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The critical incident technique in student affairs research and practice

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Since the 1950s, the critical incident technique (CIT) has aided researchers in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative data. In the student affairs literature only a very small number of CIT studies exist. Using the two most recent publications as examples, this article provides a detailed overview of the CIT, highlights its benefits and limitations, and offers specific recommendations for future applications of the CIT in student affairs research and practice.

In 1954, John C. Flanagan, professor of industrial psychology at the University of Pittsburgh, and one of the founders of the American Institute for Research (AIR), published his landmark article on the critical incident technique (CIT)—a qualitative research method. The CIT was an outgrowth of the Aviation Psychology Program of the U.S. Army Air Forces, which Flanagan was commissioned to lead in the early 1940s. In spite of its original military applications, the CIT has been widely heralded and used in several fields and professions, including counseling, psychology, nursing, communications, medicine, and social work (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). The marketing literature, in particular, has witnessed an explosion of CIT-related articles—more than 150 studies have been published since the early 1990s (Gremler, 2004).
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Although the use of the CIT in education-related fields has been well documented, studies using the CIT in student affairs are practically nonexistent. This is surprising given the ubiquity of innovative qualitative methods in higher education and specifically student affairs research. Existing CIT studies related to higher education focus on the instructor-student relationship, specifically in-class encounters and instructor fairness (Houston & Bettencourt, 1999), instructor quality or behavior (Davis & Swanson, 2001; Frankel & Swanson, 2002; Voss, 2009; Voss, Gruber, & Reppel, 2010), or satisfaction with the college classroom or with the overall university experience (Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2007; Menges & Kulieke, 1984). All of these studies, however, surfaced in the marketing and service literatures; and most of them took place outside the American higher education context.

A search for CIT-related studies in the online repositories for the Journal of College Student Personnel/Development (1965 to present), the NASPA Journal (1970–2009), and the Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice (2010 to present) yielded a total of four studies using the CIT (Belch & Marshak, 2006; Bohan & Humes, 1986; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Schmelzer, Schmelzer, Figler, & Brozo, 1987). In addition, Aamodt, Keller, Crawford, and Kimbrough (1981) published a study on resident assistant job satisfaction in a nonstudent affairs journal. Despite the applicability of the CIT to the higher education and student affairs context, why have so few studies chosen this specific method?

This article focuses on introducing and critiquing the CIT, its methods, and its applications to student affairs research and practice. In a review of the methods and findings of the two most recent publications, Belch and Marshak (2006) and Moores and Popadiuk (2011), the current study illustrates the utility of the CIT. Such a summary and methodological critique of the CIT does not exist in a student affairs context; in fact, I assume most student affairs professionals have not heard of this method. Finally, I explore the CIT as an appropriate technique to collect data for student affairs research as well as practice. It is important to note that Dwayne Gremler, professor of marketing at Bowling Green State University, published a groundbreaking review in 2004 of over 100 CIT studies used in the marketing and service literatures. The present article consults Gremler’s work to provide an overview of the utility of the CIT in student affairs research and practice.

Overview of the CIT

Background

During World War II, Flanagan (1954) developed the CIT to effectively measure combat pilot performance. Flanagan asked pilots to describe incidents that were particularly helpful or harmful in their missions, with the goal of developing a list of components critical for task performance and training (Woolsey, 1986). After the war, the development of the CIT continued at the AIR, of which Flanagan was a founding member (Butterfield et al., 2005). Over the years, researchers employed the CIT to develop ethical standards for psychologists, measure task proficiency, select and classify...
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staff, design job operating procedures and equipment, recognize attitudes and leadership behaviors, and identify factors effective in counseling (Woolsey, 1986).

Flanagan (1954) defined the CIT as follows:

[A] set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles . . . [an incident describes] any specifiable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical the incident must occur in a situation where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects. (p. 327)

To add to the original definition, Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault (1990) described a critical incident as an observable human activity comprehensive enough to make predictions and conclusions about the person displaying the behavior. A critical incident makes a significant positive or negative contribution to an activity or phenomenon (Gremler, 2004) or reflects a specific satisfying or dissatisfying interaction between customers and service providers (Bitner et al., 1990). Using the CIT, some higher education research has classified student-faculty interactions inside the classroom as service encounters (e.g., Voss, 2009).

Although incidents can be gathered in many ways, the universally accepted approach is for participants to qualitatively relate an experience, a memorable event, or an incident that in some way shaped or changed their thinking or behavior. After the collection of incidents, the CIT defines specific methods for classifying the observations of human behavior.

