

## **Student Affairs Assessment: Sharing Results through Poster Sessions**

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Student affairs assessment involves storytelling using elements that faculty members, administrators, and those with business backgrounds understand (Bentrim, & Henning, 2015). Some faculty members at research institutions may lose their jobs if they do not add to general knowledge through publication or presentation. On the other hand, unless their job descriptions specifically require it, many student affairs educators may choose whether or not to involve themselves in research projects. These professionals often engage in assessment of specific programs, however, because they not only want to improve programming and increase student learning, they also want to be accountable for the funds they use. When student affairs departments regularly assess their programs, communicate their results, and use data to support decisions, they chronicle their part in the university's efforts to provide a holistic, transformative education for students (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Schuh & Associates, 2009).

In the seminal work, *Building a Culture of Evidence in Student Affairs*, Culp (2012) identified three main reasons cultures of evidence should be built within student affairs divisions. First, having such a culture helps student affairs professionals examine what they do and increases the probability that their efforts will be effective. Second, in such a culture in which workers analyze their successes and failures, student affairs educators are constantly learning both professionally and personally. Third, hard data documents the role student affairs divisions play in a student's holistic education. When the value of student affairs divisions at universities is being questioned, building

cultures of evidence and telling departmental stories becomes even more critical (Henning, 2016).

The responsibilities of those charged with encouraging assessment practices within student life divisions include determining the varying assessment skill levels that exist within the division, building talent, and increasing knowledge as necessary (Wise & Aaron, 2015). Building talent includes encouraging those who already engage in assessment and providing opportunities for them to share their assessment findings. Sharing assessment results demonstrates to participants, especially students, that the efforts of those who participated in the project were worthwhile. Regularly seeing project results also helps faculty members and administrators know that the student affairs division is serious about building a culture of evidence (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Henning & Roberts, 2016).

A poster session where student affairs educators display their assessment efforts meets multiple objectives. The act of creating a poster forces the author(s) to re-visit the project and effectively summarize both the project and its findings. Posters benefit from those with artistic and technological skills. Team members who are not normally involved in the assessment process can contribute to the finished product.

Those faculty members and administrators who have witnessed poster sessions at professional conferences are probably familiar with this method of communicating project findings. Although the exhibited assessment projects likely examine specific situations, those involved in research for the purpose of adding to generalizable knowledge may be interested in this search for truth at their campus.

Participating in a poster session not only encourages the presenters by giving them an avenue to talk about their work in front of colleagues, it is also a good modeling experience as other student affairs professionals may realize that they, too, can engage in assessment projects. One of the challenges of building a culture of evidence within student affairs divisions is that assessment results are often “hidden” in that insights from results may be used to improve programs, but others may not be aware of the reason for programmatic changes. Some student affairs professionals may be hesitant to engage in assessment projects because they do not understand assessment’s importance to their daily responsibilities. Viewing other’s posters and seeing project results may encourage the hesitant.

Stakeholders such as students who see that their participation in assessment projects was worthwhile may be more willing to take part in a project the next time they are asked. Higher education institutions are cognizant of student survey fatigue. A poster could highlight results from a survey that assessed student learning outcomes. In viewing that poster, students are reminded that those in the department are interested in knowing that they are learning what is expected.

A poster session may give student affairs graduate students involved in research courses and those professionals obtaining a doctorate while being employed in the profession another opportunity to share their research with colleagues. Student affairs professionals may be working on a doctorate through another institution but their research projects involve the campus where they are employed. If so, participating in a poster session gives them the opportunity to share findings that may interest others.

A search of the Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, and Science and Technology databases revealed no articles linking student affairs with higher education and poster presentations. Some literature is available that could be of use when conducting student affairs poster sessions, however. This literature includes advice on preparing or presenting posters (Beamish, Ansell, Foster, Foster, & Egan, 2014; Bivens, 2010; Erren & Bourne, 2007; Gundogan, Koshy, Kurar, & Whitehurst, 2016; Marek, Christopher, & Koenig, 2002; Moore, Augspurger, King, & Proffitt, 2001; Rezaeian, Rezaeian, & Rezaeian, 2017), encouragement to use posters to enhance understanding of particular subjects (Lagares & Reisenleutner, 2017), and instructions for facilitating an online poster conference (Pierce, 2016). Many university library or research websites include instructions on poster preparation or presentation. Information on such websites may be helpful to student affairs staff.

