FACTS AND MYTHS ABOUT ASSESSMENT IN STUDENT AFFAIRS

Conducting good assessment studies and using them to influence policy and practice may well determine the future of student affairs. But many student affairs professionals are stalled in their efforts to develop an assessment strategy. Many haven't even started. Before you can begin, say the authors, it's important to know the facts.

By John H. Schuh and M. Lee Upcraft

THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT that assessment of higher education in general and of student affairs programs, services, and facilities in particular is here to stay. Once thought of as just another educational fad, assessment is now the cornerstone of our ability to plan, improve, and, most important, survive. Countless examples are available of the successful use of assessment to justify and improve our programs, services, and facilities, and to provide systematic information that helps frame policy and practice.

As we have traveled about the country assisting student affairs professionals in developing assessment strategies, we have uncovered an obvious reality: great unevenness exists in assessment efforts. Some institutions have done nothing, others have implemented partial assessment efforts in which some units are active but others are not, and a few have initiated comprehensive assessment programs. But most struggle with how to get started. Most often student affairs practitioners want to begin an assessment project but are hampered by lack of either information about assessment or the necessary skills to get the job done, and consequently they do not know where to begin.

We believe that the key to building an effective assessment effort is to know and understand the basic concepts of student affairs assessment and to dispel the myths that surround this sometimes intimidating issue. In an effort to extend the conversation with student affairs practitioners about what assessment is and what it is not, we offer the following facts and myths about assessment in student affairs.

***Assessment, evaluation, research, and measurement are all essentially the same* (Myth).** Our view is that although these activities are complementary, they are not synonymous. Dary Erwin has observed, "Assessment is oriented toward practice and usually toward some action. . . . Research may contribute new knowledge, but it may not suggest that programs need improvements or are functioning well" (1993, p. 231). We define *assessment* as any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence that describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or program effectiveness, while *evaluation* is any effort to use this evidence to improve effectiveness. *Research* is about studying, developing, or testing a theory by gathering data in a systematic way. It may or may not have anything to do with determining effectiveness or bringing about change. *Measurement* refers to the two overarching but not mutually exclusive methods used to conduct assessments: quantitative and qualitative.

Put another way, assessment is focused on determining the extent to which services and programs achieve their stated objectives. It borrows from selected research tools and uses quantitative or qualitative methodologies or a combination of both. The results of this process are data, which when systematically analyzed become the basis for determining policy and practice.

Student affairs practitioners can easily move from assessment projects, using appropriate measurement methodologies, to evaluation and research. For example, suppose that the office of resident life has developed a program to involve students with faculty. This program might be assessed to determine whether the program contributes to selected student outcomes. Focus groups (a qualitative methodology) could be used to conduct a study in which students are asked questions about how their participation in the program has changed their thinking about interacting with faculty. Are they more likely to engage in discussions with faculty about subject matter outside of class? Have they changed their thinking about pursuing a graduate degree? The evaluation of this program applies the conclusions drawn from the assessment project to such policy questions as Should the program be continued, modified, or expanded? and Is the program cost-effective?

The same program could be the focus of a research project. For example, the College Student Experiences Questionnaire might be used in a quantitative study to determine whether the program enhances student quality of effort, or to learn more about how this kind of activity extends Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. Using a control and a treatment group, the program's effectiveness could be studied and placed within the framework of involvement theory, taking into account precollege and during-college variables that might affect the outcome. In reality, however, practitioners seldom have time to do research, and our primary efforts should focus on assessment and evaluation.

***Outcomes assessments are the only credible assessments* (Myth).** Too often we assume that only an exhaustive, well-controlled longitudinal study with a large sample using sophisticated statistical analyses qualifies as a rigorous and valid assessment. The result of this thinking is that we overlook the many less complex and more doable assessment studies that can yield important information for policy and practice. At a basic level we can track the use of services and programs. This nonintrusive approach (it does not require collecting additional data from students) can be done using existing data on students. For example, if an analysis of the census count in the student health service tells us that services are used infrequently by certain groups of students, we can then explore how we might make services more attractive and accessible to these students.

Many other strategies are available for conducting assessments. We can assess student needs (using needs assessment instruments or focus groups) to determine whether the programs and services offered match what students need. Are we providing services that no one needs? Are there services that we do not provide that we should? We can assess student satisfaction to determine whether students perceive that a program has met its goals. Was the program of value to participants? How might it be improved? On a more global level, we can assess campus environments and student cultures. The Involving Colleges project reported by Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and their associates (1991) is an example of a study of student cultures. It is important to look not only at student perceptions of specific programs and services

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but also at their collective perceptions of the campus environments and student cultures within which they conduct their daily lives. Is the campus climate chilly for women? Does the campus environment support student learning?