Description of the CIT Method

Five specific steps are followed in a critical incident study: (a) determining the aim of the activity under study, (b) making plans and setting specifications, (c) collecting data, (d) analyzing data, and (e) interpreting the data and reporting results. Although this section outlines the five components, Flanagan (1954) or Woolsey (1986) provide more detail on the specific procedures.

Aim of the activity. Early CIT studies explored and described a specific activity of employees performing a task. As a result, determining the aim of that activity is a basic step for the researcher before proceeding with the remainder of the study. Questions the researcher needs to be asking in this first step are: (a) What is the objective of the activity? and (b) What is the person engaging in the activity supposed to accomplish (Butterfield et al., 2005)? An evaluation of whether the activity or behavior is effective cannot be completed unless the researchers set the expectations for the behavior at the outset (Flanagan, 1954). However, Flanagan warned that objectivity may not be reached in conceptualizing the general aim of the activity if a number of leaders or constituents want input in the activity and what is to be expected. A commonly accepted description of the functional activity, used by all stakeholders, is critical for data collection. According to Flanagan,
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such descriptions center on a simple phrase or are slogan-like in character (e.g., “appreciation,” “efficiency,” “development,” or “service”). For example, the general aim of a residence hall director might be to develop resident assistants who appreciate diversity. Likewise, the general aim of a vice president of student affairs may be the effective and efficient management of fiscal and human resources of the division. In summary, establishing the general aim of an activity should include a brief description obtained from the experts (e.g., researchers, teachers, managers, participants) in the field. This description, expressed in simple yet agreeable terms, focuses the objectives to be accomplished with the activity (Flanagan, 1954).

Plans and specifications. At this second stage Flanagan (1954) outlined the specific training of observers. Such training is necessary for objectivity and consistency in making and documenting observations of participant behavior. This stage also defines who will do the observing (e.g., supervisor or participant), which persons or groups will be observed, and what specific participant behaviors will be observed (Kain, 2004). Initially, Flanagan suggested that supervisors are the best participants for a CIT study because of their broader perspective and their likelihood of witnessing or hearing about multiple critical incidents. On the other hand, the supervisee likely only recalls his or her own critical incidents. Conversely, in more recent studies (see Kain, 2004) researchers advocated collecting critical incidents from the employee directly (e.g., resident assistant) rather than the supervisor (e.g., residence hall director). Supervisors may not directly observe all the possible behaviors of interest to a researcher studying effective resident assistant confrontation techniques or meaningful diversity appreciation programming. The bottom line in step two of the CIT is to establish a sound procedure so the researcher can clearly determine who will provide what information about a specific group of participants (Kain, 2004).

Data collection. Collecting data is the third component of a critical incident study. Flanagan (1954) initially established two main methods of data collection: (a) direct observations of participant behavior by trained experts and (b) asking participants to recall critical incidents from their memory. Although at first Flanagan felt direct observation was the preferred method of data collection, he later suggested that authentic and accurate results can emerge from recalled incidents when participants are prompted to use precise detail to present the incident (Butterfield et al., 2005). The main methods of data collection for the CIT are individual or group interview, as well as open-ended surveys or questionnaires; see Voss, Gruber, and Reppel (2010) for a suitable CIT study conducted with an open-ended online survey. Well-conceived online surveys enable researchers to reach hundreds of participants using a qualitative approach, which is impractical using face-to-face data collection methods. To determine sample size, CIT researchers observe the number of precisely recalled critical incidents rather than the number of participants (Butterfield et al., 2005). During an interview, the researcher simply invites participants to tell a story about a critical event, experience, or incident; and asks them to explain why the specific story was significant or memorable. Not all CIT studies follow the same blueprint when asking questions of participants.
In some studies researchers ask participants to recall positive and negative incidents (Aamodt et al., 1981), while other studies focus on only either positive (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011) or problematic incidents (Belch & Marshak, 2006). According to Kain (2004), some CIT researchers ask participants to recall as many events as possible during an interview, while others encourage participants to only recall one or two (either negative or positive or both). Kain (2004) pointed out that as few as 16 to as many as 4,000 incidents have been reported as adequate samples in published CIT studies. Flanagan (1954) offered the general rule that incidents are sufficiently reported or exhausted when collecting another 100 incidents only yields 2 to 3 more critical behaviors or experiences.