Though at our private, four-year university with slightly more than 17,000 students, faculty members are expected to engage in research that leads to generalizable knowledge, there are no similar expectations for student affairs staff. There is, however, an expectation that staff who work with students outside the classroom will engage in assessment. Departments related to enrollment, advisement, and academic success are in a separate division. The Student Life Division, fourteen departments, each with a mission, provides transformational educational experiences to students and works from the premise that the university exists to prepare students for life in addition to helping them gain knowledge that will lead to a career. Each departmental program has student learning goals related to the division and university mission.

Annually, we must submit reports to the university highlighting particular student learning outcomes, describing assessments of those outcomes, and detailing insights from the assessment results as well as departmental improvements that were implemented because of the insights. The vice president for the division encourages a culture of evidence and funds a full-time staff person who is responsible for assessment within the division. This person analyzes data pertinent to the division, works on divisional assessment projects and reports, and advises departments as they assess student learning goals.

In the following section, we highlight the steps we took to implement poster sessions at our university. These steps may vary according to different departmental alignments within student affairs divisions.

## **Process**

### **Secure the venue**

When it was decided that we would hold a student affairs poster session highlighting assessment projects, the Dean of Student Learning and Engagement responsible for divisional assessment, suggested that it be held during a weekly social hour that hundreds of students were used to attending to receive free ice cream floats. In this way, students would have to traverse the posters to receive their floats and faculty members, who may be more interested in the posters than the floats, would be reminded of the weekly event that encouraged interaction with students outside of the classroom. Arrangements were made with the Student Activities department who scheduled the event for the Office of Student Life Assessment to sponsor the last social hour of the academic year. Because this was a regularly-scheduled event, there was no extra cost.

In order to use the posters more than once, it was decided to hold a second poster session at the end-of-year Student Life awards banquet. It was thought that by highlighting the posters at this event eight days after the first poster session, the poster preparers could receive recognition from their peers while contributing to a culture of evidence within the division. Banquet attendees, mostly student life staff, could inspect the posters before and after the event. The divisional leadership team, composed of the vice president of the student life division and the deans of the various areas in the division, sponsored the banquet and gave their approval to include the poster session. Arrangements were made to use the university display boards that students from an undergraduate research and scholarly achievement group had used for their poster presentations the month before. These wooden boards were to be delivered and placed around the perimeter of the rooms for each poster session.

### **Solicit posters**

Emails describing the poster sessions and inviting student life staff to participate were sent to the student life assessment committee members. The members of this committee, representatives from each department in the division as well as others interested in assessment, were encouraged to forward the email to those in their networks whom they felt might be interested. The email stressed that participation was voluntary. Although each department within the division not undergoing a departmental review using Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) guidelines is required to do an annual assessment project, those departments conducting the assessment projects could decide if they wanted to present a poster about their project. Three of the ten departments doing assessment projects

prepared posters. Their projects included an assessment of the goals of the faculty-in-residence program, an assessment of student learning for students involved in public deliberation initiatives, and an assessment where a department contacted alumni to ascertain the department's impact on alumni's life decisions.

Individuals within the division involved in assessment on their own were encouraged to create posters. For example, after hearing about textual analysis in an assessment committee meeting (where a newspaper or magazine is analyzed for the number of times a topic is discussed) a committee member had analyzed the previous five months of the university newspaper, looking for articles and pictures related to events in her divisional area. Though she determined that there had been adequate coverage of her topics of interest, she concluded that newspaper staff should receive specific invitations to future events. She was encouraged to prepare a poster because her efforts were not only a good example of a small project anyone could do, but the results might also show students who worked for the newspaper that the division was appreciative of event coverage.

In order to model the use of existing data, another topic discussed in the assessment committee, the Assistant Director for Student Life Assessment used a public report from the institutional testing and research department website. After downloading the report, the data in the report was analyzed to see if there were correlations between participation in summer orientation programs and fall to spring retention of incoming freshmen.

Graduate students in the higher education program at the university had prepared posters illustrating their research projects for their fall semester qualitative

research class. Their poster session at the end of the fall semester had been the impetus for our student life poster sessions in the spring. These students were invited to participate in the poster sessions as well as those who were doing projects for their spring quantitative research class. The graduate students asked to present two posters, both highlighting qualitative projects. One chronicled Latina advising experiences in the engineering department, and the other analyzed male students' perceptions of the intersection of their constructs of masculinity and spirituality.