We can also compare our services and programs to those at comparable institutions—a method better known as *benchmarking*. How does the quality of our services, programs, and facilities compare with "best in class" comparable institutions? What have they learned that we might duplicate? We can also assess using nationally accepted standards. How do our services and programs compare with those developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (1997), various national and regional accrediting agencies, and professional organizations?

***Student affairs outcomes are impossible to define precisely and measure accurately* (Myth).** Outcomes assessments depend on our ability to define and measure desired outcomes. Too often we avoid these assessments not only because they are difficult to design and implement but also because we cannot reach a consensus on desired outcomes, and on how to measure them. Outcomes assessments start with a definition of what outcomes we are assessing. The design and methodology then follow.

Fortunately, some progress has been made in defining outcomes. In 1995, a group of educators was called together by NASPA to develop suggested learning outcomes based on the American College Personnel Association document *The Student Learning Imperative* (1994). Although the resulting framework does not provide specific outcomes, it does provide a guide for conceptualizing and organizing the following learning outcomes:

- *Complex cognitive skills:* reflective thought, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and intellectual flexibility
- *Knowledge acquisition:* subject matter mastery and knowledge application
- *Intrapersonal development:* autonomy, values, identity, aesthetics, self-esteem, and maturity
- *Interpersonal development:* Understanding and appreciating human differences, being able to relate to others, establishing intimate relationships
- *Practical competence:* career preparation, managing one's personal affairs, and economic self-sufficiency
- *Civic responsibility:* responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society and commitment to democratic ideals

To this list of six outcomes, we would like to add two others:

- *Academic achievement:* ability to earn satisfactory grades in courses
- *Persistence:* ability to pursue a degree to graduation

These eight outcomes provide us with a framework for deciding on and specifying appropriate outcomes.

Outcomes assessments are the most influential type of assessment one can conduct, although they are also the most difficult. They do, however, provide answers to such questions as the following: Is there an effect on the learning, development, academic success, or other intended outcomes of the persons who use our services, programs, and facilities, particularly when compared to nonusers? Can programmatic interventions be isolated from other variables that may influence outcomes, such as students' backgrounds and characteristics and other experiences during college? Is what we are doing having an impact, and is that impact the desired one?

***The first step in the assessment process is to determine why a study is needed* (Fact).** Thomas Angelo and K. Patricia Cross emphasize that "effective assessment begins with clear goals" (1993, p. 8). Almost all assessment starts with some problem or issue: there is a reason that we seek additional information. Our hope is that in the long term practitioners will assess programs and services on a regular basis, but our experience tells us that few institutions are at that point. As a consequence, too often our assessments are restricted to justifying our existence or promoting our survival. Although these are important reasons for assessment, there are many others, often interrelated. Survival, for example, can hardly be separated from the political dimensions for doing assessment—for example, when someone in a position of authority insists on a particular study. Other reasons include improving quality, determining affordability, making an important decision, developing a policy, and engaging in strategic planning.

Determining why an assessment is being undertaken leads to a series of other important questions: What and how will we assess? Who will assess? How will the data be collected and analyzed? and How will results be communicated and to whom? We argue that all of these questions should be asked before the study is conducted, starting with the most important question: Why?

***Quantitative methods are more rigorous than qualitative methods* (Myth).** Our view is that qualitative methods have reached a sufficient level of maturity and rigor as a scientific concept that they can be applied to a wide variety of circumstances. Although it is still true that quantitative methods are more generally acceptable in an academic community than qualitative methods, qualitative methods do have a serious scholarly base and are well accepted in fields such as sociology, anthropology, human development, and others. A very simple definition of *quantitative methods* is that they yield greater breadth of information and more accurately answer the *what* questions than qualitative methods; and a simple definition of *qualitative methods* is that they provide greater depth of information and more accurately respond to the *why* questions than quantitative methods. Too often we make the mistake of first choosing the methodology and then asking these questions. Obviously some problems lend themselves more logically to a quantitative assessment, while others are best solved using a qualitative approach, and often both methods are used. For example, if you were asked to assess a recreation program, one approach would be to track how many people use the program on a daily basis. Of these people, how many are students, faculty, or visitors? Are users male or female, underclass or upperclass students, participants in structured programs (such as intramurals or an aerobics class) or just using the running track? This approach obviously requires using quantitative techniques.

Likewise, one might want to compare the cost-effectiveness of this program with programs offered by a local health club. What do students pay per year out of their fees for the operation of the recreation program? How does that fee compare with the cost of membership in a private club? Are other fees assessed for specific programs offered in the recreational building, such as charges for using racquetball courts? How do these costs compare with those of off-campus facilities? How much money is recycled to students in the form of wages? These questions also lend themselves to a quantitative assessment.

