research (such as the literature that exists in career services, academic advising, and residential life) to inform programmatic and divisional learning outcomes. Then one can align those learning outcomes with the institutional learning outcomes. Such an approach allows for a highly organic and collaborative way to articulate learning outcomes and potentially assess them.

Another avenue to consider is to use the work generated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) LEAP Initiative and Values Project (<http://www.aacu.org/value/>). In this project, institutions collaboratively designed outcomes and rubrics to evaluate student learning that many institutions commonly deliver. Thus, when looking for an opportunity to truly collaborate with academic colleagues in the creation and evaluation of learning and development outcomes, the AAC&U LEAP and Values project may be a good place to start. Better still: begin with the general education or core curriculum outcomes institutional faculty members have written. Doing so encourages dynamic collaboration with faculty and strengthens the connection of the co-curricular to the curricular and vice versa.

## Designing Programs to Foster Student Learning and Development Outcomes

When identifying programs in which one wants to intentionally infuse and measure learning and development, start by asking a series of questions such as “How do I influence student learning? Is it through the education of my colleagues, of faculty, of parents, or of community participants?” (Bresciani, et al., 2009). Ask these questions and see what programs come to mind. It may also help to consider these questions: “How are you directly or indirectly contributing to student learning? How are you directly or indirectly supporting student learning? How are you directly or indirectly interfering with student learning?” (Bresciani, et al., 2009). The answers to these questions can lead to some insightful conclusions about the areas which may best be able to align practices with student learning and development theory, articulate outcomes, and then evaluate them.

It may also be helpful to start with articulating outcomes that are more manageable for you to assess. For instance, articulate outcomes for the outreach programs first, such as workshops, and professional development programs, because in these instances there is a captive audience in which learning can be assessed before they leave the workshop. Then later, move to evaluating individual consultations—the one-on-one time with students. However, if choosing to articulate learning outcomes for individual consultations, consider designing individual consultations in a systematic manner. For example, all counseling and psychological services’ appointments may be teaching students three common outcomes for advocating for the student’s own well-being regardless of the reason the student may actually be meeting with the student affairs professional. The importance of this systematic approach will be explained later in this chapter. Finally, consider whether to evaluate what is learned from informational pieces such as websites, posters, and brochures as the information gleaned from this type of assessment may or may not be meaningful in guiding improvement (Bresciani, et al., 2009).

Outcomes use active verbs such as articulate, illustrate, conduct, synthesize, analyze, and construct, for several reasons (Bresciani, et al, 2004; Bresciani, et al., 2009; Suskie, 2009). One of the reasons for using active verbs is that their use clearly informs the students what is expected from them. In addition, it helps identify the method of evaluation. Another equally compelling reason to use active verbs is that it helps illustrate the level of learning expected from that student. And depending on what level of learning expected from the student, one

can determine whether one has provided the appropriate length and level of learning opportunity. For example, the University of Victoria provides active verbs for each level of Bloom's taxonomy (<http://www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/bloom.html>). When these verbs are utilized in drafting outcomes, they help communicate to students whether they are expected to obtain a certain level of (a) knowledge, (b) skills, (c) attitudes/values clarification, or (d) behavior change. If using an active verb that expects students to change their behavior, yet only providing a one-hour workshop in which to teach the students all the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to move them to behavior change, one can expect that regardless of what kind of evaluation method chosen, one most likely will not see behavior change. It is important to know that behavior change does not typically come from a one-hour workshop intervention.

This example transitions nicely into a brief conversation about how learning occurs, and thus, such an understanding can help inform the articulation of learning outcomes, the design of the opportunities for students to learn, and the resulting selection of evaluation methods. What we know to be true about student learning is that activities to support intentional student learning must be planned and made systematic and that learning must then be intentionally facilitated (Bresciani, et al., 2009; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; King, 2003; Mentkowski & Assoc., 2000; Astin, 1996). Thus, there is no point in articulating learning outcomes for a program in which one is not intentionally facilitating student learning. Yes, the student may learn something; however, unless practitioners intentionally design the learning and purposefully facilitate the student's awareness of the learning, they will have a challenging time evaluating the learning in a manner to improve the design or the learning opportunity.

Learning must also be evaluated at the point of the facilitation, prior to evaluating the transferability of learning. In other words, assess the learning when it is expected to first occur, then evaluate how well it transferred to different settings (Bresciani, et al., 2010; Kuh, et al., 2005; Mentkowski & Assoc., 2000; Astin, 1996). Many times, when a workshop is offered and intentional learning outcomes have been articulated, the workshop designers do not evaluate the learning at the workshop because they feel that the real learning is in the students' ability to demonstrate what was learned outside of the workshop back in their living environment. If one does not first check to see if what the student is expected

to learn was learned in the workshop, one cannot possibly expect the learning to be transferred to an environment in which the learning is no longer reinforced. Furthermore, one has no information on how to improve the workshop design. It is imperative to first evaluate the learning at the workshop, and reinforce what was learned by communicating to the student what the student learned and how it was learned. Such communication of acknowledgement of learning will assist the student in transferring the learning to another environment.

Most student affairs professionals are in the business of student affairs because they want to change students' lives for the better. Student affairs professionals want the students to take what they are learning in the one-hour workshop and apply it to several aspects of their lives, if not apply it to all aspects of their lives. However, if one does not systematically design the learning opportunity with intentional learning outcomes, and evaluate those outcomes first at the point where students are expected to learn, then one cannot reinforce the learning. If the learning is to be transferred into other settings, the transfer of learning must be facilitated by the student affairs professional. That means designing additional learning opportunities and evaluating them, and it must be done systematically.

For example, imagine that one has designed a one-hour workshop where one wants students to be able to engage in a culturally sensitive dialogue. The student affairs professional has done the homework and used the latest research by authors that are respected who have developed such a model; one now has research to prove it can work with the given student body. What one soon discovers however, after evaluating the one-hour workshop with a five question quiz, is that in one hour, the very best one can expect from the student participants is for them be able to identify the steps involved in a culturally sensitive dialogue. Thus, one now knows the need to identify and design additional learning opportunities for students and also design additional assessment of those opportunities so that one can eventually get to a place where at least under the professional's observation, one can see that the students are role-playing an effective culturally sensitive dialogue. As one designs these learning and assessment opportunities, one has the students evaluate each other so they now know what a culturally sensitive dialogue looks like. While one still does not have an opportunity designed to evaluate whether the students who participated in the series of workshops can engage in a culturally sensitive dialogue outside of the designed "learning environment,"



one can rest assured knowing that they not only now know the steps, they have practiced the skills and can identify the presence of that knowledge and skill in another. Thus, in order to systematically improve learning, student affairs professionals must systematically design and evaluate the opportunities to improve student learning.

## Case Studies

This selection of case studies provides a representation of practice from 2- and 4-year, private and public, as well as comprehensive and research intensive institutions. Each case study institutional representative(s) addressed the following questions in their case study submission: (a) what key learning and/or development outcomes did your student affairs division identify and assess this past year or in previous years? (b) How did you select these outcomes? (c) Who was involved in the development and/or selection of the outcomes? (d) If applicable, on what theory or theories were these outcomes based? (e) If applicable, how did research, prior published opinion literature, professional association work, and/or practical experience help develop your learning outcomes? (f) What role did institutional/divisional mission play in developing your division learning outcomes? (g) What challenges did you experience in selecting or developing these outcomes? (h) How did you address those challenges? and (i) What recommendations would you make to others who desire to draft division learning and development outcomes?

In reading each case study, consider the applicability of this experience to your own institution. Pull from the ideas that are presented to inform your own practice and inquiry at your own institution.

### San Juan College<sup>3</sup>

The Student Services departments at San Juan College, Farmington, New Mexico, made a strategic decision in early 2007 to initiate a long term project of developing student learning outcome assessment across all departments. A focus on student learning, rather than program outcomes, was specifically chosen. The process by which we arrived at common learning outcomes involved numerous factors. These include benchmarking, professional development, researching published literature, facilitated brainstorming, and the use of a research-based handbook. It was also necessary to ensure alignment with the college mission, accreditation process

and strategic plan.

The San Juan College vision is to be a model of the learning college of the future. Emphasizing the learning college model, adopted from Senge's (1990) work, the institution strives to view all stakeholders as learners, including students, employees, and others who interact with the college. Additionally, the division recognized that with increasing pressure for accountability, a focus on student learning would serve us well. The decision was made to have every Student Services department participate. While this might seem daunting, the challenge was to define the term student very broadly, and find the population(s) that each department served in an educator role. Many departments such as the Department of Public Safety, Environmental Health, and the Testing Center traditionally viewed themselves as enforcers, not educators. Shifting this paradigm has taken time and cooperation.

To begin the process of selecting common learning outcomes, we visited two campuses of the Maryland Community College (MCC) system in May 2007, to benchmark their process. Committee members attended the NASPA International Assessment & Retention Conference, and reviewed The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education CAS standards (Dean, 2009). As recommended by Maryland Community College practitioners, we selected *Assessing Student Learning and Development* (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004) as our primary resource. The committee consisted of members from Student Services, Learning, Online Services, Community Learning and Workforce Development, in order to provide input from a broad base of campus sources. The committee worked with an outside facilitator to brainstorm and then consolidate a substantial number of possible common learning outcomes. Once the brainstorming was complete, we determined that they fell into six general areas. After considerable debate, we settled on five broad common Student Services Learning Outcomes (SSLOs). These are: Career Readiness, Communication and Leadership, Goal Orientation, Social and Personal Development, and Problem Solving.

In general, because we took the time to study the current literature, look at models where assessment was being done, and participate in professional development opportunities such as workshops and conferences, we

<sup>3</sup> Jill Carson, Director of Testing from San Juan College was the contributing author on this case study.

were able to develop the common learning outcomes with relatively few challenges. A decision was made during our brainstorming to not assess outcomes that fell under emotional intelligence as it was determined that most interactions in Student Services did not allow sufficient time for assessing this category. We also determined that it was important to set outcomes which were broad enough that all departments could find measurable local outcomes that successfully link to one or more common outcomes. Benchmarking at one of the MCC campuses led us to the conclusion that we needed to be flexible with departmental outcomes. If a department chose to assess something that needed adjustment after the first or subsequent data gathering periods, we should allow adjustments so that this remains a meaningful process. Since there is little experience with outcomes based assessment within many of our departments, this approach gave them permission to explore, take risks, and learn from mistakes.

The importance of understanding practical aspects of outcomes based assessment obtained through benchmarking the MCC system, attending professional development opportunities, and using well researched support materials cannot be understated. Common learning outcomes must be accessible by Student Services professionals and support staff who do not have an “education” background and who do not understand “edspeak.” It is important to allow sufficient time for training and implementation. The committee who implemented the assessment process held three half-day trainings and a facilitated work session to assist with understanding processes, writing outcomes, and learning assessment tools. The college also brought in an expert, Dr. Marilee Bresciani, for a day long workshop after the first six months of data collection in order to help Student Services directors improve both processes for data collection and the specific departmental outcomes that link to our common outcomes.

**Challenges.** The template that was developed for setting outcomes and collecting data was specifically kept to one page so that directors would not feel overwhelmed by the process. We determined that each department should be allowed to link to the Student Service Learning Outcome (SSLO) that they felt most able to assess. For example, it is difficult to assess Goal Orientation in a Testing Center. Instead, an outcome linked to

Problem Solving based on appointment management was developed. By allowing links to all of the SSLOs, we found that across Student Services, all five learning outcomes were being assessed.

**Recommendations.** San Juan College has successfully concluded a year of assessing common learning outcomes. Not every department was highly successful, and not all of the data collected were meaningful. However, all departments in Student Services have begun the process, have refined their original outcomes, and are moving into the second year of data collection. During the second year of this process our focus will be on “Moving Toward Meaningful.” The single most important thing that we have learned in the process is to let it take the time needed for development. We are committed to the process of assessing student learning in non-classroom areas of campus, to the principles of a learning college, and to the common learning outcomes developed in this process.

### University of Georgia<sup>4</sup>

The University of Georgia (UGA) Division of Student Affairs Leadership Team created the Student Affairs Learning and Development Objectives (SALDOs) in 2007 to support the academic mission of UGA. The SALDOs are an adaptation of the *Frameworks for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes* from the Council for the Advancement of Standards (Dean, 2006) and serve as the learning curriculum for the Division of Student Affairs. “Ultimately, the goal of the SALDOs initiative is to serve as a working map that shares the story of what we do in Student Affairs and how students are learning and developing at the University of Georgia” (Scott, 2008). Each unit in the Division of Student Affairs is familiar with the theoretical framework of the SALDOs to create and implement assessment of learning outcomes, which focus on specific departmental mission and values. The SALDOs are broken into eight sub-categories: leadership, intercultural competence, cognitive development, interpersonal skills, self-esteem, collaboration, healthy behavior and social responsibility (*Division of Student Affairs*, 2008).

The Department of University Housing was able to infuse the SALDOs into the learning outcomes of the fall undergraduate staff training as well as the assessment of those training processes. Processes included the Continuing the Legacy of African American Student Success Advocate (CA) Training, Resident Assistant

<sup>4</sup> Scott A. Nelson, Coordinator for Undergraduate Staff Development at the University of Georgia was the contributing author for this case study.

(RA) Training and Village Community Assistant (VCA) Training. The curriculum and assessment objective was for the paraprofessional staff to learn the various departmental policies, procedures and other essential tasks of the position in order to effectively assist all residents with their personal growth and academic success.

To meet this objective, the selection of essential programs to integrate into the weeklong training period was necessary. Essential training programs were created based on the specific expectations listed in each position description as well as those unwritten expectations professional staff expected all paraprofessional staff to learn and know. In all, twenty-two training programs were chosen to comprise the CA-RA-VCA training period. Training programs included, but were not limited to, policies and procedures, crisis management, community development and human awareness.

As the twenty-two training programs were identified, the focus shifted to what information the paraprofessional staff needed to know at the conclusion of each program. Learning outcomes were created for each session based on the expectations listed in each position description in addition to past observations made by housing professional staff members. For example, many of the CA-RA-VCA staff members had difficulty confronting certain situations in the residence halls based on past observations. During the presentation on confrontation, two of the learning outcomes were for participants to acknowledge the different types of confrontation and how to approach each situation. A total of 208 learning outcomes were created for the overall fall training event.

Aligning the established learning outcomes with the Division's curriculum was not difficult as the 163 CA-RA-VCA positions encompassed all eight sub-categories of the SALDOs. While each individual training program did not cover all eight sub-categories at one time, the combination of all training programs during the week showed all appropriate staff members the connection between learning outcomes and the sub-categories of the SALDOs. Each training program listed the appropriate sub-category that program was intended to cover. In addition, the professional staff responsible for presenting a training session was given the learning outcomes well in advance of the scheduled training session. Providing the presenters with the learning outcomes allowed them to adapt their presentation to the necessary information the CA-RA-VCA staff needed to know and do upon the completion of that specific training session.

In order to determine if the CA-RA-VCA staff

members learned the skills needed to be successful in the position, a learning assessment tool was created. A quantitative assessment using a Likert-type scale of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree was used to measure whether the paraprofessional staff learned the necessary skills to be successful in the position. Given the dynamics of the environment and the interest from departmental leadership, it was determined that the best measure to assess the desired outcomes was through a questionnaire. The instrument would be distributed to all CA-RA-VCA staff. The department decided to utilize a pre and post assessment tool to effectively measure each staff member's perceived learning development both prior to and after the training week. The Perseus software program was used for the creation of the assessment tool. Once the data from the pre and post assessment instrument was entered into Perseus, the department was able to use the SPSS software program to interpret the statistical data from both assessment instruments in order to discern whether or not the identified learning objectives and outcomes were met.

After the individual pre and post assessment results were tabulated into SPSS, the department was able to identify areas in which the CA-RA-VCA staff would need additional training. With this information, the department could plan appropriate, effective departmental training in-services that took place throughout the fall semester. Each residential community also analyzed the results. If there was data indicating a certain topic had a lower score for a specific residential community, that community's professional and graduate staff could schedule an additional training exclusively on that topic.

**Challenges.** With the selection and development of learning outcomes, there were a couple of challenges. The first challenge was the extraordinary amount of learning expected of the CA-RA-VCA staff during the training process. Secondly, there were many constituents throughout the University community who had a vested interest in the development of the curriculum and learning outcomes for the paraprofessional staff based on each constituent's area of specialty.

The Department of University Housing addressed each of these challenges. The training committee reviewed each position description to ensure all of the necessary training topics would be discussed in detail at some point during the training period. In order to determine which constituents needed to be included in the development of the curriculum and learning outcomes, professional staff members in the department made a list of staff in

various departments throughout the University. The staff members on the list were contacted and invited to help create the CA-RA-VCA training curriculum and to help establish the learning outcomes for fall training based on their area of expertise. Lastly, the Department of University Housing was as intentional as possible to ensure the material the staff needed to learn and know was addressed and talked about in detail during the week of training.

**Recommendations.** Creating and implementing learning outcomes for an event or program can be very rewarding and meaningful not only for the professional(s) overseeing the process but it can also be very beneficial for other constituents who have a vested interest. It is important for student affairs professionals to recognize that in order to create effective and meaningful learning outcomes, extensive research and preparation needs to be put in motion well before the event or program takes place. Student affairs professional staff members also need to ensure the curriculum is aligned with the learning outcomes. Another important but more difficult aspect in creating learning outcomes is to practice writing them so the learning outcomes are measurable and meaningful to the event or program through the curriculum that is presented to the participants (Bresciani, et al., 2004). When creating and writing outcomes, it is imperative each learning outcome is as specific as possible so the assessment tool can effectively document/capture student learning. Even after the conclusion of the CA-RA-VCA fall training week, the department went back and updated some outcomes, as they were not specific enough to produce the type of learning and knowledge the department wanted the student staff to acquire. In order for the students to obtain the necessary knowledge to effectively serve their residents after the training week, additional training, in the form of mandatory departmental in-services, was created for the paraprofessional staff based on the topics about which they needed to learn more.

### **Weber State University<sup>5</sup>**

Over the past four years, the Division of Student Affairs at Weber State University has been assessing seven student learning outcomes: (a) civic engagement, (b) critical thinking, (c) cultural competence, (d) interpersonal communication, (e) intrapersonal competence, (f) leadership and management, and (g) responsibility and accountability. These outcomes emerged from an organic

process created by a peer-facilitated task force, the Student Learning Outcomes Task Force (SLOTF).

SLOTF, formed in 2006, was comprised of a diverse group of professionals from across the Division of Student Affairs and one faculty member with experience in leading assessment and accreditation efforts. The professionals on the team were appointed and self-selected and were not representative of every department. Their charge was to educate the division about student learning outcomes in higher education and support departments in their assessment projects. The first step in the process was for SLOTF members to become educated about student learning outcomes, a concept relatively unfamiliar to most. Early exploration of relevant theory, research, and professional expertise included reviews of assessment publications, the examination of other university websites, and consultations with Dr. Marilee Bresciani. Ultimately, SLOTF opted to utilize an organic approach to student learning outcomes development. Representatives from each department were taught to write and measure outcomes, and they were encouraged to select outcomes reflecting natural interests, current projects, and stated values.

After each department submitted learning outcomes, representatives from across the division were invited to participate in their categorization and naming. Utilizing a card-sort activity, several groups of colleagues divided the department outcomes into various categories and named the theme evident within each category. Some categories (e.g., Interpersonal Communication) emerged quite naturally and with great consensus, while others (e.g., Responsibility and Accountability) were more challenging to compile and label. SLOTF collected all results and made final categorization and naming decisions while comparing the outcomes with published literature. The final set of seven outcomes closely reflected the feedback of division representatives. Although the outcomes that emerged were not formed from the mission statements of the university or the division, similar themes were evident.

**Challenges.** The most significant challenge faced by SLOTF in implementing its charge was the varying levels of assessment-related knowledge, experience, and motivation across the division. Some colleagues were completely unfamiliar with basic assessment concepts and had never heard of student learning outcomes. Others had excellent and creative ideas that were far too optimistic for

<sup>5</sup> Co-authors of this case study include Dianna Abel, Director of the Counseling and Psychological Services Center; Prasanna Reddy, Director of Testing, Tutoring, and Supplemental Instruction; and Jessica Hickmott, Coordinator of



a first attempt at an assessment project. Some struggled to write accurate and clear student learning outcomes, while others merely needed refinement in their data analysis. Many expressed concern that assessment was too time-consuming, that their results would influence performance evaluations, or that their assessment efforts would have little real influence. SLOTF addressed these challenges by creating clear expectations and simple documents, and also by providing extensive support to department representatives. Support was provided through the development of a comprehensive website ([www.weber.edu/saassessment](http://www.weber.edu/saassessment)) with numerous links to relevant literature, model assessment reports from other universities, SLOTF contact information, and other university-specific information such as submission deadlines and local support resources. In addition, SLOTF held open group consultation hours, assigned individual liaisons to work with each department as needed, and provided extensive editing and feedback on all submissions. Throughout the process, a very intentional effort was placed on educating and assisting, not criticizing or judging colleagues. The goal was to create a paradigm shift that spread across the division and trickled down to all levels, not exclusively impacting directors.

**Recommendations.** SLOTF and the Division of Student Affairs learned many lessons by approaching student learning outcomes assessment with a peer leadership model. These lessons included the value of an organically developed set of outcomes, which promote ownership, utilization, and a natural sense of connection with the mission and values of each department. The importance of widespread involvement in the assessment process was also made clear, as colleagues in non-director roles often made significant contributions to the design and implementation of projects. Finally, the role of an assessment coordinator within a division of Student Affairs was found to be crucial and indispensable. Developing, enhancing, and coordinating the assessment efforts of an entire division is an enormous job, one not reasonably managed by a group of professionals with other busy full-time roles. SLOTF members worked hard to get the ball rolling, did an excellent job, and were visibly relieved when a division assessment coordinator was hired.

The assessment coordinator has been working to define and measure these learning outcomes following the work of SLOTF as assessing the division learning

outcomes has been primarily at the department level at this point. During 2009-10 academic year two learning outcomes were selected on which the entire division will focus, and these will be reported on in the upcoming annual reports from the divisional level. Survey questions have been broken down into learning outcome categories and will be used as an indirect measure of learning, and rubrics are being developed and adapted so that there is a uniform direct measure to assess the learning outcomes. The assessment process is in a constant state of refinement as personnel change; new learning outcomes are drafted by departments, and as the divisional outcomes are assessed.

### **Widener University<sup>6</sup>**

Student Affairs assessment activities at Widener University, a private comprehensive institution with about 6,700 students, evolved from initial outcomes development in fall 2006 to ongoing departmental-level assessment for improvement. Staff members regularly review their outcomes and alignments, as well as specific measures and metrics. Divisional and departmental staff meetings include regular discussions of assessment activities and related research. The associate dean for student affairs coordinates learning assessment activities and reporting processes. Selected staff members serve on university-wide assessment committees.

Student Affairs learning outcomes stem from the division's strategic plan, mission, and values statements. Efforts began with staff training facilitated by the assistant provost for assessment about assessment basics and learning outcomes. Learning outcomes development was grounded in discussions of institutional principles and review of core programs to identify overarching themes. Early staff discussions regarding outcomes development were informed by the CAS standards, staff participation in national conferences, and programmatic efforts. Staff sub-groups drafted outcome statements aligned with the themes, followed by full staff participation culminating in full consensus on the following division-level learning outcomes:

- Explore and clarify values and demonstrate ethical behavior
- Promote responsible citizenship
- Develop autonomy, maturity and personal responsibility
- Understand and appreciate human differences
- Establish and maintain a healthy and balanced

<sup>6</sup> Contributing authors on this case study include Brigitte Vasey, Assistant Provost for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment and Michael Lombardo, Associate Dean for Student Affairs.

lifestyle: emotionally, mentally, physically, socially and spiritually

- Demonstrate leadership knowledge and skill.

As part of a university-wide effort, the staff mapped the extent to which division-level learning outcomes aligned with the institutional learning objectives and general education goals. Using this divisional framework, staff documented how they achieved the applicable outcomes through specific and measurable departmental objectives. Department staff established responsibilities and timelines for assessing each objective. The full staff reviewed the contributions of each department to the emerging comprehensive assessment plan for the division. A staff review team provided feedback highlighting positives, opportunities for improvements and suggestions on its overall usage. Student groups, such as the Student Government Association, executive teams, resident assistants, and student employee leader groups, provided feedback as well.

Learning outcomes assessment efforts are grounded in the professional literature and span the disciplines. Given the civic engagement and experiential thrusts of the Widener mission, student affairs assessment is directly aligned with theories and practices related to student development (Astin, 1991; Perry, 1981; Perry, 1970; Maslow, 1943), personal growth (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998); experiential learning (Eyler, 2009; Kolb, 1984), and civic engagement (Harkavy & Hartley, 2009; Dewey, 1916). Outcomes are grounded as well in literature related to the development of liberally-educated adults (AACU, 2002), high-impact pedagogical practices (Kuh, 2008), effective communication, and critical thinking (Paul, 1990; Kurfiss, 1988). Relevant research informs staff collaborations with faculty and contributes to student leadership development and cultural competence initiatives. The associate dean maintains an online repository for assessment resources.

