Coordinating Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes in Student Affairs

Custom Research Brief • April 2, 2010

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I. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Project Challenge:
A member institution approached the Council with the following questions about assessment of learning outcomes within student affairs:

- **Operationalizing Outcomes**: What are the appropriate models for coordinating and managing Student Affairs assessment efforts at the unit/program level? How have other institutions turned broad student learning goals you have defined into items that can be reported on?

- **Data Collection**: What are the measures/metrics by which to measure progress on these goals? What sort of evidence should be collected?

- **Director Responsibilities**: What are the key responsibilities and functions of the Student Affairs assessment coordinator in terms of assisting with assessment at the program level?

- **Staff/Program Support**: How have other institutions assisted individual Student Affairs units and program offices in collecting assessment data in a consistent format (e.g., creation of a standardized template for data collection across programs)? What levels of support are necessary to assist staff with collecting and reporting program-level outcomes data?

- **Applications**: How are other institutions applying findings about student learning outcomes? In particular, are other institutions using these outcomes for accreditation purposes in any way?

- **Success Characteristics**: What characteristics differentiate units that are able to really move ahead on student assessment from those that are not? Is it largely a function of the types of outcomes for which units are responsible – that is, it may be easier to measure the achievement of career-related goals than to measure the success of units concerned with promoting diversity – or is it due to other factors like assessment expertise of the unit staff, breadth of unit responsibility, etc.?

Research Parameters:
The Council reached out to student affairs assessment leaders at large research institutions with robust assessment programs (identified through secondary research).
## I. Research Methodology (Cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Geographic Location</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
<th>Approximate Enrollment (Total/Undergraduate) Fall 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>4-year, Private not-for-profit</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>5,800 / 4,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>4-year, Public</td>
<td>Research Universities (high research activity)</td>
<td>28,200 / 20,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>4-year, Public</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>20,300 / 16,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Southwest</td>
<td>4-year, Public</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>48,000 / 38,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>4-year, Public</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>53,700 / 40,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>4-year, Public</td>
<td>Research Universities (very high research activity)</td>
<td>41,000 / 26,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Key Observations:

痼 研究揭示了两套主要的模型，用于在学生活动部门内发展单元级别学生成长结果。1) 一种自上而下的方法，即单位从更大的部门目标出发，再将项目映射到这些结果上；2) 一种自下而上的方法，即单位识别现有活动的共同目的，并使用这些主题来生成部门级结果。一所机构还聘请了外部顾问来开发单位结果，并持续与顾问合作来管理学生活动评估。

痼 评估在学生活动部门中的领导往往充当部门领导的培训师和顾问，同时进行总结性、部门级的评估。通常情况下，评估工作人员最初可能主要致力于培训部门（从而授权自我评估），但最终可能主要负责将评估工作在部门内进行综合，以便提供关于学生活动进步的总体画面。

痼 在接触机构中，负责评估的工作人员范围从没有全职工作人员到拥有四名专家的办公室。大多数接触者指出，研究生工作人员经常协助专业工作人员。一些大学还开发了覆盖学生活动部门的评估团队，代表了组织中的每一层级别。团队成员作为评估工作人员与各自部门之间的联络员，往往推动了评估工作的实施。

痼 接触者采用各种数据收集方法来度量学生活动中的定性和定量结果，从传统和广泛使用的调查和小组访谈到更有创意的获取定性数据的途径。

痼 接触者同意，最具成效的部门通常至少投资一名全职人员来发展评估工作。有些接触者认为，这应是部门领导，而其他接触者认为，中级水平的员工（他们通常因最近的研究生学校培训而熟悉评估）是最佳的倡导者。

痼 接触者报告，评估工作无意中很好地与认证准备对齐。多个接触者认为，他们的评估工作在学生活动部门中协助了其他部门的认证准备，因为他们是该领域的专家。
III. MANAGING STUDENT AFFAIRS ASSESSMENT

Models for Coordinating Student Affairs Assessment Efforts

Research reveals several models for managing Student Affairs assessment efforts at the unit level and turning broad student learning outcomes into reportable items:

Model I: Top Down Approach
*College A, University C, University D*

In a top down approach model, each individual student affairs division creates unit outcomes based on the overall goals for the division and measures how current practices match these unit outcomes.

