Increasing Accountability in Student Affairs through a New Comprehensive Assessment Model

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This article gives an overview of a new model for assessment practice within student affairs divisions. With the current increase of accountability and greater demands from higher education stakeholders, student affairs practitioners need to understand how to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of their work as it relates to the mission of their department and division.

Assessment is not a new concept for student affairs. Many of the primary documents for the field contain language that encourages practitioners to intentionally connect assessment to performance improvement (American Council on Education, 1937; 1949). In practice, however, assessment has often been viewed as sporadic and endemic to particular departments. Additionally, assessment practice has not truly represented the comprehensive nature of professional practice. For many, assessment has translated to customer satisfaction and for others, assessment has meant examining student learning outcomes or student development outcomes, but it seems few models have integrated the multiple dimensions of student affairs work of service, development and learning. Thus, a comprehensive assessment model that integrates the multiple facets of student affairs practice seems warranted.

A paradigm is described as a fundamental way of viewing the world (Babbie, 2004). It is a philosophical approach that guides practice, informs decisions, and serves as the backbone from which all-else flows. Using this approach, it is clear historically that the profession of student affairs has had three distinct paradigms that have guided the past 70 years of practice. Service, development, and learning have all served as the primary focus of our field, and the evolution of the profession can clearly be tracked through these three "paradigms." Student services, student development, and most recently, student affairs have all been names synonymous with those who purport to do student support type work. In reflecting on the history of the profession, it is interesting to see the extent that each paradigm has impacted the shaping of our professional purpose, mission, and focus.

The Paradigmatic Shifts of Student Affairs

In 1937 and 1949, a group of individuals gathered for the purpose of adding structure and intentionality to their emerging profession. The *Student Personnel Points*

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of View (American Council on Education, 1937; American Council on Education, 1949) were created and became an operational philosophy for the profession, and it has since been viewed as the springboard for the profession of student affairs. As seen in the 1949 document the cornerstone for students' personal and social wisdom was believed to be contingent upon the presence of comprehensive and intentional services (American Council on Education, 1949). The focus of the 1937 and 1949 "Points of View" gave way to the first professional paradigm for student affairs: service.

The profession continued to emerge with the integration of new students and new societal influences. In 1972, building on the desire to integrate a developmental understanding into college administrative practice, The Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education (COSPA) convened a group to review professional preparation in college student personnel work (Rentz, 1996). From this work, specific points of view emerged as "keystones" for the profession which encouraged and emphasized practitioners to shift professional focus from one of service to one that integrated student development.

Also in 1972, the American College Personnel Association commissioned a monograph titled *Tomorrow's Higher Education: A Return to the Academy* (Brown). The document was intended to redefine the role of the practitioner in relation to the institution and encourage practitioners to intentionally integrate student development into daily practice (Brown, 1972). The work of both Brown and COSPA brought forth student development as the second major professional paradigm for student affairs.

The profession continued utilizing this philosophy until some began to raise questions about the profession's focus. Higher education, societal expectations, and the needs of students began to change. Accountability shifted from something discussed to something that was expected, and the public began to challenge institutions to return to the primary purpose of higher education: student learning (American College Personnel Association, 1996).

In 1996, the Association of College Personnel Administrators (ACPA) published a document entitled the *Student Learning Imperative* (SLI). The primary purpose was to "stimulate discussion and debate on how student [affairs] professionals can intentionally create conditions that enhance student learning and personal development" (p. 1). Shortly after the SLI went into circulation, ACPA commissioned a group of scholars to create principles of good practice for student affairs (Blimling, Whitt, & Associates, 1998; Blimling & Whitt, 1999). The end result became a book entitled, *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs* (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). While the SLI encouraged a focus on both learning and development, "Good Practices" focused solely on how to integrate learning, not learning and development, and advised practitioners to shift to a philosophy that embraces student learning.

Soon after, other documents surfaced. *Powerful Partnerships* (American Association of Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of College Personnel Administrators, 1998), and *Learning Reconsidered* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004) continued to advance the need for student affairs practitioners to focus on student learning. Once again, the profession began to shift focus. The new emerging trend became student learning, and this evolved into the third paradigm of student affairs.

Through the years, a case has been built as to why each paradigm is important to the profession of student affairs. Each philosophical approach has been integral in driving the evolution of the profession, and each approach serves as a cornerstone for meeting the needs of students, but in doing so have we neglected the true comprehensive nature of our work by focusing only on one paradigm at a time? Clearly student affairs has a responsibility to provide quality services, practitioners have a duty to facilitate the development of students, and the profession has an obligation to enhance the learning of clientele, but at no point in our professional history has there been acknowledgment of the need to focus on all three concurrently.