Some researchers invite participants to recall all incidents of a specific activity over time while others set the timeframe in the more immediate past. According to Voss (2009), the most effective time period for authentic recall of critical incidents should not extend more than four to six months from the incident. The aim of the study, however, is crucial here: younger participants or those bound by time or by a specific institutional environment (e.g., students at a two-year college) may require the opportunity to recall incidents that reach farther back than the suggested optimal four to six months.

As with other qualitative methods, CIT researchers should be carefully aware of how they word questions during data collection. Investigators should consider how participants may perceive the researcher’s affiliation with the general aim of the activity, the context of the questions asked, and how follow-up questions are worded. In general, most CIT scholars suggest that collecting critical incidents from respondents in interviews should always include the following specific questions or slight variations of these:

- Exactly what happened during the incident?
- Exactly who did or said what?
- Who or what was the subject of the incident?
- Where and when did the incident take place?
- What does the participant take away from the incident?
- What specifically about the incident was positive or negative?
- What has been the participant’s response to the incident?

Some researchers incorporate Likert Scales into their interviews to assess the significance of impact of the incident on the participant (e.g., 1–7, least to most significant). Others ask whether or not participants have talked about the incident with someone else to suggest positive or negative word-of-mouth communication (Voss et al., 2010).

In summary, most important for the third component of the CIT are that (a) participants report actual incidents and behaviors, (b) the relationship of the reporter to the behavior is clear,
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(c) the incidents provided are sufficiently relevant to the general aim of the activity, (d) the participant clearly identifies what makes the incident critical, and (e) the reasons for this identification are clear to the researcher (Kain, 2004).

Data analysis. The fourth section of a CIT study is data analysis. Often considered the most important and difficult step, the classification of hundreds of incidents can be complicated (Butterfield et al., 2005). Data analysis in the CIT follows inductive procedures and results that emerge from the data. Flanagan (1954) held that analysis of critical incident studies should be practical so the results could be used in training or evaluation of employees. In this stage, the researcher creates a categorization scheme, which describes and summarizes the data usefully without taking away their validity, comprehensiveness, and specificity (Flanagan, 1954). To this end, Flanagan proposed three specific steps of data analysis. First, the researcher determines a frame of reference (the classification system). In establishing the classification of the data, researchers must establish the purposes for which they will use the data. The second step in data analysis is the creation of the categories that reflect the frame of reference. Flanagan (1954) noted the subjective nature of this formation of categories, as it required experience and judgment from the researcher. This inductive analysis “is a tentative, interactive process, where the researcher sorts incidents into groups derived from the frame of reference” (Kain, 2004, p. 76). The final step in data analysis involves the selection of specificity on a continuum from general to specific. Although one could report hundreds of specific incidents, researchers advocate for listing fewer, more universal categories that inform the general aims of the activity (Flanagan, 1954; Kain, 2004). Practical considerations about the use of the research should drive the level of specificity or generality of the classification scheme. The headings should be logical and clear-cut, and Flanagan suggested that they should be easily discernable by the consumer of the research.

Data interpretation and reporting results. The final component of critical incident studies involves decisions about interpretation and reporting. CIT reports should be “vivid and evocative” (Woolsey, 1986, p. 251), conveying an image of the critical incidents in each category. The purpose of the report drives the amount and type of information to be included. Some authors simply include the categories, providing brief descriptions of each, while others explicate each category in detail, using in vivo quotes from participants to make incidents come alive (Woolsey, 1986).

Kain (2004) suggested the report account for the steps the researcher took in the preceding four phases, enabling the reader to discover how the results could be generalized to other contexts or studies. Researchers should keep in mind that qualitative data do not aim at generalization to larger contexts, but achieve reader-based transferability of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Most important in this last step is the researcher’s explication of the credibility and value of the findings. To determine these components, Flanagan (1954) encouraged researchers to explain what was most salient about the findings under initial aim of the activity.
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Benefits of the CIT

One of the most significant advantages of the CIT is its connection to real-world problems and situations provided through the words of the participant, thus limiting the subjectivity of the researcher (Kain, 2004). CIT studies collect data from the participants’ perspective, and participants decide which incidents, situations, events, or activities are the most critical, memorable, or salient. Perhaps no other qualitative method allows participants as wide a range of responses within a given research study (Gremler, 2004). CIT studies do not present the participant with preconceived questions, definitions, or constructs; and researchers do not force participants to provide experiences within a given framework, so participants freely develop the context using their own perspective. This allows cultural neutrality (Gremler, 2004), as the participants are invited to share their perspective without the cultural boundaries of methods such as surveys, questionnaires, or interviews. When recalling incidents, participants openly use their language, and the researcher's questions typically do not include jargon or technical language.