Establishes Unit Outcomes based on Divisional Goals

Audit Current Practices

Overlap Gap Analysis

No institutions report formalized processes (such as grids or rubrics) for assisting units with writing their own outcomes. Instead, assessment staff help each unit individually articulate strong outcomes in language consistent with larger goals. In addition, assessment staff work to identify measures of success and achievement on each goal. Contacts observe that a generic rubric used across programs would not meet the specific needs of all the different programs in student affairs.

After unit goals have been outlined, assessment staff and unit heads examine existing programs, asking departments the following:

- What department programs already support goals?
- What programs can be tweaked slightly to support those goals?
- What do units need to offer to fulfill goals?
- What programs do not support goals and could thus be eliminated?

The last stage of this model involves identifying goals that are underserved across units by performing an “overlap gap analysis.” Examining both unit outcomes and broader divisional goals that appear to be under-supported can help determine resource allocation across the larger student affairs division as well as future programmatic efforts at the individual unit level.

Contacts at College A suggest using a mapping exercise to audit current practices, using an excel spreadsheet to designate key functions or activities for each unit.

Contacts at College A suggest that outcomes should be “SMART:” specific, measurable, aggressive (but attainable), results-oriented, and time-bound.
Under a bottom up model, assessment staff in student affairs help units examine current practices and generate unit outcomes based on existing functions and desired impact on student body.

**Examine Current Unit Programs**
Student affairs assessment staff members discuss day-to-day responsibilities with units and decide which activities and programs are purposeful.

**Generate Unit-Level Outcomes**
Assessment staff and unit leaders identify themes that connect these purposeful programs and use these themes to generate outcomes.

**Assign Metrics to Measure Outcomes**
Assessment staff helps units identify performance indicators that align with each individual outcome.

**Reaffirm Alignment with Broad Goals**
Assessment staff at University E only bring up larger student affairs goals at the end of the process in order to make sure that unit goals match to some degree.

Contacts suggest that if outcomes are written in correct language, assessment measures (both direct and indirect) will suggest themselves.

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**Key Considerations across Top Down and Bottom Up Models**

Contacts suggest the following four strategies for assessment staff implementing either a top down or a bottom up approach:

**Focus on Programs that Animate Unit Leaders**
- Focusing on activities that animate unit leaders invests unit staff in assessment and pulls out the most exciting programs to create learning outcomes

**Acknowledge that Not Every Unit will Hit Every Goal**
- Assessment staff should convey to all units that all overall outcomes do not have to be met by all units; such expectations can create resistance and lack of trust on the part of unit leaders

**Do Not Impose Goals on Units**
- Imposing external goals (as opposed to organically developing unit outcomes) can impede assessment efforts and foster resentment within units

**Stress that Poor Assessment Findings Do Not Indicate Failure**
- Oftentimes, student affairs staff fear assessment processes because the results might indicate failure. Assuring staff that assessment serves only to improve and not to punish can help allay these fears.
After attending a NASPA symposium on learning and engagement, contacts in student affairs assessment at University B hired Keeling & Associates, a traditional higher education consulting firm, to assist with the design and assessment of learning outcomes.

**Before the Consulting Firm:**

Prior to hiring the firm, one person in the student affairs office was responsible for outcomes assessment. Contacts suggest that during this time, student affairs staff experienced difficulty understanding and conceptualizing the assessment process. As a result, assessment efforts were uneven across units based on unit experience. In addition, staff approached assessment as a compliance process rather than an improvement and teaching experience.