Prior assessments and resources informed the learning outcomes. For example, feedback from freshman orientation surveys informed changes to the orientation experience and led to revision of the student and parent survey instruments. Likewise, staff linked outcomes development to concurrent discussions on strategic planning. Institutional commitments such as civic engagement, diversity, leadership, and innovation contributed as well to the staff conversations about learning expectations. Discussions related to assessment planning were guided by best practices, benchmarking studies, and student affairs literature.

**Challenges.** Developing and assessing learning

outcomes brought various challenges. Establishing staff participation was challenging as a culture of assessment had not previously existed in the division. This challenge was overcome using a team approach to achieve common goals: the creation of a mission, strategic plan, and set of outcomes. Staff training addressed the challenges of establishing appropriate levels of outcomes and selecting direct assessment activities. Allowing for discussion, staff debate and achievement of consensus was essential. Other challenges included gaining genuine acceptance of student affairs as an academic, co-curricular partner and assessing the impacts of the division's efforts with students. Curricular enhancement and integration is occurring through staff collaborations with faculty and participation in university-wide initiatives.

Some challenges still linger, such as the comprehensive use of assessments for improving student development and planning. The division is seeking ways to share departmental plans at optimal times in the assessment cycle to improve program or service planning, staff training, data gathering, and reporting. Opportunities also exist to better identify shifts in students' development needs, formulating and implementing priority initiatives and re-allocating resources as necessary. Changes will include reviewing results prior to new budget cycles to help guide improvements and the next intentional steps.

**Recommendations.** Cultivating assessment leadership within student affairs is essential to the outcomes development process. Secure administrative support and ongoing commitment to develop and implement outcomes and assessment. Consider designating a staff person to facilitate initial discussions, achieve consensus on outcomes, and advance assessment activities. Use a thematic approach to explore common expectations from multiple perspectives within the division. Confirm the assessment plan will be evergreen to environmental changes, shifts in consensus and open to general improvement.

Once the outcomes are written, establish a commitment to use them. Draft a learning assessment plan identifying the timing of data gathering and reporting. Consider when and why assessment reviews occur with linkages to institutional practices, including budgeting and evaluations; improvement initiatives and resources then justifiably ground to current assessment evidence. Also, create a living resource repository for references that inform outcomes development and for planning aids to effectively build linkages to institutional assessments.

Finally, consider an assessment planning and management system to align and document ongoing assessment of outcomes. Our online system, WEAVEonline™, provides an efficient way to connect outcomes with standards or strategic plans, and has mapping capability for deeper analyses. The depth can help draw linkages to more areas where evidence may be needed. Thus, assessment reports are integrated with well-documented evidence to support outcomes.

## Chapter Summary

The chapter illustrated how important it is for practitioners to intentionally design the opportunity for students to learn the expected outcome. It also emphasized the importance of collaboration with regard to writing the outcomes and designing the opportunities for students to learn them as well as articulating the importance of aligning the programmatic outcomes with institutional outcomes. Institutional case studies illustrating how professionals articulated outcomes based on cognitive and psychosocial theory and connected these to services and programs were provided.

## Chapter Highlights

- Collaboratively authored outcomes and the use of active verbs helps others understand what is really expected of students as a result of their participation in a program, workshop, or service.
- Intentionally designing opportunities for students to learn expected outcomes and using learning and development theories to inform the design of those outcomes better allows for their effective evaluation.
- Alignment of programmatic outcomes to institutional goals and outcomes allows for prioritization of resources, including time, to occur.
- Professional development and a commitment to inquiry must be demonstrated by an organization in order for outcomes-based assessment to become effective in the day-to-day practices of professionals.

## Points to Ponder

- What have you discovered about how well your students learn from engaging in outcomes-based assessment (OBA)?
- What do you want to know about student learning that OBA has not yet addressed?
- What further professional development do you need to be successful in gathering the data you need to make the decisions that you need to make?
- Which intentionally designed learning and

development opportunities are the ones that make the most sense from which to gather program-level data?

- What are the best ways in which to share what you are learning about student learning and development?
- With whom do you need to collaborate in order to enact evidence-based improvement of student learning and development?

## Further Reading:

Association of American Colleges and Universities (2008). *Our students' best work: A framework for accountability worthy of our mission* (2nd Ed.).

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# Chapter 3: Data Collection

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**THE SELECTION OF** data collection and management methods is outlined in ASK Standard number three (ACPA, 2006). In this content standard, student affairs practitioners should be able to (a) identify the types of data necessary to answer the research question, (b) determine the appropriate method of data collection including an understanding of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method methodologies, (c) select appropriate processes for the assessment project, (d) choose and utilize appropriate data collection techniques, and (e) select an appropriate sample size for the assessment project (ACPA, 2006). This chapter will provide a basic overview of the types of assessment strategies and relevant questions to be considered when selecting an appropriate methodology.

This chapter begins by defining quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methodologies. It then discusses ways to determine the appropriate methodology for a project. Quantitative assessment is discussed including types of assessment, selection of a population, data collection, and reliability and validity information. Qualitative methodologies are discussed including types of qualitative assessments, choosing a population, data collection methods, discussion of standards of rigor, and addressing audience concerns. Mixed-methods assessment is briefly discussed. The chapter concludes with a case study.

## Definitions

There are many diverse definitions of quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method assessment in the literature. Definitions of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method assessment are given here to create a common language as a foundation to the rest of the chapter. Palomba and Banta (1999) define quantitative methodologies as those “distinguished by their emphasis on numbers, measurement, experimental design, and

## ASK Content Standard #3: Selection of Data Collection and Management Methods

Ability to identify the types of data/information needed to perform the assessment. This includes understanding the benefits and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative data and exploring what data already exist and do not need to be collected. These data decisions would then determine which method (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method) would be used to collect data.

Ability to identify indirect and direct methods (Maki, 2004) of assessment as well as to use intentional informal assessment (Love and Guthrie, 1999) when warranted.

Ability to select methods of data collection and analysis appropriate to answering the questions posed by the assessment project.

Ability to establish assessment and data collection procedures and processes that are manageable, appropriate, and cost-effective for one’s work function/ division/ department.

Ability to choose and implement appropriate data collection techniques including but not limited to the following: (a) surveys, (b) focus groups, (c) interview, and (d) document review.

Ability to choose appropriate sample size for the assessment depending on assumptions underlying the assessment plan (such as whether the results are intended to be generalized).



statistical analysis” (p. 337). In other words, quantitative methodologies involve assigning a number to an object, event, or observation in order to answer a question. These numbers are analyzed using specific mathematical rules or models in order to make sense of the world. Qualitative assessment on the other hand is “the detailed description of the situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors; use of direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts...and analysis of excerpts or entire passages from documents, correspondence, records, and case histories” (Patton, 2002, p. 22). Qualitative assessment does not use numbers to make meaning of the world and tends to use small, purposive samples to explore a theme, theory, or question in depth.

Mixed-method assessment is a combination of methodologies in an assessment project. Assessment using this methodology tries to combine quantitative and/or qualitative methods in unique ways in order to strengthen the evidence for an assessment question, explore it from multiple perspectives, or look at it differently than could be done using just one methodology (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

The definitions themselves do not specify a specific methodology to be used when designing an assessment project. In order to determine the correct methodology, several questions should be considered (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). What is the purpose of the assessment? Secondly, what is the subject to be studied? Who will be participating in the study? What resources and information are available to you? What instruments are available, commercially or locally? Finally, with whom will the information be shared and why will it be shared with them? These answers will help to clarify the most appropriate methodology. Often practitioners make the mistake of picking the methodology first and answering the questions second. The methodology should (a) come from the type of information needed, (b) derive from the answers to the above questions, and (c) be determined after the development of the assessment question.

## Quantitative Assessment

Quantitative assessment includes the collection of numerical data using an instrument and then analysis of those data using statistical procedures in order to make specific conclusions or inferences about the research or assessment question (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Once it is determined that a quantitative approach is the best approach to answer the established question, the assessor must decide whether or not to pursue a commercial

instrument or to develop a local instrument. Ory (1994) along with Schuh and Upcraft (2001) discuss six considerations to be used to determine whether a local instrument or a commercial instrument is most appropriate (see Table 3.1). It is important to use assessment experts on your campus when evaluating a commercial instrument and when creating a local instrument. It is also a good idea to talk with institutions that have used commercial instruments to determine the success they had utilizing that instrument.

## Surveys

There are many advantages to surveys. They can be given to a large number of people. Data can be analyzed quickly using statistical software packages. They are generally considered an acceptable assessment strategy, and they use pre-determined questions that are the same for everyone. They can also provide statistically representative data. Surveys can be administered in multiple formats to accommodate a wide range of audiences including mail/paper surveys, web-based surveys, phone surveys, and even face-to-face surveys. However, surveys often provide the “what” but not the “why.” They are not as flexible or dynamic as qualitative research methodologies, and they generally do not provide a deep understanding of the individual meaning or stories of the people who are the respondents.

## Pre-existing Data

When developing an assessment protocol, look at data that currently exists at the institutional, state, or national level. There are multiple sources of pre-existing data that can be used to complement an assessment plan. Data such as admissions characteristics, demographic information, class standing, or academic preparedness indicators are all examples of data that can be gathered to inform assessment activities. Identify key sources of pre-existing data and use when appropriate.

## Choosing a Population

Choosing a population is critical to having a successful and meaningful assessment project. What is the assessment question? Does it focus on a particular group such as first-year students, traditional students, adult students, engineering students, or parents? The population being studied should be narrowed to provide the most meaningful set of data to use to answer the question.

After a population to be studied is selected, a sample size should be identified. There are several considerations when choosing a sample size for quantitative studies. Will the survey be distributed to the entire population

**Table 3.1: Considerations for Local or Commercial Instruments**

Consideration	Definition
Purpose	What is the purpose of the study and how will the results be utilized and shared? If the desire is to compare national data sets or to benchmark against other institutions, then a commercial instrument is the correct choice. If the interest is in institutional specific information or is related to campus culture, then a local instrument may be better suited.
Match	Is there a good commercial instrument that matches the purposes of the study as clarified and decided at your institution?
Logistics	What are the necessary logistics of the research project? Considerations should include the flexibility of the instrument. Can it be adapted to meet the institutional needs? Other important logistical considerations include instrument development timeline, staff expertise, the overall cost of the type of reporting, the comparison group of institutions, the format of the instrument and the time needed to complete the instrument.
Institutional Acceptance	Ory (1994) also identifies institutional acceptance as an important consideration. Who is the intended audience for the results? Some institutional cultures favor “home grown” instruments while others prefer to use commercial instruments. If the final audience will be external such as a government, accrediting agency, or the public, a nationally normed commercial instrument may carry more validity than a locally developed tool.
Quality	It is important to determine the actual quality of the instrument. A great research project can be ruined by a poor instrument. Is the instrument measuring what it is intending to measure? Will it answer the research question? Commercial instruments typically have undergone significant psychometric tests of reliability and validity to make sure they are strong instruments. Local instruments often are not as high in quality, particularly if there is not time to perform the same psychometrics.
Respondent motivation to return a completed instrument	Which instrument will result in the highest number of response rates? A local instrument, because it is written with a specific culture, population, and norms being emphasized, will often result in a higher response rate than a more “sterile” commercial instrument.

or a sample of the population? Do you want to generalize to a larger population? If so, select an adequate sample size. Many experimental design and statistical textbooks provide charts to help determine an appropriate sample size. It is best to consult one of these standardized tables when making plans regarding the sample size. For example, see the sample size table at <http://www.research-advisors.com/tools/SampleSize.htm>. It is also important to adjust the sample size based on the average response rates at your institution and the type of instrument. Recent trends indicate that response rates nationally are declining; however, the larger the response rate, the more likely the responses are representative of the population, thus making the data more useful in decision-making.

Often a well-designed sample can increase the response rates and provide more meaningful data than surveying an entire student population.

A final consideration when selecting a sample size is the degree of survey fatigue at the institution. While research by Porter, Whitcome, & Weitzer (2004) suggests that the number of surveys given is not as important as salience, it is still important to be mindful of the number of surveys being administered during a given time frame.

### **Data Collection**

The next step in the quantitative assessment project is to collect data. When planning for data collection the following questions should be addressed:

**Why are you collecting the data?** Data are collected to answer a question and this helps make the data collected meaningful. Identifying the questions to be answered also assists in determining the correct methodology and process for collecting the data. Many assessment projects have been lengthened by questions that provide interesting but mostly useless information. If the information will not be useful in meeting the project goals, the data should not be collected.

**Who will be collecting the data?** The experience level of the individuals collecting the data is important to consider when planning for data collection. Individuals collecting the data should have appropriate human research protocol training to ensure that all data collection is done in an ethical manner. When considering who will be collecting the data, how much training the investigators have, the level of comfort with the identified data collection instrument, and the individual's relationship to the project and degree of bias should also be considered.

**What data will be collected?** If the data include confidential information or information that may involve information about illegal activities or activities that violate university policies (such as underage alcohol or drug use, cheating, etc.), decisions should be made about how to appropriately gather and report that information. Data may also explore participants' knowledge, behavior, values, skills, or actions. Other types of data that may be collected are data assessing level of satisfaction, exploring unmet needs or interests, or evaluation of a current program or assessment. Clearly identifying what needs to be measured (i.e., what question needs to be answered by the assessment) determines what type of data need to be collected.

**When will the data be collected?** The question of when data are collected is often neglected when planning for data collection. The timing of the administration of the instrument can ultimately determine the success or failure of an assessment project. For example, sending a questionnaire in April regarding first-year students' arrival experiences may not produce a quality response rate or even accurate information about the students' experiences simply because of the elapsed time between the experience and the survey. Additionally, sending an instrument the day prior to spring break may not result in a good response because of a student's absence from the community and/or the lack of focus on academic responsibilities. Another consideration is what other surveys and assessment projects are on-going at the same time. Sending two university-wide surveys at the same time may have an impact on the success of both projects because a number

of participants may be asked to participate in both projects adding to on-going survey fatigue and resulting in a lower response rate. Creating an institution-wide assessment plan can help prevent duplication of assessment efforts and prevent sending multiple instruments to students during the same time-frame. It is also important to note what works at a specific institution. Some institutions, for example, have found that administering a survey the week of final exams results in poor response rates as students are preparing for their exams. Other institutions have found that this is an excellent time to survey students as students are looking for something to do while taking a break from studying and are more apt to participate in the survey during this time. Keeping careful notes of what works at your institution for particular populations can assist in determining the appropriate time to administer the instrument.

**Where is the data collected?** The location where the instrument will be administered is also important. If it is being administered in first-year seminar classes there will be many logistics to be identified and resolved. Today technology and multi-media are available to assist in survey administration. Is the environment where the survey will be administered conducive to technology such as electronic polling software, or online/web surveys? The space, including both physical and electronic environments, should provide opportunities for confidentiality when necessary. The space should provide access to an appropriate sample population.

Finally, it is important to determine how the data will be collected. Participants may complete the survey by mail, by internet, by phone, in person, in class, or in another format. How the data are collected will influence the format and length of the questions and the timing of the assessment.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Determining whether the survey instrument and results are reliable and valid is important when evaluating an assessment. Reliability looks at the consistency of a set of measurements. If a measure is reliable, then it is measuring the same thing consistently from one time to another or from one person to another. However, reliability does not consider if you are measuring what you intend to be measure (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Validity, on the other hand, examines how closely the evidence and pre-existing theories support the interpretations of the data collected. In other words, validity determines whether enough evidence exists that you are measuring what you say you are measuring (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000).

## Qualitative Assessment

Qualitative assessment varies significantly from quantitative assessment in that quantitative analysis focuses on numerical values and mathematical procedures whereas qualitative assessment focuses on rich descriptions of an event, experience, activity, or person. Merriam and Associates (2002) summarizes Marshall and Rossman's (1995) four purposes of qualitative inquiry. "Qualitative research is designed to (1) understand processes, (2) describe poorly understood phenomena, (3) understand differences between stated and implied policies and theories, and (4) discover thus far unspecified contextual variables" (p. 9). Rossman and Rallis (2003) describe qualitative methods a little differently. "Qualitative researchers [assessors] seek answers to their questions in the real world. They gather what they see, hear, and read from people and places and from events and activities... Their purpose is to learn about some aspect of the social world and to generate new understanding that can be used" (p. 4). While both Marshall and Rossman's definition of qualitative research and Rossman and Rallis' definition read differently, they are both accomplishing the same goal: to better understand and create meaning and understanding of the world including, rather than excluding, the contextual variables.

### Data Collection Methods

For purposes of this chapter, the various methodologies and epistemological approaches to data collection will not be discussed. These approaches may include topics such as critical inquiry, ethnography, constructivist, and so forth. Rather, there is a focus specifically on several methods of collection that are most often used in student affairs assessment. These include interviews, focus groups, document reviews, case studies, and basic observations.

Interviews vary in a number of ways. Interviews can be done face-to-face, via telephone or email, and sometimes interviews are even done using a mail out interview script in which participants respond in writing to open-ended interview questions. Interview protocols vary from project to project. For example, an interview protocol can be structured, semi-structured, or open-ended. Structured interview protocols include an exact script, list, and order of questions that are pre-determined and are adhered to throughout a single interview and between interviews. In a semi-structured interview protocol, there are highly structured questions that are asked of all participants followed by a guided list of topics that may be explored. According to Merriam and Associates (2002) the exact wording or order of the questions is not predetermined.

In an open-ended or unstructured interview protocol a topic or theme may be identified or explored but the questions emerge from the on-going dialogue with the informant and may vary from participant to participant. Interviews can provide great depth of information but are also very time consuming to conduct, transcribe, and analyze. Interviews are often difficult to generalize to the larger population because they are not intended for that purpose as they explore a few informants' experiences.

In recent years, student affairs practitioners have begun using focus groups as a source of data collection. They provide a quick way to get in-depth information on any given topic. Focus groups are basically small group interviews. They tend to be very flexible and dynamic and answer "why" questions (Woosley, Knerr, & Arey, 2003). Palomba and Banta (1999) discuss focus groups as group discussions in which a facilitator or moderator supplies the specific topic for discussion and monitors the ebb and flow of the discussion. The purpose of a focus group is to gather information in a group environment so that there is interaction, on-going dialogue and engagement among and between group members. Focus groups capture diverse experiences and perspectives very quickly, and participants have the opportunity to respond to and reflect on the discussions of other group members making the information very rich and dynamic. "Focus groups provide an excellent opportunity to listen to the voices of students, explore issues in depth, and obtain insights that might not occur without the discussion they provide" (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 197).

Another important qualitative data collection strategy is document review. Documents can provide a significant source of information. Documents can include both public records such as policy and procedure documents, syllabi, institutional charters, or more personal documents such as letters, emails, journals and diaries, or stories (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Whenever doing a document review, it is important to determine the authenticity of the material being reviewed. Merriam (2009) indicated that "the strength of the documents as a data source lies with the fact that they already exist in the situation; they do not intrude upon or alter the setting in ways that the presence of an investigator might" (p. 139). Merriam also suggests that documents can include both pre-existing documents and assessor generated documents. Assessor generated documents are those documents that the assessor requests to be completed. An example of an assessor generated document is a "day in the life" journal of a new vice-president of student affairs that is created at



the request of an assessor examining the transition of an administrator into the role of a vice president.

A case study focuses on a single unit such as an individual, institution, or event. It is the analysis and description of one specific phenomenon. The focus of a case study is not on the topic to be studied; rather it is focused on the unit (i.e., individual, community, or event).

Finally, one of the most basic forms of qualitative assessment is simple observation. Observations do not take place in a “formal research space” such as an interview room or an office, rather they take place in the field of interest (Merriam, 2009; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Observations provide first-hand information about a topic. In observations, the assessor may be a silent observer who is unseen and merely watching the event unfold or may be actively involved in the event. For example, an assessor may observe a participant playing with a gaming system through a one-way mirror or the observer may participate in the gaming tournament and observe the events that happen while participating in the tournament. “Observation is the best technique when an activity, event, or situation can be observed firsthand, when a fresh perspective is desired, or when participants are not able or willing to discuss the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 119).

### **Choosing a Population**

A second difference between quantitative methodologies and qualitative methodologies is in the selection of a population to be studied. In quantitative projects, a large sample size is typically preferred in order to make generalizations to a larger population. In qualitative studies, the focus is typically on choosing a purposive sample that has the characteristics, experiences, or ability to share information about the topic of interest. The goal is to get rich material and detail about the research topic (Patton, 1990).

One of the first questions to be asked when selecting a sample to be studied is “what is the research question or topic?” Is this topic best expressed individually in an interview format or in a small group in which participants can interact with one another and add onto others’ descriptions and experiences? An individual may provide a more in-depth experience but is focused on only one perspective. A focus group shares the experiences and perspectives of multiple people and sometimes provides information that would not be obtained in an individual interview.

Student affairs practitioners new to qualitative assessment often ask, “How do I know I have a large enough sample?” or, “How do I know when I have done enough interviews and focus groups?” The answer simply is when saturation is reached. Saturation is the point at which one begins hearing the same themes, trends, and responses from each participant or group; hence, one is no longer getting new material from additional participants (Merriam, 2009; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

### **Assessor Bias**

A third area in which quantitative and qualitative assessment differs is in the consideration of bias. Assessor bias occurs when the assessor’s experiences, values, beliefs, or culture impacts administration of a study or interpretation of the results of the study. Quantitative assessment seeks to eliminate assessor bias to the degree possible. The goal is for the assessor to be separate from the process thus allowing them to be more objective. From the quantitative assessor’s perspective, “subjectivity is the very antithesis of scientific inquiry” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 56). In qualitative research, assessor bias is identified and valued. Qualitative assessment supports the belief that all realities are socially constructed and that one simply cannot separate the knower from the known (Patton, 1990). In other words, there is an ongoing dialogue between the assessor and the participants. The assessor’s backgrounds and experiences influence everything from the framing of the research question to the identification of a sample, collection of evidence to the analysis of that evidence. The individual’s biases serves as a valuable construct in the process itself. The outcomes and interpretations are a result of this relationship between the assessor and the participants therefore making the data richer. As Patton (1990) states, “qualitative inquiry depends on, uses, and enhances the assessor’s direct experience in the world and insights about those experiences” (p. 56).

### **Audience Concerns**

There are four primary concerns that are often raised by qualitative assessment (Elkins Nesheim & Knerr, 2009). These include: qualitative assessment is not generalizable, it is not objective, investigators have no control over the direction the study takes, and the methodology is often not determined at the onset of the study. These concerns are often made by individuals who do not have a strong understanding of qualitative assessment and the benefits it provides as a methodology.



The first concern is that qualitative assessment is not generalizable. In this case, the focus of qualitative assessment is not necessarily on the generalizability of the results from one sample or population to another. Rather, the focus is on making meaning of a specific topic for a specific group of participants and obtaining information about the study's question. It is up to the reader to determine if the results can be applied to other groups in a meaningful way. For example, if participants in a qualitative study of special living options discuss how participation in a special living option enhanced their ability to transition to the institution then a reader may want to consider if these results can be used with participants of special living option programs at other institutions.

The second concern is that qualitative assessment is not objective. Some phenomena are just not able to be assessed objectively. Objectivity is not a goal of qualitative assessment. Rather, the focus is on making meaning of experiences or events, interpreting those events and finding meaning in those experiences in order for actions based on those experiences or events to become apparent. Mitchell and Jolley (2000) say there is no such thing as objective assessment because the investigator always brings some bias to the table. Objective assessment is inhibiting the voices of both the participant and the investigator. Qualitative assessment seeks to bring those voices out into the open so that they can be heard. In higher education specifically, these voices might include students that are marginalized for various reasons, have small populations, or avoid participation in large scale quantitative assessment efforts. Qualitative assessment is well suited to lift up the voices of otherwise marginalized individuals and groups.

The third concern is that the investigators have no control over the study's direction. This argument tends to be made by individuals not familiar with qualitative assessment. Qualitative methodology allows the investigator to change directions based on the interaction between the investigator and the participants. This process of adjustment often happens in exploratory studies, focus groups, and in interview situations where the participants' experiences open up perspectives and areas that were not considered in the development of the study. Rather than sticking to just one point of view, qualitative assessment allows the assessment to focus concentration on a meaning making process which is flexible and dynamic.

The last concern is that the methodology is not determined at the onset of the study. In qualitative

assessment, the methodology is built around the experiences rather than an understanding of the experiences through a pre-determined set of exercises or questions. As an investigator is talking with participants, the focus of the questions or the study itself may change drastically. There is often a general structure outlined in qualitative study, but there is also flexibility to adapt that structure based on the rapport with the participants, the emerging interests of the investigator, or the discussion and experiences of the participants. This flexibility is the hallmark of qualitative assessment and varies significantly from the quantitative approach.

