

Student Affairs Assessment and Accreditation: History, Expectations, and Implications

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Student affairs assessment has become more prevalent in today's higher education assessment climate (Kuh et al., 2015; Schuh, 2015). A greater number of institutions are dedicating resources for this work (Combs & Rose, 2016) and accrediting bodies have updated standards and criteria, drawing more attention to co-curricular and student affairs interventions (Commission on Institutions of Higher Education [CIHE], 2016; Higher Learning Commission [HLC], 2014; Kuh et al., 2015; Middle States Commission on Higher Education [MSCHE], 2015; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges [SACSCOC], 2017; WASC Senior College and University Commission [WSCUC], 2015). Institutions may have mixed reactions to this: academic affairs may be confused as to the relevance of student affairs staff and the role practitioners play in student learning and accreditation. Student affairs professionals may be excited to have clear connections and common language to engage counterparts across campus, but may not recognize the responsibility and onus to demonstrate compliant practice for accreditors, let alone possess the resources or capacity to do so. For their own reasons, both academic affairs and student affairs professionals may lack confidence about how best to encompass and articulate combined efforts for accreditation purposes.

This article aims to provide information to support institutions in their student affairs assessment and accreditation efforts. It begins by describing historical changes for student affairs assessment and accreditation. With this foundation, accreditor interests and expectations are detailed and contextualized for student affairs

assessment. Implications and suggestions for practice are presented with respect to student affairs assessment in light of accreditation interests. At its conclusion, future implications and considerations are provided to assist readers in examining their own assessment practices.

Evolutionary Relationship

Familiarity with the historical evolution of student affairs assessment is helpful context to understand how it contributes to accreditation efforts. Despite assessment occurring within the classroom, co-curricular and student support areas have been slow to engage in assessment work or recognize its relevance (Schuh, 2015). Schuh (2015) noted it was not until the late 1990s that student affairs scholars really began prescribing evaluative and assessment-oriented practices for student affairs areas.

The 21st century has seen a rise in publications asserting the necessity of assessment in student affairs (Schuh, 2015). In addition to calls for assessment from the within the student affairs field, there have been external factors at play. Regional accreditors expanded their focus around learning outcomes - concerning themselves with both inputs (processes, policies, plans) and outputs (results, goals achieved, impact of actions taken) - while adding language to include co-curricular and student affairs practices alongside academic programs (CIHE, 2016; HLC, 2014; Kuh et al., 2015; MSCHE, 2015; SACSCOC, 2017; WSCUC, 2015). This was a substantial change, given the majority of accreditor calls for assessment previously focused on measuring student learning via the curriculum or academic assessment (Schuh & Associates, 2009). Such a change was certainly felt by institutions, too. A 2016 survey, with 377 unique institutions responding, indicated that the most common driver for assessment positions was

external (Combs & Rose, 2016). Institutions were being pressured to act on assessment from a variety of sources.

This call to action was not always met with the most appropriate institutional practices, however. With respect to mindset, many institutions pushed assessment from a compliance perspective (Wehlburg, 2010). On the surface, it made sense that there would be a natural connection between the two elements and, as a result, assessment grew in popularity over time. However, assessing for accreditation or compliance reasons set the wrong tone. This often resulted in faculty and staff performing assessment work to meet the necessary requirements, rather than authentically engaging in a meaningful process to improve and enhance teaching, learning, and student success. It is worth noting institutions are still struggling to balance these competing priorities (Ewell, 2009; Wehlburg, 2010).

As a further complication, assessment work was not always understood as a responsibility of student affairs staff. In response to the assessment movement of the 1990s, there were two common approaches to assigning responsibility: include assessment as an added responsibility to someone with another role (e.g., residence life person, career services coordinator) or create a single position responsible for assessment (Roper, 2015). Both options presented problems. The former made assessment an add-on element and not the primary concern of a given staff person, making it all the more difficult and unlikely they would have success encouraging engagement and commitment from others who have even less of a formal tie to assessment - not to mention holding a position that required them to lead their peers without formal authority. The latter left the impression of a single, isolated person, outside of any student affairs area, shouldering the responsibility of developing an

appropriate assessment culture and infrastructure. While assessment strategy and practice can always be improved and refined, these early efforts lacked appropriate institutional support in terms of accountability, funding, technology, and staffing.