Another major advantage of the CIT is its usefulness in the early stages of exploring an understudied phenomenon (Kain, 2004). As an inductive method, the CIT researcher avoids hypotheses and operates with a flexible set of rules to let themes or theories emerge directly from the data. Thus, the CIT is valuable in pilot studies or in research where determining all variables a priori is difficult or impossible (Gremler, 2004).

Third, CIT studies provide accurate, in-depth, firsthand, and significant portraits of events from a variety of participants. To this end, the CIT uses a narrative approach, one of the most “accessible human discourse avenues” (Kain, 2004, p. 78). This is specifically vital in higher education and student affairs contexts. Authentic accounts provide meaningful insights into how a group of participants experience a particular institutional environment, course, or student service. The efficacy of such stories in customer relations positions is not to be underestimated. Critical incidents can be instructive for management when training frontline personnel on which behaviors to perform or to avoid when interacting with customers (Gremler, 2004). In a higher education context, this is vital for faculty and student affairs staff who have more daily contact with students than any other group on campus.

Limitations of the CIT

Although the advantages of using the CIT are substantial, the CIT is not without potential drawbacks. Despite its longevity of well over 50 years, the CIT has seemingly not broken into the cadre of renowned methodologies, including ethnography, phenomenology, case study, or grounded theory designs. The paucity of student affairs research using the CIT perhaps underpins that claim.

According to Kain (2004), the CIT may suffer from an identity crisis evident in both terminology and worldview. The term critical incident technique is the most commonly used; however,
other researchers have used variations including critical incident analysis, critical event technique, critical incident study technique, critical incident report, and critical incident reflection (Butterfield et al., 2005). Such inconsistent use of the name and definition of the CIT does not guarantee its universal recognition and appreciation. Further, the CIT has been characterized as a research approach not firmly grounded in either qualitative or quantitative paradigms. Developed during a time when positivist paradigmatic approaches dominated social scientific research, many CIT scholars today still attempt to use descriptive statistics to count category membership of critical incidents (Kain, 2004). Such efforts appeal to the quantitative worldview, which is often still assumed superior to qualitative methods. The strength of the CIT does not lie in inferential or even descriptive statistics, however, but in the attention paid to authentic richness of detail in participants’ accounts of a phenomenon (Kain, 2004).

Another limitation centers on how researchers should best gain trustworthiness of the methods and findings in CIT studies. Many criticize the fact that researchers can misinterpret or misunderstand reported incidents, or potentially misclassify or wrongly code incidents into specific categories. Along with these possible flaws originating with the researcher, others criticize the CIT for its retrospective nature and the possible recall bias of participants. Researchers ask participants who have to remember past incidents to report truthfully and accurately. As a result, potential lapses in memory or reinterpretation of events are critical issues for the CIT researcher (Gremler, 2004).

Third, data collection in CIT studies relies on specific stories and incidents participants consider critical. However, participants may not be adept at telling or writing such a story. This results in a potential drawback: stories about critical incidents may be insufficiently rich in detail, thus yielding a limited dataset. Data devoid of rich detail may not present enough salient implications for practice or behavior in a specific aim under study.

**The Utility of the CIT Method in a Student Affairs Context**

The application of the CIT in student affairs has been very limited; only five studies exist with methods and findings that are instrumental for future CIT researchers. To highlight instructive examples for the CIT in student affairs research, I focus on the two most recent publications (Belch & Marshak, 2006; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011) in the following section.

Belch and Marshak (2006) explored critical incidents related to college students with psychiatric disorders. Rather than collecting incidents from student participants, Belch and Marshak studied these incidents from the perspective of 62 senior student affairs officers (SSAOs). The purpose of the study was to elucidate common issues that the participants identified as particularly problematic when attempting to work with students who have psychiatric concerns.

Belch and Marshak (2006) created a questionnaire, based on a variation of the CIT, to elicit responses from the participants and to reach a wider audience. The researchers disseminated the
questionnaire to 400 SSAOs of NASPA member institutions. This questionnaire was intentionally open-ended to avoid researcher-biased responses while also allowing for detailed unambiguous accounts of critical incidents. The authors asked two specific questions of the SSAOs: (a) to briefly describe an incident with a student with a psychiatric disorder that SSAOs or their staff considered problematic and (b) specifically what the respondents found difficult about the incident. The CIT is clearly an appropriate approach for such an aim of activity; however, two specific issues are worthwhile to point out for future student affairs researchers interested in using the CIT.

