**Student Affairs Assessment: Best Practices**

Monday, Dec 14, 2015 Presentation

**Assessment:** The systematic gathering of information about student learning and the factors that affect learning, undertaken with the resources, time and expertise available for the purpose of improving the learning.  (Source: Assessment Clear and Simple, B.Walvoord, 2006)

**Review Attached Inserts**

*The Role of Student Affairs in Student Learning Assessment*

*Best Practices for Assessing Student Learning (purpose and process)*

*Visual display of Assessment Cycle*

*Setting up an Assessment Plan for Student Affairs projects*

*Using Assessment Data for Improvement: Best Practices*

*Making Assessment Meaningful (NILOA Article)*
What is the Role of Student Affairs in Student Learning Assessment?

1) **New role for Student Affairs and Assessment**: previous role of assessment in student affairs focused on student participation numbers and student satisfaction; the recent shift involves student affairs offices to assess what students learn from their experiences from their programs and services.

2) **Linking Assessment to the Institutional Mission**: assessment in student affairs needs to align their goals that help support the mission of the institution, in order to promote appropriate academic support services.

3) **Bridging the Gap between Accountability and Improvement**: student affairs offices are now asked to bridge the gap by assessing the student’s total learning experience, completing a more detailed picture of the student experience (i.e. assessment of certain student populations; veterans, adult students, transfers, minorities, disabled, etc).

4) **Collaboration between Academic Affairs and Student Affairs**: more integration between what students are learning inside-the-classroom and the out-of-class learning experiences., developing and maintaining collaborative partnerships, and looking at the broader environment of teaching and learning.

5) **Providing Leadership and Resources for Assessment**: successful assessment initiatives must be supported and valued by the leadership, and adequate resources put into place (includes time for personnel to do the assessment tasks, funding for providing tools and training). All faculty and staff ought to be involved in the assessment, not an activity allocated for just one person.

6) **Sharing Expertise**: student affairs are experts on general student characteristics, values, interests, and attitudes of students; all of which can help faculty reach a deeper understanding and appreciation of the student learning experience; student affairs need to share and communicate their assessment results—it helps faculty understand and appreciate how student affairs programs are contributing to student learning and development.

*Source: The Role of Student Affairs in Student Learning Assessment, NILOA Occasional Paper, 2010*
What are the Best Practices for Assessing Student Learning?

Purpose of Assessment: Why should we do it?

1. Maintain our institutional accreditation (accountability)
2. Provide quality experiences for students (improvement)
3. Identify what students are learning from our services/programs
4. Plan and develop our programs/services using “evidence”
5. Build on our strengths and view our challenges
6. Retain students
7. Ascertain any duplication of services
8. Maximize our resources

Best Practices for Assessing Student Learning (Assessment Process/Cycle)

- Are students learning what we want them to learn?
  - Create (intended) student learning outcome statements that are clear, specific, and measurable based upon a program’s goals.
- What opportunities are being provided for students to achieve the student learning outcome?
  - Create a learning experience or activity that helps the student learn the knowledge, skill, or content.
- What measurement are you using to assess the student’s knowledge, skills, or content?
  - Determine when the assessment measure will take place and the timeline.
- What were the assessment results?
  - Analyze and summarize the data.
  - Determine if the student learning outcome was actually achieved.
  - Set performance indicators (% obtained the outcome).
- What improvements will be made as a result of the assessment data?
  - Document what specific change will occur in the program/service that will improve the student’s learning experience.
- Review and start the assessment process again (ongoing and sustainable)

Graphic developed by Sharon K. Calhoon based on information from the following sources:


Student Affairs Assessment Plan: Planning Guide

This document is intended to help facilitate effective communication and coordination of assessment efforts within the Division of Student Affairs. Complete for each assessment effort or project.

1. What specific program or service is being assessed?

2. What are the intended student learning outcomes for this program or service? Typically 3-5 outcomes/goals should be listed. Indicate which outcome will be assessed in your project.
   a.
   b.
   c.
   d.
   e.

