Student Affairs Assessment: Observations of the Journey, Hope for the Future

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Abstract

Assessment is crucial to demonstrating the success and effectiveness of student affairs programs. As understanding of the importance of assessment work grows, so too will the sophistication of approaches used by practitioners and the complexity of organizational structures in which programs are housed. This article offers perspectives on the future direction of assessment programs and the role of assessment within student affairs structures.

The path to the current state of student affairs assessment has not been a straight line; in fact, the terrain over which assessment professionals and the organizations they serve have travelled has been neither flat nor smooth. As a professional with more than forty years experience in the student affairs, I have experienced moments of positive amazement and instances of utter confusion as I have observed my own and other organizations struggle to develop and sustain effective assessment programs and practices. In the following essay I will share with you my observations about the growth of assessment programs in student affairs divisions in the United States. My perspectives are informed by collegial interactions, observations through my role as a Commissioner and reviewer for the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and through other campus visits.

The launch of the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* represents the best of the good news about where we have gotten to with assessment in student affairs; not just the fact that a new journal exists, but that the creators have chosen a provocative name for the journal that reflects the sophisticated and nuanced ways we are currently challenged to think, talk about, and approach what we casually refer to as assessment. The initiation of the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* offers an important opportunity to reflect on the growth of assessment as an enterprise within higher education and, specifically, within the student affairs arena. I have no doubt that the context and scholarly community created by the Journal will provoke accelerated growth in the student affairs assessment enterprise.

As is the case with most areas of life that are important for our survival, there are typically visionaries and pioneering voices that identify and communicate the environmental challenges to our persistence long before those who are potentially at risk are aware those issues are present. For years leading voices such as Gary Malaney (1993, 1996), John Schuh and Lee Upcraft (1996, 2001), Trudy Banta (2002), George Kuh (1979) and Alexander Astin (1993) produced compelling scholarship describing both the importance of adopting comprehensive assessment practices in student affairs and the value such practices would have for the success, survival and growth of student affairs organizations and the profession. However, despite the profound and undeniable

evidence presented by the aforementioned scholars, student affairs leaders were generally slow to either tune into or embrace assessment as an essential feature of an educationally relevant student affairs organization. In a few isolated cases, some enlightened student affairs leaders saw the promise and value an assessment program could bring to their organization. In those instances, the pioneering leaders made the necessary investments to establish programs that served as models for the later adopters. For example, in 1997 Gary Malaney, Director, Student Affairs Research, Information, and Systems at the University of Massachusetts, surveyed leaders of student affair research offices. In his paper he cited the fact that there were 37 institutions that could boast having true research offices, which he defined as "an office consisting of at least one person whose primary responsibility was conducting student affairs research (Malaney, 1997)." Of the early research offices all were at research universities, except one. Despite the presence of research offices at various research universities across the United States, in general, most organizations seemed to follow the same gradual, wait-and-see approach to adopting or investing in assessment efforts.

Ultimately, during a two to three-year period of time, financial, political, institutional and survival factors converged to stimulate a critical mass of student affairs programs to commit to some level of investment in assessment. This surge of organizational commitment served to stimulate greater conversations about assessment within professional associations, while also generating activity among assessment professionals. This newly formed community of practice began to provide support, guidance and learning opportunities for its members and in the process strengthened the potential for success.

The justification for and the course to initiating assessment programs are varied. Among the rationale I have gleaned, through conversations with professional student affairs colleagues, are:

- Pressure from regional the accreditation process, being virtually forced into implementing assessment programs;
- Internal and external accountability expectations required

specific data, which required a new mechanisms to comply;

- Growing awareness of what it means to be an educationally and fiscally responsible organization and the need to have evidence to make informed decisions;

- Changes in institutional budgeting that rewards units for achieving specific outcomes;

- The fact that peers or aspirational peers are engaged in assessment, to achieve or maintain relevance or status; and

- The realization that data is powerful commodity in educational settings and the absence of data potentially put the organization at-risk.