**The Firm’s Process:**

Through a series of four consultation visits during the first year, Keeling & Associates assists unit and division directors with developing learning outcomes from the bottom up, based on existing programs.

Keeling & Associates helps units assign appropriate data collection measures to each program and activity. Data maps directly to program goals and units are required to report back to Keeling on an ongoing basis.

Keeling & Associates shifts focus from learning outcomes to effectiveness outcomes, providing feedback for each unit on how to use assessment data to improve the organization at the unit level and as a whole.

**After the Fact:**

Contacts at University B state that they are very satisfied with the external consultant process, and that process has moved their assessment efforts from a simple to a much more complex level. In addition, contacts suggest that the external consultant ensures more accountability on the part of student affairs staff because they periodically report to an external body. Finally, student affairs staff at University B suggest that the process has helped units better connect with each other and the assessment framework.
III. MANAGING STUDENT AFFAIRS ASSESSMENT (CONT.)

Supporting Student Affairs Staff with Assessment

Assessment Leadership

Although staff members across the entire student affairs division are involved in assessment, most contact institutions employ at least one dedicated professional staff member whose primary responsibility is to direct assessment in student affairs. The table below outlines models across institutions, ranging from full student affairs assessment offices with multiple professional staff to maintaining no dedicated point person in student affairs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Number of Internal professional staff dedicated Assessment</th>
<th>Staff Member Titles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>• Director (Ph.D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assistant Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Senior Research Associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assistant Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Senior Assessment and Learning Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Research Associate (Ph.D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assessment and Learning Specialist (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Research Analyst and Reports Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Research Associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>• Director (Ph.D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Associate Director (Ph.D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assessment Coordinator (Ph.D in progress)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Data Analyst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>1 + graduate students</td>
<td>• Senior Research Associate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University C</td>
<td>1 + graduate students</td>
<td>• Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>.5(^1)</td>
<td>• Associate Director for Assessment, Office of Institutional Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>0(^2)</td>
<td>• (Employ outside consultants to collaborate on assessment work)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Role of Student Affairs Assessment Leadership

Contacts suggest that the responsibilities of a student affairs assessment director and staff change as the student affairs division evolves to better coordinate assessment efforts. Contacts suggest that the director initially teaches unit leaders and other student affairs staff about assessment. After successfully building an assessment capacity among student affairs staff, the director and assessment office serve more in a consultant role, as a resource to assist unit leaders with assessment of their own practices rather than directly conducting unit assessment. Finally, as units become more comfortable with conducting their own assessment, the director and assessment staff can focus on the broader division, aggregating assessment data across units to determine which learning outcomes need additional support and shaping strategic planning based on these findings. Common responsibilities of a student affairs assessment director and staff at each phase of this development are outlined below.

\(^1\) Student Affairs at College A maintains strong relations with an assessment director in the Office of Institutional Research used to direct assessment solely for student affairs.

\(^2\) University B does not dedicate internal staff to direct assessment because all assessment efforts are coordinated through an outside consultant.
III. MANAGING STUDENT AFFAIRS ASSESSMENT (CONT.)

The Evolving Role of Student Affairs Assessment Leadership

Building Assessment Capacity

- Inform student affairs staff about the importance of assessment and creating specific learning goals
- Assist units with development and articulation of strong unit-specific learning goals that map to broader student affairs learning outcomes
- Educate staff about available tools for assessing goals
- Assist with the selection of assessment measures for specific activities

Serving as a Consultant

- Review unit plans and assessment measures periodically
- Support units with complex assessment collection measures
- Address challenges that arise across units
- Identify and target units that are struggling to offer additional guidance/support
- Review assessment data with units as it is collected
- Help units apply assessment findings and make changes to existing practices

Conducting Research

- Manage institution-wide student affairs and climate surveys
- Aggregate assessment data across divisional units into a report to provide holistic picture
- Lead strategic planning process for the student affairs division based on aggregate data
- Write a newsletter that outlines departmental findings
- Serve as an information resource for people outside of student affairs who seek information

Assessment Teams

In addition to dedicated assessment staff, several contact institutions have established assessment teams, comprised of student affairs staff from across the division at each level of the organization. Assessment teams provide a platform for training, engaging, and communicating with individual units through departmental liaisons. A team can drive and coordinate assessment efforts, as well as provide an opportunity for departments to share successful methods. Contacts at University D and University C observe that the information-sharing and discussion of methods that occurs through these teams is critical to successful collaboration across the division.