### Mixed Methods Assessment

Mixed methods assessment is a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in one research project. There are three types of mixed methods assessment: triangulation, explanatory, and exploratory (Creswell, 2005; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Triangulation is when two different methodologies are used to interpret data. Explanatory studies are done when an assessor conducts a follow-up qualitative study after a quantitative study. For example, in a quality of life survey in housing it was determined that students did not always lock the doors in their residence hall room. Follow-up focus groups were held to further examine why students locked or did not lock their doors and their perceptions of possible consequences.

There are many reasons to use a mixed methods design. Mixed methods allow the assessor to look at a question from multiple perspectives. This type of method allows the study to be built on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods and also allows the assessor to get a more complete picture of the topic or study questions (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The disadvantages of mixed methods designs are that the investigator must have skills in both kinds of methods. Mixed methods designs also often require the use of more time, staff, and fiscal resources. The other disadvantage is that mixed-method designs are often looked down upon by staunch quantitative or qualitative assessors as a method that "waters down" true quantitative or qualitative approaches. At times mixed-methods approaches, while gaining in popularity and acceptance, are difficult to sell to a research based audience.

### Summary

This chapter sought to provide a basic overview of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method assessment

methodologies for the basic practitioner or those new to assessment. For more in-depth discussion of methodologies and analysis techniques please see the resource list or collaborate with a quantitative or qualitative research expert for more in-depth assistance. The following case study is an example of a project that used different methods. The case study is a mixed-methods exploratory study conducted by the Office of Residence Life at Penn State University to determine the impact the resident assistant position may have on an RA's experience while at Penn State. The case study addresses how the research question was developed and the decisions that were made to create the research methodology as well as the decisions made around analyzing the data.

## Case Study

### The Pennsylvania State University, Office of Residence Life<sup>7</sup>

In 2007, the Office of Residence Life began a conversation around what, if any, impact the Resident Assistant (RA) position had on a RA during their tenure as a student at Penn State. Anecdotally, those in residence life often touted their experience as an RA as the reason they continued in residence life professionally, but there was little research or literature that examined the impact the RA role may have had on an RA after graduation if they went into a field outside of higher education.

It was determined that the assessment would be an exploratory study. The first step was to conduct focus groups to look at how current RA's described their jobs and/or the impact the RA role has had on their lives as students. The focus group questions were based on literature on RA roles, the Penn State RA program statement, the outline of goals and learning outcomes of the program, and the RA course syllabus. In order to explore the topic of RA impact we thought it was important to hear from the students about their experiences and see how that compared to the desired impact as we defined it. The exploratory study culminated in a survey mailed to RA alumni 5-7 years post-graduation.

For the focus groups, three groups of returning RA's (i.e., those who had been in their role at least one semester) were selected. It was determined that after a semester, they would have a good idea of the position and would be able to better articulate if their job had an

impact in other areas of their college experience such as their academic work, their professional work, or their interpersonal interactions. The focus groups were also spread out over campus so that we had RA's from a variety of living environments represented, including suite-style, first-year, special living option, and sorority living environments. At the end of three groups, we compared notes, realized that we had reached saturation (not getting any new information) and ended the focus group stage.

In order to collect the data, we did a half-day focus group facilitator and note-taker training for any residence life staff member interested in participating. Those who participated in the training were then placed into teams to do a focus group. Facilitators were not sent to an area in which they supervised RA's or had worked in past years in order to increase RA's openness in the conversation. We chose to record the focus group sessions and later transcribed the conversations. We also took handwritten notes during the focus group to mitigate against possible failure in recording technology. The questions were created after a careful review of the roles, expectations, program statements, and other literature of residence life programs. Questions were developed around learning outcomes, programmatic goals, and performance expectations of an RA. Questions involved discussion questions, group activities such as brainstorming activities, and individual activities.

After the focus groups were completed, each focus group transcript was given to a different co-investigator who coded that transcript for emergent themes. When finished, the co-investigators traded transcripts and continued to code until all three transcripts had been seen. Then, the three co-investigators met, reviewed their themes and came to a final theme structure. Lastly, a fourth co-investigator was given the final coded information to synthesize and check for completeness and consistency. Few modifications were needed at this stage of the analysis.

Valuable lessons were learned during this project. First, it was important to have staff involvement in the entire process so that they could see assessment in action and also see how the data were relevant to the day to day work of staff members. One recommendation we would make to other institutions planning an assessment project such as this is to spend time investigating the literature as the instrument is developed. Questions, activities,

<sup>7</sup> Amanda R. Knerr, former Senior Associate Director, Residence Life at The Pennsylvania State University

and even the research design are often based on the literature. Creating the instrument is much easier when the knowledge base is there. It is also important to test the instrument on the intended participants to make sure they understand what is being requested of them so that rich descriptive material is obtained, and the language is appropriate for the audience. Finally, spend time training the people involved in the assessment, especially if the assessment design includes focus groups or interviews. These methods are not as easy as they first appear. It is important to understand group dynamics, managing conflict, handling issues of sensitivity, facilitating conversation, and dealing with facility issues, among other topics, in order for a focus group or interview to be successful. Both facilitator and note takers can benefit from this training which will help to ensure the success of the project and the trustworthiness of the data.

When preparing an assessment project for a program or unit, it is important to (a) identify the types of data necessary to answer the research question, (b) determine the appropriate method of data collection including an understanding of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method methodologies, (c) select appropriate processes for the assessment project, (d) choose and utilize appropriate data collection techniques, and (e) select an appropriate sample size for the assessment project (ACPA, 2006). This chapter provided a basic overview of assessment methodologies and considerations to assist the student affairs professional in meeting these five goals for an assessment project.

### Chapter Highlights

- Qualitative assessment is assessment that uses small purposeful samples to explore themes, theories, or questions in depth. It does not rely on numbers.
- Quantitative assessment utilizes numerical data and statistical analysis to understand the assessment question(s).
- Individuals engaging in assessment activities should first identify key sources for pre-existing data.
- In selecting a methodology, consider: reliability, validity, objectivity, population to be sampled, report audience, and overall purpose of collecting the data.

### Points to Ponder

- Where are the key sources of pre-existing data that I need on my campus?
- With which collection methods am I most comfortable engaging?
- What instruments of data collection am I most

familiar with or most comfortable using?

- Specifically from what people will I gather data? Which population will help me answer my assessment questions?

### For Further Consideration

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## Chapter 4: Analyzing Data

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**WITH LITTLE TRAINING** and mentorship, the analysis phase of assessment can seem quite daunting to the practitioner. While there are many challenges to analysis, a primary struggle may be in simply not knowing *how* to analyze data. Yet, experts agree that analysis is one of the most important areas in which to build skill level (Lovell & Kosten, 2000; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). The goals of analysis are the same as any assessment project: to better understand what we do, how well we do it, and how to improve our programs and services. Simply put, the analysis phase of assessment involves breaking the information down into component parts (analyzing), making sense of those component parts (interpreting), and then re-organizing the information into a useful format (reporting). The difficulty lies in the fact that these processes frequently overlap and progress concurrently.

Assessment challenges exist for individuals at all skill levels. Individuals or units may want to tackle too much assessment at once without the available time and resources, greatly impacting how well the analysis can be done. Further, the priority of assessments may depend on the institution and administrative hierarchy. A vice president's request may necessitate setting aside existing projects, while a peer's request may be delayed. An individual's clarity of thinking can also influence the assessment. A clear assessment question makes subsequent analysis easier to plan, but muddled or incomplete thinking about a topic will make the direction of the assessment unclear and more difficult to perform (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

### ASK Content Standard #7: Assessment Ethics

Ability to analyze and interpret data using the appropriate univariate and multivariate statistical techniques and appropriate software to perform those analyses.

Ability to analyze and interpret data using methods appropriate to qualitative inquiry (e.g., constant comparative analysis, ethnography, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, etc.). Ability to use software appropriate to these analyses.

Ability to establish standards of rigor, trustworthiness, and authenticity to assessment projects using qualitative methods.

Ability to aggregate and disaggregate data to identify patterns of student achievement and development.

Ability to interpret the data in ways that are understandable to both technical and non-technical audiences.

Ability to distinguish between statistical significance and practical significance.

The culture of assessment at an institution or within a specific department greatly impacts this phase of the assessment process (Banta & Associates, 2002). According to Seagraves and Dean (2010), individuals' perceptions of assessment may vary based on the following conditions: (a) support from the senior student affairs officer; (b) informal, or lack of formal, expectations for assessment; (c) belief in assessment as a means to improvement; and (d) the sense of collegiality among co-workers. Student affairs practitioners assume responsibility for assessment



projects in a variety of ways and – regardless of their professional preparation – each person can contribute to the institution's culture of assessment in positive ways.

In order to build a strong culture of assessment, it is important that all student affairs practitioners have at least a rudimentary understanding of the tools, concepts, and resources associated with data analysis (Sandeem & Barr, 2006). It is not enough to collect information and disseminate the raw data to others in the organization. Data analysis requires the individual to make sense of the information within the context of the organization and make critical decisions about what is important and what deserves more attention and resources (Schuh & Associates, 2009). In other words, data analysis tells the story behind the data.

Student affairs practitioners should be familiar with quantitative and qualitative analysis processes; they should be aware of resources to help them during this process and identify resources or areas to strengthen within their skill set to properly analyze information gathered. The purpose of the chapter is to orient the reader to the various traditions of data analysis and serve as a guide for the competencies identified in Standard seven of the ACPA Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards (2006). The authors will also discuss how to analyze qualitative and quantitative data and resources available. The chapter will conclude with an example of analysis in practice.

### Considerations in Analysis

The analysis phase of assessment requires careful planning and preparation. Since analysis processes are directly connected to the types of data that are collected, the student affairs practitioner conducting the assessment should consider what type(s) of analysis is required, the tools and resources necessary to conduct the analysis, and the styles of reporting required for a given assessment project. Keep in mind, the type of data collected (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed) will determine the direction of the analysis process. Therefore, practitioners should be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and plan the assessment accordingly.

When conducting data analysis, looking ahead and making adequate preparation will make the process easier and more meaningful. Even when handed a project mid-stream or asked for a particular set of data, it is important to identify what information is truly desired and how the information might be used. To determine the intent of the assessment, ask clarifying questions

of both a practical and political nature. For example, when developing a survey, ask whether the answer to a particular question would inform practice, raise issues, or affect decision making. One might also consider what types of analysis would best answer the question at hand, whether or not related data already exist, if there are additional questions that have not been asked, and who on campus might provide assistance. There are times when student affairs practitioners have a specific agenda they want to support through data analysis, and asking related political questions is essential. Considering who would be impacted by the data analysis, how others might use the information, and potential ramifications will help a practitioner navigate the political nature of assessment. Keep in mind, data are neither positive nor negative. They are simply words and numbers. Yet, in any assessment project it is important to understand how the political environment might influence the ways individuals view and interpret the information.

Collaborating with peers across campus is an opportunity that practitioners at all ability levels may consider. Collaboration may include working with others in the department, interrelated departments, or institutional research offices. These collaborations include individual consulting as well as creating cross-functional teams focused on particular questions or topics. The level of collaboration impacts both the analysis and the use of the findings. According to Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblander (1996), collaboration fosters wider improvement because it lessens resistance to change, increases communication in and among units, creates unintended benefits, and improves the assessment culture.

### Overview of Analysis Process

With a clear question and an understanding of an institution's practical and political climate in hand, practitioners begin the analysis phase of assessment guided by several basic principles consistent with all types of data. First and foremost, individuals should keep in mind the question they are working to answer and remember that assessment is a process designed to inform programs and services. The question and purpose should drive the focus and emphasis of the analysis. Information may be interesting but not relevant to the question at hand. Disciplined practitioners may wish to note these interesting findings for future analysis but should remain focused on the current topic. Second, individuals should approach their work systematically and break down a project into manageable pieces. Set goals for the



analysis process and move through those goals one at a time. Finally, remember analysis is a continuum that can be achieved at a number of levels. Start with the basics and then move to more sophisticated forms of analysis as needed. For example, when analyzing a survey with several open-ended questions, the analysis can range from noting the number of comments related to a particular topic to identifying more detailed themes or patterns within the comments. Remember, there are multiple ways to accomplish a goal; choose the level and style of analysis that seem most appropriate to tell the story at hand.

As previously stated, the type of data analysis conducted is directly related to the method of data collection. Analyses can be conducted with words (qualitative analysis), numbers (quantitative analysis), or a combination of the two (mixed methods analysis). The following sections provide an overview of qualitative and quantitative analysis and an example that demonstrates how practitioners can use both in tandem to address a specific concern.

### Analysis of Quantitative Data

Quantitative analysis focuses on summarizing information using numbers. Nardi (2003) provides an easy way to remember the differences. In describing a movie, the qualitative analysis would include descriptions about acting, camera work, and the screenplay and the quantitative analysis would include the number of stars or thumbs up the movie received.

Three of the competencies listed in Standard seven of the ASK Standards (ACPA, 2006) describe skills associated with quantitative data analysis:

- *Ability to analyze and interpret data using the appropriate univariate and multivariate statistical techniques and appropriate software to perform those analyses.*
- *Ability to aggregate and disaggregate data to identify patterns of student achievement and development.*
- *Ability to distinguish between statistical significance and practical significance.*

Univariate statistical analysis simply refers to the examination of one variable or one unit of measurement. It is the key component to descriptive statistics and can be used to summarize numerical data including measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode), rates of dispersion (range, standard deviation), and relative position within a specific category (percentile rank) (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Descriptive statistics are an important aspect to quantitative analysis because they tell the reader more about the population within an assessment project. Descriptive statistics are fairly simple calculations that can be performed quickly by hand or in Microsoft Excel.

Inferential (key word inference) statistics describe methods for comparing groups and generalizing from a sample to a population. Methods of analysis for inferential statistics include the chi-square test, t-test, and ANOVA (analysis of variance). See Table 4.1 for more information.

**Table 4.1. Overview of Basic Multivariate Statistical Analyses**

Statistical Test		Purpose of Test
Correlational	Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient	Describes the relationship (strength and direction) between two continuous variables
	Spearman Rank Correlation	Describes the relationship between paired sets of ranked variables
Inferential	T-Test	Describes the relationship between paired sets of ranked variables
	Chi Square	Compares differences between two groups on a variable of interest
	ANOVA	Compares observed frequencies to expected frequencies Compares the significance of group differences between two or more groups

It is important for the student affairs professional to remember that neither correlational nor inferential statistics indicate causality – that is to say, these techniques cannot be used to indicate that if X occurred then Y is the result. Rather, they are designed to gauge strength of relationships. Software packages that are appropriate for multivariate analysis include SPSS Predictive Analytics Software (formerly SPSS) or Statistical Analysis Software (SAS). While these are not the only software programs available, they tend to be the ones most popular within educational settings. For additional information about univariate and multivariate analysis, please see the references at the end of this publication.

Aggregating and disaggregating data are ways of looking at the same dataset from different perspectives. While not a statistical method of analysis, aggregating and disaggregating data can help the investigator determine how populations or subpopulations feel about specific programs, services, or policies. Aggregate data may be used to show the “big picture” of a particular issue or situation. It can also be an effective way to disseminate information while protecting respondent identity. Disaggregating data is essentially a filtering mechanism that breaks variables down into sets such as gender, race/ethnicity, or classification level. It can shed light on the responses of a specific subpopulation or an underrepresented group within a majority.

For example, if a survey were conducted on student satisfaction with intramural sports and overall scores reflected satisfaction as 4 out of 5, most student affairs practitioners would accept this as a high approval rating for intramural sports. If more males completed the survey and ranked intramural sports as 5 out of 5 and fewer females completed the survey and ranked intramural sports as 2 out of 5, the aggregated results would not reflect the true nature of all students’ opinions regarding intramural sports. By filtering the data, a student affairs practitioner could see that there was a disparity in scores between men and women and take proactive steps to address it (Lindsay & Peterson, 2010).

Understanding the differences between statistical significance and practical significance and knowing how and when to use each can also be important for the student affairs practitioner. Both terms are related only to the analysis of quantitative data and can provide important information to the reader. Statistical significance means that the observed differences between two measures are not likely due to sampling error. In other words, it is the degree of confidence we have that the difference between

two variables is not due to chance. Statistical significance is expressed in terms of “p” (typically identified as:  $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and is directly linked to the sample size. Increasing the sample size increases the power because larger samples estimate the population parameters more precisely. The value of calculating statistical significance is that it adds greater credibility to research findings.

Practical significance, on the other hand, indicates whether this difference is large enough to be of value in a practical sense for programmatic or policy changes. As previously stated, an increase in sample size increases power and therefore increases the ability to see a difference between groups. Practical significance is expressed in terms of effect size (ES) and is not affected by sample size. The ES essentially provides an indication of the size of differences between groups and can provide additional information for decision-makers. It is important for student affairs practitioners to remember that based on the size of the sample a difference may be statistically significant but not practically significant.

### Analysis of Qualitative Data

Qualitative analysis is based on interpreting the words, images, artifacts and experiences of individuals and groups and relies on inductive reasoning in which events are interpreted to make generalizations often associated with experiences and observations (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). The individual conducting the assessment is ultimately responsible for making sense of the data collected and communicating it to others in a logical and orderly manner. Two of the competencies listed in Standard seven of the ASK Standards (ACPA, 2006) describe skills associated with qualitative data analysis:

- *Ability to analyze and interpret data using methods appropriate to qualitative inquiry (e.g., constant comparative analysis, ethnography, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, etc.).*
- *Ability to establish standards of rigor, trustworthiness, and authenticity to assessment projects using qualitative methods.*

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process that requires the individual to become immersed in the data. As stated by Marshall and Rossman (1989), qualitative data analysis is “a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data” (p. 111). By its very nature, qualitative data analysis can be a time consuming and ambiguous process. At the same time, it

can be an immensely rewarding experience that brings life and depth to an assessment project.

One method for organizing and analyzing qualitative data is through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009). Rooted in the classic research tradition of grounded theory, constant comparative techniques can be used to help student affairs practitioners search for potential patterns in the collected data (Hatch, 2002). Based on the level of inquiry, the constant comparative method can be divided into the following six steps: (a) reflection, (b) open coding, (c) axial coding, (d) review of additional data forms, (e) thematic coding, and (f) sorting (Tscheplikow & Wells, 2010).

Reflection is the process of organizing one's thoughts regarding the assessment project by defining the assessment question, narrowing the focus of the investigation and exploring the research literature on the specific topic. Once data have been collected, coding provides a systematic way to denote the pieces of data that may be most relevant to the assessment project.

Open and axial coding are the first two sequential steps for grouping codes into specific categories. When combined with additional data forms, thematic coding can then be used to create overarching themes that span multiple categories. Sorting, the last step in the process, involves organizing all of the data units into the selected theme (Tscheplikow & Wells, 2010). Student affairs practitioners may find the constant comparative method of analysis to be advantageous because it is both user-friendly and suitable to multiple data forms.

As identified in ASK Standard seven (ACPA, 2006), ethnography is another form of qualitative inquiry. According to Creswell (1998), ethnography is "a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system" (p. 58). Based primarily on participant observation, an ethnographic investigation requires prolonged immersion in the day-to-day lives of a specific group in order to better understand the "behavior, language, and interactions of the culture-sharing group" (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). The culture-sharing group can be narrowly focused (e.g., student clubs and organizations, student subcultures) or broadly focused (e.g., entire campus community) (Creswell, 2005). The collection and analysis of ethnographic data can provide the student affairs practitioner with insights regarding group dynamics, cultural and competing norms, and shared values as revealed through artifacts and ceremony.

"Narrative is an interpretive approach in the social sciences involving storytelling methodology. The story

becomes an object of study, "focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives" (Mitchell, 2003, p. 2). In reviewing qualitative data, student affairs practitioners should consider the ways in which data are presented (chronological, theory-rich, thematic, etc.) and the audience for whom the data are presented. The primary goal of any narrative piece is to create a sense of authenticity for the reader so that he or she can determine the extent to which the assessment findings are relevant to other settings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). As Creswell (1998) suggested, the complex and interrelated processes of qualitative assessment often makes it "difficult to separate the activities of data collection, analysis, and report writing" (p. 189).

Regardless of the type of qualitative inquiry that is chosen, qualitative assessment requires a great deal of organization. Data collection can be quite extensive and include written transcripts, notes, journal entries, pictures, and documents such as policy and procedure manuals and bylaws. Once the data have been organized, analysis typically includes the following steps: (a) becoming familiar with the data; (b) generating categories, themes, and patterns; (c) coding the data; (d) searching for alternative explanations; and (e) writing the report (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

There are numerous methods for organizing and analyzing qualitative data, as identified in this standard. Depending on the scope of the assessment project, student affairs practitioners may choose to code the data by hand or use a Microsoft application like Excel or text-to-table in Word. Additionally, there are numerous software packages that can be used for organizing and sorting qualitative data. Programs that tend to be most popular among student affairs professionals include NVivo, XSIGHT, and ATLAS.ti. For additional information about methods of qualitative inquiry, please see the references at the end of this publication.

The terms that may be most familiar to individuals conducting assessment projects are *reliability* and *validity*. These terms are appropriate for quantitative investigations and refer to the consistency and integrity of the data. Similarly, there are methods within qualitative data analysis for establishing the principles of "trustworthiness" including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Elkins, 2010).

Credibility of data may be established through the triangulation of data sources, methods, investigators, and theories to corroborate evidence (Creswell, 1998). Additional methods for establishing credibility may

include distributing information to other individuals to seek an external review of the process (peer debriefing) and sharing codes, themes, and findings with the individuals who participated in the assessment project (member checking). As noted by Creswell and Miller (2000), “participants add credibility to the qualitative study by having a chance to react to both the data and the final narrative” (p. 4). Establishing transferability of findings is a decision that will be made by the reader rather than an assertion that can be made by the individual.

Patton (1980) indicated that “the trustworthiness of the data is tied directly to the trustworthiness of the evaluator who collects and analyzes the data” (p. 338). Therefore, it is important that an individual keep a detailed account (audit trail) of the decisions that are made throughout the process of analysis. Dependability refers to the extent to which decisions made throughout an assessment project are appropriate and consistent throughout, and confirmability refers to the extent to which the results of the assessment project make sense. Both of these standards of rigor are directly connected to the audit trail.

### Analysis for Reporting Needs

Analyzing quantitative and qualitative data and communicating the results to key constituent groups are two different but interrelated processes. One of the competencies listed in ASK Standard seven (ACPA, 2006) describes skills associated with reporting the results of analysis:

- *Ability to interpret the data in ways that are understandable to both technical and non-technical audiences.*

In order to be effective, it is important to know the intended audience and how they might process the information. Utilizing multiple report formats (executive summary, concise report, full report with appendices, etc.) personalized for various audiences improves the communication of the analysis. For individuals who may not be as familiar with quantitative and qualitative language, it may be important to provide a glossary of terms and a rationale for how and why a specific type of analysis was conducted. According to Maki (2004), “analyzed results presented through digital diagrams, tables, charts, graphs, spreadsheets, or maps help many viewers visualize information” (p. 160). Even the best

assessments are of no use unless they are shared with others in ways in which their content can be understood.

## Case Study

### University of Alabama at Birmingham<sup>8</sup>

The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) is a public, four-year institution with a total enrollment of over 18,000 students in the schools of liberal arts and science, professional schools, and the university-wide Graduate School (UAB Office of Planning and Analysis, 2009). The Division of Student Affairs encompasses the areas of Enrollment Management, Student Life, and Student Facilities and Finance.

In spring 2009, managers and representatives from a variety of student affairs offices at UAB were brought together as a work group to investigate the feasibility of developing a one-stop model of student service. The team used data from historical records and focus groups to answer two primary questions associated with this investigation: (a) what do students mean when they say they experience the “runaround” with student service agency, and (b) what actions can be taken to improve services and thereby mitigate these experiences?

The *Graduating Student Survey* (GSS) was a locally developed assessment instrument designed to measure student satisfaction with the programs and services available in student affairs. The instrument was electronically administered to graduating seniors approximately five weeks prior to commencement, and responses were maintained in a secure database. Quantitative and qualitative data were drawn from scale measures and open-ended comment sections of the GSS that were collected from spring 2004 through fall 2008. The GSS is a good example of how student affairs professionals can incorporate a survey instrument into the design of an assessment project and use mixed methods results to create a more complete and compelling analysis report.

### Quantitative Analysis

Student satisfaction with services was rated using a three-point Likert-type scale (Jacoby & Matell, 1971). Response options included “Definitely met my needs,” “Somewhat met my needs” and “Did not meet my needs.” Additional response options included “I did not know about this service” and “Did not use the service by choice.”

