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This chapter identifies elements that contribute to developing a culture of assessment in student affairs.

Developing a Culture of Assessment in Student Affairs

John H. Schuh

Assessment is a student affairs activity that I have been engaged in since 1976, first as a student affairs administrator and more recently as a faculty member. Over the years I have been engaged in assessment for two purposes: accountability and improvement. These purposes are central to the work I do as a member of accreditation panels for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and also for my interest in the professional practice of assessment. Assessment ought to occur, in my judgment, because it is seen by student affairs educators as an essential element of their professional practice (Schuh and Associates, 2009). Assessment should be as important as other fundamental activities in student affairs practice such as staff selection, program development, and enhancing student learning (Sandeen and Barr, 2006). To sustain assessment as a central function in student affairs, my view is that student affairs educators need to establish a culture of assessment in their professional practice.

What is a culture of assessment? At the heart of my definition, and most important in my opinion, is that in a culture of assessment staff members recognize that they must collect evidence systematically to demonstrate accountability to their stakeholders, and that they must use that evidence to improve. Fundamental to the concept is my back-of-the-envelope definition of culture that has as a central element the phrase "how we do things here." In the case of a culture of assessment, "how we do things here" includes a commitment to stakeholders and a dedication to improvement. Some institutions already may have a culture of assessment; others may not have thought about this concept very much. Accordingly, this chapter is designed to identify and discuss elements that I think

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contribute to a culture of assessment. I hope that these ideas might help student affairs practitioners advance their work toward developing a culture of assessment, whether they are just getting started or have been engaged in assessment for a long period of time.

Over the years I have been fortunate enough to have been a member of two major studies of the college student experiences, first in 1988 and 1989 in a project called “involving colleges” (Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt, 1991) and then in the earlier part of this century in a study called Project DEEP (Documenting Effective Educational Practices) (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2005/2010). In the “involving colleges” project, our team studied fourteen institutions that in the opinion of a panel of experts provided high-quality out-of-class experiences for their students. In Project DEEP our team studied twenty colleges and universities than had higher than predicted graduation rates and higher than predicted scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). In both studies we found colleges and universities that had a culture of assessment. Were the institutions we studied exceptional because of their assessment activities? I can’t make that claim, but a culture of assessment was a common feature at these institutions. Accordingly, let’s take a look at some elements that I believe contribute to a culture of assessment.

Elements of a Culture of Assessment

A culture of assessment can be used to inform policy makers, enhance our credibility with various stakeholders, and provide a basis for continuous improvement. Although some staff will get excited about assessment, or at least intrigued by its possibilities, it can be difficult to sustain interest in assessment over time. Increasingly, as I have conducted workshops and had conversations with student affairs professionals, the discussion has had less to do with how to get assessment projects started and more to do with how to sustain assessment activities. Student affairs educators ask me such questions as:

- Now that we’ve done assessments for three straight years, how do we keep going?
- I’m having a hard team keeping my staff motivated to do assessments, so how do we proceed?
- We’re not learning much in the way of new information year after year, so how do we sustain our enthusiasm?

These questions lead to the larger issues of how to develop and sustain a culture of assessment. From Project DEEP I have identified some elements that I think contribute to a culture of assessment. I have also learned from the thinking of Linda Suskie (2009) in identifying dimensions of student affairs practice that I think contribute to developing a culture of assessment. Here they are:

First is a recognition that a culture of assessment recognizes that assessment is a commitment of accountability to our stakeholders but also a commitment to continuous improvement. Peter Ewell (2009) has published very insightful observations on the tensions between assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement. Of course accountability and improvement represent different purposes, but I would posit that unless assessment is conducted for both purposes, problems will emerge. In short, without recognizing both purposes, staff are likely to spend time putting out fires. If you simply conduct assessments because of your need to inform higher headquarters, provide data to various stakeholders, keep accreditors at bay, and so on, you will be focused on fighting rearguard actions, metaphorically, but you will not get any better. On the other hand, if you conduct assessments only to get better, you will lose sight of your obligations to your stakeholders and they will nip at your heels. The accreditors will want very specific information, parents will want to be assured that their students are learning, governing boards will want to know that money is being spent wisely, and so on.

This is not to say that the same assessment can't be used for multiple purposes, because it can. But my view is that one simply can't conduct assessments solely for one purpose and forget about the other. In fact, they can and should be conducted for both purposes.

