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Making Assessment Meaningful: What New Student Affairs Professionals and Those New to Assessment Need to Know

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For some professionals in higher education, assessment seems an onerous task or an “add on” to an already overloaded schedule. For others, assessment is a “mandate from on high”—coming with extreme expectations but not the resources to support them. Still others suspect assessment is a disguise for personnel evaluation or a subtle strategy to impose different values. While such trepidations at the prospect of assessment are common, implementing *meaningful* assessment can go far to allay them.

This brief from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) describes what assessment is intended to be, why the involvement of student affairs professionals in the assessment of student learning and development is critical, and how student affairs professionals can authentically engage in designing and assessing student learning on their campuses. When it is implemented by leveraging student affairs professionals’ inherent passionate concern for students’ holistic learning and development, assessment is experienced as truly integral to the nature of the work of student affairs professionals—fitting easily into their innate inquiry processes and day-to-day practices.

Defining Assessment

Assessment begins with simply wondering whether what you do all day is contributing to what you hope your efforts can accomplish. Many student affairs professionals naturally inquire this way into whether their programs, interventions, curriculum designs, and services are accomplishing what they should. Often, however, because these natural inquiry processes are not organized or systematically implemented, they cannot connect to the larger context of accountability. More and more, campus leaders, the state, accreditors, and the public are asking us to justify the resources we are using and to show what value we are adding to the student experience (Ewell, 2009; Provezis, 2010). If we do not document what we discover about our programs in ways that are consistent and that others can interpret, we cannot demonstrate how we have used the resources entrusted to us.

Assessment, in essence, takes our natural curiosity about our work’s effectiveness and puts it in a systematic framework, where we explicitly articulate what we hope a student participating in a program will take away from the experience—the learning outcomes. Once we have described the learning outcomes, we design the program—using design tools like concept mapping, curriculum mapping, outcomes delivery mapping, or action planning—to best enable the student to achieve these outcomes. Once we have in place a program based on the desired outcomes, we determine how best to capture—with carefully selected assessment tools and criteria—what the student actually learned or how the student developed. We then collect the assessment data and—through data analysis and interpretation—identify the implications and potential uses of these findings. Next, drawing on the findings, we make decisions and recommendations for revising and improving the program or the assessment design. If we have the necessary information, we can link these decisions and recommendations to the larger organizational values or strategic initiatives, thus, integrating the accountability of the program with that of the organization. Finally, for the ongoing implementation of assessment, we determine when the program should be reassessed to see whether our decisions and changes actually brought the desired improvements in learning outcomes.

How Campus Leadership Engages in Assessing Student Learning

The literature¹ illustrates several examples of the fine ways in which campus leadership is engaged in assessing student learning and development (Banta & Associates, 2002; Banta, Jones, & Black, 2009; Bresciani, 2006; Bresciani, Moore-Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009a, 2009b; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005, 2010; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 1991; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). These books and manuscripts provide excellent ideas and practical strategies, embedded in real life examples, for encouraging faculty, staff, parents, students, and community partners to become fully engaged in assessment. Some of these strategies need only a foundational knowledge of assessment to be implemented on your campus. Others are more sophisticated and may require you to become a little more experienced with assessment, in addition to engaging in collaborative conversations across departments and divisions.

While examining the examples in these books and manuscripts, I noted some similarities among them—characteristics that are also reflected, incidentally, in a hallmark document on assessment, *Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* (American Association for Higher Education, 1991). These characteristics, which you may find helpful when implementing assessment at your organization, are as follows:

1. *The focus of assessment is not on “assessment for assessment’s sake” but, rather, on exploring what students are learning and how they are developing in a manner producing evidence that can lead to decisions to improve learning.* Instead of conducting a survey, for instance, just to be able to say that assessment has been done, the examples in these documents use methods and tools that genuinely seek to discover what students are learning and how they are developing. Furthermore, they do so in a manner that contributes to discussions of how to use results to inform decisions that improve program design and, thus, improve student learning. If the assessment tool is a survey, as in the instance mentioned above, the survey is aligned directly with the outcomes it is assessing.
2. *Learning and development are recognized as dynamic processes in which learning needs to be purposefully facilitated and not just expected.* The student affairs professionals and faculty in these examples clearly recognize that behavior change does not occur in a one-hour workshop or during one class session. Therefore, that type of learning or development is not represented in the outcomes or assessment designs. Rather, consistent with the latest learning and development theory, assessment of specified varying levels of learning and development outcomes is aligned with systematically designed and facilitated learning experiences.
3. *The learning outcomes are clearly and succinctly stated.* The learning outcomes are specific, identifiable, and meaningful to the students, to professionals involved in the program, to the faculty with whom the professionals collaborate, and to the community members that the program is intended to serve.
4. *The program design is implemented in such a way that the outcomes should be met if participants engage in the program as the program designers intend.* This is the curriculum-mapping or action-planning portion of the project. Reflecting, as previously, the view of learning and development as dynamic, the purposeful design of the program specifies expectations for the achievement of articulated outcomes for which learning opportunities have been provided, rather than for the achievement of outcomes for which students were not provided opportunities to learn. This characteristic removes any arbitrary, unfounded expectation of learning and, instead, purposefully embeds within the design the means for realizing the intended learning outcomes.
5. *Because inquiry is ongoing, assessment—being nothing more than inquiry placed into a manageable framework—is an ongoing, organized process.* To stop questioning whether what we do is working as expected is to invite stagnation and a collapse in creativity and innovation. Without inquiry, learning program problems cannot be solved and student learning and development cannot improve. Without ongoing inquiry informing decisions and recommendations for continuous improvement, we cannot demonstrate our good stewardship of the resources we have been given to facilitate learning and development. Only with assessment can we demonstrate accountability.
6. *Assessment design processes and conversations for improving student learning and development are collaborative, involving people and resources across departments and divisions.* While some of what you do in the assessment process will be within your locus of control to improve, other improvements will require collaboration across organizational lines. Therefore, collaborating in the design of the outcomes, programs, assessment tools and criteria will not only garner collaborative ownership in the program’s success, it will promote collaborative discussion of the evidence that was jointly agreed upon to gather and, thus, collaboration on improving the program.
7. *Students, parents, faculty, student affairs professionals, and community partners assess student learning and development that they really care about.* The notion that assessment is a mandate from on high has been expressed mostly either by those who do not recognize they are already engaged in an inquiry process but just do not document that inquiry or by those who simply refuse to engage in a systematic, documented assessment framework. While assessment has been required for regional accreditation purposes for decades, its true value is made known when people demonstrate they care about what they do by documenting what they learn

¹The resources section for this paper, found on the NILOA website, provides additional information on assessment.

about how to improve student learning and development. By implementing assessment in a manner that meaningfully examines what you and your constituents care about, you will reap the benefits of meaningful results that inform important decisions and that positively impact student learning and development. You will also advance meaningful conversations about accountability, with discussions based on evidence of real learning and development rather than based on indicators that have very little to do with student learning.

8. *Programs that are assessed align with larger institutional learning outcomes or strategic initiatives.* In the context of the growing demands to demonstrate the value of an associate's, bachelor's, or master's degree, the more student affairs professionals and faculty can align their outcomes with institutional learning outcomes and strategic initiatives, the more they can participate in this conversation. Furthermore, such alignment demonstrates the wide sphere of influence of student affairs professionals in enhancing learning and development. Finally, it connects student affairs professionals to conversations about how resources held at a higher level in the organization are allocated or reallocated.
9. *Evidence of student learning and development is shared in a manner that is transparent and understandable to those outside the profession.* The days of the famous inside joke that no one understands what student affairs professionals do are long over. The ability to demonstrate meaningful contributions to student learning and development in a manner that can be understood by those outside the profession creates powerful partnerships that are integral to the ongoing improvement of student learning and development and to the enhancement of the accountability conversation.