<sup>8</sup> Mike Fifolt, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Project Director for the Evaluation & Assessment Unit in the Center for the Study of Community Health



Search criteria within the database included term, student status, and functional area, and reports could display all survey responses across terms. Comparison data showed that student satisfaction with services was either at or below minimum levels of acceptance as determined by the directors of these units. A simple review of the numerical responses using measures of central tendency indicated that a problem might exist related to student satisfaction with services and that these issues would require further investigation.

### Qualitative Analysis

UAB's one-stop work group reviewed the open-ended responses by students and divided the responses into functional areas. Qualitative analysis was conducted for the areas of financial aid and registration and academic records. Specific areas addressed in open ended questions on the survey included: (a) walk-in registration, (b) web-based registration, (c) transcript request, (d) financial aid in person, and (e) financial aid through ACCESS (a web-based application). The Director of Assessment and Planning sorted comments in Word using a text-to-table application and designated them as positive, negative, or neutral.

To manage the large volume of data, positive and neutral comments were removed and negative comments were assigned a code based on the content of the comment. Each comment was considered an individual unit of text and placed under one or more of the following headings: (a) people, (b) process, or (c) information. Due to the complex nature of programs and services, it was not uncommon for a comment to reflect both a *people* issue as well as a *process* issue. Data were sorted and displayed in descending order to highlight the number of comments in a particular section as well as the areas of overlap. Focus group sessions were also conducted with current students and front-line staff members to discuss the historical accounts of students' experiences. Transcripts of focus group sessions were reviewed by the Director of Assessment and Planning and coded using the same headings of people, process, or information. Results were shared with the work group and used to identify ways in which services could be streamlined to reduce the level of dissatisfaction that students had expressed in the past.

### Analysis Conclusions

Through GSS responses, students expressed frustration and concern about the quality and consistency of service they received in the offices represented by the work group. Students described the "runaround" as both

a metaphor as well as an actual occurrence in which they were physically "running around" campus to get the signatures, approvals, or documentation necessary to complete a transaction.

Data analysis also revealed that students used the term "runaround" to communicate their negative experiences in navigating the university website for answers related to student services. By assigning new meaning to the conventional phrase, students, in essence, described a "virtual runaround," in which they encountered dead links, confusing pages, ambiguous or incomplete information, and poorly defined search terms (Fifolt, 2010).

In all three focus group sessions, front-line staff members described both positive and negative experiences that they had experienced in attempting to assist students. Staff members expressed empathy for the students who had received poor service and identified specific examples within the student comments in which service could have been better. As a result of these conversations, staff members said that they felt "empowered" by their managers to respond to questions, seek additional answers, and to make suggestions to improve the systems in place. Collectively, front-line staff members identified resources that would help them perform their jobs more effectively including training sessions on customer service, improved methods for internal communication, and enhanced web capabilities and presence.

The one-stop model for service provided front-line staff and managers a platform for exchanging information and responding to students' needs in a more systematic and effective way. By analyzing data trends using both quantitative and qualitative techniques, the one-stop team was able to "quantify" complaints and truly "listen" to students' voices in a setting that was free from the distractions of an emotionally charged situation or one that required immediate action. Individuals discovered that by working together, rather than in isolation, they could affect greater change resulting in more cross-unit collaboration and, ultimately, greater student satisfaction (Fifolt, 2010).

### Recommendations

The one-stop initiative was a collaborative effort that required input and feedback from a variety of constituents. While the Director of Assessment and Planning did the initial work to organize the data, the managers and front-line staff were responsible for interpreting the data and making recommendations for improvement. Analysis



of the data was not a difficult process nor did it require extensive knowledge of assessment techniques, it simply required a new framework from which to view the survey responses. This example shows how multiple assessment techniques (scaled measures, content analysis and focus groups) can be used in combination to explore an issue from an existing dataset to achieve positive results.

## Chapter Summary

### Chapter Highlights

- Good analysis begins with the end in mind. Asking clarifying questions upfront, understanding how data may be used, and staying focused on the topic at hand will guide the selection of appropriate analysis tools and keep projects manageable.
- The type of data collected will determine the direction of the analysis process and should be intentionally chosen based on the inquiry and the practitioner's skill set.
- Data are neither positive nor negative; they are simply words and numbers. However, they can have far-reaching political implications that should be understood prior to the analysis process.
- Though practitioners can seek help on a case-by-case basis, they may find it advantageous to find a peer group and/or a mentor (Zachary, 2000). Discussing ideas and projects from a coherent framework with others one trusts can increase learning and make the process more rewarding.

### Points to Ponder

- On which competency(s) in ASK Standard seven (ACPA, 2006) would I most like to improve?
- Can I identify faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, or other professionals on my campus that could provide analysis assistance, or will I need to look beyond my campus?
- What software is available on my campus to analyze data? Do I have the resources to purchase additional software, or can I find free online tools that would be useful?

### For Further Consideration

Following is a list of suggested resources that will provide more in-depth instruction regarding the skills and methods presented.

- **ACPA Assessment Institute:** ACPA hosts an annual Assessment Institute organized around the ASK Standards (2006). Experienced speakers provide direct instruction, and facilitators lead small group sessions where participants can discuss their current (or desired) projects and network with other colleagues engaged in assessment. Novice to advanced.
- **ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation:** In addition to organizing the annual Assessment Institute, the ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation manages a listserv that distributes helpful ideas regarding assessment methodology. More information about the commission can be found at: <http://www.myacpa.org/comm/assessment/>
- **Bibliography:** The bibliography at the end of the book provides an extensive list of assessment resources. Of particular interest may be *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods* (Nardi, 2003), which includes several chapters on quantitative data analysis techniques in easy to understand language. Novice to moderate.
- **Company Websites:** Commercial companies include some free assessment resources on their websites such as the "Survey Random Sample Calculator" on the CustomInsight website: <http://custominsight.com/survey-research-articles.asp>. Novice to moderate.
- **Courses and Seminars:** Many institutions provide training sessions and credit-bearing courses on select software applications. Novice to advanced.
- **On-line Tutorials:** On-line tutorials are available for a variety of analysis software tools. Novice to moderate.

# Chapter 5: Using and Sharing Assessment Data

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**ASSESSMENT IS A POWERFUL** tool for institutions. At its best, reporting encourages program improvement, it enhances understanding, and it serves as catalyst for creating a culture of assessment. However, if the results of assessment efforts are not shared effectively the tool becomes useless. For example, the assessment report can either motivate others to positive action or it can cause the data to be questioned and potentially dismissed as untrustworthy. This chapter provides a framework for planning and developing assessment reports for institutional improvement. To begin, assessment reporting will be defined along with an explanation of why effective reporting is important. Reporting elements outlined in the ASK Standards will also be highlighted (ACPA, 2006). Next, planning and developing useful reports will be reviewed. Criteria for effective assessment reporting will be discussed, and finally, three case studies will provide concrete examples of how institutions have created and utilized assessment reports.

## What is Assessment Reporting? Why Is It Important?

Assessment reporting is the way in which information gathered in assessment activities is shared with constituents and audience members. It can include a variety of methods including comprehensive reports, electronic dashboards, posters and visual displays, interactive data, oral presentations, flyers and marketing materials or a combination of several different types of

## ASK Content Standard #11: Effective Reporting and Use of Results

Ability to develop an appropriate written report of findings that recognizes the intended audience(s) and stakeholders in terms of sophistication areas of sensitivity and level of detail likely to be effective and helpful.

Ability to effectively communicate results with use of visual support such as graphs, charts, and/or PowerPoint that recognizes the intended audience(s) and stakeholders in terms of sophistication, areas of sensitivity, and level of detail likely to be effective and helpful.

Ability to apply results to improve programs and services. Ability to discover and question assumptions underlying current practices (“double loop learning” as described by Argyris & Schon, 1974 and discussed in Love & Estanek, 2004).

Ability to effect change with the assessment results.

reporting formats. An effective report not only describes the assessment process, but shares important results, and assists the reader in identifying links between the assessment results and action (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Woosley & Knerr, 2011). Effective reporting is critical in assessment because it may be the only contact an audience member or constituent has with the assessment project and/or the unit. A strong assessment project can be doomed if the reporting of results is not done in an effective manner. The ASK Standards provide several specific elements that lead to effective reporting and use of results (ACPA, 2006).

These include:

- “• The ability to develop an appropriate written report of findings that recognizes the intended audience(s) and stakeholders in terms of sophistication, areas of sensitivity, and level of detail likely to be effective and helpful.
- The ability to effectively communicate results with use of visual support such as graphs, charts, and/or PowerPoint that recognizes the intended audience(s) and stakeholders in terms of sophistication, areas of sensitivity, and level of detail likely to be effective and helpful.
- The ability to apply results to improve programs and services. Ability to discover and question assumptions underlying current practices.
- The ability to effect change with the assessment results” (ACPA, 2006).

While it is important to use the elements outlined in the ASK Standards, it is also important to understand when assessment reporting decisions are best made. Often, assessment reports are considered as an afterthought when all the work has been completed. As a result important information can be overlooked and unused. For this reason, assessment reporting decisions should be made early in the assessment planning process (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996) and should be revisited at every step in the assessment cycle and adjusted as necessary to meet the reporting needs for the audience (Woosley & Knerr, 2011).

The reporting mechanisms may change during the assessment cycle for a variety of reasons. While a project is in process, the outcomes measured may be revised. The assessment project or timeline may be adjusted, creating a need for revisions in the reporting plan, or the results might lend themselves to a different reporting structure than originally planned. Finally, as the assessment project unfolds, competing demands, resources, and financial changes may have occurred that will create a need to revise the assessment reporting plan. For all of these reasons, it is important to continually revisit and revise the assessment reporting plan outlined in the initial assessment plan (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

There are a variety of important questions to ask about the details of an assessment reporting plan during the assessment planning process (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Palomba & Banta, 1999), such as:

- Who are the stakeholders?
- Who needs to know this information?
- How will this information be shared?

- What does this data mean?
- How will it be used to improve processes?
- What questions didn't we ask?
- What do we do with unanticipated results?

However, the overarching question should always be, in what ways do we share this information to strengthen and improve what we do? These questions and considerations will now be discussed in more depth.

## Considerations: Assessment Report Planning

In creating an assessment reporting plan, there are several areas that should be considered (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Woosley & Knerr, 2005).

- What is the purpose of the assessment? The purpose of the assessment may be for program improvement, evaluation of a program or service, or to measure student learning.
- How broad is the domain of the project? The assessment may be very specific, examining one type of student population, such as first-year students, or it may be broader, looking at all student populations.
- How will the anticipated assessment information be utilized to improve practice? The project may be conducted to improve an office or make a determination to eliminate a program.
- Who will be the primary audience for the information obtained by the assessment? Knowing the stakeholder(s) will determine some of the decisions made during the collection process and the lens through which data are later presented.
- What format(s) and aesthetic presentation will best communicate the story of the data?
- How will the information be delivered to audience members?
- What resources are needed to implement the identified reporting plan?

Knowing the answers to each of these questions will assist in the development of a useful reporting tool and will be discussed in the following section.

### Purpose

As stated in previous chapters, the first question to consider is the purpose of the assessment. Is the assessment a formative assessment or a summative assessment or a measurement of student learning? In a formative assessment, information related to an ongoing program or service is collected with the intention to use the results to make improvements to the program as it is happening (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Such an

assessment might focus on strengths or weaknesses of a program, potential areas for growth or improvement, or longitudinal trends. The reporting process necessary for this type of assessment will be significantly different than that of a summative assessment. A summative assessment provides a culminating evaluation of a past event, program or service. In these types of reports, one may be including summaries of a program or service, or a determination on whether key performance indicators or service outcomes were achieved (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Ewell, 1991). Finally, in assessments considering student learning, the focus of the assessment may be on any level of Bloom's Cognitive Development Model (1956) such as knowledge acquisition, application of knowledge, or changes in attitudes, perceptions or beliefs. The purpose of the assessment will have significant influence on what information will be included and/or highlighted in an assessment report.

### **Domain**

The second consideration is to determine the breadth of the assessment domain. For example, the assessment may be focused on just one unit, program, service or specific student population. The more narrow assessment will be presented differently than an assessment with a broader domain such as one that may encompass multiple units, a variety of sub-cultures of the student population, or multiple programs or services. Determining the breadth of the domain under consideration helps to later develop the format and components of an effective report and will also help in identification of the key audience members and/or stakeholders.

### **Uses of Assessment Results**

The next consideration is how the assessment results will be used in decision-making and practice. The results may be planned for internal use at the institution, such as for budget allocations, program development or evaluation, internal marketing or education, or other types of interventions or decision-making. The results may also be intended for purposes external to the institution, such as accreditation, benchmarking with other institutions, grant proposals and reports, or publicity or marketing with external constituents such as Board of Trustee members, surrounding community, corporate partners, or parents and family members of students. The assessment results may also be used for a combination of internal and external purposes.

### **Audience and Stakeholders**

It is important to identify the intended audience

or stakeholders for which the assessment results will be shared. Who will have a vested interest in the information provided by the assessment (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Woosley & Knerr, 2011)? The audience may include internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, or a combination of both. Internal stakeholders include groups such as administrative decision-makers, Board of Trustee members, institutional governing bodies, staff, students, or faculty, specific units, or others. External stakeholders may include groups such as parents, accreditation bodies and reviewers, alumni, community or government officials, parents, or corporate partners or businesses. Often there are multiple constituents with varying needs that are identified. It is important to identify the audience and stakeholders so that the appropriate method to convey the message can be developed. Further, consideration should be given to the ability of report recipients to interpret and utilize the assessment results as well as the resources that will be needed to create the report itself (Woosley & Knerr, 2011).

Identifying who will read and use the findings is essential (Suskie, 1992). Once audience and stakeholders are identified, the information obtained from the assessment project can be further prioritized based on its relationship to the audience roles and/or areas of purview. An example could be if the student activities staff conducted a study on student involvement and found that most students were involved in more than three organizations and that the average student spent more than ten hours a week engaged in student activities but less than ten hours a week on academic related work. They might see the following offices as potential stakeholders: student senate, faculty, residence life, other student affairs offices working with student groups, and the counseling center.

### **Format and Components**

After the purpose and the audience of the assessment have been identified, appropriate reporting formats and components can be identified to best convey the information in a way that allows it to be interpreted and used by the stakeholders (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). There are a variety of types of assessment reports that can be considered including comprehensive reports, executive summaries or assessment notes, short fliers or newsletters, brochures or marketing pieces, institutional snapshots or electronic dashboards to name just a few (Woosley & Knerr, 2011). Creative reporting techniques can also be



developed that may better meet the needs of the audience. Once the type of reporting is identified, the medium for reporting can also be determined. This may include paper reports, electronic mediums, oral presentations or a combination of multiple methods.

When identifying the appropriate report format, additional considerations include audience needs, education and audience experience related to the assessment project, data collection and analysis, and the time required to digest and utilize the information (Woosley & Knerr, 2011; Woosley & Knerr, 2005). Determining the story to tell a particular audience through the collected results is helpful in determining the best format for presentation. Lastly, realize that there will always be more information or more data that could be shared, but weigh the pros and cons of over-stimulating the reader with data.

Referring back to the previous student involvement example, the student activities staff may decide that they need different reports for the various audiences. Residence life staff may need specific numbers and hours related to both student involvement and academics. Faculty may want both student involvement and academics. Faculty may want both a report and a presentation focused on academic information. Student senate may want a discussion of specifics about student involvement in various organizations.

A “one report fits all approach” does not lead to a well-developed assessment plan. A variety of reports may need to be developed to best meet the needs of all stakeholders. From the student involvement study example, it is easy to see how the components of a report may vary depending on the audience (Suskie, 1992). Specific report components may include a descriptive title, a summary of the results, a statement of purpose, assessment design and analysis (methodology), findings, and final recommendations and/or action items. Again, referring to the involvement study, a report to the residence life office might identify crucial components such as when and where students study, what organizations tend to be most popular, and programming opportunities that help students find balance and manage time. While a report to senior leadership might summarize some of the narrow findings, it will be more important to link the findings to the broader institutional implications on achievement of campus-wide learning outcomes goals.

The appropriate format and the necessary components of the report need to be identified for each audience group so that the appropriate information is provided

to each constituency. Careful consideration needs to be given related to the appropriate amount of information as well. Giving too much information can lead to people being bogged down in all the data and prevent them from isolating the key information they need to make decisions related to improving practice.

### **Delivery Mechanisms**

The next consideration is how the information found in the report will be delivered and by whom will it be delivered. Should it be delivered as a written document, electronically, or through personal delivery and conversation? Again considering the student involvement study example, it may not make sense to have an entry-level student activities program coordinator present the information to the faculty senate. The entry-level program coordinator will likely not have the political or formal authority that will garner the respect of the faculty senate. On the other hand, if the information is presented by the Vice President of Student Affairs, who is also a faculty member, the information may be received and utilized quite differently.

The other important consideration is the timing of the distribution of the assessment results. For example, a report regarding resident student satisfaction distributed at the end of the semester is less likely to be read than if that same report were distributed during spring resident assistant training. Another example of inappropriate timing would be distributing a report about performance indicators that need to be considered for budget allocations two days before budget proposals are due. It is crucial to get the information in the hands of the appropriate people at the appropriate time in order for the data to be best utilized for practice and decision-making. It is unlikely that this will happen if the assessment report is considered as an after-thought to the project instead of a core component planned during the initial preparation stages.

### **Resources**

The final consideration is the resources needed to create the appropriate report. This consideration can be broken down into two areas, (a) resources needed to create the report and (b) resources needed to interpret and use the report. The resources to be considered when writing the report are the equipment and finances necessary to create the report, the human resources needed to write or develop the report, the degree of expertise of those charged with developing the report, and the necessary technology (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). For example, if



a planned report requires very deep statistical analysis yet the professional charged with writing the report is new to data analysis, that professional may be unable to effectively interpret or communicate the results. Further, if there is an expectation that staff create a report utilizing an on-line dashboard, allowing individual stakeholders to quickly examine the desired data, someone needs to have the technological expertise to create such a system. Conversely, what resources will the audience member need to interpret and utilize the data effectively? What assessment expertise will they need in order to make meaning of the information? The answer to each of these questions will guide professionals in how best to allocate existing resources or request additional resources if they are needed.

Overall, keep the report interesting and readable (Suskie, 1992). Some assessment-averse readers may already dread reading assessment findings. Yet, if the report has a clear “hook” that compels the reader to engage with the findings from the outset, and applicable, results-oriented recommendations, the report content becomes easier to digest and be used by all levels of staff. In the student involvement example, the counseling center was

identified as one of the audiences to receive the data. The content that may be most intriguing to them is how students are finding balance and the stressors students identify in their daily lives. This, along with students’ recommendations for programs and services, would be components of a compelling report.

### Dissemination of Data

Student affairs professionals spend much of their time determining how to represent the data and findings in palatable ways. Providing timely and informative data to various constituents often requires preparing multiple reports, presentations, or documents (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Knowing one’s audience is crucial to providing data that will be used by the individuals reading the reports and ultimately using this information to create change. Table 5.1 provides a few ideas for professionals who are looking for various ways to disseminate assessment information in creative ways.

Effective assessment reporting requires careful planning before the assessment process even begins. These conversations and decisions need to be revisited and tweaked at every step in the process.

**Table 5.1: Suggestions for Dissemination**

Type of Report	Benefits
Executive Summary	Useful brief for scholar-practitioners to learn more about the findings rather than being inundated with methodology or other nonessential contextual information.
Full Reports	Useful for senior administration and/or scholar-practitioners tasked with executing and improving assessed programs.
Multiple Briefs	Useful to provide appropriate sections of data and findings to the relevant constituencies.
Interactive Presentations	Useful for engaging those that are intimately involved with the programs, For example, think tanks, hands on/experiential workshops, multi-sensory exhibits, town hall meetings, presentations by students-for students, etc.
Interactive Websites	Very “green;” saves financial resources. Effective for ongoing feedback from various constituencies, provides for manipulation of data and/or specific queries relevant to users. Allows for individuals to read at own pace.
Social Media	Useful for garnering narrative, qualitative feedback and ongoing interpretation and discussion of the study findings.

## Case Study

### University of North Texas – Institutional Assessment and Reporting<sup>9</sup>

The University of North Texas (UNT) is a four-year, public university located north of the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area. UNT is designated as a Research University – High Research Activity (Carnegie Foundation, 2012) and is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. UNT was founded in 1890 as teacher's college, currently is the fourth largest university in Texas, and is among the 50 largest in the country (UNT Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2011).

Institutional Assessment and Reporting, an office within the Institutional Research and Effectiveness (IR&E) division, assists departments throughout the university to integrate intentional and continuous assessment as part and parcel of daily operations (UNT Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2012). Institutional Assessment and Reporting uses a division-based assessment team model to help staff members in each division coordinate their assessment activities and share relevant findings across departments (UNT Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2012). Institutional Assessment and Reporting staff utilizes Schuh and Upcraft's (2001) model of program assessment to inform the departmental assessment process.

The executive summary process uses a format that closely mirrors that of a traditional five-chapter dissertation (UNT Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2012):

- **First Section: Introduction & Problem Analyzed** – Brief statement about the conditions which precipitated the need for the study, including a description of the campus, departmental or programmatic context in which the assessment activity took place. The problem statement should be clearly articulated so that someone who is not familiar with the study can understand it.
- **Second Section: Methodology** – Description of the instrumentation used for the study and whether it is quantitative or qualitative. For quantitative studies, the sample, actual number of students who participated, response rate, confidence interval, and test of statistical significance should be stated. For

qualitative studies, the focus group or interview protocol and approach to transcribing and analyzing responses should be stated.

- **Third Section: Results** – Summary of what the department learned in a concise, data-oriented manner. The results should be framed in the context of previous research and literature. Charts and tables for quantitative data should be included; in the case of qualitative data, salient themes should be reported with direct quotes from participants to underscore the themes.
- **Fourth Section: Conclusions/Next Steps** – Discussion of the impact the study's findings have on current operations. Particular attention should be paid to any specific programmatic or service changes the department will make as a result of the findings. Recommendations for future studies or next steps should also be highlighted.
- **Fifth and Sixth Sections: Contact Information and Appendices** – departmental and Institutional Research and Effectiveness contacts should be included. Appendices should include the top three findings of the study, distilled to an "elevator speech" for senior leadership. Other appendices can include data tables, theme quotes, and references.

Departments are strongly encouraged to complete executive summaries within 30 days of the conclusion of an assessment activity. The department representative responsible for the study routes it to the department director and the appropriate vice president's direct report for feedback, then notifies Institutional Assessment and Reporting that the document has been vetted. Institutional Assessment and Reporting then routes the executive summary to the vice president for student affairs and posts it online. Then, the department's assessment team member presents the findings during an upcoming meeting, using a pre-defined template. This allows others to learn about the findings, ask questions, and even compare data to previous findings.

Institutional Assessment and Reporting also works with department staff to report assessment findings to UNT's senior leadership and identify others on campus who may benefit from the data collected. The most common form of assessment reporting used at UNT is the executive summary. These executive summaries are used in a variety of ways beyond reporting to senior leadership (UNT Office of

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Institutional Research and Effectiveness, 2012):

- Development of departmental annual reports;
- Forms of evidence for accreditation;
- Findings utilized in departmental marketing materials;
- Supporting documentation for student service fee budget requests;
- New employee orientation resources;
- Supporting changes to departmental strategic plans; and
- If the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, used for presentation and publication purposes.

The reporting of results is important to many parts of the institution. Emphasizing this with staff involved in assessment activities is important. The staff at UNT are provided with these expectations early in the assessment process and supported through to the final report. Sharing the results is what keeps us developing as an institution.

## Chapter Summary

### Chapter Highlights

- Creating intentional assessment reports will increase the utility of assessment data.
- In creating reports practitioners should consider who needs to know the information, who key stakeholders are, and how the information will be shared.
- When utilizing results in creating reports consider what the data means, how to handle unanticipated data, and how it will improve practice.

### Points to Ponder

- What type of reports do I feel best equipped to create?
- What further professional development can I engage in to create more useful assessment reports?
- To whom do I need to consider reporting results?
- What do other assessment reports on my campus look like? Does our student services division have a standard structure for sharing our information?

### For Further Consideration

Bresciani, M. J., Gardner, M. M. & Hickmott, J. (2009). *Demonstrating student success: A practical guide to outcomes-based assessment of learning and development in student affairs*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing

Palomba, C. & Banta, T. W. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing and improving assessment in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

UNT Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness.

(2012). *University of North Texas: Assessment team resource manual*. Denton, TX: Author.

UNT Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness. (2011). *Fact book 2011-2012*. Denton, TX: Author.