In addition, one might want to assess the value that students attach to the recreation program. Is the contribution of students' fees worth it? Do students find value in having such a facility available? Why do they use it? What modifications would lead to their using the facility more often? How might the recreation program be improved? These and other value questions are best answered through qualitative techniques, such as individual interviews or focus groups. Our conclusion is that both methodologies can lead to important discoveries. These methods are complementary, not mutually exclusive.

***All assessment is political* (Fact).** Unlike researchers, who by and large can pursue their research with little regard for the political consequences (with exceptions, such as fetal tissue or human cloning research),

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assessment investigators must be attuned to the impact of their studies from the moment an assessment idea emerges. Certainly the integrity of an assessment study should never be compromised, but the various contexts within which assessments are undertaken and the people affected by those assessments should be taken into consideration in the assessment process. For example, an assessment could lead to discontinuing a program, which would displace workers and leave clients having to look for other sources of support, programming, resources, and so on. Stakeholders obviously have an interest in the results of an assessment; the impact on them should not be overlooked.

One of the primary purposes of assessment is to have an impact on policy and practice. It has been our experience that assessment studies, even good ones, do not speak for themselves. They must be developed strategically and reported in ways that have an impact. Nothing is more frustrating than conducting an assessment study of high quality and then learning, usually over some period, that decision makers failed to act on the study's findings. We believe that one of the reasons studies often end up gathering dust on someone's shelf is that political realities often thwart their impact. The question then becomes, How can investigators develop, conduct, and report assessment studies in ways that have an impact on policy and practice?

We have several suggestions. First, *do not do a study no one really wants.* That is, make sure that policymakers can live with the results. For example, we know of a study that was done to determine whether gender or race biases were reflected in the salaries of student affairs employees. Unfortunately, there was little if any discussion of what might be done if bias was found. The study found that women and minorities were not paid comparably to other employees, but only after the study did it become obvious that not nearly enough money was available to address these inequities. Because gender and racial discrimination are not only wrong but illegal, the institution was faced with a very serious dilemma. Insofar as possible, investigators must determine in advance of a study whether the institution is serious about using the results, whatever they may be.

Second, *involve those who are affected by the assessment as well as those who are interested in it.* Trudy Banta and her colleagues observe in their book *Assessment in Practice,* "There is, perhaps, no more important principle in the assessment literature than this: successful assessment requires collaborative efforts" (1996, p. 35). We strongly urge that rather than blindside these persons with the results after the study is done, involve those who will be affected by the study or asked to implement its recommendations from the beginning. This is especially important if there is a possibility that the results may embarrass an important political constituency. For example, if a study is conducted that has the potential of making the college's president appear inept, it would be good to make sure in advance of the study that he or she is ready to deal with the possible results.

Third, *conduct a good study.* This assertion seems obvious, but a bad study will do more harm than no study at all. When the findings are reported to the various political constituencies, you will want them to focus on the results and recommendations, not on your methodology. The study should be able to withstand the challenges of people who do not agree with the results. One way of softening methodological criticism is to make sure that the limitations of the study are reported. Then the readers will at least realize that the writer knows about the study's limitations, and they can make up their own minds about the efficacy of the study.

***All assessment is local* (Fact).** The purpose of an assessment is to affect policy and practice at a particular institution. Many wonderful national studies are conducted each year in higher education. Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini's classic work *How College Affects Students* (1991) contains summaries of more than three thousand such studies. It has been our experience, however, that national studies have little influence on institutional policy and practice unless local evidence confirms the national findings.

For example, some wonderful work was done in the last three decades on the influence on students of living in a residence hall, including landmark studies released by Arthur Chickering (1974) and Alexander Astin (1977). The effects were found to be very positive, and housing directors all over the country used these studies to attract students to on-campus living. The problem, of course, is that these data may or may not apply to a specific campus. Unless the director of housing can point to the results of a locally conducted study showing positive impact, policy and decision makers may remain unconvinced of the value of living on campus.

National studies may be more elegant in design, sophisticated in research techniques, and lucid in the presentation of results, but locally produced studies, if well done, will have more impact on a particular campus. For example, institutions may want to know more about the quality of life in campus sororities and fraternities, the value of participating in volunteer services, or the influence of counseling services on retention. As a consequence, we urge student affairs practitioners not to rely exclusively on national studies to support the value of their programs and services, and to be prepared to deal with local results that may not be consistent with the findings of national studies.

