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Remembering the Basics

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Abstract

Previous articles from Schuh (2015), Roper (2015), and Henning (2016) contained a wealth of information pertaining to the history, evolution of practice, future projections, and application of scholarship to student affairs assessment. Despite robust resources and past practices, some fundamental assessment elements are often omitted from practice. This letter to the editor explores how the field could benefit from recalibrating around outcomes-focused efforts, appropriate data collection, and making use of data.

Recent *JSAI* articles gave me pause as I considered student affairs assessment practice. Historical perspectives have shown us slow to acknowledge and adopt practices (Schuh, 2015). Practice has shown varying degrees of success in adoption, quality of processes, and authenticity of purpose or reason for acting (Roper, 2015). While there is a strong literature base for student affairs assessment (Henning, 2016), staff participating in student affairs assessment exhibit short-term memory for good practice or omit fundamental elements in efforts. Reflecting on these pieces and what typically occurs in the field, assessment practitioners could benefit from recalibrating around outcomes-focused efforts, appropriate data collection, and making use of data.

Outcomes-Focused Efforts

Student Affairs assessment needs to go beyond satisfaction to measure learning (Keeling, 2004). This would entail identification and articulation of outcomes, which some areas still operate without. It is especially important to not only articulate, but also align and show connection between outcomes and interventions.

Appropriate Data Collection

Assessment practitioners need to make sure the right data is being collected. I recently heard an accreditation scholar at a conference indicate the best student affairs assessment data to hope for are indirect measures from surveys. Even when aware a variety of direct and indirect measures exist, assessment practice is often without comprehensive and intentional approach (Barham & Scott, 2006; Bresciani, 2010). To address this:

1. Identify what data is needed (e.g., refer to outcomes/objectives).
2. Know in what form data is needed and what methods might provide desired outputs.
3. Consider available resources and capacity to execute efforts. The ideal approach may never be achieved, but strive to get as close as possible.

Following those steps should not only capture data, but ensure

intentional collection of meaningful data in the desired format.

Use of Data

Data needs to be used. Ewell (2009) says a primary purpose of assessment is for accountability, where data should inform practice and direct action for continuous improvement. If nothing is done with data, I seriously question why it was collected in the first place – what need was it supposed to satisfy? What question was it supposed to answer? Even if it is believed taking action or making changes may not be called for (e.g., targets are met or exceeded, data is extremely positive), sharing of results is always appropriate. Sharing should be intentional, considering which pieces of information to communicate with which audiences through appropriate medium(s).

Conclusion

While there are plenty of other tips and even more detailed steps related to the aforementioned concepts, these stood out as core concepts to reiterate in light of where student affairs assessment practitioners have been, where we are, and where we intend to go. Despite a storied past and robust history of practice, many continue to struggle with the absence of or convolution of these elements. Sometimes practice starts well enough and, with intention of elevating practice, efforts are merely complicated or activity levels increased. More is not always better and complexity does not necessarily provide more insight. Stepping back and taking time to reflect, evaluate efforts, and ensure that fundamentals of practice are in place can be invaluable.

About the author

Joe Levy is the Director of Assessment at National Louis University, with responsibility to guide university level assessment, support academic program assessment, and coordinate student affairs assessment. Joe is passionate about data-informed decision making, accountability, and promoting a student-centered approach inside and outside of the classroom. Joe earned his MS in Student Affairs in Higher Education from Colorado State University and his BA in English from

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