Woosley, A. R. & Knerr, A. R. (2005). *Outcomes based academic assessment reporting*. [Webinar], Retrieved from <http://www.academicimpressions.com/webcast/outcomes-based-academic-assessment-reporting>

# Chapter 6: Ethical Assessment

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THROUGHOUT THIS BOOK information about conducting assessment has been addressed, and one of the most important aspects of good assessment is when those engaging in assessment activities have knowledge about and follow ethical standards of practice (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Winston & Saunders, 1998). Assessment serves the purpose of improving programs and services and should follow ethical principles to ensure truthful data are available to guide those changes (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Determining how to conduct an ethically sound assessment process can be quite challenging and complicated, but with awareness of potential pitfalls, one can prepare a more reliable assessment.

Ethical practice should be inherent in the process of doing assessment, and serves as the foundation of a good study (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Upcraft & Schuh, 2000). It is important for student affairs professionals to be knowledgeable about the ethical standards and principles of good assessment studies and intentionally plan for the integration of these principles throughout the process. This chapter will address the importance of ethical practices in the assessment process and provide strategies to address specific dilemmas. First, it will discuss guiding philosophies for ethical behavior as it relates to principles developed by Kitchner (1985) and standards by American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) (2010). Next, it will highlight potential ethical situations that could negatively impact assessment data as well as provide approaches to address those issues. The chapter will conclude with two case studies that demonstrate how ethics are put into practice in assessment.

## ASK Content Standard #10: Assessment Ethics

An understanding of the purpose and role of an Institutional Review Board and appropriate procedures for human subjects.

Ability to appropriately determine when and where data and findings should be promulgated in a way that respects confidentiality and/or anonymity of the participants.

Ability to interpret and apply FERPA guidelines in assessment and evaluation projects.

## Guiding Principles & Standards

Ethics can be defined as distinguishing right from wrong or substituting appropriate actions for inappropriate ones; it is about doing what is right (Winston & Saunders, 1991). Ethics can be highly subjective, full of hidden meaning and can cause emotional reactions that can complicate the assessment process. However, professionals can turn to standards of practice to guide their work (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). It is important for student affairs professionals to have a good understanding of sound practice and ways to avoid unethical action.

Kitchner (1985) presents five principles of ethics in research and assessment. These include: (a) respect autonomy, (b) do no harm, (c) benefit others, (d) be just, and (e) be faithful. These five principles serve as a guide for the student affairs professionals throughout each stage of the assessment process.

### Respecting autonomy

Respecting autonomy means that participants in the assessment study have freedom of thought and choice (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Student affairs professionals often engage students in low risk assessment activities; however, there are several ways in which professionals may infringe upon individual autonomy. This infringement may include surveying students at inappropriate times of the year, pressuring students into participation when they initially decline, or sharing a list of participants together with the final results. Student affairs professionals often develop close mentoring relationships with students and this should be considered when planning how participants will be selected and asked to participate in assessments (Dean, 2010). Students may feel obligated or even pressured to participate simply because they have a relationship with the assessor, which could also impact the response to questions posed to them as participants. The student affairs professional engaging in assessment activities should honor individual privacy, guard against revealing individual identity in the results, and avoid coercive participation (ACPA 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). People today have very busy schedules and may decline participation due to lack of time or obligations for which they have committed. This pressure to perform should also be taken into consideration (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001).

### Do no harm

Participating in an assessment project should not put participants at risk, or put them in a position that could cause personal or collective harm (ACPA, 2006; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). The CAS guiding principles (Dean, 2010) remind professionals to consider the student as a whole unique person and participation in a study should not adversely affect the student's ability to learn and develop. Most assessment studies conducted by student affairs professionals are internal studies by a specific office to gain information about a program or service and results are not published or shared widely. Thus, these studies often do not require approval by Institutional Review Boards or Offices. However these institutional resources should be consulted in each study to guard against any unforeseen risk (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). The Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards developed by ACPA (2006) state that professionals should have "an understanding of the purpose and role of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) and appropriate procedures for human rights" (p. 8). When there may be

a risk, or for the purposes of sharing results beyond the division or institution, an informed consent document clearly explaining the purpose of the study and how results will be disseminated must be utilized (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001; Walvoord, 2004). To be on the safe side, consult with those working in the institutional research or assessment office before starting any project. Further, in the case of true research, federal guidelines do not allow the individual researcher to judge if a project needs IRB approval. That decision rests solely upon the Review Board to determine.

### Benefitting others and being just

When talking about *being just*, Kitchner (1985) referred to fair treatment of all participants as well as equal access and distribution of resources. A thorough assessment process should be developed and conducted, governed by impartiality and accuracy, regardless of the findings (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). The purpose of most assessment is improvement and benefit to others; in student affairs it is the promotion of better programs, services, and opportunities (Kitchner, 1985). When engaged in assessment, one should be aware of and acknowledge one's connections with participants, especially when conducting qualitative assessments such as focus groups, individual interviews, or observations. Often student affairs professionals seek students with whom they are most familiar to gather their data. This decision could present multiple challenges to the quality of data received and, ultimately, the robustness of the information analyzed. Further, this decision has the potential to impact the established relationship. Administrators need to also be aware of their connection to the assessment project itself as this could influence selection of participants, the design of the study, or interview questions themselves. These considerations are necessary in order to design a study with minimal bias that can drive improvement.

### Be faithful

Along with *being just*, Kitchner (1985) asks professionals to be *faithful*—revealing the truth. When conducting assessment, it is easy to gather and analyze the data and move on with little to no change. However, being faithful means sharing and utilizing these results with all appropriate constituents. Winston and Saunders (1991) state "this principle embodies the concepts of loyalty, keeping promises, trustfulness, and basic respect" (p. 326). If professionals take time to gather the information, they should also take the time to share their findings, whether the



results are perceived as negative or positive, with the intent to create positive change. The ACPA Ethical Standards (2006) call professionals to “make all efforts to be accurate in their presentation of facts, honor agreements, and be trustworthy in the performance of their duties” (p. 12).

### **Professional guiding principles**

ACPA and NASPA both list several standards related to ethics and assessment, and student affairs professionals should be familiar with these statements. Specifically, ACPA (2006) in its introduction of professional standards states “the principal purpose of this statement is to assist student affairs professionals in regulating their own behavior by sensitizing them to potential ethical problems and by providing standards useful in daily practice” (p. 1). The ACPA standards focus on professional responsibility and competence as well as responsibility to the institution and society. Further, these standards go on to state that the principles are based on the foundation that professionals will “act to benefit others, promote justice, respect autonomy, be faithful, and do no harm,” (pp. 6-7) which are similar to those defined by Kitchner (1985).

Competency of the practitioner is a key factor in the assessment standards set by the Joint Taskforce for ACPA and NASPA (2010). In addition, the new Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners developed by ACPA and NASPA (2010) have assessment broken down into basic, intermediate, and high levels of assessment competency. At the basic level, practitioners are expected to determine the trustworthiness of data methods related to measurement problems or triangulation with qualitative studies and understand the necessity to follow institutional and divisional procedures. At an intermediate level, student affairs practitioners should be able to construct reliable instruments and manage the institutional and professional standards for ethical assessment activities. At an advanced level, practitioners are expected to be able to lead a variety of assessment practices including designing qualitative and quantitative studies and communicating results (Joint Task Force, 2010).

### **Potential Ethical Dilemmas**

Many student affairs professionals begin the assessment process with good intentions; however, many feel under-prepared and inexperienced, and thus begin the process with little preparation and guidance (Timm, 2006). These feelings are compounded by the consideration of ethical components of good assessment. The following section will highlight some of the potential ethical dilemmas and

provide information for avoiding problems, allowing for the creation of a smooth and effective assessment process.

### **Working Independently on a Project**

Student affairs professionals may potentially face several situations when conducting assessment for their institution. Some of these situations could be deemed as unethical. One such situation occurs when individuals conduct assessment in a silo. Assessment should be a collaborative effort but some professionals neglect to include other campus offices (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). Potential pitfalls of working alone include not connecting to the mission or core values of the institution and not having a broad perspective of other assessment processes already taking place.

All accredited higher education institutions have a specific mission and vision as well as goals to achieve that overall direction. Departments need to demonstrate, through assessment practices, how they are contributing to the mission and goals of the institution. “The best assessment programs are those clearly connected to academic and co-curricular programs and policy” (Sandeen & Barr, 2006, p. 150). It is important that assessment relate to the core goals of the campus through a collaborative effort with other departments and the institutional research office to demonstrate the impact student affairs functions have on institutional goals. Working on an assessment project alone or independent of broader institutional efforts could compromise this important goal.

There is another ethical concern related to operating in an assessment silo. Professionals operating in this mode may not be aware of similar assessment projects being conducted on campus that could influence their own assessment plan. When working on an assessment plan, it is important to build in time to gather information that will assist in identifying learning outcomes, identifying the questions to ask, and selecting an appropriate methodology. This may involve benchmarking with other areas of the campus and other institutions. Good benchmarking helps identify how similar information has been collected either at your institution or other institutions. Others may have completed a similar study that provides answers to the determined questions.

A strategy to address both these potential ethical dilemmas is to review the institutional, divisional, and departmental mission statements and goals as an assessment plan is being developed (ACPA, 2006; Banta & Associates, 2002; Pike, 2002). In the planning stages,

it is important to have conversations about the role of these mission statements in the assessment plan. Further, reviewing institutional goals and objectives will assist in strategically developing assessment questions related to student learning outcomes (Pike, 2002). Identifying the ways the study will connect to these mission statements and strategic plans provides evidence that the assessment is necessary.

### **Role Conflicts/Hidden Agendas**

Another ethical consideration when creating the assessment plan is to determine the best person to conduct the assessment and the potential role conflicts that may arise (Schuh & Upcraft, 1996). Often those beginning an assessment plan are doing so to acquire specific information. For example, a person in charge of the orientation program would have a vested interest in demonstrating the positive impact his or her office has on student retention and transition. Rather than looking at both the negative and positive outcomes of the assessment results, the individual may only focus on producing and sharing positive ones. The problem is that sometimes people anticipate a specific outcome or expect certain results to justify their point. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) talk about this issue as part of the role conflict that can exist in conducting assessment. It is important to have a clear understanding of the professional's role in the assessment process as well as the reasons for conducting assessment.

Personal agendas can also create problems when individuals report results that prove a point or highlight a personal issue (Sandeem & Barr, 2006). This may be related to making a department look positive to administration or to gain support for a program or policy change. One example may stem from a personal interest in changing the transfer orientation to an online program. Such a practitioner could design an assessment project examining costs and staff time associated with the current orientation with the agenda of demonstrating the benefits of an online program. However, the assessment is not examining the orientation program as a whole but is focusing primarily on resources. Therefore, aspects of the program itself are being overlooked.

One strategy for addressing the potential ethical dilemma of role conflicts or biases and avoiding working in silos, is to have staff members work in cross-departmental teams during the development of a comprehensive assessment plan. Throughout the process, the team would work to support and challenge one another by working

to unearth individual assumptions, hidden agendas, and personal biases (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

### **Insufficient Assessment Competency**

Student affairs professionals may not understand the important role assessment can play in their work (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000). Staff who have insufficient competency may not engage in assessment because they are uncomfortable with it or, if they engage in assessment, the information may not be accurate because of a lack of knowledge about process and procedures (Upcraft & Schuh; Timm, 2006). Assessment can often feel like a task professionals “must” do which can make the activities associated with assessment seem like a necessary evil.

A strategy to overcome this dilemma is for colleges and universities to provide specific training on effective assessment practices (Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009). A single-dosage one-time training will not suffice; continuous in-service development of professional skills across time is required. In addition to providing training, colleges should determine the assessment competency level of their professionals in order to determine the type and extent of training that is needed.

### **Selecting the Right Methodology**

Another potential ethical dilemma faced by student affairs professionals is selecting appropriate methods for collecting data. As discussed in previous chapters, there are two primary categories of methods in assessment: quantitative and qualitative. One ethical consideration is determining which method is appropriate for the assessment plan or question, rather than the one the professional is most comfortable using to gather the data. The best assessment method depends on the purpose of the study and can be distinguished based on known and unknown outcomes. Rather than relying on what is most comfortable, student affairs professionals must consider the purpose of the study before determining the best assessment method.

Within each of these two traditions are additional ethical considerations. With quantitative methods, the ethical issues focus primarily on the reliability and validity of the instrument or survey that is used. With qualitative methods, the ethical issues focus more on reliability and validity related to the person who is conducting the research because of personal bias, face credibility, and basic competency (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). For additional information on reliability and validity, see other chapters of this book.

Strategies to address this potential ethical situation are to provide training for practitioners so they have a full understanding of the different assessment methods and analyses. Practitioners could partner with institutional assessment office staff members who are more versed on assessment practices.

### **Violating the Confidentiality or Anonymity of Participants**

Beyond selecting the best assessment methods, there are also ethical issues related to the manner in which data are collected from participants, including maintaining the confidentiality or anonymity of participants. Anonymity is difficult to promise while confidentiality is more likely to be maintained in an assessment project (Babbie, 1999?). Confidentiality makes a participants' identity difficult to pinpoint because information is gathered and/or reported in a way that prevents anyone from putting the various data and demographic information together to identify a specific participant.

Participants' anonymity or confidentiality must be protected for two primary reasons. The first reason is so students feel comfortable responding honestly. If they believe their identity will be known, they are more likely to falsify information. As such, results are not reliable. Second, it is important to protect anonymity or confidentiality so students are not identifiable in institutional reports or journals (Palomba & Banta, 1999). The best approach is to analyze and report in the aggregate (Walvoord, 2004), which means to collect results and summarize the information using the group rather than the individual as the focus for reporting outcomes.

Another ethical concern is for participant protection. This relates to Kitchner's (1985) principle of *doing no harm*. The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research identify several ethical principles when working with human subjects including respect for persons and beneficence (1979). These principles deal with protecting the confidentiality of the student and the information that is collected as well as securing participants' welfare. Certain questions may elicit an emotional reaction or disruptive behavior that could negatively impact their own physical and/or mental well-being. To safeguard against this, participants should be completely informed regarding the (a) purpose of the assessment project; (b) what benefits or negative consequences could take place by participating; and (c) how the information will be used (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Schuh & Upcraft, 1998). If a

consent form is not required by the institution, assessors must allow the participant the right to decide if they want to participate or not (Love & Estanek, 2004). Forcing or misleading an individual to participate could injure participants' physical and mental well-being.

Each institution has its own policies and procedures for the collection of data. At some, working with the IRB or assessment office to collect consent forms is voluntary while others require the use of such forms regardless of project. It is important for assessors to identify the requirements established by their institution before beginning any data collection.

### **Increased Pressure**

Thus far, there has been a focus on ethical factors that impact the assessment process based on the methods selected, considerations in working with students, and the people who conduct the assessment. Now the chapter will shift to examine ethical issues that influence reporting assessment results. One such ethical situation involves the role of accrediting agencies and how their expectations have changed over time, creating additional pressure for institutions and administrators to demonstrate the effectiveness of campus programs and services. Because of the emerging pressures for accountability, there is a potential for the accuracy of assessment data to be compromised by personal agendas and concerns about less than favorable data.

"Assessment is a value-laden activity surrounded by debates about academic standards, preparing students for employment, measuring quality, and providing incentives" (Boud & Falchikov, 2007, p. 9). Indeed, the role of accreditation has changed over the years and has led to discussions over the need to prove worth versus the need for improvement. Wright (2002) describes the growth and changes of these various accrediting associations. It was in 1985 that the regional accrediting associations emphasized assessment as a form of institutional accountability and revised their procedures (Wright, 2002). Institutions began collecting data about their academic programs and the student experience. In 1988, the U.S. Department of Education established new criteria for recognizing all accreditation bodies which included a focus on "educational effectiveness" (Wright, 2002, p. 243). Now, it was not only important to document the experience of students but also to provide evidence of their educational achievement. At this point, the motivation was focused on improvement. In 1996, accrediting associations became insistent about their expectations for documenting the educational

achievement of students which caused institutions to increase their level of assessment activity.

More recently, these associations have new criteria that require documenting educational achievement and providing evidence that students are achieving the educational outcomes described in the institutional mission statement (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). With the increased requirements related to accreditation, assessment is now an obligation rather than an optional task. A large part deals with federal and state governments and the use of publicly invested funds. Many states are moving toward performance based funding to assure the public that state institutions are fulfilling their missions. The Ohio Board of Regents recently changed to performance based funding with different criteria for main campuses, regional campuses, and community and technical colleges. For example, the University main campuses' funding model is based on course completion, student success related to cost of degree and degree completion, and institutional specific goals and metrics (Ohio Board of Regents, 2010). "As pressure from outside the academy has increased, institutions have felt it necessary to respond to accountability mandates from accrediting agencies and state governments" (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996, p. 57). This pressure creates an environment where not only unethical assessment practices can take place but information that is reported may be skewed because of these increased pressures.

Another ethical consideration when reporting results is actions practitioners may take because of pressure from senior administration. With the need to demonstrate accountability, "the temptation for student affairs may be to avoid certain issues or only to conduct safe studies that will not reflect poorly on their programs or impinge on areas outside student affairs" (Sandeen & Barr, 2006, p. 144). In this respect, practitioners may not report negative assessment results because of institutional political pressures. It is important to keep in mind that assessment provides dual purposes of promoting improvement and providing assurance regarding the quality and effectiveness of educational programs and institutional services. It is vital for student affairs professionals to conduct and publish reports, positive and negative, that include accurate and clear information and address the most significant issues. A negative result simply provides an opportunity to make improvements in those areas. To

ensure that senior level administrators are not completely surprised by any negative results, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) suggest communicating with administration all the possible outcomes in the assessment prior to starting the process. They also suggest sharing negative results with interested parties before a final report is distributed so they are aware of any issues that may need to be addressed prior to the data being made public. The reader can also review the chapter on Politics of Assessment for additional information.

## Case Studies

The following two case studies provide insight into the ethical decision making that takes place while conducting assessment activities.

### The University of South Florida in Lakeland<sup>10</sup>

The University of South Florida in Lakeland is a campus within the University of South Florida System, located in Lakeland, FL. With a home campus designation of about 1800 students, it currently serves as a 2+2 system offering bachelor and master degrees for juniors, seniors, and graduate students. Because of the non-traditional population on campus, the orientation program has shifted over the years from an on-site, face-to-face orientation to an online orientation that students take at their own convenience before registering for classes. Since its inception, the orientation program had not been formally assessed to determine its effectiveness in educating students on academic policies and campus resources as well as supporting their overall transition to campus. At the time of the assessment, USF in Lakeland offered two on-campus orientations of about two hours in length where various campus administrators presented on policies, campus resources, and registration processes. It also offered a fully online orientation covering the same material through written content, videos, and quiz questions to ensure students were reviewing the orientation. Students could choose either method to complete their orientation requirement.

A brief literature review was conducted to determine the effectiveness of other online orientation programs but limited information was available because little research or assessment has been conducted or reported on this topic. Another brief literature review was done on on-campus orientations to help determine what should be covered

<sup>10</sup> Jan Lloyd, Former Vice President for Student Affairs from the University of South Florida in Lakeland was the contributing author on this case study.



in transfer orientation. After reviewing the information, a decision was made to assess the effectiveness of each orientation as it relates to students' academic success in areas such as understanding academic policies and identifying campus resources, as well as transition to college which included students' sense of belonging and involvement on campus.

There were several ethical situations that were considered in implementing and conducting the assessment plan which included, deciding on the type of assessment to conduct, determining who would conduct the assessment, maintaining confidentiality of students, addressing personal relationships, and getting student consent to participate. After determining the purpose of the assessment, a qualitative method was chosen so that rich and detailed information could be gathered from students on their experiences rather than limiting their input with predetermined questions.

Another ethical consideration was determining who would conduct the assessment. With a recent reorganization of the orientation program, the two administrators who implemented and conducted the assessment process were new to the department although they had actively participated in the on-campus orientations. An important piece of qualitative research is acknowledging personal biases related to the assessment topic in order to minimize the influence they might have on the data that is collected and analyzed. Both administrators acknowledged a preference for the on-campus orientation and because of the potential for bias, the assessment plan and protocol were shared with other administrators not associated with the orientation program to identify biases that might be present in the questions. Both administrators were familiar with qualitative assessment, had time to conduct the assessment, and were interested in doing the assessment. Because of these competencies, they were determined the best people to conduct the transfer orientation assessment.

In planning the personal interviews the two administrators knew they would be conducting these at different times and it was important to ensure they were following the same qualitative methods. A discussion between these two administrators about the interview protocol led to the development of semi-structured questions that each administrator would follow. The details of how the interviews would be conducted were

also discussed so the method was consistent between administrators.

USF in Lakeland is a small campus; administrators know many students personally, thus it was necessary to acknowledge and account for any personal relationships, to ensure confidentiality of the students participating. The administrators agreed that if one of them had an existing relationship or conflict with a participant that student would be interviewed by the other administrator. Students were assigned a random number that was used in the recorded interview so they were not identifiable.

To further respect students' autonomy and the principle of do no harm, consent forms were signed by the students with their approval to participate. The purpose and process of the assessment were described to the students so they had a full understanding of what would take place. Because some interviews were conducted in group settings, the importance of confidentiality was also discussed not only between administrator and student but between students in the group. Students were allowed to not answer questions if they felt uncomfortable, although this did not happen through the assessment process.

The assessment was helpful in making changes to increase the effectiveness of the orientation. Both the on-campus and online orientation continue and have been revised to better address student needs and department/institution goals. One other change was to require students in online programs to complete the online orientation and students in grounded degree programs to complete the on-campus orientation. Because the ethical considerations of this assessment project were taken into consideration at the beginning of the process, it ensured the results were comprehensive, trustworthy, and unbiased.

### **Georgia Southern University<sup>11</sup>**

Georgia Southern University, a state university enrolling over 19,000 students each year, houses just over 4,300 undergraduate students. In an effort to better serve the residential population and continue to provide quality services and programs the Department of University Housing uses several different tools to assess the housing program. The primary tool for assessing program success and student satisfaction is the Resident Satisfaction Survey developed by Educational Benchmarking Incorporated (EBI) and the Association of

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<sup>11</sup> Jon K. Coleman, Director of Business and Administrative Services for University Housing at Georgia Southern University



College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I). This national instrument was selected for a number of reasons. The instrument itself is a reliable and statistically valid instrument that the department did not have the resources to produce internally. It also provided staff with comparison data for the current year to six selected institutions, the Carnegie class grouping, and the total population of institutions participating during a specific year. By committing to a multi-year plan the department was able to generate longitudinal data for review and program improvement.

There were a number of ethical issues that the Department of University Housing addressed during this assessment process. First, it was critical that valid information from a reliable instrument was received. In deciding to use a national instrument, staff had to think carefully about what information this instrument would provide and what it would not provide. Though members of the department's staff had experience with assessment, the resources to develop an instrument of this type internally were not available. The staff had to consider using an existing instrument which might limit their flexibility and ability to customize questions they want to specifically target in a particular year. Additionally, the staff reflected on the cost associated with using an outside instrument. As a department, the leadership determined that the benefits of using an existing instrument exceeded the benefits of designing an institutional assessment instrument. Using this instrument meant requesting additional support from the organization administering the instrument so that questions, refinements, and the interpretation of data could be supported by subject matter and technical experts outside the department.

Another issue involved determining how to gather participation from students. Utilizing a web survey eliminated the face-to-face pressure of getting students to complete the survey, and thus avoided the potential for students shifting their answers due to their proximity to staff while completing the survey. The convenience of using this instrument through web applications allowed the staff to collect student answers continuously. To increase student input the staff decided to use an incentive program where a limited number of students would win prizes of high monetary value. Students who participated in the survey could enter the drawing and share in the possibility of winning one of the items. This decision was made for two primary reasons: (a) the Resident Satisfaction Survey is long and takes a commitment of time on the part of the student so the staff wanted to provide some recognition of the student's willingness to take the time

to share their thoughts and (b) staff members felt that by offering a chance at the prizes, those individuals with a lesser motivation to share their feedback (positive or negative) would be encouraged to participate.

One of the unique offerings of the instrument is in selecting institutions with which to compare results. This occurs blindly; after the institutions are selected the results are provided without specific institutional markers. Determining with whom to compare themselves each year is a challenge because staff members have to consider the levels of academic ability, general demographics of students, and the types of housing in which students live. At Georgia Southern the housing inventory is over 75% private bedrooms in suites and apartment style housing. This makes it very difficult to find comparisons to other institutions when their housing inventory reflects more traditional style housing that studies show has a measurable impact on student interactions and satisfaction. After a number of years, the leadership still has not been able to identify a reliable comparison group; therefore, it was decided to look at the peer and aspirational institutions identified by the university administration for comparison data. Although these schools do not share the housing profile of Georgia Southern, that factor is considered when comparing results among the select six and a greater focus is placed on longitudinal results to show the change in students' scores as a result of programmatic and other changes within Georgia Southern.