Despite historical challenges, the evolution of assessment practice has called for measures to go beyond satisfaction, needs, quality, and compliance to emphasize student learning (Keeling, 2004). Based on the results from the 2017 National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) survey of chief academic officers, institutions are executing and acting on assessment results for co-curricular areas more now than reported in 2013 (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017). Additionally, Kinzie and Kuh (2017) noted many institutional policies, practices, and opportunities have changed due to assessment results in co-curricular and student affairs since 2013.

For both assessment and accreditation, it is worth noting the technological advances that have occurred over the years. Educational technology available today can reduce the amount of time or manual effort needed to conduct assessment work (Hollands, 2017; Maki, 2010; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrin, & Henning, 2015). While accreditors do not call for the use of specific technology, assessment professionals are expected to know the functionality and types of educational technology available to meet assessment needs (Yousey-Elsener, Bentrin, & Henning, 2015). Although educational technology is helpful for users, it can specifically aid student affairs staff who may not have been formally trained in assessing student learning (Aloi, Green, & Jones, 2007; Kuh et al., 2015).

Despite the challenges that have been faced, assessment continues to be an important and valued activity across institutions and within the accreditation framework. Additionally, assessment technology, funding, and staffing continues to

advance. The field expects to see continued expansion and richness in student affairs assessment practice (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Roper, 2015). Bearing the past and future in mind, accreditation and assessment are likely to remain inextricably linked. As for the present, those linkages are worth unpacking and exploring in order to better understand the ways in which student affairs contributes to accreditation efforts.

Accreditor Interests and Expectations

Adapting to changes over time, institutions have done their best to ensure assessment practice meets accreditation standards and criteria. This section provides an overview of accrediting bodies' interests and expectations regarding assessment and the subsequent connection to student affairs. While there is a compliance element to their work, accreditors hope to instill good operational and educational practice for continuous quality improvement; above all, accreditors care about ensuring institutions deliver on promises for quality learning experiences for students. Accreditor interests and expectations specific to student affairs include strategic planning and assessment alignment, evidence of assessment, use of data as part of process, and qualifications and training of employees.

Strategic Planning and Assessment Alignment

Accreditors expect academic and co-curricular learning outcomes to align to the mission and strategic goals of the university in order to make for a more coordinated, intentional student learning experience (HLC, 2014; MSCHE, 2015; SACSCOC, 2017; WSCUC, 2015). Outcomes assessment should be considered in the strategic planning process, given that strategic planning informs the direction and scope of institutional activities (Middaugh, 2010; Walvoord, 2010). A lack of synchronicity with assessment practice could have implications both for the accomplishment of strategic goals and re-

accreditation. To prevent this, institutions can map the connections between their strategic plan, mission statement, learning goals, and assessment goals in order to facilitate a sustainable assessment process tied to the institution's foundational elements (Banta & Palomba, 2015).

Accreditors also expect assessment to inform improvement initiatives and strategic planning (HLC, 2014; MSCHE, 2015; SACSCOC, 2017; WSCUC, 2015). The degree and frequency of change to strategic planning and institutional initiatives can create a challenge for assessment planning and action with results. In all cases, articulated alignment enables institutional visibility of strategy in assessment planning and execution. Such connections also add accountability and importance to assessment work.

To reinforce these expectations, accreditors may call for specific examples of projects or initiatives to demonstrate alignment. For instance, the SACSCOC (2017) requires a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). As an example, Oglethorpe University's previous QEP focused on improving the quality of academic advising for incoming first-year and transfer students, where improvement in first-year and transfer student success connected deeply to Oglethorpe's strategic plan (Oglethorpe University Bulletin, 2017). Such projects can spotlight or reinforce strategic alignment with student affairs activities, while also promoting interventions to others on campus.

Assessment Evidence

Institutions can address accreditor expectations, in part, by demonstrating a culture of assessment (Kuh et al., 2015). Documentation as evidence of student learning is emphasized (Principles for Effective Assessment of Student Achievement, 2013), primarily taking the form of direct measures of learning as evidence, though there has

been increasing acceptance of secondary or indirect measures of learning (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Direct measures include assessments whereby faculty and staff determine the student's level of competence. In contrast, indirect measures are assessment opportunities for students to reflect on and rate their own experience and abilities. Proper documentation of assessment activity can illustrate an institution's commitment to being learner-centered, as well as demonstrate improvement efforts (Maki, 2010). Student affairs has an opportunity to present how their collective portfolio addresses needs, encourages learning, and promotes development of the whole student. Reports can allude to the interconnections and complementary efforts across the institution, leveraging alignment of activity to the university outcome framework regardless of whether it happens inside or outside of the classroom.

