Closing That Loop:

Effective Assessment in Student Activities

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ASSESSMENT JUST DOESN'T SEEM TO GO AWAY, DOES IT? Student affairs educators discuss it at conferences, in publications, and during meetings and workshops. Yet, we continue to struggle incorporating assessment meaningfully into our daily work. We assume that "adding assessment" means "adding 20 hours to our already packed schedules." However, by looking at assessment through a different lens, while also changing how we complete our work, we can close the assessment loop and effect positive change in programming and beyond.

A Crash Course in Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment is "any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, or divisional effectiveness," whereas evaluation is "any effort to use assessment evidence to improve that effectiveness" (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, pp. 18-19). Assessment is either quantitative, assigning numbers to represent objects, events or observations; or qualitative, collecting descriptions of behaviors, accounts, attitudes or beliefs (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). We use the results of assessment to evaluate the impact or effectiveness of our policies, programs, services and facilities, and to continuously improve them.

So why do we do it? We assess and evaluate to remain accountable for programs, resources and participants; continuously improve programs and processes; increase staff morale; increase efficiency; demonstrate credibility; communicate information more effectively; and ensure that students are developing and learning in beneficial ways (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

Types of Assessment in Student Affairs

There are eight types of assessment that student affairs educators can use to compile data in support of evaluation (Schuh & Associates, 2009):

- **Utilization:** We track who uses our programs, services and facilities, both in terms of quantity of uses (overall raw numbers) and individual uses (repeated uses by one individual).
- **Needs:** We attempt to understand our students' desires or needs to help them succeed academically and developmentally.
- **Satisfaction:** We attempt to collect feedback regarding how positively or negatively students view our policies, programs, services and facilities.
- **Learning outcomes:** We want to ensure that our students are growing holistically, in and out of the classroom. Institutions develop learning outcomes based on mission and values, as well as the goals of individual divisions, departments or programs. Outcomes are specific and action-oriented, expressing what students will be able to know or do. They are measureable, identifiable and observable (Gahagan, Dingfelder, and Pei, 2010).
- **Cost effectiveness:** We must remain effective stewards of dollars entrusted to us by our students, institutions and governing bodies, so we examine our cost per user.

The remaining are atypical in terms of student affairs educators' day-to-day work, but are still essential pieces in assessment and evaluation on campus.

- **Analyzing environment, culture and climate** explores how our students feel in or about the campus community.
- **Benchmarking** compares our offerings and outcomes against other institutions, and identifies best, high-impact practices.
- **Professional standards** from NACA, CAS, AAC&U, ACPA, and NASPA help guide our work.

The Assessment and Evaluation Process

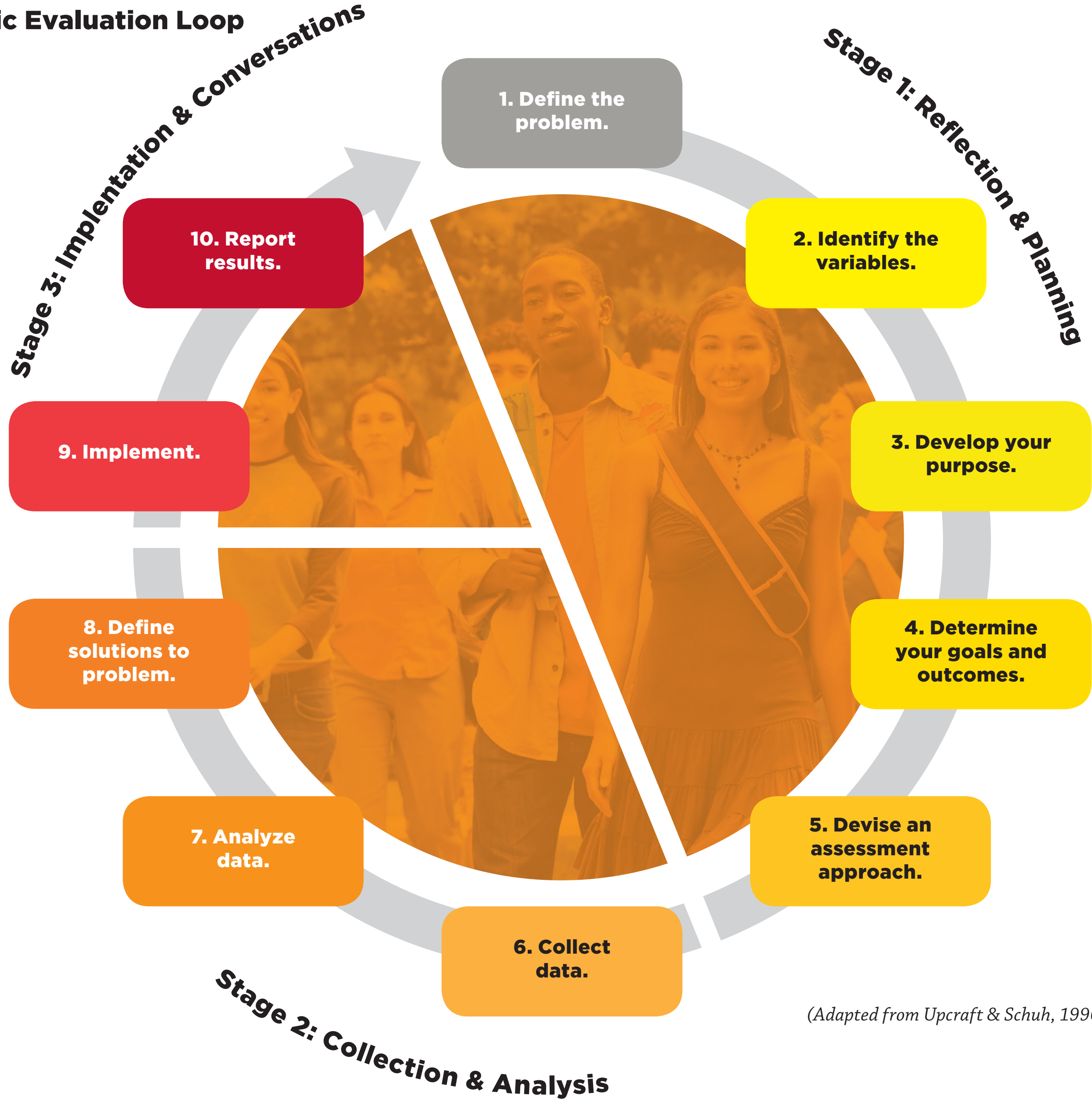
How does the assessment and evaluation process actually work, though? Student affairs educators can easily become overwhelmed by the prospect of conducting assessment, and by possible outcomes or ramifications. Often, we do not know where to begin. However, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) provide a comprehensive framework for the assessment process, which has been adapted in the graphic on Page 7.