Today, student affairs success hinges on how we embrace an ever evolving higher education landscape. In the past three decades, higher education has been transformed by a more diversified student population, a greater accountability of student learning, a sweeping integration of information access and technology, and most pressing today, a call for greater accountability. Each contributes to the growing complexity faced by student affairs practitioners. These complicating variables have challenged the profession to a new level of responsibility and accountability where an isolated focus is no longer accepted as best practice. Future expectations of the student affairs profession is an operation that integrates comprehensively the philosophies of service, development, and learning within an accountability frame.

The Emergence of Assessment

Assessment is the clear link in demonstrating greater responsibility. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) made reference to this fact by saying student affairs will have to respond to external and internal pressures for accountability by providing evidence that funding for nonacademic programs is wise. Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) stated that assessment is a means by which student affairs can demonstrate its importance and worth, a means for measuring the quality of programs and services, and a means for measuring students' development and learning.

Assessment has historically been viewed as a strategy for advancing the field of student affairs. It is apparent that service, development and learning are each integral to student affairs work and to the advancement of the profession. It is for this purpose that a new approach to assessment is needed, one that integrates the philosophies of the past into a new comprehensive paradigm which also

incorporates accountability. The future of student affairs rests in our ability to embrace and implement the proposed model systematically into daily practice.

The Development of the Model

The new comprehensive assessment model for student affairs was born from a series of discussions around the question: What should an assessment model look like for a division seeking to become "premier"? Three components emerged in the responses and subsequent review of the literature. First, the model should be comprehensive. Each philosophy (services, development, and learning) is equally important to the field despite the recent singular focus on learning, and each should be addressed and assessed with equal rigor in order to meet the growing demands of our student population. Second, the model should be intentional and systematic in guiding practitioners to realistic and relevant student outcomes. A strong assessment model should provide a step-by-step sequential process in order to ensure accuracy and success of implementation by practitioners. Finally, embedded in the systematic approach of the model, the assessment process should be iterative. By directing evaluation findings back to the model's foundations of mission and strategic plans for the division or department, practitioners have opportunities to know when, where, and how they are demonstrating organizational effectiveness. This approached thus increases divisional accountability (see Figure 1). This process is often referred to as "closing the loop," a practice emulated and affirmed in recent assessment literature (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Maki, 2001).

A New Comprehensive Assessment Model for the Division of Student Affairs

Foundation

The base or foundation of the model heralds the mission of the university, the mission of student affairs and a division's strategic goals. Within this foundation, although unlisted, are each department's interrelated mission and objectives. The model's fluidity hinges on the cohesiveness of the foundation. As departments consider their mission and objectives, it is critical that each department be fully aligned with the mission of their division and the university before engaging in assessment. If a department moves forward with assessment and is unaware or unsure of its place in the foundation of the model, subsequent objectives and outcomes could be fundamentally misguided. Alignment of goals and objectives is a critical component in student affairs supporting the mission and objectives of the institution (American Association of Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of College Personnel Administrators, 1998) and it is an essential foundational step to this model.