Contact was made and invitations sent to other campus entities outside of the division. Some staff in the academic success center, a division separate from Student Life, had been integral in working with an outside company to facilitate a new student survey to incoming students. They were appreciative of the opportunity to share findings from this new survey and prepared a poster to that effect.

Once news of the poster session circulated, others wanted to participate. A task force who had studied campus food insecurity asked to highlight their findings. A departmental employee who had studied university students' involvement in mentoring wanted to prepare a poster with national and local data illustrating the importance of mentoring. An assessment committee member who had participated in a national research project analyzing the voting habits of university students wanted to share our university results.

Another assessment committee member suggested that those in the division who had recently obtained doctorates might want to do a poster illustrating their dissertation research, so they were invited to participate. One department director already had a poster from her doctoral research project. She had obtained her doctorate at another



university and had not previously had an opportunity to present her research at our university. All who were able to participate were asked to indicate whether they needed training on preparing a poster or if they needed financial help with the cost of printing.

### **Offer training**

The librarian assigned to work with Student Life arranged for another librarian who regularly offered poster preparation workshops to present a workshop for us. The twelve individuals who indicated they wanted training were invited, but only half could attend. Though the workshop had been designed to help students with science research projects, the librarian made adjustments within her presentation, shared examples of well-done and poorly-done posters, and provided resource links. She happily answered many questions. The presentation as well as the resource links were forwarded to those who wanted training but were unable to attend the workshop.

### **Prepare the posters**

Twenty-one presenters registered eleven posters with the Office of Student Life Assessment. Nine posters needed to be prepared as the two from the graduate students had been presented previously. Five of the posters were to be printed from divisional assessment funds, and arrangements were made with the university copy center to print those posters.

### **Advertise the poster sessions**

An attractive email advertisement for the first poster session during the university social hour was prepared by a marketing staff member and sent to all those employed by the division. Those who prepared posters as well as divisional leadership

were asked to forward the advertisement to acquaintances who were faculty members or administrators.

### **Conduct the poster sessions**

As planned, the first session occurred during the social hour. The display boards were arranged on either side of the entrance of the large room. The ice cream floats were available at the back of the room, such that the students had to pass by the posters to receive their floats.

Everyone who had prepared a poster was invited to present during the second poster session, before and after the end-of-year divisional awards banquet. For this session, the boards were on either side of the room. At the beginning of the award ceremony, poster presenters were asked to stand for recognition in front of over 200 divisional staff and guests.

In the next section, we will discuss the applicability of this method of communicating assessment results as well as insights related to these particular poster sessions.

### **Discussion**

Those who prepared and presented posters were invited to do an informal assessment of the process and make suggestions for the future. The authors also noted issues to be addressed before the next academic year. At our university, the Assistant Director of Student Life Assessment's doctorate is in educational psychology. She is relatively new to student affairs. Her observations had to do with the process of a poster session in a student life division at a university. The comments of the poster preparers and insights from the Dean of Student Learning and Engagement, whose doctorate is in

higher education, mainly involved suggestions for increasing interaction between the students and the posters.

### **A Poster Session in the Student Life Division at a University**

#### **Increased visibility**

The poster sessions were worthwhile on many levels. The poster preparers all reported that they felt the sessions were beneficial, especially the session during the student social hour, and appreciated the opportunity to present their work. The vice president responsible for the division remarked, “This is wonderful,” while touring the posters on display. Many faculty members and administrators viewing the posters appeared surprised and were appreciative of the work involved. A psychologist, new to the university and working as a counselor in the Counseling Center, remarked that though he knew about the importance of research to the health field, he was glad to see the interest in assessing issues pertinent to our campus. Even though not all those invited were able to attend, it is believed that even knowing that the division was conducting a poster session was worthwhile for the divisional reputation at the university.

#### **Encouraged assessment**

Other assessment committee members who had not prepared a poster were seen studying the posters. They will be encouraged to prepare a poster next year. One poster preparer from a small department mentioned how departmental staff had observed that working together on the poster had been a positive experience, bringing the staff together as they reviewed their assessment project. It is believed that this positive experience will be naturally communicated to other departments, encouraging

participation. Some who had prepared posters used them again in their departments in the following weeks. People from one department attached their poster to a wall in their office. It was learned that several posters from one department were displayed at a departmental workshop a few weeks after the poster sessions.