Second is a commitment to student affairs practice that we called positive restlessness and a commitment to continuous innovation. Organizational life almost always is dynamic. I believe that in organizational life things are changing constantly and organizations are either getting better or getting worse. I have come to this conclusion primarily because in higher education rarely are our organizational actors or environments static. Our student body turns over by a significant percentage each year. Faculty and administrators come and go. New benefactors support our institutions and others move on. The external environment, including economic, political, and demographic features, is fluid. So, if we can agree that our organizations and the environment in which they function are changing continuously, then it seems to me that our path is clear—we need to get better in our responses to our evolving circumstances. We do not want to get worse, for certain, so we need to make a conscious commitment to improve—to provide better learning opportunities for students, better services for them, and more innovative and contemporary approaches to the environment we create. When we met with the senior academic officer at Macalester College as part of Project DEEP, he asked one simple question: How can we get better? (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2005/2010, p. 147). That question can be used to frame a way to view organizational life and the commitments we have to our institutions.

Third is that institutions with a culture of assessment are self-critical. This is closely related to positive restlessness. This element does not refer to intramural squabbling that degenerates into people picking on each other.

Rather, it refers to a culture where people are not afraid to raise questions about how things are done in any area of the institution because their motive is to improve the student experience, as opposed to taking resources or authority from one area and placing them in their own portfolio. I had a difficult challenge when I began my work as director of the residence life department at Indiana University (IU) that was related to the quality of life in the residence halls. Two faculty members were quite critical of the study atmosphere in the residence halls and while at times their expectations were unrealistic in terms of our staff's ability to control student behavior, they truly were interested in improving the conditions in the residence halls so that students could accomplish their academic assignments. I worked closely with them during my nine-year stint at IU and, while I was frustrated at times, I also recognized that they were not trying to take resources away from me (in fact, they were supportive of adding resources to my department). They certainly were not interested in taking over supervision of the residence halls. When I left IU I felt like I had their respect and their cooperation, and in the end the students' residential experience was better, according to our assessments, than when I started.

Fourth is an approach we called data-driven decision making. Perhaps the best way to introduce this element is to quote one of Emory University's staff members and chapter contributor to this monograph, Jonathan Zerulik, who was quoted in the October 14, 2010, *Emory Report* as follows: "'It's about being accountable,' Zerulik says. 'We need to make data-driven decisions'" (Krajnak, 2010). His thinking is identical to mine.

If you attend conferences, read the literature, or talk with colleagues at other institutions, then you know that new innovations are always coming down the pike. Our approach to residential living changed in many ways over the twenty-seven years that I was involved in residence hall administration. The work became much more sophisticated, staff training was more deliberate, programming was more intentional, student learning became much more the focus of our work, and the environment that we created was far more academic in nature. We undertook these initiatives because what we learned through assessment was that our conventional efforts were inadequate. In short, we used data to make decisions. We did not proceed on the basis of hunches, intuition, or the latest trend. We made our decisions on the basis of data, and while I would not claim that we had even thought about data-driven decision making as it currently is conceptualized in contemporary higher education, I think we could claim with some level of assurance that we moved forward to a great extent on the basis of what data told us.

Fifth, assessments need to be conducted across the institution. Everyone who has some influence on the learning of students ought to be engaged in assessment. That is, assessment can and should focus on for-credit experiences as well as not-for-credit experiences. Few are exempt from conducting assessments. When you conceptualize assessment, please think about what you can learn regarding how what you are responsible for affects and enhances student learning. Now it is possible that what you are responsible for is a service that is not much more than a transaction. I suppose in this situation you might not have to do much assessing, other than from a customer service or satisfaction perspective. But I would argue that virtually everything we do in student affairs and academic affairs contributes to learning in one form or another. You might consult with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards, reported on in detail by Laura Dean in Chapter Three, about the student learning that potentially results from virtually every aspect of student affairs if you are hazy in terms of what students learn from your area of responsibility. I think you will be well served if you approach student learning with great zest, since fundamentally our institutions of higher education are about student learning, and the extent to which you contribute to student learning will solidify your role in the university.

Sixth, using multiple forms of assessment contributes to a culture of assessment. Typically, too often I think, we tend to conceptualize of assessment as a process of distributing questionnaires, collecting them, analyzing them through a statistical technique, and then writing a report. What I have just described is a form of quantitative assessment. My view is that while quantitative assessment is important and appropriate in some situations, there are other ways to conduct assessments that use other methodological approaches.