The Importance of Student Affairs Professionals Involvement in Assessment

In the examples from the resources cited above, the characteristics illustrating how campus leadership is assessing student learning are important to consider as you move forward in implementing assessment within your organization. I would not be preparing you well, however, unless I also emphasized the need to connect your work as much as possible to the overall general learning principles and goals of your institution. This requires collaborative conversations with faculty and with other learning and development partners outside as well as within your organization.

As mentioned already, we are in an environment with growing demands that we provide evidence of exactly what constitutes an associate's degree, baccalaureate degree, and master's degree. In addition, there are increasing expectations that we explain the acceptable levels of learning within each of these degrees and how we arrive at those levels. Student affairs professionals know that learning and development are inextricably intertwined (American College Personnel Association, 1996). We can help explain why varying levels of learning for each degree level may well be exactly what is needed to educate an entire nation while ensuring that no one lacks an opportunity to learn. Without student affairs professionals at the table, the ongoing national conversation about enhancing learning could leave out a large number of students because their ways of learning and developing are not yet fully understood and are not accounted for in typical evaluations.

Now is the opportune time to embrace assessment of student learning and development in all of the student affairs programs for which it is applicable. It is a favorable time to engage in collaborative conversations where shared design of learning and the application of learning outside the classroom can be assessed. And it is the right time to involve new professionals in this conversation as well.

Benefits from Involvement in Assessment for Student Affairs Professionals

As a new student affairs professional in an exciting part of your career, you have creative energy and curiosity that can fuel the very essence of what assessment is designed to be. You bring to this endeavor the latest knowledge in learning and development theories as well as questions that can challenge current ways of doing with a welcome, fresh perspective. You will be starting your job in need of becoming aware of the organizational culture in which you work. The implementation of outcomes-based assessment provides you with a framework within which to respectfully and legitimately integrate your new ways of knowing and your enthusiastic inquiry with a sound and sustainable process for improving student learning and development. Outcomes-based assessment legitimizes the opportunity for you to question practices that may have been historically out of reach for new professionals. It is an empowering process of discovery and reinvention.

How to Learn More and Get Involved in Good Assessment Practice

This manuscript shares many resources, also listed in the reference section, that may be of value to new professionals. If you found this manuscript on the NILOA website (<http://www.learningoutcomeassessment.org/AboutUs.html>), you will likely continue to use NILOA as a resource and will find other helpful tools and

resources there. Finally, the website “Internet Resources for Higher Education Outcomes Assessment” (<http://www2.acs.ncsu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm>) offers resources on assessment tools, criteria, and examples of how other student affairs organizations conduct assessment.

In addition, the following organizations provide professional development in assessment for student affairs professionals and offer other books and materials to enhance your learning. Such organizations include NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (<http://www.naspa.org>), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) (<http://www2.myacpa.org>), the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) (<http://www.aalhe.org>), and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (<http://www.cas.edu>). The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) (<http://www.AACU.org>) offers venues for collaborative discussions among student affairs and academic leaders and hosts opportunities to learn how to collaboratively design and improve student learning and development.

Conclusion

This NILOA brief describes assessment as nothing more than the systematic implementation—in the day-to-day work you already do—of an innate inquiry process. When good practices in implementing assessment are used, student affairs professionals and those new to assessment can effectively and meaningfully contribute to designing and assessing student learning on their campuses. The involvement of student affairs professionals in the assessment of student learning and development is critical—and the need for your involvement is urgent. As new student affairs professionals, you can leverage your inherent passion for high-quality, holistic student learning and development as well as strengthen the credibility of the issues you raise by helping your organization implement systematic assessment. Keeping in mind your organization’s culture while you gather evidence of the accomplishments and needs of programs, interventions, curricula, and services, you will find an open avenue for your meaningful contributions to the improvement of student learning and development.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website went live on February 11, 2009.
www.learningoutcomesassessment.org
- The NILOA research team reviewed 725 institution websites for learning outcomes assessment transparency from March 2009 to August 2009.
- One of the co-principal NILOA investigators, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and again in 2010. He was also president of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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