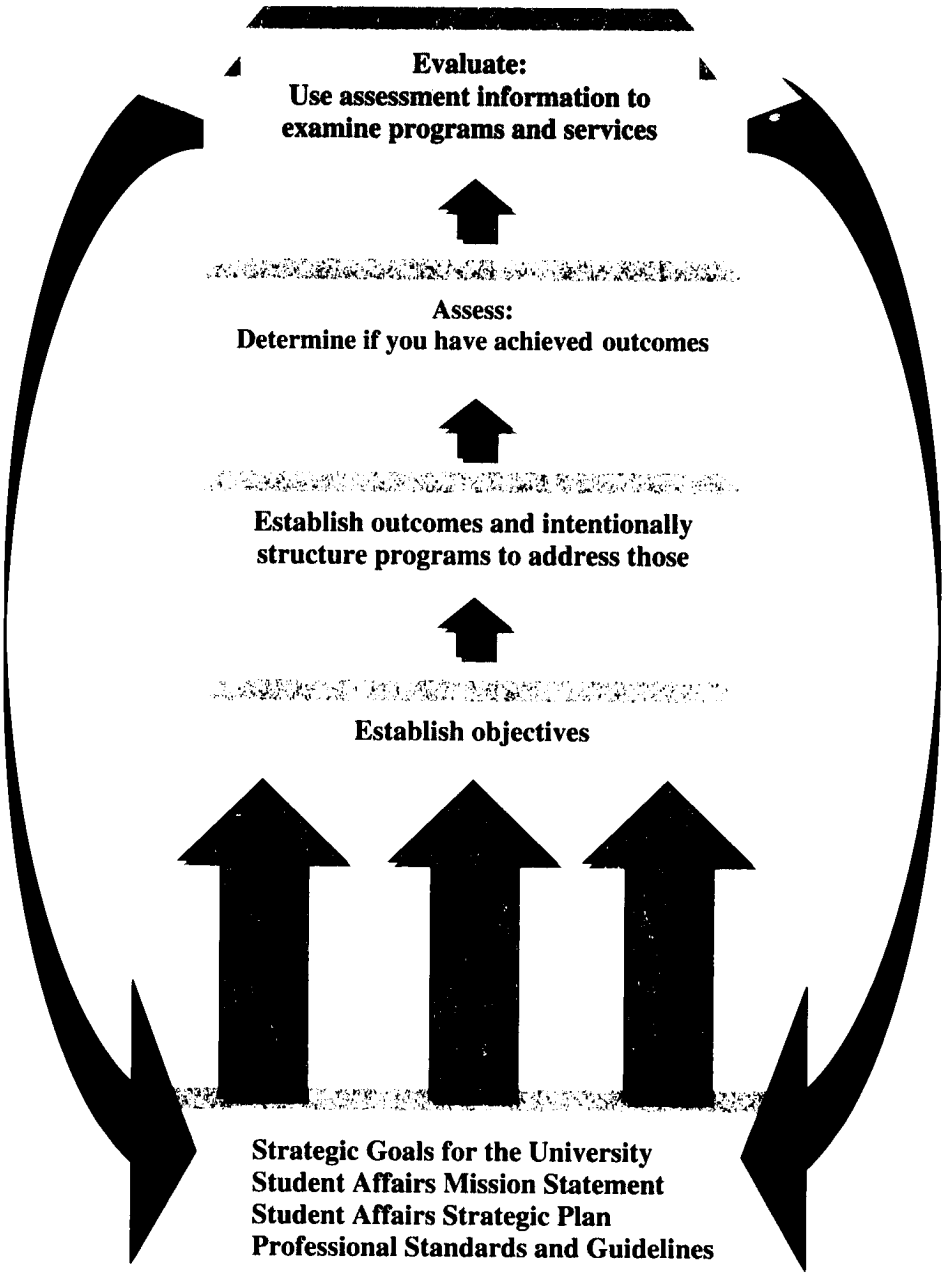

Figure 1. Assessment Evaluation Model

Another critical component of the foundational phase is the use of professional standards to guide assessment efforts. While different functional areas of student affairs have their own standards and guidelines, most have been developed in concert with the Council on the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, nd). The CAS standards not only challenge practitioners, they also serve as a map that guides work enhancing institutional effectiveness. The standards also propose to develop students through opportunities that challenge and support critical thinking. While the use of professional standards developed by professional associations is voluntary, they provide practitioners with a needed instruction manual to review goals and functional areas that help determine the extent to which departments are meeting the established objectives (Mable, 1991).

The Arrows

Moving beyond the foundation of the model, the three philosophies, service, development, and learning, as designated by arrows pointing upward, signify the importance of their connection to the building blocks of assessment, and pointing upward toward a seamless and continuous process. Student affairs practitioners understand that service, development, and learning do not simply occur one time, but they are a continuous and evolving part of each student's college experience (American Association of Higher Education, 1991; American College Personnel Association, 1996; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004). Subsequently, for assessment to be accurate and effective, it should be a continuous process (Bresciani et al., 2004; Winston & Miller, 1994).

Step One: Select a Philosophical Area to Assess

In the service paradigm, assessment is often characterized as customer satisfaction; however, for the purpose of this model, the term service is one that incorporates multiple facets. Assessing service may translate into asking clients their opinion (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). It may also involve tracking the characteristics of users (Palomba & Banta, 1999), the patterns of office use, and the way in which students use a facility. Practitioners may also find it helpful to examine the service needs and wants of students (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Examples of service outcomes could include shortening wait times at the Health Center, increasing the number of Caucasian students who visit the African American Cultural Center, or decreasing the amount of vandalism that occurs to the student center during home football games.

Development, on the other hand, involves multiple dimensions of student growth. Areas such as moral, ethical, psychosocial and cognitive development; racial, identity, and spiritual development are only a few of the many concepts that can be considered within this paradigm. Assessing development may involve measuring a student's emotional growth, interdependence, or identity development, all components of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of psychosocial development. Assessing development may also lead practitioners to examine other

areas such as ethical reasoning or racial awareness to determine if their specific program enhanced students' growth in these areas. Such information gives confidence and credibility. As Bresciani et al. (2004) stated, "We cannot only speak with confidence about 'what we do,' but we can also discuss 'how well we do it'" (p.1).

While assessing development utilizes the concepts of student development theory, learning assessments examine "educationally purposeful activities" (American College Personnel Association, 1996, p.1). Such activities may be rooted in the philosophies of the *Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1996), *Learning Reconsidered* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004), in theories such as Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), or Baxter Magolda and King's Learning Partnerships (2004). Regardless of the guiding framework, the overarching purpose of assessing learning is to demonstrate the contribution student affairs makes to the overall educational experience (Bresciani et al., 2004).