Considering how to share the data received creates yet another ethical issue for contemplation. The results of this instrument are designed to be an internal measure and tool for improvement and not to be used to compare scores or results competitively with other institutions. Georgia Southern University supports that principle. Results are shared with internal staff members working in the various areas of housing, as well as some partner offices in Student Affairs, Auxiliary Services, and the President's Council. The staff is also aware of things that may skew results, causing the "halo effect." Being aware of the impact of factors such as new construction, renovation projects and the closing of buildings before results are reviewed and shared is key in presenting the whole picture. One of the most important lessons the staff members at Georgia Southern have learned through their use of this instrument is to look beyond the data to the patterns and how the data is affected by their unique campus offerings. Their assessment data is not an end result, but rather the beginning of the discussion for program improvement and evaluation.

## Chapter Summary

Ethical assessment behavior is important for all student affairs professionals. This chapter has highlighted several issues to consider in conducting assessment and reporting its results. There are many factors that influence this behavior such as increased pressure from external constituents and lack of assessment knowledge.

## Chapter Highlights

- Guidelines and principles for effective and ethical assessment are described and discussed.
- Strategies to overcome these ethical considerations include using the correct methods for data collection, developing comprehensive assessment teams, coordinating with the institutional research office, providing on-going education and training, and identifying the best person to conduct the assessment.
- In conducting assessment it is vital to be aware of all ethical pitfalls and guard against deception so that one can ensure that programs and services are examined for improvement and the rights of participants are protected.
- Institutions that provide ongoing assessment training to professionals not only build professional competency but create a stronger culture of assessment for the campus as a whole.

## Points to Ponder

- When are the best times to assess students in my area?
- As I solicit participants am I getting a truly representative group?
- In what ways does my assessment support or contribute to the mission of the institution, division, or department?
- Am I the best person to conduct this assessment, and if not who can help me?

## For Further Consideration

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# Chapter 7: Politics in Assessment

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**POLITICS ARE AN** essential aspect of organizational life (Morgan, 1997) resulting from different people wanting different things. Any time a diversity of interests exists, politics will as well. Add in—or take away—scarce resources and you have an environment that is rife with politics. Even in the realm of assessment, where “objective” data is the main source of information, politics play a role. In fact, because those data and the assessment process affect other people’s programs and services and how resources are allocated, politics may be even more challenging in the area of assessment (Roberts & Osters, 2006). In order to be an effective student affairs professional and leader, one must understand how politics may influence the assessment process and develop the necessary skills to effectively influence others in order to benefit the organization. This chapter will provide an overview of the concept of politics, discuss assessment politics, including identifying specific points in the assessment cycle at which politics are likely to play a role, and conclude with a case study.

## Politics: A Diversity of Interests

All organizations are comprised of individuals and groups with differing – and often conflicting – perspectives and interests. It is these differences that create the political nature of organizational life, and the more complex an organization, the more differences that are likely to exist, and the greater the likelihood that political behavior will be apparent. Politics are likely to be more prevalent, and perhaps more relevant, when resources are scarce. Conflicts result from individuals or groups competing for the scarce resources needed to advance their interests. Colleges and universities are a particular type of “political arena” (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 198), comprised of different cultures with different norms, values, goals, attitudes, and practices. Faculty, administrators, students,

## ASK Content Standard #12: Politics of Assessment

- Ability to determine political risks that may apply to assessment results and the audiences likely to be adversely affected by findings.
- Ability to use assessment in the context of strategic planning, budgeting, unit or institutional decision-making including use of assessment to effect changes when warranted.
- Ability to identify the context/institutional factors that shape the need for assessment.
- Ability to report assessment findings with an awareness of the political context for those results such as who will receive the results, the format in which the results should be reported, and timing of the reporting.
- Ability to exercise personal and professional maturity, good judgment and critical thinking skills in the reporting and use of assessment results.
- Ability to identify, recognize, and overcome barriers to performing assessment and incorporating assessment results into policy and practice.

alumni, board members, and perhaps even the state are all players in this arena, each with their own general interests related to the institution. For example, administrators and legislators may focus on fiscal responsibility and other forms of accountability, while students may be concerned with keeping the price of tuition low, and alumni with the perceived value of their degree, all of which may not be mutually achievable. In student

affairs, there is an awareness of the “cultural divide” with faculty and academic affairs based on distinct roles, differing emphases related to aspects of student learning and development, competing initiatives (Cook & Lewis, 2007), different languages and cultural norms, financial competition, differing specializations, and often different organizational rules and rewards (Kezar, 2003).

## Power

The primary means to navigate the difference inherent in politics is the exercise of power. When faced with the inconsistencies that exist in organizations, decision makers must consider who wants what, who has power or not, and who will or will not act in the decision making process (March, 1994). The concept of power becomes a necessary part of decision making because of the complex and diverse nature of organizations. It is “the medium through which conflicts of interest are ultimately resolved. Power influences who gets what, when, and how” (Morgan, 1997, p. 170). If power is the ability to get what one wants, then being able to do so should lessen the hindrances of complexity by providing access and control. Power is the way that these conflicts are resolved. It is the capacity to make things happen in order to reach one’s desired outcomes when there are conflicting or competing interests (Pfeffer, 1981).

There are multiple sources of potential power in organizations that can be classified as structural or personal (French & Raven, 1959). Structural sources of power are hierarchical, based on formal authority in the structure of the organization. These formal positions endow individuals with discretion over resources and

may also provide individuals with the authority or the ability to set the ground rules for decision making, such as what issues will be discussed, when decisions are made, and who is allowed to participate in the process (March, 1994).

Personal sources of power include “status characteristics,” such as experience, education, and professional activity that confer legitimacy to an individual (Lin, 1982). For example, in institutions of higher education, individuals who have significant research experience, a terminal degree, and are recognized as legitimate by their peers are likely to have personal power. Connections to other individuals or groups may also endow an individual with the ability to access resources and information (Morgan, 1997). Four common and recognizable forms of power generally applicable to the practice of assessment are described in Table 7.1.

Different entities have different power, and each is limited by others’ power. Yet, politics cannot exist without interdependence because individuals and groups rely on one another for resources. For example, faculty rely on student affairs professionals to care for students’ mental health needs so that they can persist in their academic work. As a result, individuals or groups must build support with others through the formation of coalitions, whether formal (e.g., unions) or informal (e.g., coffee break groups). Coalitions provide the ability to achieve levels of power and influence that cannot be achieved alone. Furthermore, while singular perspectives may create simpler situations, a pluralistic approach developed collaboratively can create fuller explanations, lessen bias, and open a window onto alternative viewpoints.

**Table 7.1: Forms of Power**

Position Power	The authority a person has based on their position in an organization. This may include control over rewards, budgets, information, resources, policies, and decision making.
Expert Power	Results from an individual’s expertise in a particular area. In other words, it is based on what one knows, what experience one has, or what special skills or talents one has.
Referent Power	Derives from the relationships and affiliations one has with other individuals, groups, or organizations.
Information Power	The ability to control or access information. It results from possessing knowledge, or the ability to get information that others need or want.

The representation of a wide range of interests and the potential for more creative solutions stems from the different perspectives and skills that are unlikely to be found in any one individual or group. However, because of diverse interests, coalitions also require negotiation, trade-offs, and compromises across and within groups to identify achievable and desired outcomes.

### Politics in Assessment

The assessment function exists within this organizational political context, with its own interests and power to contribute to the complexity—primarily to influence policy and practice. Individuals and groups have differing perceptions, priorities, and interpretations about assessment and its role. This power differential is made even more difficult from the perspective of student affairs, which often also carries the burden of being viewed as less relevant to the educational process. Yet, assessment is a way to provide evidence of our effectiveness and our contribution to the educational mission and to compete for resources. However, just like any other of the variety of interests and functions within colleges and universities, competing interests can inhibit the assessment function, particularly when resources are scarce or when findings may be damaging or undesirable. Decisions will be made and policies defined, regardless of whether assessment results are available (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). How can assessment practitioners ensure that relevant data are available, accepted, and applied? Focusing on the interests, potential conflicts, and power provides a useful frame for analyzing organizational politics (Morgan, 1997). It is important to understand the role of power within the assessment cycle and how to harness it – the power within the assessment function, the power of others across the institution, and the power to be developed.

By its nature, assessment is a flashpoint for politics to become apparent and significant. Some of the primary functions of assessment – to inform decision making, to assist in resource allocation, to evaluate and improve programs, to create a culture of continuous improvement and learning –are all areas that bring to the forefront a multitude of different and conflicting interests. Addressing politics in

assessment is an ongoing process, one that must start early in the development of an assessment culture. Most organizational life is routine and guided by existing procedures. Trying to introduce a new routine, one that changes the culture and asks others to care about and commit to a new way of doing things will require the ability to influence others, in other words – the exercise of power. Developing a “culture of evidence” requires the development of relationships and the demonstration of expertise. People must learn to trust the process and feel confident that they can be successful in it. For more specific information on building an assessment culture, see Chapter Eight.

Throughout the assessment cycle, there are a variety of opportunities and strategies to consider regarding the role of politics and the use of power. For example, one may have position power depending on placement in the organizational structure and stated responsibilities. The student affairs professional role probably has a significant amount of authority over many aspects of the assessment process, from policies about schedules to budgets for implementation. But where one is located in the organizational chart may also decrease power. For example, while a full-time assessment professional reporting to the vice president may have position power, without developing other relationships or colleagues’ capacity, the same individual might suffer from being considered part of “top-down” administrative policies related to assessment. If assessment is only a portion of a professional’s role, he or she might have been able to develop relationships with other similar colleagues, but may have less control over resources and rewards. It is important for student affairs professionals to recognize these multiple sources of power: what professionals have and what they can give, as well as the power of others to influence and share power and responsibility. The next sections outline particular political considerations that can emerge during the assessment cycle.

### Mission, Goals, and Outcomes

From the start, connecting assessment to the mission and goals of the institution or division creates a sense



of legitimacy. Of course, it helps to have leadership support from those in positions of power, but student affairs professionals also need to provide leadership for others. Clearly aligning the assessment function with widely-held beliefs and accepted institutional ideas relies on the broad referent power of organizational membership and creates a strong rationale for the process. However, the complexity of interests among multiple actors can still work against even a focus on mission (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996) as individuals and groups may hold varying interpretations and emphases of the same mission. Including a variety of other stakeholders in the process of developing goals and intended outcomes is beneficial to clearly connect them to the mission and to invest them in the purposes of the assessment. Involve individuals such as faculty members, other administrators, students, employers, and community representatives from the outset in order to incorporate their needs and interests and to solicit later support (Banta, 2002). Given the diversity of goals within institutions of higher education, consider what particular individuals or groups on campus want from their perspective. Consider who needs to be involved in the discussion; in other words, build a coalition that reflects the diverse interests of those who will be affected by the interpretation of mission, and then jointly define goals and identify criteria for success. Including others on a committee that tackles these issues is a means of giving them positional power. This strategy can create support for and commitment to future assessment efforts by building trust that multiple perspectives will be heard and included. It may even begin to develop colleagues' capacity for understanding and valuing the assessment process.

### Study Design

Once goals are clarified and outcomes defined, the need to consider assessment projects with a political lens remains. Assessment designs reflect political realities since what is measured, and how, is determined by the prevalent interests and power involved (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001) that can reach well beyond the assessment office. Individuals are

often compelled to do assessment because someone in a position of power wants information (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Political requests for information may not always fit into the plans developed (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). On the other end of the continuum, it is also important to avoid conducting a study that no one wants. It is wise to follow the adage *if you don't want to know the answer, then don't ask the question*.

In the design stage of the assessment cycle, remember that the assessment function has power. Specifically, student affairs professionals have expert power in to design a useable and useful study. First, one may know about – and have access to – relevant information that already exists, making another study unnecessary. If not, one's knowledge, skills, and experience can guide a study that is attentive to design details. For example, one should have the ability to understand when qualitative methods are most appropriate and to articulately defend that choice to critics (see Chapter Four on data collection for more information). Of course, whenever possible in terms of design and budget, using multiple measures to triangulate data and abate potential critics is recommended. Expert power also comes in the form of experience navigating the positional power of institutional politics and policies, such as IRB approval, inherent in the design process. Gaining IRB approval to implement a study before approaching others who control necessary information, such as student email addresses, may provide useful leverage. Finally, professionals' expertise can guide the development of an instrument that serves its purpose while respecting participants' time and reflecting sensitivity to campus “hot button” issues (e.g., diversity, budgets, parking). Roberts and Osters (2006) wisely point out that as student affairs professionals, we should be thoughtful about the questions we choose to ask, and cautious about asking questions in which we have no ability to make decisions or changes based on the responses. Using one's expertise means also knowing the limits of one's power.

Share power by re-engaging or building a coalition for the assessment design process, taking care to include those who are likely to be affected

by the results of a particular study. Looking ahead to the implementation process, including certain others may help to ensure that they trust the resulting information, and at the very least increase response rates by providing a wider set of voices marketing the process. There are several groups to consider. First, think to include those individuals whose power lies in controlling information you might need, including access to students or other target populations. Even if they are not seated around the table, give thought to the critics' perspectives and work to address potentially controversial or sensitive results (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Determine who has the power to assure that results are used to inform changes in programs or policies and build support for this accountability by keeping powerful individuals informed at all points in the process (Roberts & Osters, 2006). If necessary, include them in key discussions as an ally who can persuade others using their positional or expert power. If they cannot – or will not – support accountability, consider whether or not this study is worth expending your and others' political capital. Remember that sometimes a proposed study may never start, may be discontinued, or may be kept confidential once completed due to others' positional or referent power.

Power in the design process can also come from building trust and developing commitment. For example, consider designing assessments around larger units – like an entire division – before focusing on smaller, more identifiable units like specific programs or departments. This broader approach gives others an opportunity to experience the process as part of a safer, larger group of colleagues and can help one build strategic relationships by showing that one understands that many will have concerns and questions. Empower others by sharing assessment costs as a way to include and to benefit multiple parties (Roberts & Osters, 2006). Celebrate small steps; work with colleagues to develop capacity by starting with something manageable, encouraging collaboration, and providing resources and professional development. Even then, focus on those who are most willing first, then once one has gained credibility – and supporters – one can move on to other stakeholders.

## Reporting

A basic competency for conducting assessment is the ability to “identify the political...sensitivity of raw and partially processed data and [assessment] results, handling them with appropriate confidentiality and deference to the organizational hierarchy” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 10). Among student affairs professionals, there is an understanding of the need to share the information garnered from assessment projects. Staff members understand that if data sits on a shelf and is not used, not only is this failing to “close the loop” but also one loses credibility and the ability to influence programs and policies, and potentially students' willingness to participate in future projects. The desire is to increase the chances that results will be used (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). However, while data can promote awareness and understanding (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996) and serve as “neutral” information, it does play a role in decision making, therefore highlighting its political nature. After data collection and analysis, data dissemination remains a particularly sensitive area for politics.

Information is power, but with that information comes a great deal of responsibility. Sharing information can be seen as giving up power, especially if the information is negative (Petrides, 2002). As such, it is vital to consider the costs and benefits of sharing information. Assessment practitioners have access to information and often the ability to control that information, but must be cautious of political landmines in the reporting step of the assessment cycle. First, know what the sensitive topics are on campus and consider how to handle results that are less than ideal (Roberts & Osters, 2006). Work to draw on personal expertise in assessment to articulate an improvement-based, formative philosophy regarding using data rather than focusing on summative evaluation, and also remember to be sure that those who can support such a perspective are involved in decisions about design and reporting.

Second, consider what information other individuals or groups want or need. Know who stakeholders are and who might be interested in the results (Roberts & Osters, 2006). Again, knowing the issues and activities on campus is a powerful avenue

for sharing specific information with a particular individual or group. While others' position power may dictate what is shared, one may still need to filter for high-level decision makers in order to distill the information to what is meaningful and useful. Too much detail may result in reports being ignored. Other audiences may require only specific portions of data sets and very few will want—or need—entire reports.

As one considers potential audiences for reporting, remember the positional power of students. Communicating information back to them, as appropriate, can create support for future projects and for identified changes. More importantly, when changes happen, let students know that it is based on the information they took time to share. By doing so one can build credibility for the assessment process by showing students that their participation is valued and not in vain. Connect with student government on issues of concern to the student population. Share community-wide reports with student leaders.

Regardless of the audience, student affairs professionals must use their expertise around the power of data, its limitations, and its sensitivity in the reporting process. The goal is always to share information in ways that will help to improve programs, practices, and policies. Consider both what, how, and when to disseminate, as well as who should be involved, in order to achieve this goal. In other words, think about content, form (e.g., electronic, paper, presentation, social media, etc.), timing, and messenger (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

**Content.** When a study is complete and analysis begins, the content that can potentially be shared is overwhelming! As stated previously, it is vital that student affairs professionals understand their campus' needs and sensitive issues in order to best determine what can and should be shared. Regardless of what content is selected for dissemination, individuals need to be prepared for critics, challenges and how to address concerns, whether it is about methodologies or response rates.

**Form.** As the experts, student affairs professionals must filter and translate information

so that it is useful to the audience. Again, one may control information but as stewards, professionals are obligated to share it in appropriate and useful ways. Consider different forms of reporting beyond written documents, including presentations and web sites that make use of user-friendly visuals and downplay actual statistics when necessary. This may mean that larger reports must be distilled down to a one-page brief of essential, targeted information or that information must be presented in person in order to facilitate its use. However, use caution when relying on particular media for sharing data at all points in the report development process. Disseminating information by email may allow controversial data to be easily forwarded by recipients, so avoid sharing sensitive data this way. Professionals at public institutions in particular may also need to be particularly careful as published information may be accessible through public information or “sunshine laws.” In any case, if one is unsure, it may be wise to consider drawing on others' expert power to assist in this process, including a university relations or general counsel office, before releasing information, or perhaps even before conducting a study. Never release a report without the prior approval of your department administrator, and in many cases, the division administrator. Premature release of sensitive information is one of the fastest ways to find one is seeking a new job on a new campus.

**Timing.** While one may be anxious to share data as soon as it is available, it is important to consider when information might best be positively received and have the greatest impact. For example, one may not want to release a report about the relationship between student alcohol use and academic performance in June when a large part of the audience—faculty members—is away from campus and not able to engage in a conversation about the meaning and use of that information. In this regard, one must acknowledge one's power—one's ability to influence—is variable. Know what power one has at any given moment and consider whether it is better to act now or wait until a more appropriate, and convenient, time for the given audience. It

is helpful to remember that politics exist because of different actors, so all roles in a conversation must be considered. Having information available in the right place at the right time requires one to understand the issues and the actors.

**Messenger.** Student affairs professionals, likely the authors of assessment reports, do not always need to be the messenger for the results. Others' position, referent, or expert power may make them more credible. For example, a vice president may be willing and more appropriate to deliver information about particularly sensitive topics if he or she is committed to action and improvement in that area. As professionals are not always content experts in all areas of student development, partnering with a particular program director or other area expert to deliver a presentation or coauthor a report can also provide additional support and credibility, as well as expertise on content.

### Renewal: Closing the Loop

Several aspects of politics are particularly important to consider in order to effectively “close the loop” including understanding how to tie results back to mission, knowing who to involve in improvement discussions, and how to empower others in the improvement process. We engage in assessment to understand the extent to which programs, services, and policies achieve their intended outcomes by using evidence to inform continuous improvement. In other words, a major aspect of assessment is using evidence to renew practices. However, at its core—whether it is structural or programmatic—change involves humans and a variety of reactions from anxiety to resistance to enthusiasm. This, of course, means that politics and power will play a role in closing the loop. Particularly when budgets and/or resources are restricted, assessment has a political role because the results can help with decisions about how to allocate resources and to focus efforts on mission-based programs. Assessment, in part by what is assessed, indicates what is important and gives clear clues about what an organization wants to be, what is of value and what is of central importance to the institution. However, the possibility that programs

or services will be eliminated creates a charged political environment as different constituencies focus on their different interests and how to achieve or maintain them.

Student affairs professionals can share information that provides a clear rationale for specific changes, but should also consider the role and power of mission to provide guidance and legitimacy. Institutional mission, as a shared and valued concept across an organization, can influence decision making through the power it has to set priorities, to provide context, to control where resources are directed, and to define success. Professionals must remember that mission serves as a “filter” for our and others' choices (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996). When competition for resources exists, information is required for strong arguments that can be used to influence these decisions. Professionals have access to information and can often control its use and understand the mission at multiple levels, know the important issues, who the decision makers are, and what kind of information they want.

While one has access to information as a lever for change, one does not always have the positional power to influence change beyond sharing data and potential implications. Often, that is rightfully left up to those charged with particular programs and services. However, decision makers may take action—based on their own positional power—that is contrary to interpreted results because they have different problems and issues to address (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Having a plan in place for how the report will be used may make it more difficult for others to ignore findings (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). As always, building relationships and referent power through collaboration and coalitions is an excellent strategy for approaching the change process. Engaging others in collaborative discussions of study results and recommendations can build support for change and provide opportunities for empowered participation and involvement.

Renewal should also include an opportunity to reflect on the entire assessment process—not just results—and to consider where change should occur. For personal development, student affairs

professionals should consider the four primary sources of power discussed here – position, expertise, information, and referent (i.e., relationships) – to determine what worked well and what areas need further development. For example, one may need to update skills in order to maintain expertise or develop a stronger relationship with a particular campus stakeholder. Modeling improvement is a great way to create legitimacy among one’s colleagues. Finally, empower others through the process by including them in discussions on the pros and cons of the process, and by providing training to develop capacity and expertise. Ask others if the data shared was meaningful. Including others in this way can accomplish several things – positive renewal of the process, buy-in from others, and the development of stronger relationships. Politics are a normal part of everyday organizational life, but they can produce positive results for everyone involved if we attend to the power we have and what others bring to the table (see Table 7.2). Know one’s power as it relates to one’s position within the organization, relationships

with individuals and groups, expertise, and access to and facility with information. Know the campus – understand the mission and goals, know what the emerging and sensitive topics are, and be aware of the power that others have to either help or impede the process. Planning ahead to consider how each of these can positively influence the assessment cycle can result in a smoother and more successful process.

Finally, empower others by sharing information, including them in coalitions, and developing their expertise. Building relationships and collaborating can lead to the creation of shared responsibility for the assessment process and can develop commitment beyond one’s own role as an assessment leader. “One of the most promising but underused opportunities for collaboration...comes in the form of outcomes assessment” (Banta & Kuh, 1998, p. 42). Especially if one is in the early stages of developing an assessment culture, one can build support by including others in decision making and the development of processes and goals.

**Table 7.2: Building Power for Assessment**

Position Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include others by building coalition based on diverse interests</li> <li>• Rely on others to deliver information or messages</li> <li>• Empower others in the renewal process</li> </ul>
Expert Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use own experiences and expertise in the assessment process</li> <li>• Include and/or consult with others who have specific expertise</li> <li>• Develop others’ expertise in assessment</li> </ul>
Referent Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect the assessment process to institutional, departmental, or program mission</li> <li>• Build relationships with others and include them in the assessment process</li> </ul>
Information Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rely on assessment role/position to identify and access information</li> <li>• Share information with others, with attention to form, content, and timing</li> </ul>



## Case Study

### Dartmouth College<sup>12</sup>

Dartmouth College is a private liberal arts college with about 4,000 undergraduates. The Career Services department asked the Director of Student Affairs Planning, Evaluation, and Research (SAPER) to help them with their departmental review process. The department initiated this project on their own because the college does not have a structure for systematically engaging units in a review process. In fact, the Director of SAPER was the only assessment professional on campus. The department wanted the director's assistance for several reasons. First, they saw him as an expert in assessment. He had been engaged in doing student affairs assessment full-time for seven years, had facilitated an "assessment camp," led the assessment team, and had assisted other offices on campus with their assessment efforts. Second, the Director of SAPER had known the Assistant Director of Career Services, who was leading the program review process, for about 10 years. They had been hall directors together in buildings right next to each other at another institution, thus there was a lot of trust from her and her staff.

While the review team was positive and eager, they did not know where to start with the program review process, except to invite external reviewers to campus. As they began to develop the process, the Director of SAPER was able to bring in appropriate and useful tools, such as SWOC (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges) analysis and the CAS (Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education) that would help the Career Services staff members in the program review process. Additionally, the director held a certain amount of power due to his position, not simply in terms of planning, evaluation, and research. The SAPER function was located in the Dean of College Division (i.e., student affairs) and reported to the Associate Dean of the College for Development and Administration. Perhaps more importantly, because he was from "outside" of the Career Services department, his position could allow the Career Services staff and others involved in the review process to view him as being more objective. Due to his position, he also had access to both the Associate Dean and the Dean to which Career Services reported. Having regular access to these two powerful campus individuals

allowed the Career Services department to ask what information the Deans might be interested in learning.