3. What type of assessment project will this involve? (choose as many as applicable)

☐ Learning Outcomes – measuring the impact our services, programs and facilities have on students’ learning, development, and student success.

☐ Tracking Participation/Productivity – monitoring who uses our programs, services and facilities (e.g. raw numbers, frequency, age, class standing, gender, race, residence, etc); are we serving all students or targeting certain populations, are there community contacts, number of faculty and staff who benefit, etc.

☐ Needs Assessment – identifying needs of our students and clientele (e.g. emerging trends, new directions and demands that inform our services); who is succeeding and dropping out, who is graduating and who is not, etc.

☐ Satisfaction – measuring the level of student and clientele satisfaction with our programs, services, and facilities; are services user-friendly, do students get what they need or want from our service, are students respected and understood, follow-up with phone calls, etc.

☐ Environmental – assessing the collective perception of campus and student experience (e.g. campus climate, academic environment, residential quality of life).

☐ Benchmarking – identifying how the quality of our programs, services and facilities compare with peer institutions’ best practices (i.e. NSSE survey).

☐ Cost Effectiveness – determining whether the programs, services and facilities we offer to students are worth the cost, and are efficient.

☐ Program Evaluation – using professionally-accepted standards to assess our programs and services (e.g. national guidelines, self-study, external review).
4. Methodology and Data Collection (*Measures*)
   
a. Please describe your intended sample population.

b. How will you invite participants or request existing data?

c. How will you collect data? (survey, focus groups, interviews, document analysis, existing data, observation, etc)

5. *Assessment Results*: How will you analyze the data (qualitatively, quantitatively) and who will conduct the analysis (assessment office, institutional research office, student affairs staff, etc...use someone who is objective, not biased).

6. How do you intend to *use assessment results and report* your findings?
   
a. How will it be reported? Where? To whom? Etc.

b. How will you use the findings to improve the program or service?

7. Do you need *IRB approval* to conduct the assessment project?  *No* or *Yes*
   
a. **No**: if individuals are solicited to give anonymous feedback; such as:
      
      • A student is invited to participate as a result of their participation in a program and/or accessing a service (i.e. they are not part of a random sample).
      • Confidential information must be kept confidential and handled as required by FERPA guidelines.
      • Participation is voluntary, and students are not required to participate.
      • The assessment results are used only for improving a program/service (internally)

b. **Yes**: if project meets one of the following criteria:
   
   • It meets the criteria for human subjects research, (sensitive data) or
   • A random sample of students is required for the assessment, or
   • You wish to solicit participants who have not interacted with your program, or
   • If individuals being assessed in your program can be identified, or
   • You intend to share results outside the university (i.e. publications, conference presentations, website posting).
Using Assessment Data for Improvement: Best Practices

What institutional assessment data are already being collected?

_Assessment Cycle: Institutional Assessment Surveys_

*NSSE National Survey*  *(will be administered in Feb-Mar 2016 to FY and SR students)*

*Student Preference Survey*  *(survey ended Dec 2015, report will be completed by early Jan 2016)*

*Graduating Senior Survey*  *(completed Spring 2015, next administration Spring 2017)*

*Alumni Survey*  *(completed Summer 2015, next administration Summer 2017)*

*Advising Survey*  *(completed Summer 2015, next administration Summer 2017)*

Is the institutional survey data useful?

*Set up meetings to specifically discuss the institutional assessment results.*

*Examine the survey items that are relevant for your program/services. Are there breakdowns of the data that would be helpful? Do you see trends?*

*Are there additional items we can add or edit, or delete irrelevant items to align the institutional goals and the departmental/program goals?*

*To eliminate survey fatigue and duplication; collaborative efforts are important.*

Is the program-level assessment data (in your office/division) being reviewed annually?

