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Many student affairs professionals are well aware of the importance of assessment in the work on our campuses. We read articles and attend conference presentations on the topic in an effort to improve our skills, and new professionals are expected to have some knowledge of assessment when they begin their first job (Waple, 2006). Practitioners work in an increasing “culture of evidence” and must develop the skills necessary to prove the effectiveness of their programs (Carpenter, 2001, p. 305; Schroeder & Pike, 2001).

As practitioners seek assessment skills and attempt to implement these skills on campuses, we often become frustrated or intimidated. These frustrations can come from many sources and can paralyze assessment efforts. Often, assessment is viewed as something a department is forced to do in order to avoid punishment or to be rewarded and as a process that has no real value (Love & Estanek, 2004). The struggles some professionals have with assessment begin with the vocabulary associated with the topic (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001; Upcraft, 2003; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In fact, even experts in the field sometimes use assessment terms interchangeably, with vocabulary shifts and meanings changing between articles, presentations, and institutional conversations, leaving practitioners confused and perhaps avoiding assessment activities. This article establishes a working vocabulary for assessment and provides a broad overview of how terms may overlap.

Assessment

Assessment means many things to different people, but definitions often share similar concepts and terms. Assessment has its roots in business and educational psychology (Erwin, 1991). Under some pressure from external stakeholders, higher education recognized the value of the movement and adopted the process and its benefits to meet needs on campuses around the

nation. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) defined assessment in the academy as “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (p. 18). While this definition captured the process, it described the effort as one event separate from other assessment efforts. Practitioners know that plans, policies, and programs seldom occur in a vacuum. Assessment should be an ongoing effort. Love and Estanek (2004) added a continual process perspective when they described assessment as “on-going efforts to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes individual, programmatic, or institutional effectiveness and using that evidence to improve practice” (p. 85). Their definition also introduced an intentional component to the process. The evidence gathered is used to improve some process or part of practice. Assessment efforts are a waste of resources if practitioners do not close the loop and apply what is learned to impact positively the work we do with students (Brigman & Hanson, 2000). Erwin and Sivo (2001) focused the goal of this improvement when they defined assessment as “the process of documenting student learning and development” (p. 357). Their definition highlights the learning and developmental outcomes necessary in higher education. For the purpose of this special edition of the *Georgia Journal of College Student Affairs*, assessment is defined as “the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students’ learning and development” (Erwin, 1991, p. 15).

Steps in an Assessment Plan

While a working definition of assessment is important, professionals are concerned with what the concept looks like in practice. The components of the definition move from abstract to concrete when they are implemented in an assessment plan. Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates

(2001) developed steps that practitioners can follow as they develop and implement assessment studies:

1. Define the problem.
2. Determine the purpose of the study.
3. Determine where to get the needed information.
4. Determine the best assessment methods.
5. Determine whom to study.
6. Determine how data will be collected.
7. Determine what instruments will be used.
8. Determine who should collect the data.
9. Determine how the data will be analyzed.
10. Determine the implications of the study for policy and practice.
11. Report the results effectively

The process is not concise and can become unruly if the first step is not completed in a clear manner. A clear definition of the problem will provide direction and cohesion to the remainder of the assessment plan. Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates emphasized, “These steps must be addressed for each study *before* the study is conducted” (p. 24). Practitioners should spend time in the planning stage to make sure the end results will answer the initial questions.

Student Outcomes Assessment

The definition of assessment for this special issue has as its end goal increasing student learning and development. Student affairs has a commitment to contribute to the seamless education (Schroeder, 1996) and holistic development of students (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Student outcomes assessment measures any change or consequence occurring as a result of

enrollment in a particular educational institution and involvement in its programs (Erwin, 1991). Assessment allows practitioners to measure the success of their programs by tracking student outcomes.

As student affairs divisions are held more accountable for the effectiveness of our programs, we will need to prove that we are contributing to the academic mission of the institution. In order to demonstrate accountability to constituents, administrators can assess student outcomes related to mission and goals. Erwin and Sivo (2001) identified six steps for assessing student learning and development:

1. Establishing learning and developmental objectives that fulfill program goals.
2. Planning the design of the study.
3. Selecting or constructing assessment methods.
4. Implementing the assessment study design.
5. Analyzing or evaluating assessment information.
6. Summarizing how the information will be used (p.360).