### **Exposed a need for training**

An unexpected observation was the need for training for some student affairs professionals on both the purpose of a poster session and how to present a poster. Though some had attended professional conferences and were familiar with poster sessions, it was observed that many of the student affairs professionals who attended the end-of-year banquet were unused to seeing the posters displayed on the perimeter of the room and did not know what to do. There needed to be clear instructions and an invitation to peruse the posters and talk to the presenters before and after the banquet. One suggestion was that in the future, the posters should be arranged in the hall leading to the banquet room as once in the room, invitees were focused on other things.

The Assistant Director for Student Life Assessment observed that higher education students as well as those with a recent doctorate were more likely to stand beside their posters, inviting passers-by to view the poster, explaining the project and results. This behavior is typical of poster sessions at academic conferences as presenters are expected to engage others, especially those who show interest. Many poster preparers were comfortable interacting with friends at a distance from their posters while interested viewers perused the poster on their own. This behavior of some of the poster presenters appeared to confuse some faculty members who expected personal explanations of how results were obtained.

## **Increasing Interaction between Students and Posters**

Many of the student affairs educators remarked that although they were satisfied with the sessions, we needed to investigate ways in which to involve more students in reviewing the posters. The following were suggestions to consider for the future.

### **Hold a session at the beginning of the year**

A poster session at the beginning of the year could highlight results from the previous year, showing how those results had been used to impact current programming. Such a poster session would give a department another opportunity to talk about their services and programs. Students, who might be looking for a way to become involved, would be more likely to respond at the beginning of the year. Students would also see that their participation in assessment projects was important and might be more willing to participate in that year's projects.

### **Prepare a brochure detailing the posters**

One suggestion was to prepare an informal brochure to pass out to students who were entering the room to receive the free ice cream floats. The brochure with pictures of the posters, a brief description, and a map indicating where each poster could be found would give the students more information and encourage students to view the posters that interested them.

### **Give students a “poster passport.”**

Similar to the brochure, one suggestion was to give students a “passport” containing the names of each poster. When a student viewed a poster, the presenter would place a “stamp” in the student's passport for that poster. Completed passports could be deposited for a drawing in which the winner would receive a prize.

### **Advertise the poster session to students**

Although university employees in the student life division had received word of the poster sessions, the students were surprised when they walked into the room to receive their ice cream floats and saw the posters. Many who might otherwise have taken the time to peruse the posters had already made plans to study for exams or work on end-of-the-semester projects. It was suggested that perhaps asking the university paper to write a series of articles leading up to the poster sessions or asking them to highlight specific posters that would be presented might increase student interaction.

### **Display signage**

Signs that could be read from a distance were needed to identify the individual posters as well as the poster sessions as a whole.

This article is applicable to student affairs professionals because a student affairs poster session is not only an effective method to spotlight departmental work and student learning outside the classroom, it can also give campus colleagues an avenue to share pertinent findings. Some faculty members, administrators, and students may be unaware of the significant contributions various student affairs departments make to students' holistic educations. Posters, which may be more interesting and succinct than reports, can highlight findings that affect students while illustrating the division's commitment to the institutional mission.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the First Annual Student Life Poster Sessions at our university were a success. They were also a learning experience. We realized that a student affairs

poster session highlighting assessment projects and their results meets the needs of various student affairs professionals, whether they view assessment through a broad or narrow lens.

Student affairs leadership charged with championing their division before the university and those who do not have a student affairs background may view assessment through a broad lens. They may see building a culture of evidence within student affairs as necessary to effective communication with faculty members and administrators. Especially when resources are tight, they may see gathering data and conducting assessment projects as essential to validating the efforts of the division as a whole.

Those who may have chosen a career in student affairs because they wanted to impact students daily, might view assessment through a narrower lens. For these individuals, as they focus on fulfilling job responsibilities, they want to know that their assessment efforts make a difference in students' lives. They may have little interest in assessment projects if they view the projects as processes that take time away from their roles with students. Their attitude toward assessment may improve, however, when they see ways in which projects have provided meaningful results.

Poster sessions highlighting research and assessment efforts in student affairs divisions are an easy, cost-effective way to illustrate that a culture of evidence is being built within the division. Using a tool that may be familiar to faculty members and administrators, assists with communication throughout the university while reinforcing the concept of student affairs' contribution to student learning at the institution. Poster sessions can be attractive to student affairs educators as sessions may provide an

additional opportunity to demonstrate to students that the division is sensitive to their needs.

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