Clearly, there is an array of reasons why student affairs organizations embark on the path to assessment and in most cases there is no single factor, the reasons are complex and nuanced. Yet, the important point is, student affairs leaders have generally tuned in to the importance of needing mechanisms to conduct assessment on behalf of the organization and responded by investing in an assessment structure.

Establishing Assessment Offices

The typical model for establishing assessment programs in student affairs is to identify somebody currently employed in the organization, who has an interest in assessment, and then to apportion a percentage of that person's job to leading assessment the effort. In other cases, the organization might hire a single individual, full or part-time, whose sole responsibility is to lead the assessment program. The first step is important, as it demonstrates commitment to a direction; the first step can also suggest intensity. The context in which the assessment leader is asked to perform and the span of leadership that person is delegated in the organization play a major role in the development and success of student affairs assessment efforts. The typical pattern for the organization of a student affairs assessment office is as follows: a single individual is assigned responsibility to lead\ direct\coordinate across a range of departments. The newly appointed person is then asked to create a system for collecting data to demonstrate the success, effectiveness or needs of various

student affairs programs and services. At the same time, the person who assumes the assessment leadership position is confronted with bringing order to dispersed activity in a way that will enable it to be presented as an "assessment program." Amidst efforts to bring coherence to assessment activity, other student affairs leaders are also communicating an immediate need for data to respond to pressing questions or demands, particularly in response to requests related to institutional accreditation and external funders.

From the outset the challenge for the assessment leader has been multifaceted and includes such responsibilities as: developing a clear definition of the role (operational); understanding the scope of authority for the role (responsibility); identifying effective approaches to interacting with student affairs colleagues (engagement); developing standards of success for the role (accountability); and identifying a peer group to support their work (community). The initial identity and role clarification for the assessment leader should not be underestimated, as success in navigating through those issues have major import for success of the overall assessment endeavor.

Of course, other student affairs colleagues have their own set of issues to make sense of in regards to the presence of a dedicated assessment leader. Many of the questions regarding how the person will operate, the scope of responsibility, engagement, and accountability will be present. However, the questions take on more intensity at the personal level for individual leaders. The student affairs literature has done a wonderful job of covering the fear and vulnerability associated with introducing assessment into organizations, particularly when assessment is viewed as an unfunded mandate or a contributor to competition for resources (Katz, 2010; Bresciani, 2010; Ewell, 1988). Additionally, assessment has been challenging to introduce because, "the work of assessment is an uneasy match with institutional reward systems (Hutchings, 2010, p.9)." However, little has been written that addresses the isolation associated with assessment leadership. The student affairs literature speaks of the need to develop a "culture of assessment", but not the interpersonal aspects of such a culture. The major obstacles faced by the first wave of assessment leaders, are much like the issues faced by those hired to lead

diversity programs: being thrust into environments where your colleagues have fear of the issues you are being asked to lead; there is hesitance to talk about the area about you are asked to be passionate; others want to delegate to you response to all issues related to "your" area; and there is a general lack of investment in figuring out what others can do to be a good colleague to you.

The approaches used to establish most assessment positions seem to have been more geared towards creating a mechanism for gathering assessment data and producing assessment reports than for establishing a lively organizational culture. A vibrant organizational culture involves reciprocally supportive relationships; collaboration to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes; work towards shared values, goals and aspirations; consistent reinforcement of agreed upon norms; commitment to on-going communication regarding needs and expectations; and consistently acting upon shared responsibility and accountability for success of the culture. Too often the assessment leader is saddled with responsibility to singularly create and sustain the desired culture, which is an almost impossible task. At this point, student affairs leaders need to consider what is needed to create a true culture of assessment and culture of assessment leadership within student affairs organizations.