***Assessment should be done by assessment experts* (Myth).** The traditional approach to research is that the researchers should be "experts" in research methodology and "objective" observers with no vested interest in the outcome of the study. We disagree. No one understands the subtleties and nuances of an individual program or service better than the people assigned responsibility for that program. In their article on outcomes assessment, Dary Erwin, Robert Scott, and Alfred Menard point out that "The use of assessment results causes practitioners to focus on what they are doing, why they are doing it, and how well they are doing it" (1991, p. 761). As a consequence, we believe that these people are the ones who need to take the lead in conducting assessments, as long as the assessment designs have integrity and as long as the expertise needed to conduct these studies is available. Clearly each campus will have experts on assessment techniques, such as faculty, institutional research staff, or perhaps graduate students in selected disciplines who are involved in local assessments. But nobody should have more responsibility for assessing a specific program than those who are involved in its operation. The skills needed to conduct successful assessments are wide ranging. Trudy Banta describes some of these skills in the following way: "The most successful [assessment] coordinators are bright, articulate, persuasive, adaptable individuals who can organize a complex set of activities, mobilize numbers of people to carry them out, and follow through to ensure that the results of evaluative activities are used to inform decision making" (1993, p. 359).

Unit administrators should take the lead in conducting assessments and ask other members of the campus community to join in the process. To rely exclusively on so-called experts to conduct assessment in specific areas is an exercise in wishful thinking and is not good practice. We believe that assessments are best conducted when student affairs staff develop their own projects, seek expert advice as needed, and see studies to their conclusion.

***Assessment takes time and money away from providing direct services to students* (Fact).** There is no question that assessment takes time and money. In *Assessment in Practice,* Trudy Banta and her associates conclude that "successful assessment requires an environment characterized by effective leadership, administrative commitment, adequate resources (for example, clerical support and money), faculty and staff development opportunities, and time" (1996, p. 62). Ideally, of course, that time and money should come from additional resources. But the reality we have uncovered is that most student affairs operations do not have additional money and time to allocate to assessment activities, so money typically comes from existing resources, and the time comes out of the hides of already-busy professional staff. That creates an enormous dilemma for those of us who want both effectiveness and the assessments to measure that effectiveness.

For example, it has been our experience that our best staff (that is, those who are most productive and committed to serving students first) are often the most resistant to taking time away from their primary responsibilities to work on assessment. So we are faced with a Catch-22 situation: to do assessment, we must take valuable time away from regular job responsibilities; but if we do that, our assessments may temporarily underestimate our effectiveness. So what should we do?

As painful as it is, sometimes we do what we must in order to do what we want. We have argued that assessment should be done locally, involve those who are affected, and use experts when needed. We further assert that assessment should be seen as an investment in a unit's future. The most promising solution to this dilemma is to ask selected staff, on a rotating basis, to take time away from their regular responsibilities to conduct appropriate assessment. For example, if counselors reduce their client load to spend time designing, conducting, interpreting, and reporting assessment studies, we must be willing to tolerate, at least temporarily, things like waiting lists and the resulting student dissatisfaction they will generate. But the alternative is to do no assessments, and that, as we have argued, could be fatal to the very existence of our services and programs.

***How we communicate the results of our assessments is as critical as the assessments themselves* (Fact).** It has been our experience that a major complaint of those who conduct assessment studies is that such studies too seldom make a difference in policy and practice. A study that goes unread will not bring about change. In addition to the advice we have offered about the political dimensions of assessment (involve people affected, conduct a good study, and never do a study no one wants), write a good report.

Unfortunately, many assessment studies are reported using a research format similar to doctoral theses. If the purpose of an assessment is to inform, frame, and influence policy and practice, reporting the results should reflect that purpose. That means writing a report that creates interest and motivates readers to action. For example an executive summary that highlights the most important results and recommendations should come first, not last.

Even the title is important. For example, if we did a study that demonstrated that student leader participation in a leadership development program resulted in increased leadership skills, a title based on a dissertation format might read, "A Study of the Relationship of Semester-Long Leadership Development Programs to Student Leader Development of Leadership Skills." A much more engaging title that would attract reader interest might be "Strategies to Help Students Develop Leadership Skills."

Knowing one's audience is crucial in report writing. We recommend sending summaries targeted to specific audiences, rather than sending the whole report to everyone. For example, a one-page summary outlining the findings and recommendations is more than enough for a president. Condensed reports that highlight the findings relevant to a particular audience (students, faculty, student affairs staff, trustees, and so on) are also highly effective. In fact, we seldom, if ever, send the full report to anyone. Of course we make it clear in our various summaries that readers may receive a copy of the full report upon request.

Reports should also contain recommendations on how the results should be implemented. We believe very strongly that it is not enough simply to report assessment results, leaving their implications to the reader. To reiterate a point made earlier, we have a responsibility not only to assess (report findings) but also to evaluate (report what the findings mean for policy and practice).

CONDUCTING good assessment studies and using them to influence policy and practice may well determine the future of student affairs. We believe that the best way to start is to have a firm grasp of the concepts outlined in this article. Of course we cannot make the claim that conducting assessment studies will ensure a bright future for student affairs programs, services, and activities. We are convinced, however, that such studies can go a long way toward providing a systematic basis for justifying and improving our services and programs.

NOTES

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