*Review how program assessment results compare with the institutional results.*

*Determine at least one thing to improve in the program, document the change.*

*Communicate changes to the university community (via a flyer, email, in the student newspaper, campus forums, etc).  Example:  Student Opinions Matter Flyer, post a brief flyer stating what students reported (on NSSE Survey) about Advising Services, then state the changes that have happened as a result of the student feedback.*
Making Assessment Meaningful:
What New Student Affairs Professionals and Those New to Assessment Need to Know
Marilee J. Bresciani

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.

An example from my own professional experience will further illustrate this systematic cycle of inquiry—assessment. I had the privilege of working with a team of student affairs professionals who were wondering whether the conflict resolution training they provided for residence hall advisors (RHAs) was working. The first step in the team’s inquiry was to clearly articulate what they thought the RHAs needed to know and be able to do as a result of participating in the training program. Before planning the entire training week, the team wrote the learning outcomes: a) to identify the steps of the conflict resolution model, b) to identify the strategies used in the conflict resolution model, c) to explain how and when to implement those strategies most effectively, and d) to critique and advise peers on improving their use of the model.

Next in their planning process, the team examined whether the training model they had been using actually provided opportunities for the RHAs to learn what was expected of them. Realizing they had not provided the RHAs an occasion for peer critique and feedback, they made changes to the training design to incorporate that learning opportunity as well as the chance to assess that learning. They then chose and designed assessment tools: a short quiz for outcomes a and b, case studies with a criteria checklist for outcome c, and a videotaped roleplay with a rubric for outcome d. Using these tools, they administered the assessment during the one-week training session for RHAs.

Once the week of training was complete, the team analyzed and interpreted the data gathered from the administration of the quizzes, criteria checklists, and rubrics. To help them make meaning out of their assessment findings, the team also consulted published research on conflict resolution models. Realizing that the decisions needed to improve RHA student learning were well within their locus of control, the team refined the design of the training and of one of the rubrics to more effectively produce the kind of learning they really wanted to see in their RHAs—with the plan to gather the refined data during the next delivery of the training. Because this entire process was documented, the team could now confidently explain to their colleagues what the RHAs learned in the one-week conflict resolution training session and, with the same confidence, how they knew this. These student affairs professionals were demonstrating accountability through assessment.

This example illustrates student affairs professionals leveraging their natural inquiry about whether what they had designed was working as they expected it to work. I assisted only by putting their natural inquiry within a systematic framework so that it became organized and could be easily embedded in their day-to-day student affairs work. After participating in this process, rather than seeing assessment as an “add-on” or a “mandate from on high,” these professionals became engaged in building meaningful inquiry into their day-to-day doing. Furthermore, they could connect the conflict resolution training outcomes to the institution’s learning principles for civic engagement, allowing them to document their programs’ contribution to the institution’s achievement of a key learning goal for all students.

How Campus Leadership Engages in Assessing Student Learning

The literature 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

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1 The resources section for this paper, found on the NLOA website, provides additional information on assessment.
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 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 partner-
ships 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. 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.nycap.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. The New Leadership Alliance for Student Learning and Accountability (http://www.newleadershipalliance.org) has developed a set of criteria for evaluating organizations' practice of assessment of student learning and development. The Alliance also offers a certification process. Even if your organization is not a member of the Alliance, you may find their criteria helpful in designing your own assessment processes and in evaluating how well your organization is moving forward in demonstrating good assessment practice.

Professional associations such as the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Association of College Unions International (ACUI), the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), the National Association for
Campus Activities (NACA), the Association of International Educators (NASFA), and the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA), along with many others, can offer additional functional area support for the assessment of programs with residence life, auxiliary services, student activities, academic advising, career services, international student programming, and service learning—to name a just few program areas. Finally, the website "Internet Resources for Higher Education Outcomes Assessment" (http://www2.acs.nctu.edu/UPA/assmt/resource.htm) offers resources on assessment tools, criteria, and examples of how other student affairs organizations conduct assessment.

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.

References


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 of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001. He is currently serving as Interim President of the University of Illinois.

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