The outcome of the early approaches to establish assessment offices is that progress has been slower than necessary and potential has been under-realized. Too often, the implementation approaches stunt the growth and productivity of the assessment leader and restrict the learning and development of other student affairs colleagues. Assessment offices should, in fact, be a major stimulus for individual and organizational learning in student affairs organizations. Situating assessment leaders in isolation from others has impeded the deep engagement needed to cultivate culture and community. In this case, culture and community would be centered on a dynamic learning environment, shared professional development, integrated planning, and widespread data sharing that contributes to ongoing improvement in programs and processes.

Though much has been written about the importance of assessment and evaluation, too often the role of the assessment

office and assessment leaders has been limited to the act of assessment. The outcome is that many of our organizations are rich with data and poor with analysis – we conduct the measurement, but we do not render the judgment. In this regard, the potential for student affairs assessment units is under realized. The niche for assessment offices should be more than that of collectors – the span of leadership should include the full continuum of assessment, evaluation, decision-making, communication, and planning as a continuous cycle. The potential for student affairs assessment offices is much more profound than current approaches suggest. If approached in an comprehensive way, the assessment leader, because of her/his access to data, will have a broad picture of the organization, its successes, its challenges, and its needs at a level that will equip that person to provide perspective on organizational direction, resource allocation, and strategic opportunities in ways that may not be currently realized. This will challenge the current paradigm of "content expert" focused decision-making and move to "data expert" focused leadership. Such a shift demands the type of learning culture and community described earlier.

As the number of assessment offices have grown, so too has the industry and technologies available to support and advance assessment work. No longer is assessment limited to administering satisfaction and usage surveys for individual units. Assessment organizations can have the potential to initiate innovation within student affairs and beyond. As assessment leaders have embraced and utilized emerging technologies and increased the sophistication of their work, new possibilities for the understanding the influence and outcomes of student affairs efforts are emerging. Pursuing these possibilities offer promise for uncovering more effective ways to important student affairs leadership agendas.

The Future

The good news is, there is among student affairs professionals a strong awareness about the importance of assessment. While the infrastructures to support assessment and approaches to assessment efforts are uneven, most organizations are at least giving some degree of attention to assessment. These things are

positive and a source of hopefulness about the future.

The launch of the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* offers a wonderful opportunity to pause and reflect on the journey of student affairs assessment and to consider the possibilities for its future. This new journal offers a challenge to its readers and contributors to abandon the rigid thinking and behaviors that have often unnecessarily bounded and limited the way we think about and approach student affairs assessment. Assessment is at once an activity, a process, and an ethic. Assessment, at its best, is woven into an organizational way of being; it is at the heart of practice, the center of planning, and the stimulus to innovation. The future of assessment offices is intimately tied to the future success growth and development of student affairs divisions or, more accurately, the future success and growth of student affairs divisions is tied to the success of assessment offices. Because of this I believe, while many assessment organizations are still in their infancy, it is time for reinvention.

Assessment (measurement) is only one small part of what an assessment office can and should do for an organization. As was stated earlier, assessment leaders should provide guidance for measuring, making judgments about the direction and implications of data, help to translate the judgments into decisions about future directions, contribute to how data is communicated to broader audiences, and play a role in organizational planning. Data can be powerful and appropriately used data can be transformative. Assessment units must sit at the heart of student affairs organizational transformation. The assessment office of the future will be multi-layered in its responsibilities. The leader(s) should no longer be able to be viewed as someone whose primary domain is surveys and reporting data. The essential knowledge and skills of the future assessment leader include: research, assessment strategies, technology proficiency, critical analysis, and large-scale planning (data to practice translation). It will also be imperative that assessment leaders possess convening and facilitation skills.

If student affairs leaders are to successfully vie with other campus units for diminishing financial resources and make compelling cases to potential donors for financial investment, the outcomes

of assessment will be pivotal. Data tells a story and the way organizations commit to act on data sends a message. In the future student affairs organizations will need to be increasingly cognizant of the importance of constructing a coherent and compelling narrative about the experiences of students on their campus and the leadership it is demonstrating to bring greater value to the experience. If student affairs units are to attract greater investment it will be because of the compelling nature of what has been achieved and deemed worthy of continued support, presenting a clearly demonstrated need that connects with an institutional commitment or commitment of a donor, or demonstrating potential that stimulates interest in cultivating. Assessment data, tied to a plan for future innovation and impact, will be major components of the growth and sustainability of student affairs organizations.