One of my favorites is using qualitative assessments. This approach often involves interviewing students individually or conducting focus groups. It is particularly useful when a small number of students have participated in an experience. For example, suppose six students participated in a study abroad program in Ireland. We could ask them to complete a questionnaire about their experiences, but quite frankly, the potential number of participants is so small that we'd have to use nonparametric statistical procedures to analyze the resulting data and the chances of discovering anything meaningful would be remote. But interviewing the participants in a focus group very well could generate very valuable information. We could pinpoint what they learned, determine how the experience affected their thinking, and as a consequence identify what the students might do next. Suppose that the participants kept journals of their experiences. If so, analyzing the journals (with the students' permission and perhaps collaborating with them) could be an excellent way to discover what the students had learned from their experiences. So, using other than quantitative approaches can result in assessments that are meaningful and add to our understanding of the college student experience.

Seventh, learning outcomes need to be identified and measured. Learning outcomes, associated with the institution's mission, the goals of the division of student affairs, or the objectives of specific programs or experiences, need to be identified so that they can be measured. Assessments can focus on student needs, student satisfaction, or the efficient use of resources, but in our contemporary environment, what is most valuable, in my opinion, is to know what students have learned from the experiences and programs in which they participated. To measure this learning, particularly from a quantitative perspective, one needs to know what the potential learning outcomes are. Again, the CAS standards (Dean, 2006) can be very helpful in identifying learning outcomes associated with many, if not all, student affairs programs, experiences, and services, as Laura Dean described in her chapter. Examples of some of the learning outcomes according to CAS include realistic self-appraisal, effective communication, healthy behavior, and leadership development. Units that have identified learning outcomes, in a culture of assessment, should be provided with resources to measure these learning outcomes. Those units that have not identified learning outcomes should not receive extra funding until they have completed assessments that demonstrate the student learning that results from them.

Regional accrediting bodies increasingly are paying careful attention to the learning outcomes that institutions in their regions have identified for their students, and the extent to which these outcomes have been achieved. So, not only will students benefit from this work, but this approach also will help institutions stay in the good graces of their accrediting bodies. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (2010), for example, has a core requirement: "The institution provides student support programs, services, and activities consistent with its mission that promote student learning and enhance the development of its students" (p. 18).

Eighth, while someone needs to be in charge, all student affairs staff members should pitch in when it comes to assessment. This element may seem like a contradiction, but the general concept is that while one person in student affairs needs to be in charge of assessment, that person should not be designated as the person who does assessment for the entire division. Carolyn Livingston and Jonathan Zerulik provide excellent information about the role of the assessment coordinator in Chapter Two. You may have a person on your campus who leads assessment efforts, but my guess is that this person's job is not to conduct assessments for all the units in student affairs each year. Rather, this person's job is to identify resources that others can use in conducting assessments, to provide training activities so that staff members have the skills to conduct assessments, to serve as a consultant to individuals and units who are conducting assessments, and to advocate across the broader university about the good assessment work done in the division of student affairs. This person's job is to provide a foundation so that assessments can be done, and done well, but not to conduct all the projects on his or her own.

We might consider conceptualizing the assignment of assessment responsibilities as a crosscutting theme for campus life much the same as thinking about the relationship of the student learning that results from the programs, activities, and experiences provided by campus life as they relate to your institution's mission. Presumably, everything you do relates, somehow, to the institution's mission, and everyone contributes to the institution's mission in some way. Similarly, everyone has a responsibility to determine for accountability and improvement purposes how well their units or areas of responsibility are performing. So, everyone pitches in when it comes to assessment, but one person provides the leadership for it.

The ninth element is that results are communicated and acted upon. As we reported in a *Change* magazine article (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt, 2011), the University of Maine at Farmington (UMF) found, through an analysis of NSSE results, that students were not as engaged with faculty as institutional leaders, administrators, and faculty had hoped. Their analysis led to the conclusion that the curriculum had to be revamped, and four-credit courses needed to be organized to replace three-credit courses. As a consequence, the modal course offering was changed from three to four credits. This change required substantial discussions on campus, including faculty leaders as well as institutional administrators, and even included members of the governing board. The result was the implementation of this major change and the addition of several new faculty members in difficult economic times, but improvement in the student learning experience was manifested in further empirical study at UMF. Had the initial NSSE results wound up in a report on an office shelf, in the archives, or in a wastebasket, or in a report that was not circulated widely and discussed broadly, nothing would have happened. The student experience would have been static, and in a culture of assessment, that is not acceptable. UMF is committed to ongoing improvement, given its culture of positive restlessness; and as a consequence, the university continues to work at improvement, even though its results suggest that it has been doing a very good job for years.