These steps will help practitioners as they see assessment efforts through from beginning to the end of the process. As with the steps of all assessment plans, careful attention should be paid to the objectives and goals throughout the process. The summary at the end should reflect the original learning and development outcomes.

Needs Assessment

Assessment can serve many purposes in the academy. Student affairs professionals will often use a specific form of assessment to better understand and thus meet the needs of students and other constituents. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) defined needs assessment as “the process of determining the presence or absence of the factors and conditions, resources, services, and

learning opportunities that students need in order to meet their educational goals and objectives within the context of an institution's mission" (p. 128). This type of assessment is especially helpful in the development of programs and in strategic planning. Administrators must be careful to differentiate between needs and wants. Understanding departmental goals and objectives can assist in this differentiation.

Measurement

The terms measurement and evaluation appear often in assessment literature. While the two words are closely related, they have different meanings. Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) defined measurement as "methods we use to gather information for the purposes of assessment" (p. 4). These methods can use different approaches but serve to provide data for assessment purposes. The methods and the data they yield can take two different forms, quantitative and qualitative. The two forms of measurement differ but are not mutually exclusive (Schuh and Upcraft, 1998). Quantitative assessment assigns numbers to data. Practitioners may find numerical information "makes it easier to aggregate, compare, and summarize data" (Babbie, 2001, p. 36). Examples of quantitative data include attendance numbers at a program, financial records, and scaled survey instruments.

Qualitative data also provides useful assessment data. Bogden and Biklen (2003) identified five features of qualitative research that also pertain to assessment data collected in a qualitative manner. First, this type of data is collected in a naturalistic style that preserves its context. Second, qualitative data is descriptive and concerned with more than bare numbers. Third, practitioners collecting descriptive data are "concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products" (p. 6). Fourth, data is analyzed inductively, or without preconceived hypotheses. This feature is especially important as it allows an assessment project to make

unanticipated discoveries that can better a program or an institution. Bogden and Biklen's final feature pertains to the meaning people make of their experiences. Constituents' perceptions of programs may vary from the original intended goals. Examples of qualitative assessment projects include focus groups, exit interviews, and analysis of mission statements or strategic plans.

Evaluation

Evaluation is the next step in the assessment process after measurement. Love and Estanek (2004) defined evaluation as:

efforts to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence to determine an evaluation focus..., quality, utility, effectiveness, or significance in relation to stated criteria or other standards and, in cases where the object falls short, use that evidence to help the evaluation object reach an adequate level of performance. (p. 86)

Their definition is broad and combines measurement and evaluation. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) provided a more specific definition of evaluation, when they described it as "any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (p. 18). The assessment evidence mentioned in this definition are the findings of qualitative and quantitative measurement methods used by administrators.

Student affairs professionals will use two types of evaluations as they create a culture of assessment on their campuses. Both formative and summative evaluations are important in sustaining and improving an organization. Brown (1979) described formative evaluations as those "conducted periodically throughout the developmental phases of a program and ... used to provide quick feedback to the program staff so that changes can be made to improve the program as time passes" (p. 21). This type of evaluation looks for ways to improve beginning or existing programs. Formative evaluation may include, for example, an examination of a method of

publicity or some other process that may be changed as the program continues, to improve effectiveness.

While formative evaluations look to improve existing programs already in process, they normally are not used to determine whether the programs will continue. Summative evaluations are conducted at the conclusion of a program to examine it as a whole. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) wrote, “Summative evaluations are used to determine if a particular organizational activity or function should be continued, enhanced, curtailed, or eliminated” (p. 19). These types of evaluations are usually more formal as they are used for accountability purposes. Budget and decision makers are interested in summative evaluations. In times of shrinking budgets and limited resources, this type of evaluation can help administrators make difficult decisions about the survival of programs (Brown, 1979).

Practical Application

The importance of assessment in our field will only grow in the future. As institutions struggle to deal with budget constraints and calls for increased accountability, assessment and strategic planning activities have become more prevalent across the institution (Rames, 2000). Practitioners should seek professional development opportunities that allow increased assessment experience. These opportunities may range from a small scale assessment of a program to membership on a committee charged with preparation for institutional accreditation. Love and Estanek (2004) wrote, “Assessment plans, programs, and practices are . . . much more effective when they are conducted by individuals who work from an assessment mindset” (p. 117). Student affairs professionals will only gain this mindset through practice and will thereby become better equipped to contribute effectively to their institutions.

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