

NETRESULTS

Outcomes Assessment in Student Affairs: Moving Beyond Satisfaction to Student Learning and Development

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Many of us begin our experiences in assessment by engaging in student satisfaction, needs, and/or utilization studies. These assessment practices are important and have informed some program change decisions. In conducting satisfaction, needs, and utilization studies, we grow to understand what students desire and value. While this understanding is extremely important, it does not always give us specific information on how to improve our programs, nor does it typically help us understand whether our program is accomplishing what we intend it to accomplish. Furthermore, student satisfaction studies rarely help us understand how our services impact student development and learning.

Why should we assess our program outcomes and student development and learning? Before addressing this question, it is important to illustrate the purpose of assessment. Program assessment's intention is quite simple. Assessment attempts to answer certain questions about a program's intended outcomes:

- What are we trying to do and why are we doing it?
- What do we expect the student to know or to do as a result of our program?
- How well are we doing it?
- How do we know?
- How do we use the information to improve?
- Does that work?

Answers to these questions allow us to use assessment in many different ways. If done well, assessment can:

1. reinforce or emphasize the mission of your unit,
2. modify, shape, and improve programs and/or performance (formative),
3. critique a program's quality or value compared to the program's previously defined principles (summative),
4. inform planning,
5. inform decision-making,
6. evaluate programs not personnel,
7. support the request for additional funds from the university and external community, and

8. assist in meeting accreditation requirements, models of best practices, and national benchmarks.

In order for these objectives to be met, assessment must be meaningful and manageable, and decisions must inform continuous program improvement.

With the framework of sound assessment in mind, ask yourself the question again, "Why should we be concerned with assessing student development and learning?" If assessment's purpose is to gather evidence on articulated intended outcomes so that the program can be improved or celebrated for its achievements, then one would want to be assessing that which the program is intended to accomplish. Furthermore, as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Student Learning Imperative (1996) suggests, "The concepts of learning, personal development, and student development are inextricably intertwined and inseparable" (p.118). The Student Learning Imperative (1996) further states, "Student Affairs policies and programs are based on promising practices from the research on student learning and institution-specific assessment data," (p. 121).

Others echo this perspective. For example, Trudy W. Banta, Karen E. Black, and Kimberly A. Kline (2001) state that "Good assessment is based fundamentally on collaboration among colleagues. And since student learning takes place both inside and outside the classroom, some of the most interesting and intellectually exciting work in assessment involves collaboration among faculty and student affairs professionals." (p.1) James A. Anderson (2001) reports, "It is important for student development professionals to inform the academic side of the institution of their desire to establish, maintain, and assess functional collaborations. Among these should be collaborations that

- promote measurable student learning
- promote student engagement and socio-academic integration
- provide training to student affairs staff about learning environments and learning outcomes." (p. 1)

Finally, the National Research Council reports that "advances in the study of thinking and learning (cognitive science) and in the field of measurement have stimulated people to think in new ways about how students learn and what they know, what is therefore worth assessing, and how to obtain useful information about student competencies." (p.16).

Clearly, there is an expectation from some educators and assessment professionals that student affairs professionals are partners in learning and development. The accompanying expectation is that, as educators, student affairs professionals assess the development and learning outcomes of their programs. A movement from satisfaction to program outcomes and student learning and development outcomes is in order. So, how does one proceed?

It may be best to illustrate the movement from satisfaction to student development and learning through example. To start, let's use an example from Career Services. The sample satisfaction outcome is "97% of the career service participants will agree or strongly agree that career service programs provided information and assistance that were helpful in their preparation to leave the University."

In order to assess this satisfaction outcome, you may administer a self-report survey. You may even observe satisfaction or interview students individually or in focus groups to gather satisfaction information. Now, ask yourself these questions.

1. Will this outcome and assessment method help me understand what it is that I am doing that is leading

to the outcome?

2. Will this outcome and assessment method help me understand why I am doing what I am doing?
3. Will the evidence collected from this method help me make the decisions I need to make about my program?