With all three paradigms, the intentionality of the process is paramount. The practitioner must first identify the specific area they wish to target (service, development, or learning), have an understanding of the specific area within that paradigm they wish to target, and then align outcomes, objectives and curriculum that will facilitate the desired change. As stated by Bresciani et al., (2004), "Decades of cumulative research indicate that students respond to intentional activities that are linked to positive outcomes" (p. 1).

Step Two: Accountable Objectives

The paradigms in student affairs connect to the second step of assessment within the comprehensive model, which is the establishment of objectives. According to North Carolina State University's Committee on Undergraduate Program Review, objectives are "broad, general statements of [1] what the program wants students to be able to do and to know, or [2] what the program will do to ensure what students will be able to do and to know" (Committee on Undergraduate Program Review, 2001, Objectives section, para. 1). Thus, objectives describe what the program hopes to accomplish and bring to life the mission of the department and division. When creating objectives, it is important to step back and reflectively examine if the objectives are truly connected to the department's mission. Are the objectives broad enough to encompass the desired experience? Are they important and meaningful not only to students, but to other student affairs and higher education stakeholders (Bresciani et al., 2004)? The objectives step, like all other subsequent steps in the model, acts as the first check-point to ensure that the program being created is truly connected and accountable to the institution, the division and the individual department.

Step Three: Accountable Outcomes

Creating outcomes which measure the end result of objectives is the third step in the model. Outcomes are more specific statements derived from objectives. When creating outcomes, it is important to think with the end in mind. What do you hope students learn or gain from your program or service? The use of active verbs such as identify, solve, or demonstrate, gives the specificity needed for outcomes to be measurable. Careful attention should be given to avoid vague words that are open for interpretation (Palomba & Banta, 1999). Though outcomes are specific by nature. They cover a broad scope of territory ranging from program or service outcomes, to student learning and development outcomes, and to faculty and staff outcomes (Bresciani, 2003).

Step Four: Assessment

The fourth step of the model involves testing and measuring the intended outcomes of your program or service. Assessment is commonly understood within student affairs as, "any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional or agency effectiveness" (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 18). Indicative of its definition, assessment can employ several techniques. The trick is choosing a technique or combination of techniques which can truly measure the intended outcomes. It is important that practitioners choose wisely which assessment technique to utilize. There are many resources that can guide practitioners in this intricate process (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001; Bresciani, 2003; Bresciani et al., 2004; Palomba & Banta, 1999).

Step Five: Evaluation

The fifth step of the model is the evaluation of stated outcomes. Evaluation is defined as "any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 18). This step is often the most difficult part of assessment because it requires a critical look at program effectiveness. The purpose of evaluation is for program improvement, as well as recognition of meaningful work. Evaluation is situated at the pinnacle of the model because it is at this point that the model loops back and the process begins again. The hope is that the information gained through the evaluation is used in improving future program outcomes and confirming that the programs and services in place are meeting the stated outcomes. As Palomba and Banta (1999) stated, doing assessment is not enough, the data must be used to make improvements. The evaluation step should provide a time to consider improvements and a time to celebrate how the intended outcomes contribute to student success and to the mission of the department and division.

Conclusion

Assessment is not a new concept for the field of student affairs. As previously discussed, assessment language is found in some of the earliest professional documents (American Council on Education, 1937; 1949) and points toward an intentional connection between understanding and improving practice. Because this model is comprehensive, it will give practitioners from a variety of student affairs units a point of commonality and direction to pursue assessment together. In the past, assessment practice has often been viewed as sporadic, endemic to particular departments, or practiced through student satisfaction only. To infuse a culture of assessment and implement a user-friendly practice, a comprehensive assessment model is needed.

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) pointed toward the comprehensive nature of assessment as they outlined several reasons for its importance to student affairs. They contend that assessment is important to survival and demonstration of worth, to the quality of programs, cost effectiveness, strategic planning and policy development, and accreditation. This model places student affairs in the position to respond to stakeholders and administrators questions such as: How does student affairs contribute to learning? Is student affairs competitive with industry standards? What are students gaining from programs and services? By taking a comprehensive approach to assessment and ensuring that all paradigms, service, development, and learning are represented, this model leads to greater accountability and organizational effectiveness. Because this model systematically connects the mission of a student affairs division with individual departments' objectives and outcomes, practitioners should be able to integrate the concepts in a relevant, pragmatic manner.

This article was intended to be an introduction to a new comprehensive assessment practice within student affairs. We believe this model can act as a compass to help student affairs divisions navigate their own unique assessment culture, and we also believe this model is inclusive enough to provide a framework for implementing training with practitioners from diverse specializations.

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