Tenth, and closely related to number six, discretionary resources are used to seed assessment projects. I am probably as guilty as anyone else in challenging people to work harder to conduct assessments. That is, I use the example that, if your president called today and asked you to take on a major responsibility, you would be wise to accept the invitation and you probably would do so. However, in most cases, so my story goes, the president is not going to call today, so you can use the time to conduct an assessment. But frankly, assessment does take resources, even if it is nothing more than your time. Sometimes support is needed to buy instruments, collect data, analyze data, and so on. Even printing takes money if you choose to print copies of your final report. So a culture of assessment would include seed money for assessments. Maybe this support involves buying access to Survey Monkey (2012; http://www.surveymonkey.com) or a similar electronic resource, providing a graduate assistant to help in the project, or finding funds to provide release time for a faculty member to assist in project design. The amount does not have to be great. Survey Monkey, for example, costs from nothing to several hundred dollars annually, depending on the services you seek. Maybe that is the level of support you need. Maybe the amount is more, or less. The purpose of the seed money is to take care of expenses associated that are first-time, extraordinary costs. After a year or two, the cost of assessment should be built into the annual budget, similar to personnel costs, operating costs, and so on. In an ongoing situation, budgeting for assessment should be no different than any other cost of operations.

Another budgetary item, my eleventh element, is that assessment findings are rewarded with resources. What this means is that what we have learned from our assessment projects provides a guide for the future direction of programs, services, and activities. It might mean that resources are dedicated to make demonstration projects permanent, or it could be that, while trial projects are found to be successful, they need additional resources to be made permanent. Following are two examples.

Suppose that an experimental project was developed to provide service-learning experiences for a small group of students designed to be engaged with a middle school reading enrichment project. A one-time grant from a foundation was secured to support the project. Upon completion, an assessment was conducted and found that students had learned a great deal from participating, and what adds luster to the project was that it really fits with an element of your institution's mission. To continue the project will require ongoing funding, and that would have to come from the institution's permanent budget. As a service-learning project, support is sought jointly by academic and student affairs, and if funded, the project would be jointly administered.

Another example might be a project implemented by an existing office, but what is learned from an assessment of the project is that additional resources are needed for it to be successful. Suppose your office sponsored a special spring break volunteer project, and it was found that the program worked but the costs of operation were far greater than anticipated. The shortfall was covered by a one-time allocation, but for the program to be continued additional permanent funding is needed. One option might be to establish an endowment to support the project, and knowing that a foundation is interested in supporting the project, permission is given to raise the money. Ultimately sufficient funds are raised to endow the project, and it can be continued for years knowing that permanent funding is in place.

Finally, the twelfth element is that formal events are used to celebrate and discuss assessment results. A one-day conference on assessment in student affairs is an example of such an event. Another might be a half-day program that consists of poster sessions reporting results of assessments with a kick-off speaker and perhaps a luncheon. The purposes of these events would be to recognize, in a formal way, the efforts of those who conducted the assessments, to share the commitment made by student affairs with the rest of the institution, and to celebrate how assessment has added potency to the student experience. Celebrations are very much the part of the life of most institutions, and adding an annual recognition of the assessment activities will contribute a great deal to the culture of assessment in a division of student affairs at an institution of higher education.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, following are some questions to consider about the culture of assessment on your campus.

- How would you describe the culture of assessment in your division of student affairs?
- How has this culture changed over the past few years?
- What do you see as the strengths of the culture of assessment in your division of student affairs?
- What needs to be improved to strengthen your division's culture of assessment?
- Looking forward, what, if anything, do you think needs to be done to enhance your division's culture of assessment over the next five years?
  - What assets do you have that will facilitate this development?
  - What impediments will inhibit this development?

This chapter has been designed to identify elements of a culture of assessment in a division of student affairs. The development of a culture of assessment will facilitate the work of student affairs; provide information required by stakeholders; and help student affairs improve in its delivery of services, programs, and experiences for students. Moving forward, the words of Sandeen and Barr (2006) are inspirational: "Student affairs professionals have proven themselves very capable of being active participants in this [assessment] movement, and despite any challenges they face in assessment, they are now in the best position they have ever been to become important contributors to understanding and assessing the ways students learn" (p. 154). A culture of assessment will lead to student affairs professionals achieving what Sandeen and Barr have challenged them to do.

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JOHN H. SCHUH is distinguished professor of educational leadership and policy studies Emeritus at Iowa State University.