First, as chief student affairs officers on campus, SSAOs likely are too far removed from firsthand encounters with students with psychiatric disorders, particularly at larger institutions. As a result, all critical incidents they report are prone to be secondhand information. Selecting directors of campus counseling centers or actual counselors as participants may have been more appropriate because of their closer proximity to critical incidents with students with psychiatric concerns. Studying those more immediately involved with the aim of an activity likely yields incidents richer in detail and, therefore, more salient implications for practice.

Second, the questions Belch and Marshak asked on the questionnaire were perhaps not specific enough to elicit more detailed incidents. The authors encouraged participants to offer a "brief" description of the incident without asking more explicitly who said or did what, where and when the incident occurred, or the subsequent response of the participant or student to the incident. This lack of specificity potentially contributed to a relatively low response rate of 16%. Further, it is unclear how many useable critical incidents resulted from the study. Informing the reader about the specific sample of critical incidents is helpful and instructive for future CIT users and aids in gauging transferability of results.

In their 2011 study, Moores and Popadiuk focused on the transition of seven international students to a Canadian university. The authors collected critical incident data in one-hour, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Not considering any negative events, the researchers gathered 134 positive incidents, yielding an average of 19 critical transition incidents per student. This leaves potential questions about the level of detail of each incident and the depth of the stories participants can offer. In addition, the authors provided their participants a list of key questions prior to the interviews—a technique not discussed in other CIT studies. On the one hand, CIT researchers aim to avoid having participants relay incidents that sound rehearsed or unauthentic because they were prepared beforehand. On the other, having the opportunity to think about critical incidents ahead of time may aid the recall process and yield richer data.

Moores and Popadiuk (2011) offered comprehensive information about their data analysis techniques serving as an instructive method for future CIT researchers. The authors completed their data analysis in three stages: (a) incident extraction from the data, (b) category formation, and (c) explication of trustworthiness. Matching the techniques of other CIT researchers, Moores and Popadiuk considered only those incidents that participants discussed in sufficient detail, those whose events were clearly identified, and those that clearly related to the focus of the study.
During incident categorization, the authors described their strong collaboration, which included meeting on several occasions and frequent e-mail correspondence to review and develop the categories reflecting the incidents. Moores and Popadiuk indicated that they categorized data by the incident itself, rather than the source of the incident or its outcome.

CIT researchers face difficulties when participants relate incidents without clearly demarcating whether the outcome or source is the incident in the mind of the participant. For instance, in Moores and Popadiuk’s (2011) context, is a well-conceived orientation for international students the source or the outcome of the activity? Asking clarifying questions during data collection can ameliorate this concern. Moores and Popadiuk identified eight major categories of incidents and nine subcategories. This process included a shaping and reshaping of the categories until only relevant incidents had been placed in each category and until all relevant incidents had been included.

Moores and Popadiuk (2011) detailed strategies to achieve trustworthiness of their findings using techniques explained by Lincoln and Guba (1985), including prolonged engagement with participants, peer debriefing with colleagues, member checks, and persistent observation. Moores and Popadiuk also employed two tests of inter-rater agreement between researchers and an assessment of the comprehensiveness of the categories using a 10% sample of incidents initially not included in the categorization. These techniques can be easily followed by future CIT researchers who want to achieve a high level of trustworthiness. Moores and Popadiuk’s study is an apt example for how the CIT can be used in a student affairs context. Although the study leaves some unanswered questions, the authors offered a thorough analysis of methods and data analysis within a CIT framework.

As this brief discussion of CIT studies has shown, variations of the CIT exist in student affairs research. Scholars who want to use the CIT in subsequent studies should design their studies carefully from the outset and record their specific steps during the process so the explication of methods and findings is clear for a potential submission for publication. Although the studies discussed here provide a satisfactory level of detail about how to use the CIT, Gremler (2004) presented outstanding instructions about study design and data analysis.

**Suggestions for Applying the CIT in Student Affairs Research and Practice**

As previously stated, it is surprising that the CIT has not seen more frequent use in student affairs research. Its relative ease of data collection and analysis, the ability to record and provide authentic lived experiences of participants, and the capacity to let the participant decide what is most salient in a given experience make the CIT attractive to the student affairs researcher. Aside from scholars who aim to create new knowledge about phenomena, the CIT provides practitioners a meaningful assessment tool to get a clearer picture about how constituents perceive their servic-
es, programs, or activities. The CIT is a near-perfect method for gathering evaluative and summative information about all student affairs functions and units.