Another expectation with assessment culture is systematic and comprehensive efforts, going beyond episodic or ad-hoc activity (Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrin, & Henning, 2015). The widespread expectation is that assessment is cyclical in nature, occurring repeatedly through an established timeframe. As an example, a career services center may assess students' knowledge of career development twice per year and use that data to inform changes to delivery of a particular program or types of services offered. Student affairs can establish assessment processes and procedures which not only meet accreditor and other external expectations, but also are flexible and responsive to functional area needs, too (Suskie, 2009). Having clearly articulated expectations encourages campuses to integrate assessment into regularly occurring activities like strategic planning, budgeting, or perhaps even performance evaluations for those with assessment responsibilities.

Using Data to Close the Loop

Accreditors have expanded their focus from inputs to incorporate outputs, adjusting language related to assessment to look at use of student learning data to inform improvement (Kuh et al., 2015). They expect to see results and the impact of using data for continuous quality improvement. Data-informed decision making is assumed, with expectations to see assessment data informing programs, services, budgeting, staffing, and strategic planning. Most commonly, utilizing assessment results to inform change, or “closing the loop” remains a challenging part of the assessment process (Kinzie & Kuh, 2017; Suskie, 2009). In order to move past this barrier, institutions must determine how they are going to use their assessment data in order to make the necessary and relevant changes followed by clearly communicating expectations to staff. Such planning includes involving the appropriate constituents in the decision implementation process (Banta & Palomba, 2015). The nature of student affairs work requires staff to have strong partnerships with many areas of the university and student affairs professionals are often involved in university-wide initiatives. This puts student affairs professionals in a unique position to champion assessment practices, encourage the sharing of results, and promote changes to improve the student experience.

As an example of this in action, Hope College leveraged assessment data gathered from the 2004 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to close the loop and improve student outcomes (Banta & Blaich, 2011). The NSSE survey revealed that Hope students were behind their student counterparts in academic effort, particularly in the number of hours dedicated to homework per week. As a result, the assessment director shared the results with a large group of faculty in an attempt to address this issue. Each

department met as a group and devised two strategies aimed at improving students' academic effort. After the development and implementation of these strategies, results demonstrated that Hope students closed the gap in hours spent on homework per week, which ultimately increased academic effort results. This collaboration demonstrated the effectiveness of a robust assessment process that leveraged results to improve student outcomes.

In initiatives on data-informed improvement, institutions should be informing and involving stakeholders (Kuh et al., 2015; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrim, & Henning, 2015). Invite stakeholders into the next cycle of assessment to address the following questions: Who should contribute to planning or design? What partners can support the execution of data collection, analysis, or interpretation of results? Which audiences should receive information from the report pertaining to their needs or interests?

Among other populations, student affairs is excellently positioned to engage students in the assessment process. Students can be utilized to support assessment efforts in the following ways:

- providing staff with feedback on design (reviewing for student-friendly terminology and piloting instruments)
- assisting staff with interpreting results (providing additional context to responses, drawing conclusions from a student perspective)
- engaging in discussions with campus stakeholders about the best way to use results to improve the student experience

All of the above efforts empower students as active agents in the process (Heiser, Prince, & Levy, 2017), communicating a powerful message of assessment for and by the

institutional community. The engagement of students in student affairs assessment demonstrates to accreditors both transparency and student voice in decision making.

Qualifications and Training

Staff hired to lead co-curricular or student affairs areas must demonstrate to accreditors that they are appropriately qualified and trained for the work (HLC, 2014; MSCHE, 2015; SACSCOC, 2017; WSCUC, 2015). Assessment professionals are not exempt from this requirement. The ACPA and NASPA (2010) professional competencies include a section on assessment, while the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education's (CAS) professional standards (2015) indicate assessment as part of the responsibility for each area. In an effectively functioning assessment culture, there are specific roles and responsibilities for people across all levels and departments (Kuh et al., 2015; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010).