While the director had power, he did not completely control the process, although he did facilitate some aspects. The department was empowered by their ability to choose which tools they would actually use, based on his recommendations, and they implemented most of the tools and analyzed the information themselves. The director further empowered the department by advising them on some analyses and inferences, but their ownership allowed them to control their own assessment process rather than relying on the external review team to make all of the conclusions. In the end, the partnership provided the department with a useful review and the Director of SAPER with a solid example of how to initiate, develop, implement, and use a departmental review.

This situation highlights several sources of power that helped the Director of Student Affairs Planning, Evaluation, and Research to effectively assist the Career Services department to develop and implement a comprehensive departmental review process. First, he had recognized expert power due to his role and responsibilities at the College, as well as his knowledge of useful tools (e.g., CAS Standards). Second, he had many avenues of referent power, both with the assistant director of Career Services who managed the review process as well as with other influential campus roles (i.e., the deans). Information power is also evident in this case, as characterized by his knowledge of how to utilize particular tools as well as his ability to bring information garnered from conversations with the deans. Finally, position power is evident throughout the case in his access to practical and human resources.

### Chapter Highlights

- Colleges and universities are natural political arenas, and assessment plays a part in the politics on any given campus.
- The idea of power, or who has power can play a big role in assessment and even the sharing of results.
- Assessment is typically used to influence policy and practice or implement change, understanding this will lead to more ethical practice.
- It is the responsibility of student affairs professionals to conduct useful and appropriate assessments and to share the results in an effective and timely manner.

<sup>12</sup> Contributed by Gavin Henning, Former Director of Administration, Dean of the College Division, Dartmouth College

**Points to Ponder**

- What cultural norms, values, goals, or attitudes influence your assessment activity?
- What sort of power do I have on campus and how might that be used to appropriately engage in assessment and create change on campus?
- Who holds power on campus that may help me with my assessment activities?
- How can I provide evidence that what I do supports the mission of the institution?

**For Further Consideration**

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## Chapter 8: Creating a Culture of Assessment

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**HOW DOES ONE** go about building a culture of assessment in student affairs? Answering this question, which student affairs professionals often pose, is the focus of this chapter. Before articulating strategies for building one, it may be helpful to first define what is meant by the phrase, “culture of assessment.” Schein (1997) provided a definition of “organizational culture” that is useful in this endeavor. He described organizational culture as: “A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problem [...], that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 12). In simpler terms, organizational culture describes those things within an organization held in common by its members, such as a belief that systematic assessment improves organizational effectiveness. Drawing on Schein’s definition, we define culture of assessment as an organizational culture whose values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors reflect a shared appreciation of assessment practice and its value to institutional advancement.

Establishing such an organizational culture has never been more important for student affairs organizations. Regional accrediting associations, national associations and organizations, and state and federal governing

### ASK Content Standard #10: Assessment Ethics

An understanding of the purpose and role of an Institutional Review Board and appropriate procedures for human subjects.

Ability to appropriately determine when and where data and findings should be promulgated in a way that respects confidentiality and/or anonymity of the participants.

Ability to interpret and apply FERPA guidelines in assessment and evaluation projects.

agencies alike have made assessment in higher education a priority and called upon universities and colleges to better demonstrate how programs and services contribute to student learning. Sandeen and Barr (2006) have gone so far as to label assessment “the most powerful movement in American higher education” (p. 154). Yet, as Love and Estanek (2004) pointed out, even with the often forceful rhetoric surrounding assessment, student affairs organizations have struggled to move beyond conducting individual, disparate assessment projects to developing and maintaining an integrative assessment program that permeates all areas of practice. Said differently, some student affairs organizations have struggled to establish an organizational culture in which assessment is integral to practice. This phenomenon may be due in large part to a dearth of literature on how to build a culture of assessment specifically in student affairs organizations. What follows is an attempt to redress this gap in scholarship.

It may be said that an organization must first be understood before its culture can be shaped purposefully. Building a culture of assessment in student affairs,

therefore, begins with identifying the integral properties of human organizations. Organizations, however, are hardly simplistic, logical social collections. In fact, they are quite the opposite: organizations are complex and unpredictable. At the same time, most organizations inside and outside of higher education share certain properties. Bolman and Deal (2008) provide a theoretical model for understanding these properties. This model includes four “frames,” or perspectives, which help administrators elucidate and order chaotic organizational environments. The four frames are structural, human resource, political, and symbolic, and with these frames in mind, student affairs professionals can shape their organizational culture more effectively.

This chapter begins with a general explanation of each frame in Bolman and Deal’s (2008) theoretical model. We then delineate ten practical strategies administrators can implement to build a culture of assessment in student affairs organizations. This approach is intended to assist readers as they consider each strategy in the context of their unique organizational environment. This chapter concludes with a look at how administrators within the division of student affairs at the University of Georgia implemented several of these strategies in an effort to build a culture of assessment. The case study is designed to serve as a roadmap for student affairs professionals seeking organizational change related to assessment practice.

### **Structural Frame**

The structural frame involves the implementation and coordination of specific roles and responsibilities for individuals within an organization. Bolman and Deal (2008) used a factory metaphor to describe the structural frame. Subunits, or individuals, have their unique jobs that work in concert with one another toward achieving the overall goals of the organization.

Key elements of this frame are *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation is the allocation of responsibilities to individuals or subunits throughout an organization, while integration describes the coordinated efforts of smaller working units occurring through both formal and informal means—i.e., the chain of command, staff meetings, committees, and so on. In student affairs, staff members often are divided into offices or departments like Housing, Student Life, and Health Services to accomplish their unique responsibilities. Yet, these same departments recognize the need to work together through collaborative planning and programming to achieve the overall goal of student success.

As its name suggests, the structural frame is less concerned about the human elements of an organization and is more focused on the structures that support an organization’s goals. Examining an organization’s structure forces the manager to determine how work is divided among staff members and subunits (differentiation) and how those subunits employ strategies to work together (integration).

### **Human Resources Frame**

Unlike the structural frame, the human resources frame primarily focuses on the individuals within an organization. This frame examines how individuals support the organization and how the organization supports the individuals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Managers should strive to hire employees who demonstrate a “good fit” with the organization, as both the individuals and the organization experience benefits that promote success for all parties (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 137).

Bolman and Deal (2008) offer basic human resources strategies that managers can utilize to work most effectively with their staff members. Investing in and empowering staff members involve giving them opportunities to expand their knowledge and skill sets through formal and informal training. Examples of training opportunities in student affairs include conference attendance and participation, on-campus in-services, book discussions, and topic-specific webinars. As demonstrated later in this chapter, developing a culture of assessment may require student affairs leaders to employ these strategies of engaging and training staff in assessment activities.

### **Political Frame**

Bolman and Deal (2008) defined politics as “the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests” (p.190). The primary asset of the political frame is power, which often comes from a variety of means: formal authority within a system; the control of rewards; and, information and expertise. Individuals who demonstrate political skills often have the ability to set the agenda, network and form coalitions, map the political terrain, and bargain and negotiate.

For example, in student affairs, university housing staff wanting to create a curricular component to their first-year residential experience program would need support from faculty and other administrators to have the opportunity to grant credit for these courses. These staff should seek allies within the faculty who support this collaboration and who have credibility among their colleagues and the administration. Finding advocates

across campus that can assist in promoting an agenda to benefit students is an example of the political frame in action within colleges and universities.

### Symbolic Frame

Bolman and Deal (2008) recognized the importance of organizational culture, which they defined as “the way we do things around here” (p. 278). Symbols help transmit the culture of an organization to new members and to those outside of the organization. These symbols include myths, vision, and values; heroes and heroines; stories and fairy tales; rituals; ceremonies; and, metaphors, humor, and play. Through each of these symbols, an organization communicates distinct elements of its culture to a variety of constituents.

On college campuses, orientation programs provide opportunities to encourage new students, faculty, and staff to engage in the existing culture. For example, student affairs staff members often are exposed to an institution’s culture when participating in on-campus interviews for new jobs. Campus tours during these interviews usually include important landmarks and traditions and promote key aspects of the culture upon which much institutional success is based. Leaders can communicate their organization’s goals and objectives through these symbols.

## Ten Strategies to Build a Culture of Assessment

As Bolman and Deal (2008) indicated, structures, human resources, politics, and symbols represent integral properties in organizational life. Understanding and using these properties is essential to bringing about substantive cultural change. In terms of building a culture of assessment, specifically, student affairs professionals will benefit from strategies that take into account these aspects of their student affairs organizations and the universities and colleges of which they are a part.

Ten examples of strategies for building a culture of assessment follow that address the four components of Bolman and Deal’s organizational framework. Figure 8.1 lists each strategy alongside the frame or frames it addresses most acutely. The list of examples is not intended to be exhaustive, nor is implementing all of the strategies necessary to engender meaningful change related to assessment practice. Rather, the strategies are intended to guide student affairs professionals towards a plan of action that is grounded in one’s distinct organizational culture. To that end, each strategy is practical, flexible, relatively easy to implement, and applicable to a wide-range of student affairs organizations.

**Figure 8.1: Strategies to Build a Culture of Assessment**

Strategies	Relevant Frame(s) from Bolman & Deal (2008)
Cultivate Support from Upper-level Administration	Structural
Infuse Assessment Responsibilities into Job Descriptions	Structural
Building Common Language among Staff	Symbolic
Provide Ongoing Educational Opportunities for Staff	Human Resources
Orient New Staff to Assessment Expectations	Human Resources, Symbolic
Build Confidence among Staff	Human Resources
Infuse Assessment into Existing Institutionalized Processes	Structural, Symbolic
Building Relationships across Campus to Increase Support for Assessment Practice	Political
Celebrate Staff Contributions to Assessment Priorities in Ceremonies and Rituals	Symbolic
Use Assessment Results in Decision-making Opportunities	Political, Symbolic



### **Cultivate Support from Upper-level Administration**

Student affairs professionals must cultivate support from upper-level administration in efforts to foster a culture of assessment (Love & Estanek, 2004). Upper-level administration can be defined most broadly as the Senior Student Affairs Officer (SSAO) and more narrowly as the unit directors of each individual functional area. Love and Estanek (2004) discussed the importance of upper-level involvement. They indicated that practitioners whose SSAO champions assessment practice tend to have a greater sense of responsibility toward engagement in assessment activities. In their discussion of the structural frame, Bolman and Deal (2008) point to why this may be the case. They noted that employees who are unclear about an organization's goals often shape their work around personal preferences—preferences that might not be related to assessment. Upper-level administrators are well positioned to ensure that goals include activities that promote assessment and are articulated clearly throughout the organization. It is important, therefore, for student affairs professionals to cultivate support from these individuals around assessment initiatives.

Support from upper-level administration can take a variety of forms, including allowing time for employees to learn assessment skills, setting clear expectations regarding the development of assessments that are informative and utilized in decision-making, and appropriating both monetary and human resources to support assessment work. Practitioners who initially find their upper-level administrators less than enthusiastic about assessment should find ways to cultivate their support. Some techniques for doing this include: demonstrating how assessment can lead to improvement of the programs and services offered through the division; providing examples of how to enhance a unit's reputation; highlighting the role of assessment activities in accreditation processes; and starting assessment efforts on a small scale to avoid the need for a major initial resource commitment.

### **Infuse Assessment Responsibilities into Job Descriptions**

As noted above, allocating work—or differentiation—is at the heart of the organizational structure. Differentiation is formalized through personnel job descriptions. Infusing assessment responsibilities into these documents can go a long way in building a culture of assessment.

At some institutions, assessment has become an “add-on” responsibility that falls under the “other duties as assigned” line item within a position description. This approach can leave student affairs professionals unaware of the formal expectations regarding their

involvement in assessment activity. Furthermore, staff may not feel empowered to spend time working on assessment initiatives. Formalizing the role of assessment in an employee's job description eliminates confusion about a supervisor's expectations and gives the employee justification for spending the appropriate amount of time doing this work.

The hiring process presents an excellent opportunity to revise a job description to include assessment related responsibilities. When beginning the hiring process, practitioners should carefully review the job description of the position being filled (Raetz, 2001). Reviewing, updating, and refining a job description allows supervisors to align responsibilities with assessment priorities and communicate those priorities to current and future team members.

### **Build Common Language among Staff**

Building a common language around assessment is critical in promoting a culture of assessment in student affairs organizations. In the last two decades, however, there has been a shift in the meaning of many common assessment terms (see the glossary at the end of this book for an updated list of common assessment terms). This shift has made it difficult for those professionals who have been exposed to assessment terminology—through a graduate program, for example—to communicate through a shared language. Furthermore, some professionals have never been exposed to accurate assessment terminology at all. Whatever the case, if assessment is to become an accepted part of the organization's operations, it is paramount that student affairs professionals at all levels have a common understanding of key assessment terms and concepts.

There are many strategies for building a common language around assessment. For example, a division could define and institutionalize key terms and concepts through a consensus-building process. This process would result in an institution-specific glossary of terms. Dartmouth College, as well as other institutions, has developed such a glossary to codify and clarify assessment terms for all staff within their respective student affairs divisions (Henning, 2007). Professionals promulgate these glossaries via the units' websites (Henning, 2007). Other institutions (Student Affairs Assessment, ND) have incorporated assessment terms and definitions directly into the documents used in standardized reporting processes. This ensures that staff members are regularly exposed to accurate assessment language. As a final approach, individuals who manage ceremonies and rituals, such as meetings, can ensure that any assessment-related discussions include accurate terms and that these

terms are understood by all participants. Ultimately, language is one of the most important symbols within an organization. Professionals attempting to build a culture of assessment will benefit to the extent that a common language around assessment exists among staff.

### **Provide Ongoing Educational Opportunities for Staff**

For many student affairs professionals, the thought of conducting an assessment can be daunting, given a lack of understanding or training related to the process (Timm, 2006). Thus, ongoing education is a vital part of creating an environment in which assessment is espoused. Winston & Creamer (1997) stated that “staff development is a process that demonstrates the commonness of purpose of all staff and the crucial nature of individual knowledge and skills to perform assigned duties in relation to the achievement of these larger goals” (p. 13). Without assessment knowledge and skills, professionals cannot be expected to achieve those larger organizational goals that support assessment.

Educational opportunities for staff can be formal and informal in nature, and providing both types of activities is important. Examples of formal educational activities include a regional or national conference focused on assessment, an on-campus workshop on learning outcomes, and a multi-week training program for student affairs staff. Informal educational activities include day-to-day interactions and discussions among staff like supervision time or staff meetings, an in-house publication about assessment that staff can read on their own time, and a list of readings provided to staff for individualized study. The key thread among all of these activities is that staff members are expected and empowered to learn how to conduct assessment effectively.

A reality is that some educational activities may take a great investment of financial resources, while others can be done relatively inexpensively. Allowing the cost of educating staff to impede this important human resource strategy is something student affairs organizations cannot afford. Administrators must overcome scarce resources by finding creative, yet effective ways to educate staff. Not providing professionals with the skills and knowledge needed to conduct assessment in formal and informal ways will stymie any effort to increase organizational support for assessment practice.

### **Orient New Staff to Assessment Expectations**

At the point of entry, new employees are eager to learn the mores, values, and traditions of the new institutional home. It is important to communicate goals, expectations, and performance requirements during this period

(Winston & Creamer, 1997). New employee orientation programs provide great opportunities to introduce incoming staff to the division’s goals, expectations, and performance requirements related to assessment practices. In essence, this important organizational ceremony gives incoming professionals a sense for how they can be successful in their new positions and assimilate smoothly into their new institutional environment. As such, new staff orientation programs are an excellent medium in which to publicize assessment as an integral part of individual and divisional effectiveness.

If a formal orientation program does not occur on campus, it is still possible to emphasize the importance of assessment on campus early in a new employee’s training. In fact, for many new professionals, becoming familiar with the institution occurs through websites and social networks long before they step foot onto campus. Highlighting assessment activities or results in publications and on websites can provide the initial context for a new employee to consider the critical role assessment plays in the day-to-day work of the student affairs organization. In addition, new employees should learn about the institution’s annual assessment processes, e.g., standardized annual reports and evaluations, immediately after arriving on campus. Furthermore, these new members in the community need to see examples early in the orientation process of how assessment results drive decision-making processes and lead to program improvement. Properly introducing new employees to the expectations surrounding assessment practice will foster broad-based support among the entire staff.

### **Build Confidence among Staff**

Building the confidence level of staff is one way to create an organization that supports assessment practice. Schuh and Associates (2009) stated that “success will build upon success” (p. 11) when it comes to assessment activity. Thus, finding ways for staff to achieve success early in the process will generate sustained support, interest, and commitment to assessment.

Developing confidence can include any or all of the following techniques: starting small; making projects manageable; co-constructing and conducting projects; and, demystifying the assessment process. The first projects should be small and simple in scope, should be aligned with the assessment-related skills professionals already possess, and should be directly linked to a question staff members have been asking about the organization (Schuh & Associates, 2009). Professionals should be encouraged to work together to co-construct mutually-beneficial projects that address questions they

have about their services and programs. These approaches will lead to assessment projects that are more manageable and informative for those professionals.

Demystifying the assessment process is another key human resource technique for building confidence within student affairs divisions. Individuals in the organization more comfortable with and knowledgeable of assessment should be involved in training other staff and showing them how to get started on their particular projects (Schuh & Associates, 2009). The adage, “Give a man a fish, he eats for a day. Teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime,” applies to the assessment process. Too often, professionals new to assessment become easily frustrated with the process and rely on others within the organization to “do assessment.” Breaking this cycle requires an environment in which staff members are given opportunities to learn from one another and early successes are achieved and celebrated publicly.

### **Infuse Assessment into Existing Institutionalized Processes**

A concern often articulated by student affairs professionals is that assessment is an “add-on” to regular job responsibilities. Another is that assessment is merely an ephemeral trend. When viewed this way, it is no surprise that assessment has failed to achieve permanence in some student affairs organizations. Infusing assessment into existing institutionalized processes within the organizational structure is one means of countering such a mentality. Institutionalized processes are those designed to promote organization effectiveness. These processes recur on a regular basis, and, in student affairs organizations, they are usually managed by the SSAO and implemented by unit directors at the departmental level. Examples of institutionalized processes in student affairs include anything from a yearly strategic planning exercise, to an end-of-year annual report, to a five-year departmental review.

Institutionalized processes can serve as useful tools through which assessment practice is integrated into the core of student affairs organizations. First, institutionalized processes act as symbols that communicate an organization’s values to its employees. For example, strategic planning processes usually convey the values of intentionality, improvement, and prudent fiscal management. To extend this example, a student affairs organization can affirm assessment practice as one of its values by asking employees who are engaged in institutionalized planning processes to articulate how the achievement of strategic goals will be assessed. Second, institutionalized processes are usually an established part

of an organization’s reporting apparatus, having been part of day-to-day business for some time. Including in these processes a component related to assessment practice helps transmit the message that assessment is not a fad, but is here to stay. In addition, student affairs professionals may perceive assessment responsibilities to be less cumbersome and less like an “add-on” because they are infused in an activity customarily performed by the organization.

Infusing assessment into institutionalized processes is a relatively effortless task. It involves slightly altering these processes to include directives associated with existing expectations for assessment. Techniques to do so include encouraging units to include assessment priorities in strategic planning documents; including a section for describing current and recently completed assessment projects in annual report documents; requesting that units discuss their long-term assessment priorities during program review opportunities; requesting that units provide assessment evidence to support budget proposals; and leveraging requirements from regional and national accrediting agencies to initiate assessment activity.

### **Build Relationships across Campus**

Sandeen and Barr (2006) noted that, “in their zeal to improve their programs and services, student affairs professionals involved in assessment have too often acted alone” (p. 148). This isolationism may engender undesirable political ramifications. First, working alone can lead to an uncoordinated approach to assessment that is disconnected from divisional and institutional priorities. As a result, campus leaders may view assessment efforts as endeavors to further a particular, self-centered agenda and, in consequence, discredit them (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). Second, working alone can promote the mentality that assessment is the responsibility of a select few individuals rather than the entire organization. Professionals must avoid this sort of isolationism if assessment is to take root in student affairs organizations.

One of the most effective ways to combat isolationism is to build relationships across campus to increase support for assessment practice. A great starting point in this effort is engaging well-known advocates with whom a relationship already exists in structured conversations around assessment initiatives. It is important to reach out to advocates beyond student affairs professionals, such as faculty, administrators in institutional research and planning offices, and students. This group of advocates may decide to hold structured conversations as an informal working group or as a formal committee or council. Whatever the arrangement, the group should meet regularly and set forth as a primary agenda item the

development of specific tactics to increase support for assessment initiatives by extending the existing network of advocates throughout campus.

Another step towards building relationships is maintaining regular one-on-one meetings with key leaders in student affairs, such as unit-heads. Professionals in leadership positions can use these meetings to gather feedback on assessment initiatives, offer support for and guidance on current assessment projects, and determine the training needs of staff within the organization. Again, it is important that these meetings are structured around assessment topics and recur on a consistent basis.

Additional strategies for building relationships include: requesting a seat on any institution-wide committees related to assessment; engaging faculty and administrators outside of student affairs in training opportunities for staff; and establishing a cross-divisional assessment team to manage large scale assessment projects sponsored by student affairs.

### **Celebrate Staff Contributions to Assessment Priorities in Ceremonies and Rituals**

Bolman and Deal (2008) discussed the important role ceremonies and rituals play in organizations. They define rituals as simple day-to-day patterns in human behavior, such as weekly staff meetings, routine one-on-one meetings, and daily trips to a coffee shop with colleagues. While similar in many ways, a ceremony is grander, occurs less frequently, and often celebrates significant transitions. A welcome back event held for staff at the beginning of each year is an example of a ceremony. Rituals and ceremonies are important to an organization because they reflect its values, convey meaning to employees, provide structure to daily work, and elucidate ambiguity around complex issues. As a result of these characteristics, these organizational symbols have the capacity to unite members of an organization around a common vision.

One way student affairs professionals can use ceremonies and rituals to foster a culture of assessment involves providing space to celebrate contributions to assessment priorities. For example, supervisors can celebrate contributions to achieving assessment priorities in organized staff meetings, highlighting individuals who have exceeded expectations. Celebrations do not need to be elaborate or time consuming as long as they lucidly demonstrate the positive impact the recognized activities have had on the organization. As another example, executive leaders can celebrate key achievements in the area of assessment during division-wide events, such as a staff appreciation ceremony. Providing an official token of achievement—a certificate, for instance—to

commemorate honorees may enhance the effectiveness of this strategy. Including celebratory activities around assessment in ceremonies and rituals goes a long way toward communicating the value of assessment in student affairs practice, endorsing assessment as a normal part of day-to-day operations, and uniting employees around assessment priorities.

If existing ceremonies and rituals are not conducive to celebration, professionals should consider establishing ones that are. Additional strategies for celebrating staff contributions to assessment priorities include: distributing a weekly “shout-out” related to assessment via the student affairs listserv; featuring quality assessment projects in student affairs newsletters, websites, and other publications; creating an annual award for best practice in student affairs assessment; and, encouraging supervisors to recognize individual contributions to assessment in one-on-one meetings.

### **Use Assessment Results in Decision-Making Opportunities**

One indication that a student affairs organization maintains a culture of assessment is that professionals consistently use assessment results in decision-making opportunities. Using assessment results in this way serves two main purposes: conveying the value of assessment to student affairs practice and encouraging evidence-guided decision-making. On the other hand, failing to use results may: (a) perpetuate the notion that assessment is merely a political exercise conducted primarily to satisfy demands for increased accountability; (b) diminish collective momentum around assessment initiatives; and (c) discourage individuals from engaging in assessment activity in the future. Echoing the latter point, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) asserted that, “nothing is more frustrating than to conduct an assessment study of high quality and then learn ... that decision-makers failed to act on the study’s findings” (p. 275).

At the end of the day, to embrace assessment fully, student affairs professionals must believe that it is a worthwhile and beneficial exercise. A part of developing this belief is learning how assessment results are being used across campus to improve programs and services for students. From this perspective, communication takes on an important role in building a culture of assessment in student affairs organizations. It is important, therefore, to not only use assessment results in formal and informal decision-making opportunities but to communicate that use to stakeholders at every level, including students and alumni. Techniques for using and communicating assessment results include



establishing a monthly publication dedicated to student affairs assessment projects; discussing assessment results in all staff meetings; creating activities in which data are utilized in group meetings; describing how assessment results have been used to improve practice on student affairs websites; distributing to key leaders across campus executive summary reports from assessment projects that include a section devoted to implications; and creating opportunities, formal and informal, during which staff communicate how assessment data are used in decision making.

## Case Study

### University of Georgia<sup>13</sup>

The University of Georgia is a large, land and sea grant research extensive university. There are approximately 35,000 students who attend the university with approximately 21,000 undergraduate students and the remaining 14,000 being graduate and professional students. Units that reside within the Division of Student Affairs include the Disability Resource Center, Recreational Sports, Student Affairs Assessment, Student Affairs for Extended Campuses, Student Life, Student Support Services, Tate Student Center, University Health Center, University Housing, and University Testing Services.