Assessment Team

University D
- Each of the 17 departments in student affairs selects a representative to serve on the assessment team
- Representatives serve as liaisons between the student affairs assessment office and their respective departments

Assessment Council

University C
- Created in 1995 to report assessment findings and progress annually
- 15-20 members, volunteers from across the division
- Vice President of Student Affairs has granted the council purview over division assessment
- The council conducts trainings and provides consultation through a contact for each department
- Larger departments within Student Affairs have created smaller assessment councils within their departments
IV. COLLECTING AND APPLYING ASSESSMENT DATA

Collecting Assessment Data
Contacts institutions employ a range of metrics and collection methods to measure learning goals and outcomes once they have been developed. Most assessment directors in student affairs aim to collect both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a thorough and accurate picture of the division. By collecting multiple points of both qualitative and quantitative data, direct and indirect measures, staff conducting assessment are able to triangulate data to get a more complete picture of a department’s activities and the impact of those programs. Assessment directors work with individual units to determine what types of data will support the specific learning goals identified for that unit. No contact institutions report using templates or uniform data collection tools across student affairs units; rather, contacts suggest that assessment metrics must be tailored to individual units specifically.

Quantitative Assessment Metrics
All contacts collect quantitative data as part of the assessment process for unit learning goals. Frequently collected quantitative data includes:

- Overall student participation numbers for events
- Frequency of student attendance at events
- What types of students participate in different events (e.g., broken down by residential versus off-campus, ethnicity, year, etc.)
- Staff hours for individual advising in student affairs

Qualitative Assessment Metrics
At the divisional level, assessment directors have worked with student affairs staff to develop and employ numerous qualitative strategies for data collection. Each assessment director describes various tools and techniques, ranging from traditional and widely-used surveys and focus groups to more creative approaches of garnering qualitative data:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program/Event Reviews</th>
<th>Students complete basic satisfaction surveys and provide written feedback about individual events or programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Distributed to students who partake in services across the division and within departments; some institutions also participate in national surveys to provide benchmarking data; however, contacts warn against over-surveying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essays</td>
<td>Students are asked to write reflective essays about their experience with a department or specific program; essays are then analyzed for content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>Students discuss their experience with and development as a result of participating in programs or departments; discussions take place in an informal setting, often mediated and observed by a student affairs staff member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubrics</td>
<td>Goals/outcomes outlined for programs or for individual student learning within a program or organization; actual learning self-reported by students or documented by advisors against these goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Online Platforms as a Method of Collecting and Sharing Information

Several assessment offices use online platforms, such as EPortfolio, StudentVoice or WeaveOnline, to collect and share documents. Contacts suggest this ability to collaborate in turn greatly contributes to the success of assessment in the division as a whole, especially for those institutions with few professional student affairs assessment staff.

**Mapping Outcomes to Data Collection: Examples across Contact Institutions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Program Goal</th>
<th>Method of Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>To offer students a robust menu of programs to assist students in achieving their individual, academic and personal potential</td>
<td>Track the number of professional staff hours accumulated for individual advising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University B</td>
<td>Students involved in judicial affairs hearings will develop an understanding of the impact of their actions on the community</td>
<td>Analyze student reflective essay that identifies one of four levels of impact on the community outlined by student affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University D</td>
<td>Students will develop understanding of diversity</td>
<td>Analyze student written reflection on their own photographs taken to record ‘diversity’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University F</td>
<td>Students will be knowledgeable about alcohol abuse and sexual assault</td>
<td>Examine “Outside the Classroom” survey results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University E</td>
<td>Students will be knowledgeable about relationship abuse</td>
<td>Observe focus group student discussion in response to watching Twilight movie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. COLLECTING AND APPLYING ASSESSMENT DATA (CONT.)