It is important to remember faculty and staff do not necessarily receive training on assessment practices in preparation for their roles (Aloi, Green, & Jones, 2007; Kuh et al., 2015). As such, institutions have a responsibility to provide professional development, training, and resources to support capacity building for employees related to assessment (Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010). There are external resources available from professional organizations, as well as internal resources an institution can create or adapt to meet needs. If not sure where to start, assessment staff can ask participants to reflect on existing assessment processes and experiences to determine the support or training needed.

Planning for the Future

The climate in higher education requires proof of the value of a college degree, which can be met, in part, through the expansion of the student affairs assessment

activities. This call for evidence comes from various higher education constituents, some of which include accreditors, students, families, employers, the government, and is unlikely to dissipate in the foreseeable future (Kuh et al., 2015; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009). In many ways, accreditors and universities work together to respond to this call. Accreditors create criteria that will demonstrate the value of a college degree to constituents and higher education institutions strive to provide an exceptional learning environment, demonstrating educational value, and simultaneously meeting external interests and requirements.

There are several challenges for academic programs and student affairs units' given expectations and the unknown of what the future will hold. First, stakeholder needs - internal and external - must continue to be met regardless of their evolving and changing nature. Second, institutions need to balance resource usage and streamline processes to contribute to a comprehensive and robust assessment infrastructure. Finally, institutions will need to leverage professional development and capacity building to ensure individuals are better equipped to engage in assessment and accreditation work.

Anticipating and Meeting Stakeholders' Needs and Interests

Assessment professionals must continue to anticipate future needs and do their best to be prepared when stakeholder interests arise. However, meeting the demands of all constituents can be challenging, with accreditors posing broad questions that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Accreditors are explicit about the need for learning outcomes and assessment activity to occur, but the number of outcomes, what types of methods employed, and systems utilized, are not explicitly defined (HLC, 2014; MSCHE, 2015; SACSCOC, 2017; WSCUC, 2015). While there may be some perceived

ambiguity, this affords great flexibility for institutions to make this process their own and do what fits best for their areas and student needs.

One way to anticipate and meet institutional needs is to ensure open lines of communication. Sharing assessment results is imperative (Middaugh, 2011; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2010) and working to establish regular and open lines of communication can help inform assessment planning, as well as result sharing, to benefit all parties. Meetings to engage stakeholders on results from recent assessments can be quite helpful. After sharing findings, assessment staff can ask stakeholders if more information is needed or if their needs have changed, which in turn opens lines of communication, increases transparency, and sets a plan for the future.

Regardless of planning or sharing results, cultivating collaborative partnerships advances assessment practice (Maki, 2010; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrin, & Henning, 2015). Student Affairs should already be looking at faculty as partners for enhancing student learning. Mutually beneficial partnerships can be created with areas such as information technology, institutional research, academic assessment, and marketing. These collaborations create opportunities to engage in a unified approach to pursuing institutional strategies. Both elements - faculty and staff involvement, documentation of progress or achievement of goals – can be evidence for accrediting purposes.

Streamlining Assessment Activity

Knowing the emphasis accreditors place on strategic planning and alignment, institutions should establish or align with an institutional framework for outcomes and strategic goals. As assessment activity unfolds, plans and reports can contribute to broader institutional initiatives demonstrating the impact of a student affairs division as a whole. Utilizing a framework that facilitates a macro perspective will make it easier for

assessment coordinators to be prepared for a variety of calls for evidence of a division's commitment to assessment. Seeing this in an institutional context can further increase accreditor understanding of the impact co-curricular and student affairs programs have on the student experience.

Mentioned earlier, CAS (2015) professional standards is one such framework that many institutions use. Developed in conjunction with 42 member organizations, CAS engages with over 100,000 professionals in the field to develop unique standards and guidelines for 45 functional areas, organized in a consistent 12-part framework. CAS information can be utilized for program review, evaluating appropriate functional area operations, and even articulating and measuring student learning domains. The CAS standards are a wonderful resource to utilize in consistency of content, preparation, and planning.