You may be able to figure out how these questions are answered by data that would be gathered to measure whether 97% of the career service participants will agree or strongly agree that career service programs provided information and assistance that were helpful in their preparation to leave the University. However, if you only use a self-report satisfaction survey, that type of data could not answer the aforementioned questions. Again, this is not a discussion about the importance of student satisfaction outcomes. It is of great value to know whether your students are satisfied with your services; however, that type of information does not typically tell you if your program is accomplishing what it is meant to accomplish. It certainly does not inform you about how you may be contributing to student development and learning.

Consider taking the satisfaction outcome and expanding it. This time, however, you should write the outcomes with the intended student development and learning results in mind. Consider the following examples:

- Students will demonstrate appropriate interview skills during videotaped mock interviews.
- Students will articulate a high level of confidence in their career choice.
- Students will document their qualifications for a position in their resume and performance portfolios.

In these examples, you are no longer assessing satisfaction. You are assessing that which your program is trying to accomplish. In so doing, you are measuring student learning and development.

The next step is to consider the manner in which you would evaluate these outcomes. Several examples of possible assessment methods follow.

- Self-report Survey
- Interviews based on criteria
- Observations based on criteria
- Standardized career service assessment instruments
- Student Portfolios
- Peer evaluation
- Self evaluation

Three of these assessment methods were applied to the satisfaction outcome. However this time, the methods are capturing evidence of student learning and development.

Now, apply the questions to the outcomes:

- Which outcome and assessment methods will help me understand what it is that I am doing that is leading to the outcome?
- Which outcome and assessment methods help me understand why I am doing what I am doing?
- Will this kind of evidence help me make the decisions I need to make?

It quickly becomes clear how the outcomes can begin to inform decisions for continuous improvement. Through articulating criteria and then observing the student exhibit the articulated criteria for appropriate interview skills (or the lack thereof), you see for yourself what your students are able to demonstrate. You then can examine your curriculum or program offerings looking for holes that should be filled. If you observe that your students are consistently demonstrating the appropriate interview skills, you know for a fact and you have the evidence gathered that your program is achieving one aspect that it intends to accomplish. That is evidence worth sharing and celebrating.

If you need some assistance brainstorming ideas that will enable you to write student development and learning outcomes, the following suggestions may prove invaluable. One place to look for intellectual stimulation is, of course, the ACPA Student Learning Imperative, which will assist you in thinking about your program's contributions to student development and learning.

The following questions posed by Dr. Peggy Maki, Director of Assessment at the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), and may also prove helpful in stimulating different ways to approach the writing of your outcomes:

- What do you expect your students to know and be able to do by the end of their education at your institution?
- What do the curricula and the co-curricular "add up to?"
- What do you do in your programs to promote the kinds of learning and development that your institution seeks?
- Which students benefit from which co-curricular experiences?
- What co-curricular processes are responsible for the intended student outcomes the institution seeks?
- How can you help students make connections between classroom learning and experiences outside of the classroom?
- How do you intentionally build upon what each of you hopes to achieve?

Finally, it may be that a slight change in the delivery of the service needs to occur before assessment of student learning can begin. For example, it may be that the Career Services professionals need to re-cast their many career services workshops into a curriculum for juniors and seniors. In this curriculum, juniors can begin by drafting their first resume, learning interview etiquette, learning how to research the job markets, and then progress to developing and presenting their portfolios of accomplishments as seniors. A curriculum such as this would allow for more direct methods of assessment, thus producing increased evidence of student learning and development for Student Affairs.

The following questions, posed by Dr. James A. Anderson, Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Affairs, may help you recast your services, if needed:

- What is the thinking task, intellectual experience, and/or co-curricula experience that needs to be designed relative to the preparation level and diversity of the students at your institution?
- Can the interpersonal transactions that occur in the everyday life of the student and that reflect cultural orientations serve as a basis for potential new models of critical thinking? What curricular experiences will promote this skill development?
- What structures need to evolve to assure that students have the opportunity to enhance academic self-concept and understand their role in the culture of learning at your institution?

There is value in assessing student satisfaction, needs, and service utilization. There is increased value in assessing student development and learning. In engaging in the latter, you position your program to provide evidence of what you have historically valued as a student affairs professional. In addition, you demonstrate your role in the partnership for student learning and development and you illustrate through example your direct contribution to your institutional mission.

References

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