Applying Findings from Data

Student assessment is typically internally-driven, from within student affairs or in response to a larger university initiative. While assessment directors have found assessment practices to be closely aligned with the accreditation process, directors who have found assessment most valuable connect it to effectiveness outcomes, using results to drive change and improvement throughout the student affairs organization.

Applying Assessment towards the Accreditation Process

Contacts suggest that accreditation rarely drives successful long-term assessment; rather, the results of strong assessment lend themselves well to building a foundation for accreditation reports. Continuous assessment work allows student affairs divisions with robust data to easily compile reports for accreditation purposes. Contacts who have developed successful assessment practices suggest that the accreditation process can provide a “time for student affairs to shine,” as data allows student affairs departments to clearly tell a story about how student affairs programming is meaningful. Several contacts even note that they have assisted other divisions, such as academic affairs, with their assessment and accreditation preparation due to their expertise and success within student affairs.

Applying Assessment towards Effecting Change

Contacts assert that assessment data is most effectively used to enact change to address gaps in service to students. Institutions with robust student affairs assessment staff aggregate departmental assessment results to assess the student affairs division as a whole and to identify gaps in service to students. According to contacts, assessment can and should become inherent to department directors’ work; successful programs do not use results merely to report to the vice president or dean of the division but to also improve at the program and unit level. For example, at University B, a student affairs department eliminated an established annual event because assessment results suggested that the student learning achieved at this event was duplicated by another division-wide event. In addition, at University D, the director of the student life assessment office conducts a review of each department on a five-to-six year rotation, to ensure that units are actually applying findings revealed through assessment efforts.
## V. Characteristics of Successful Student Affairs Assessment Efforts

Contacts agree that a number of factors contribute to a Student Affairs division’s ability to move ahead on assessment, both at the unit level and the broader divisional level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Dedicate Assessment Leadership</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacts at <strong>College A</strong> insist that it is essential to maintain a dedicated leadership position for student affairs assessment in order to drive and coordinate the process, although College A recently moved this position from within student affairs to the institutional research office.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Involve Unit Heads</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Although institutions differ in approach to developing outcomes, all contacts stress the importance of close collaboration with department heads. Most assessment directors report that, at the very least, department heads of successful units value assessment practices, even if another staff member within the department is primarily responsible for the actual assessment processes. The director of student affairs assessment and research at <strong>University E</strong> asserts that a department director should be present at initial meetings with assessment staff to “set the stage,” but might not have to be as involved throughout the process.</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Maintain a Point Person for Each Unit</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacts suggest that successful assessment at the unit level is dependent on maintaining at least one staff member in the unit with influence who values and drives assessment. However, contacts disagree on whether that person should be a director or if it is more effective owned by a mid-level manager who may be younger and more familiar with assessment from recent graduate work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Invest Staff at All Levels</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In addition to maintaining a specific point person for assessment at the unit level, all contacts agree that the level of involvement in assessment from all staff is a clear indicator for success; that is, those departments that engaged staff at every level were exceptionally successful with outcomes assessment.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Actively Seeking Invested Staff</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>University B</strong> generates invested staff by actively hiring staff with assessment backgrounds. The student affairs division includes assessment responsibilities in staff job descriptions and performance reviews to ensure accountability and thoroughly integrate assessment at every level of the department.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Present Assessment as Continuous Improvement</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacts report that assessment can be especially effective when viewed as a means of continuous improvement, embedded in the daily work and thinking of staff as a “state of mind.” Contacts describe the assessment process to staff as a multi-step process, of which creating learning outcomes for departments and the greater division is only the first piece.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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