At the same time, assessment offices are confronted with the obligation of communicating with the audiences from whom data is collected. The ethical responsibility of data collection within a community context suggests that it is imperative to share with community members what has been learned from them and about them and what the organization's plans are to use or respond to that information. To effectively communicate with students (and other stakeholders) student affairs organization must have a durable vehicle through which to communicate what has been learned through assessment and what it is doing with that knowledge. It will also be important that the data shared through the student affairs communication channels present a promising picture of the organization's leadership and commitments.

This complex array of possibilities and responsibilities suggests that assessment offices should reside at the center of a critical nexus of contemporary student affairs leadership initiatives. Future student affairs assessment programs must be tightly linked with student affairs Development initiatives and Communications/Marketing efforts. If done well, there should be a seamless relationship among those units, which will largely be characterized by clarity of data, a connection of that data to institutional and donor commitments, organizational messages to stakeholders about what has been learned from data, and broader communications that translate data and future goals into powerful

messages that attract the interest and support of others. While the assessment leader should not be actively involved in soliciting funds or advocating for individual programs, that individual is crucial to the construction of the rationale for the ask or the basis for the advocacy. The assessment leader should be a key informant in the focus of organizational outreach and external relationship development.

By positioning assessment programs at the heart of the student affairs organization, the potential for transforming the organizational culture of both student affairs and assessment will be greatly enhanced. The new future for assessment will move assessment leaders out of the isolation that too many experience and will position them as a member of a crucial leadership team. Student affairs organizations will be enhanced by the construction of more integrated and comprehensive approaches to data collection, management, communication, translation to practice, and resource generation and management.

Contributors to the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry* will play an important role in inspiring innovation and evolution in student affairs assessment offices. Through sharing individual and campus efforts, contributors will incite colleagues to think more boldly and lead more confidently. Those who submit to the Journal will provide validation of the work being done by others and will provide the encouragement needed to motivate experimentation and innovation by members of the assessment community. Regardless of where an assessment office is in its development or where an individual assessment leader is in her or his professional journey, membership in a community of practice is vital to growth and learning. It will also be important for the development and success of the community that each member considers ways to contribute to achieving the goals of the community. Whether as a contributor or consumer, engagement with the Journal will produce value.

The Journal will also provide a vehicle for research and reinforce the role and responsibility assessment professionals have to be active contributors as higher education leaders. Assessment offices must be centers of research and the source of scholarship. As citizens of the academy, assessment leaders must engage in the

most critical activities of our institution – teaching, research and service.

The forum of the Journal will enhance the sense of community among assessment leaders; while at the same time, help uncover possibilities for how members of this community can be at the center of campus leadership in constructing viable models to elevate, sustain and advance student affairs work. The reinvention or re-visioning of assessment office will rest on the increased capacity of those who provide leadership for assessment programs. Assessment program leaders will need to truly embrace leadership as a responsibility and skill. The Journal offers a forum through which new models can be shared, leadership strategies communicated and embedded assumptions challenged.

The Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry signals the promising future for student affairs assessment; it portends that the work is not just about "assessment." The future success of those doing what is currently narrowly described as assessment is connected to the ability to engage in deep reflection, intentionality, transcending constricted categorization, and demonstrate bold leadership to reframe the work. I encourage the use of the Journal to "think out loud", ask "why not?", and do whatever you can to add power and substance to the vital discourse on the state and future of student affairs assessment. As was stated earlier, there is power in data. There is also power in the voice of those who generate, disseminate and interpret data. I hope members of this community will use the power in your voices to help shape the student affairs enterprise in a way that will ensure its contributions are realized in the most effective ways possible.

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