Previous research has shown the utilization of the CIT in human resources or management contexts (Butterfield et al., 2005). In student affairs, supervisors should employ the CIT to assess the level of training needed, skill attained, and the competencies mastered by staff members at all levels. Undergraduate staff members in orientation or residence life, for instance, may be excited to participate in such a study because they decide which incidents are most critical and engage more authentically in the study. In addition, the CIT can be used to supplement performance evaluations of staff members and of supervisors. In a 360-degree evaluation, for instance, staff should be invited to report satisfactory and unsatisfactory incidents in interactions with other staff or supervisors. If conducted by an impartial consultant, such evaluations can remain anonymous to yield authentic information.

Another potential application of the CIT involves the development and evaluation of leadership behaviors or professional ethics. Student activities officers could use the CIT to gather data about which behaviors or actions are considered critical by program participants or staff, or gather data from student affairs leaders on campus about their perception of critical behaviors to subsequently devise new programs or training modules. Given the recent endorsement of new professional student affairs competencies by the ACPA and NASPA, opportunities abound for the CIT to help discover whether a given student affairs unit meets the competencies or moves staff in the direction of mastery.

Flanagan (1954) initially used the CIT to assess which tasks combat pilots perceived as critical under stressful situations. In student affairs, stressful situations occur in crisis response and emergency management. First, the CIT presents an invaluable tool to explore effective emergency response and crisis management skills of staff by identifying critical training and development deficiencies. Second, the CIT can be used as a counseling technique to help staff identify which events or situations are critical during crisis response. When well-designed, this use of the CIT may provide staff a cathartic outlet to share stressors, while providing the supervisor with salient data about emergency response training. Woolsey (1986) pointed out the CIT’s capacity to offer a counseling-like setting between the researcher and participant. Such an effect of the CIT on a stressed student affairs professional should not be underestimated.

Diversity education and awareness potentially represent a large area for application of the CIT in the student affairs context. Practitioners should use the CIT to gather data from diversity trainers, program participants, students, or faculty about the levels of civility on campus. The CIT offers a welcome break from typical quantitative campus climate studies that fail to understand critical events from a lived experience chosen by and expressed in the words of participants. This may yield more authentic data about diversity concerns on campus. On the other hand, practitioners should employ the CIT to unearth the most satisfying incidents on campus relative to diver-
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...sity appreciation. Quotes gathered from such assessments fit well into marketing strategies or advertisements for services or educational programs. When discrimination or harassment occur on campus, professionals may use the CIT to gather specific data about what victims consider most critical in the event. Should a concern of a cultural nature exist for the victims, the CIT allows them to relate an experience in their own words, instead of the researcher using typical scripted questions based on a potentially different cultural foundation.

Finally, student affairs practitioners can use the CIT to determine how student affairs professionals influence college student success. The learning outcomes movement urges college educators to unequivocally identify how they or their services affect student success; however, professionals in student affairs have not yet followed suit universally, due to time constraints or to inadequate training in assessment methods or data analysis. The CIT gives student affairs professionals the opportunity to empirically identify which staff, events, or programs students perceive most critical to their learning and success. Such a study would go beyond merely reporting student satisfaction; student participants can explicate incidents in which student affairs staff affected their success critically, and not simply those who made a student happy.

This article aimed to encourage all student affairs researchers and practitioners to understand, utilize, and develop the CIT in their research or during outcomes assessment. One word of caution: as with all qualitative methods, CIT studies take a significant amount of time. Using the CIT to produce trustworthy critical findings means the student affairs professional should be meticulous in design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Without giving the CIT due diligence, the outcome may be a hasty collection of unreliable data with little value for student affairs research and practice.

Conclusion

Although the CIT has been sparingly used in student affairs research and practice, it presents an invaluable method of collecting authentic data about the lived experiences of participants. The relative ease of use by following five specific steps in the design phase, its benefits in collecting and analyzing data, and its capacity to report vivid and evocative incidents in the words of the participants make the CIT an invaluable research technique. Student affairs researchers and practitioners alike should begin to explore the CIT because it provides a meaningful, culturally sensitive, and authentic data-gathering strategy to study the effectiveness of any student affairs unit, service, or program.
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