Organizations are complicated and slow to change. If assessment were to become a customary and sustained practice within the division, it was evident that an intentional plan would be necessary. As such, a multi-year approach to achieving the desired change was created and implemented. During each year of the four year plan, one major objective was identified toward advancing the assessment culture (see Figure 8.2). Year one, the focus was on building individuals' understanding, support and comfort with assessment. Year two, the focus was on infusing assessment into existing processes. During year three, the primary focus was on creating a sustainable culture, and during year four, the priority was implementing an assessment framework that brought intentionality to the Division's work. Over the years, the annual priority shifted from one that emphasized the individuals within the division to one that implemented an intentional structure for the division as a whole.

Using Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frames of

organizations, a systematic approach to creating an organization that supports assessment was developed. Although developing a culture of assessment was a priority for the division, other strategies were also implemented to address unique organizational challenges. The following text represents the annual priorities and strategies that became the multi-year approach to creating a culture of assessment. G. Henning stated, "planning should foster intentionality not hinder flexibility" (personal communication, July 15, 2010). It became clear throughout this process that planned flexibility was crucial for overall success.

### Year One – Prepare Individuals for Change

During the first year, several activities were utilized to increase overall awareness of assessment. Early in this process it was discovered that some within the organization were already conducting assessment, while others found the practice a waste of time. As such, it was important to start the process by building individual support and comfort with assessment.

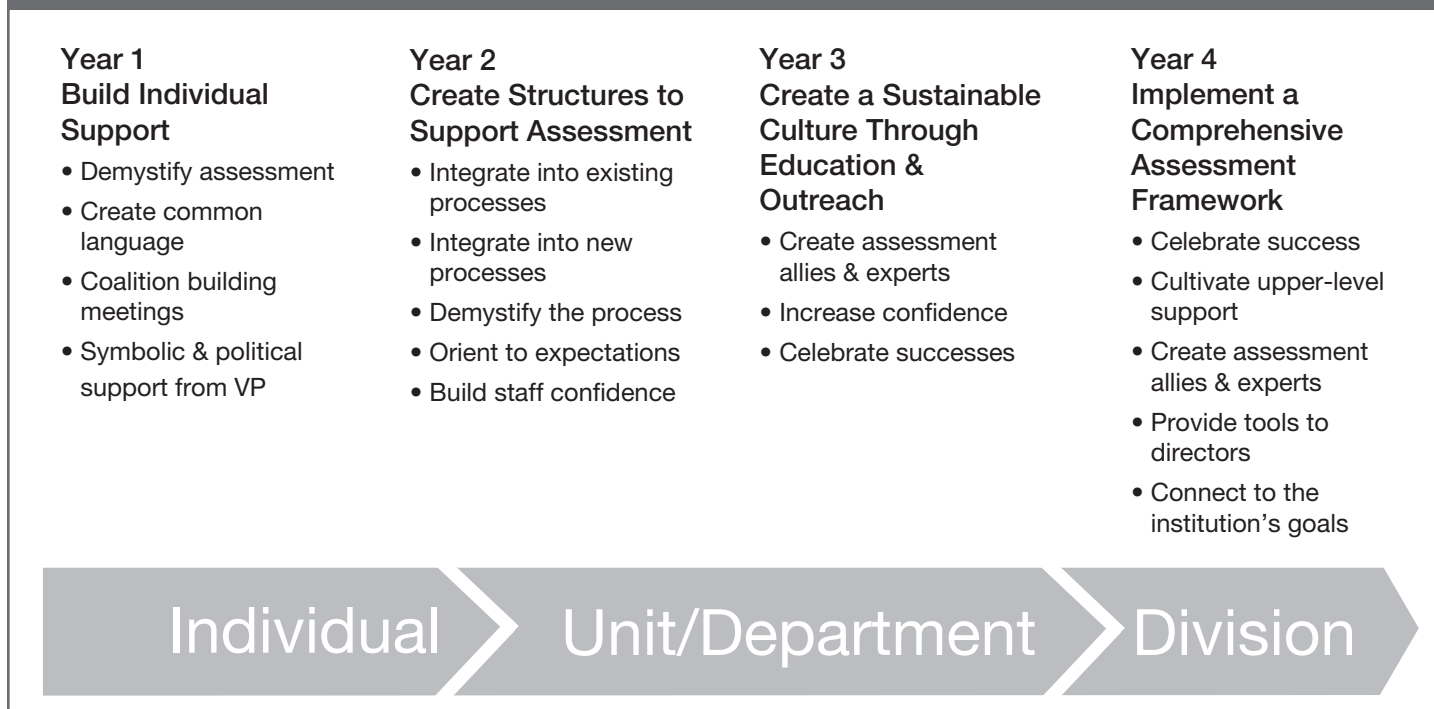
The year began with individual meetings with each director. During these coalition-building meetings the discussion was focused on what they wanted to know about their students, their department, and their staff. In most instances, the Assessment Office worked to address their "points of interest" to demystify the process and demonstrate the value of data.

The Director of Assessment and Staff Development worked with the Vice President to get verbal, written, symbolic and political support for the practice of assessment. Together they incorporated assessment into staff meetings with the unit directors as well as division-wide events. An assessment publication/newsletter, the Student Pulse (Department of Student Affairs Assessment, 2006), was developed to share examples of assessment being conducted within the division, principles to conducting quality assessment, and the importance of assessment in the day to day work of the division. The publication was distributed to all division staff and key stakeholders outside the division.

The Vice President and Director of Assessment and Staff Development conducted a half day training workshop for unit directors. During the retreat, key constructs of assessment were shared, and the Vice President utilized his positional power to encourage individual support. During

<sup>13</sup> Contributions for this case study were made by Jan Davis Barham, Associate Dean of Students at the University of Georgia and former Director of Assessment and Staff Development. University of Georgia.



**Figure 8.2: Multi-Year Approach to Creating a Culture of Assessment**

the training, “Assessment Nomenclature” for the division was identified. The nomenclature document defined key terms and processes used at UGA and created a common language for the unit directors. Lastly, the Vice President established expectations for conducting assessment, using the data to make decisions and improve practice, and reporting the results in a timely and systematic way.

Also during the first year, discussions of the University’s reaffirmation of the accreditation process began. At that point, the university was five years away from the official review; however, the division began exploring how it could support this institutional priority by creating a sustained practice of assessment that demonstrated contribution to students’ learning and development.

In the first year, when possible, staff members were taught how to conduct their own assessments, whereas in prior years the Student Affairs Assessment office conducted most of the assessment initiatives for the units. This shift was intentional as a strategy to increase staff knowledge and comfort with assessment.

#### **Year Two – Integrate Into Existing Processes**

During the second year, the focus was on putting structures in place that would support assessment practice. This was done by integrating assessment practice into existing division processes and initiating an annual priority planning process that included assessment of

learning and development as a core component. The division also increased outreach and laid the foundation for the division’s learning outcomes curriculum. Lastly, senior administrators closely reviewed progress made toward building a culture of assessment.

During year two, one-on-one meetings with unit directors were once again held in an effort to garner broad-based buy-in and support. This coalition building strategy became one of the most valuable tools in creating understanding, increasing support, and integrating assessment into existing processes. During meetings, individual assessment initiatives for each unit were reviewed, and each unit director was informed on ways in which assessment activities were being incorporated into existing division-wide processes. Lastly, an important question was asked of each director, “What one thing do you want to know about UGA students?” This information was later used to create the “SNAP” (Student Needs Assessment Profile) questionnaire.

The Student Needs Assessment Profile (SNAP) was created from key questions submitted by unit directors in the division. The data from the survey were analyzed and distributed back to the unit directors by the assessment office. Custom reports were generated for each department, and findings from the data were shared at meetings with directors. Additionally, a summary of interesting findings

was included in the Student Pulse publication. Over time, unit directors and other decision makers in the division became more confident in using these data to inform practice. In the end, SNAP served as another conduit for demystifying the process of assessment and facilitating the use of data for institutional improvement.

A comprehensive model for assessment was also created during year two (Davis Barham & Scott, 2006). The model was designed to be inclusive of all functional areas within student affairs. Structurally, it incorporated components for service, learning, and development and demonstrated the importance of using results to improve practice. With this model, all units, including the service driven areas, could see the connections between their work and the assessment model. The details of the model were disseminated to the unit directors, presented in the Student Pulse, and later became the keystone for the Assessment Team Training Program, described in more detail below.

Staff were oriented to the expectations for conducting and reporting assessment during year one; however, the implementation of the expectations occurred in year two. During the annual report process, units reported on (a) assessment initiatives, (b) their findings, and (c) how the data were being used to improve practice. This information was summarized and highlighted in the division's annual report, which was submitted to the university's provost. This report was also shared with student affairs staff via email, and a hard copy was distributed to all unit directors with the request that they discuss it during their departmental staff meetings.

At the beginning of the second year, outreach workshops were provided for any staff interested in enhancing their skills. Topics included questionnaire design, the ABCs of assessment, and using existing data. The hope in providing these educational opportunities was to increase staff members' knowledge of assessment, foster a common language, and as a result, increase their confidence with assessment.

Although at this point in the four year plan the emphasis was still at the unit and departmental level, it was important to identify a division-wide framework for assessment. The first step toward this end was developing a learning and development curriculum that included eight overarching objectives. This process began with the directors stating their thoughts on what students should gain as a result of being involved in student affairs programs and services. The result of these conversations was a list of eight learning and development objectives to be infused throughout all units in the division.

The last part of year two was spent reflecting and evaluating the status of the assessment culture. How much progress had been made? What was the comfort level of staff? How had assessment practice changed since beginning the process of building the culture? What obstacles were present that prevented staff from engaging in assessment? A survey was administered and the data indicated that further demystification was needed. In addition, there appeared to be a need to continue demonstrating the value of assessment. During the first year of the program, the focus was on equipping unit directors to conduct the assessment. It became clear, however, that the unit directors may need to delegate responsibilities around assessment to other staff. As such, assessment education needed to be infused into all levels of the organization to reach those staff members who were responsible for day-to-day management of programs and services for students.

With the findings from the assessment on the progress of implementing the four-year assessment plan and the anecdotal evidence from personal observation, plans for creating a systematic outreach program began. In year three, the Department of Student Affairs Assessment created the Assessment Team.

### **Year Three – Create a Sustainable Culture Through Education and Outreach**

As indicated, at the end of year two, it became clear that the unit directors had little time to conduct assessment. As a division of student affairs, it was necessary to develop assessment experts in each unit beyond the directors. This would help individual units accomplish their assessment priorities without obligating the unit directors; thus, the Assessment Team (A-Team) was created and implemented. The A-Team was designed to intentionally equip members of the division to be effective assessment practitioners and advocates for assessment initiatives. Using a cohort model, representatives from each department within the division were trained. As a result of completing the curriculum, A-Team graduates acquired a basic understanding of assessment practice, skills, and literature. Participants also planned and executed an assessment project that aligned with their department's assessment priorities. Participant's successes were rewarded by the Vice President and the unit directors through an annual ceremony at the end of the academic year. Projects were also highlighted on the division's website and in the Student Pulse.

In addition to the A-Team, individual units met with the Director of Assessment and Staff Development to encourage more unit-based assessment. During these conversations, creative ways in which the staff members

could use assessment to answer key questions about their work were addressed. Discussions also focused on ways in which the departments could use existing data (institutional-level and unit-level) to better understand students, their unit, and the unit's existing programs and services.

The learning outcomes referenced above eventually became the Student Affairs Learning and Development Objectives (SALDOS), the learning curriculum for the division (see <http://studentaffairs.uga.edu/assess/saldos/index.htm>). SALDOS were grounded in the general education goals for the university, best practices established in the literature, and the expertise of the unit directors. The division viewed the SALDOs as the curricular manifestation of its mission. SALDOS became a tool to prepare the division for the upcoming SACS reaffirmation as it established objectives that could be used to measure learning and development in specific programming and service areas.

#### **Year Four – Implement a Comprehensive Assessment Framework**

The fourth year proved to be a year of great growth. The division had now embraced a division-wide framework for learning outcomes assessment. Though the SALDOS curriculum was created in year three, it was fully implemented into the division during year four. This initiative became the backbone for systematic learning outcomes assessment. Departments were expected to (a) integrate SALDOS into two initiatives within each unit, (b) assess the learning that occurred as a result of the program, and (c) report the findings from the two learning outcomes assessments. This practice provided documentation for reaffirmation efforts; it provided data for programmatic improvement; and revealed our contributions to student learning at the institution level (with the general education goals). A systematic training of division staff on the SALDOS (through posters, emails, The Student Pulse, and discussions at the various meetings) was implemented in this year as well. The vice president spoke publicly about the importance of the initiative and provided positional support at every turn.

The Assessment Team continued in year four with its second cohort, and the SALDOS were integrated into its curriculum. Directors were encouraged to require their A-Team participant to design an assessment project around SALDOs. To further support the work of the A-Teamers, a supervisor's guide was created. The guide described ways supervisors could provide support to their participant in integrating the A-Teamer's new knowledge and skills into the daily work of the unit.

At the end of year four, the data regarding assessment practice was impressive. All units were engaged in some form of assessment to include the SALDOs. Areas that had previously not seen the importance of evidence-guided decision making were now engaged in assessment activities and sufficiently fulfilling the division's assessment requirements. As a result, the division was able to provide evidence to others around campus as to why decisions were made. The division was also better positioned to demonstrate its contributions to the university's strategic goals and better prepared to answer calls for efficiency and accountability.

#### **Lessons Learned**

Some of the biggest challenges along the way came from people. Regardless of how much division leadership demonstrated the value of assessment, no matter how simple the process was made, and no matter how much training and education were provided, there were staff members who were uncomfortable with the activity of assessment. One solution to this problem was to circumvent these individuals and find others who would more readily engage in assessment efforts. Further, it became important to find allies within each area who had a propensity for assessment work. In other words, those staff persons who enjoyed asking and answering questions like, "How will this impact our students?" and "How do we know this program matters?" Directors were coached on the type of individuals suited to be A-Team representatives. Working with younger professionals who had assessment experience from graduate level preparation programs was also helpful.

How one discusses assessment is an important factor in creating a culture of assessment. Using technical jargon may intimidate staff. During initial meetings, directors were rarely asked, "What do you want to assess?" Instead, they were asked, "What do you need and want to know?" "How do you think we can find the answer to that?" versus "How will you assess that," or "What methodological approach will you use?" Using complicated terms and processes were not necessary; instead, we increased staff confidence and buy-in by cultivating a common understanding of and appreciation for assessment.

Revealing too much information too soon can be counterproductive in building a culture of assessment. The initial plan to increase assessment practice within the division included the creation and implementation of a system for measuring learning outcomes. It became clear that the plan required changes, both organizationally and practically. We had to first build the knowledge of and comfort with assessment prior to introducing the concept

of learning outcomes assessment and staff members had to be comfortable with the concept before implementing a process which would require staff to conduct learning outcomes assessment on two areas within their department and report the findings of that assessment on an annual basis. Revealing the plan for change to the entire division may have engendered unanticipated resistance.

At the outset of the process of creating a culture of assessment, it was thought that a four year approach would yield the desired result and that the division would officially “arrive” at a desired “end.” While the division has arrived at a point in which the organization has engaged in the practice of assessment and the organization appreciates and values assessment, it is clear that an organization can never reach a final destination in regards to an assessment culture. As stated, the journey began with the thought that a four year focus would yield an organization in which staff conducted assessment and the “work of assessment” would not need to be as intentional. The discovery is the exact opposite. Organizations are not static; they are dynamic and the needs of the organization are ever changing. Individuals within an organization are ever changing and will need continuing education on assessment. The needs of students and the ways in which we engage them in the process of assessment are ever changing. Sustaining a culture of any kind requires maintenance, champions and allies, and support (educational and otherwise). It requires intentional effort.

The Division of Student Affairs at University of Georgia has truly shifted from an organization that once resisted assessment to one that today regularly conducts assessment for institutional improvement. Yet, as indicated, sustaining that culture is equally as important as “arriving.” The division will continue to face challenges and will continue to embrace change, but it will persevere in the endeavor. Our students deserve it, and our profession demands it.

## Chapter Summary

The above case study exemplifies the culture shift for a large division of student affairs, however, the principles utilized in the journey are applicable to any type of institution - those with an Office of Assessment and those without. To build a culture, support from upper-level administration must be unwavering, with assessment responsibilities infused into job descriptions that build relationships across campus to increase support for assessment practice, infuse assessment into existing institutionalized processes, and build a common language among staff. Additionally institutions need to provide ongoing educational

opportunities for staff, orient new staff to assessment expectations, celebrate staff contributions to assessment priorities in ceremonies and rituals, and use assessment results in decision-making opportunities. The idea is to start small, be flexible, and stay the course. Change takes time!

## Chapter Highlights

- Bolman and Deal provide four frames (structural, human resources, political, & symbolic) through which to consider creating a culture of assessment.
- Ten strategies for creating a culture of assessment within student affairs divisions were presented:
  1. Cultivate Support from Upper-level Administration
  2. Infuse Assessment Responsibilities into Job Descriptions
  3. Build Common Language among Staff
  4. Provide Ongoing Educational Opportunities for Staff
  5. Orient New Staff to Assessment Expectations
  6. Build Confidence among Staff
  7. Infuse Assessment into Existing Institutionalized Processes
  8. Build Relationships across Campus to Increase Support for Assessment Practice
  9. Celebrate Staff Contributions to Assessment Priorities in Ceremonies and Rituals
  10. Use Assessment Results in Decision-making Opportunities

## Points to Ponder

- How does building a culture of assessment within student affairs divisions enhance the student experience?
- How do institutional mission and size influence the process of creating a culture of assessment?

## For Further Consideration

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# Glossary

**Accreditation** – a quality control process in which institutions or programs voluntarily engage in a rigorous review for the purpose of demonstrating compliance with a set of standards established by the accrediting organization.

**Aggregate** – report of the results at a summary versus individual case level.

**Alignment** – the process of insuring or strategically developing program/services that reflect the stated goals of the department, division and institution.

**Analysis** – the process by which data collected is transformed into information that can be shared and used.

**Anonymity** – means there is no way to identify a participant in the assessment process.

**Assessment** – actions taken to gather, analyze, and interpret information and evidence to support the effectiveness of institutions, departments, divisions, or agencies.

**Assessment Cycle** – the cycle refers to the full sequence of assessment activities including identifying outcomes, determining methods, planning assessment, gathering evidence, analyzing and interpreting evidence, sharing results and implementing change.

**Assessment Plan** – the assessment plan is the intentionally developed sequence of activities that ensures coherence from program planning through implementation.

**CAS** – Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education.

**CAS Standards** – standards which help professionals create high-quality programs and services.

**Closing the Loop** – the process of utilizing data for improvement or modification of a program, service, or department.

**Coding** – the process of translating raw data into meaningful categories for the purpose of data analysis. Coding qualitative data may also involve identifying recurring themes and ideas.

**Confidentiality** – ensuring that a participants' identity is difficult to pinpoint because information is gathered or reported in a way that prevents someone from putting the various data and demographic information together to identify a specific participant.

**Conformability** – the extent to which the results of the assessment project make sense.

**Correlation** – a relation between statistical variables or phenomena which tend to vary, be associated, or occur in a way not based on chance alone – such as, through a correlational statistic with a max of 1.0.

**Credibility** – the process of providing information that is valid and credible to the larger audience.

**Curriculum Map** – a chart that shows where and how in the curricular program outcomes are addressed, to ensure completeness and avoid excessive overlap.

**Data** – information gathered for the purpose of research, assessment, or evaluation.

**Dependability** – the extent to which decisions made throughout an assessment project are appropriate and consistent.

**Developmental Outcomes** – detailed statements, derived from program goals and grounded in professional theory, epistemology, and research that specifically describe what the student should be able to know and do as a result of the program/service; Often discussed in conjunction with learning outcomes, as in learning & development outcomes.

**Direct Measures or Evidence** – evidence that is tangible, visible, self-exploratory and compelling evidence of exactly what students have and have not learned. They include both objective exams and performance measures such as evaluations of demonstrations, internships, and portfolios that are evaluated by individuals other than the instructor.

**Effect Size** – how practical significance is expressed. It is a way of quantifying the size of the difference between two groups. This statistic is calculated and expressed differently depending on the type of analysis.

**Ethics** – right from wrong, appropriate actions instead of inappropriate. It involves abiding by established professional standards and following principles of ethics (respect autonomy, do no harm, benefit others, be just, and be faithful).

**Formative** – assessment designed to provide useful information during the conduct of a program, process, or learning experience that can be used to make changes as the program/experience proceeds.

**Focus Group** – group discussions that are intentionally designed to gain in-depth discussion around a specific topic. These groups are typically led by trained moderators with questions that have been developed prior to the session. The intent of focus groups is to examine feelings, perceptions, attitudes, and ideas.

**Generalizable** – applicable to a larger population.

**Goal** – the end result. A goal makes an element of the mission statement more tangible, but it is still broad enough that there may be a number of steps or ways to achieve it.

**Indirect Evidence** – evidence that consists of proxy signs that students are probably learning – it is less clear.

**Institutional Research Board (IRB)** – the group that is responsible for reviewing and certifying studies involving human subjects. They provide the policies and guidelines to protect human subjects. Review by an IRB is typically required when wanting to share findings beyond the campus community.

**Learning Outcomes** – statements of what students will be able to do, know, or believe as a result of participating in a learning activity which could be a class, a project, an educational program, or an individual interaction.

**Mapping** – refers to identifying linkages between mission and goals at each level.

**Mean** – the average number received by summing the values and dividing by the number of observations.

**Measure or Assessment Measure** – an assessment measure is a data source or tool used to indicate outcome attainment. While it is desirable to use multiple assessment measures over different points of time, each outcome must have at least one assessment measure.

**Measures** – instruments, devices, or methods that provide data on the quantity or quality of the independent or dependent variables.

**Median** – the middle case average in a rank-ordered set of observations.

**Method** – the approach taken for data collection – qualitative, quantitative, or mixed design.

**Methodology** – the epistemological approach to how data will be gathered.

**Mission** – a statement that clarifies purpose of an organization. A mission statement can be at the institutional, divisional, departmental, or programmatic level.

**Mixed Method** – combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in an assessment project.

**Mode** – the average of the most frequently observed value.

**Objective** – the intended effect of a service or intervention, more specific than a goal.

**Outcome** – statements of outcomes as a consequence of an intervention or intentional experience. It describes what students should know, understand, or be able to do because of their involvement in the experience.

**Practical Significance** – indicates whether the difference is large enough to be of value in a practical sense.

**Pre-post test/assessment** – administering the same assessment before and after a program, service, training, etc.

**Program Outcomes** – illustrates what a program should accomplish

**Program Evaluation** – program evaluation includes any process or activities designed to determine whether a program has achieved its stated objectives and intended outcomes; evaluation implies a judgment of merit and effectiveness.

**Program Review** – program review is generally used to describe an institutionally-mandated process of systematically studying units to determine effectiveness, contribution to institutional mission and goals and fiscal viability, often for the purpose of resource allocation and strategic planning or decision-making.

**Qualitative** – analysis used to tell a story or demonstrate key themes. Detailed descriptions of people, events, situations, interaction, and observed behaviors.

**Quantitative** – data collection that assigns numbers to objects, events, or observations according to some rule. Generally analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

**Reliability** – consistency of a set of measurements; the extent to which they measure the same thing over repeated administrations.

**Research** – involves the collection of information for the purpose of gaining knowledge, developing theory, or testing concepts and constructs

**Rigor** – what makes a strong study, the degree of trustworthiness.

**Rubric** – an established set of criteria by which information is being measured, categorized, or evaluated.

**Sampling** – The manner in which participants are selected. There are various types – probability, which allows you to make inferences about a population, and non-probability, which does not allow you to make inferences to a larger population.

**Self-Study** – an internal assessment used to evaluate programs including quality and effectiveness in reference to established criteria.

**Statistic** – a variable used in a summary description to estimate a population parameter. “Statistics” also refers to a range of techniques and procedures for analyzing data, interpreting data, displaying data, and making decisions based on data. In a second usage, a “statistic” is defined as a numerical quantity (e.g., the mean).

**Summative** – assessment designed to provide useful information at the culmination of a program, process, or student’s learning experience.

**Survey** – method of collecting information from people about their characteristics, behaviors, attitudes, or perceptions. Most often surveys are questionnaires or structured interviews with a specific set of questions.

**Transferability** – examines the extent to which the results can be transferred or applicable in other settings.

**Triangulation** – when two (or more) different methodologies or sources of data are used to interpret or explain a phenomenon.

**Trustworthy** – built on credibility, transferability, and dependability of a study. Provides evidence that the assessor developed an assessment that was credible, dependable, and could be repeated with similar results.

**Validity** – determines if the instrument measures what it is supposed to measure and includes construct, criterion, and content validity.

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