Working with the consistent 12-part framework per functional area, institutions can utilize CAS standards to make intentional connections and be prepared to report on outcome alignment across the university. Institutional or common learning outcomes of all graduates can be used to identify where and when students are exposed to content, as well as determine oversaturation or gaps in coverage. Utilizing an established, external framework such as CAS could make a compelling accreditation story of assessment systematization and comprehensive practice.

The utilization of comprehensive frameworks and systems does not necessarily mean more documentation and increased complexity in resource coordination. Advancements in technology should increase efficiencies, make centralization of documentation easier, and expedite reporting (Maki, 2010; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrin, & Henning, 2015). Assessment systems can be intentionally utilized to lessen some of the

assessment burden on departments or individuals, while also advancing capabilities or analysis. Educational technology can range in price, however, there are several open-source or widely available tools for data cleaning, analyzing, and visualization efforts like R or even Microsoft Excel. Aside from financial cost of do-it-yourself options or off-the-shelf products, be mindful that educational technology can be taxing in time and energy for implementation, training, and actual use (Levy, 2017). Institutions should be careful to provide appropriate support and guidance in leveraging tools for assessment work. While system or tool-agnostic, accreditors appreciate seeing intentional organization, centralized efforts, and consistency in approach to data collection, analysis, and reporting. Institutions should take stock of their assessment management system - formal or informal - for these very reasons.

Considering activity and importance of the work, the assessment approach should include developing and maintaining an assessment infrastructure. This may consist of resources such as templates, examples of sound practice, assessment equipment, platforms/software, guiding frameworks, an inventory of staff needs and interests, as well as training and mentoring opportunities. Examples include establishing a place for all faculty and staff to borrow assessment equipment (e.g., audience poll technology, event/class attendance readers), facilitating collaborative professional development activities related to teaching, assessment and research (e.g., research ethics training, rubric design, pedagogy), or using peer review to provide feedback on assessment plans and reports. In working together with other assessment professionals across the university, student affairs assessment coordinators create synergy, increase assessment buy-in across the institution, and create a more coordinated, cohesive assessment culture. If done well, these changes will show up in

accreditation documentation and discussions about the university's approach to assessment and may positively impact the results of assessments related to the quality of the student experience.

Staff Training

Kinzie and Kuh (2017) found one of the most reported assessment needs in the field (from 811 different institutions) is professional development; this was second only to more use of assessment results. This is likely due to the lack of formal training or experience staff bring to their roles (Kuh et al., 2015). Student affairs graduate programs should look to incorporate more assessment into their curriculum. By doing so, this could provide staff with more familiarity and experience, as well as reinforce a positive tone for assessment. Instead of early introductions driven by compliance, practitioners would approach from a place of curiosity and desire to know more about how students are learning and what could be done to possibly improve student success. This also moves assessment in the right direction by providing more training and familiarity on the topic earlier in professional careers.

Aside from familiarity in general, student affairs staff need to be aware of promising practices and diverse assessment methods. Kinzie and Kuh (2017) shared some of the most used and valued assessment tools in the field are rubrics and performance assessments. While surveys have appropriate times for use, staff will need to become more familiar with different practices.

Finally, professional development has inherent value in relation to assessment (Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Yousey-Elsener, Bentrin, & Henning, 2015). Professional development can afford institutions a mechanism to keep staff knowledgeable and familiar with emerging trends or practices in the field. Institutions can gauge

effectiveness of professional development and training with participant feedback, but more importantly, change or improvement in behavior and service with students.

Conclusion

As the assessment field progresses, higher education institutions are becoming more adept at explaining the importance and value of a college degree to their stakeholders. Student affairs assessment has become increasingly easier and simultaneously more complex. With accreditation requirements changing and exerting influence on assessment activities, clarity and accommodation may be necessary. Knowing the history of accreditation and student affairs assessment may best prepare institutions for the future to come. Institutions must work closely with their internal and external accreditation liaisons to stay up-to-date on interests and expectations for student affairs assessment. Given several implications and suggestions for practice with respect to student affairs assessment, institutions should have ideas for application or enhancement of assessment culture. A sound process reflective of good practice and continuous quality improvement is the core expectation of accreditors, who afford freedom and flexibility for institutions to operate according to their campus culture and student needs. These unique institutional approaches make for a rich and ever-evolving field of practice which can be promoted and exemplified by accreditors as partners in the process of ensuring student learning and success.

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