This process describes 10 steps broken into three stages. The first encourages student affairs educators to reflect on the (1) problem or question our department, division or institution hopes to resolve, while also (2) understanding its context through different variables. This, in turn, helps us (3) develop purpose and (4) determine goals or intended outcomes of the project, as well as (5) devising the most appropriate methodology.

The second stage puts the assessment plan to work by executing the quantitative, qualitative, or mixed design and (6) collecting data, which student affairs educators will then (7) analyze in order to (8) formulate actionable recommendations to introduce change.

Finally, the student affairs educator takes those recommendations and (9) implements them, such as changes to policy or process, adding or eliminating a program or service, or upgrading a facility, while also (10) tracking changes or impacts so as to report the results of the purported solutions.

Basic Evaluation Loop



(Adapted from Upcraft & Schuh, 1996)

In this process, assessment is never-ending. Solutions will introduce change, which may introduce new or different problems or questions, thus causing the process to begin again.

STATIC Closes That Loop: Suggestions for Easy and Effective Assessment

The Student Activity Committee (STATIC) is the campus programming board at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), which has developed a comprehensive assessment and evaluation plan to help guide its work. It consists of various activities that produce meaningful data, inform the board of campus trends and opinions, and encourage meaningful change, without overburdening its executive board and advisor.

1. Event Analysis Form: The student chair and the advisor reflect upon an event and provide feedback and data relating to general event information, attendance, ticket sales, cost, quantitative data based on a five-point Likert scale, and qualitative feedback based on impressions and experiences of the board and participants.

2. Campus Programming Survey: This is a large campus survey, which is distributed annually to a proportional sample of undergraduate and graduate students. The survey asks students if they attended particular events. If the student responds with "no," they are prompted to answer why, and then proceed to the next event. If the student responds with "yes," they are asked to rate satisfaction with staffing, venue, artist and ticket price, and then indicate why they attended the event.

3. Pre- or Post-Show Survey: This is a very brief (four or five question) survey, given to participants while waiting to enter or exit an event. Each question collects immediate, in-the-moment feedback regarding artist selection, performance, venue comfort, security, ticket price and marketing. The survey takes no more than one minute.

4. Student Learning Outcomes Satisfaction Survey: This is a homegrown survey developed by the IUP Student Affairs Division. It asks students (leaders or participants) to rank, using a five-point Likert scale, 22 questions about their experiences with a program. Each question is mapped to specific learning outcomes.

5. Staff Evaluation Forms: This form is broken into three categories, based on skill areas: event management, professionalism, and leadership and teamwork. Each category lists various "I" statements, and staff rate themselves and their peers on a five-point Likert scale, as well as offer any clarifying comments. Each statement is mapped to learning outcomes, job descriptions or expectations. Staff members receive an evaluation from themselves, a peer, and the advisor. The data is aggregated and the advisor hosts a one-on-one meeting, discussing performance and growth.

6. Group Effectiveness Scale: This is a short survey asking staff to evaluate the effectiveness of the organization. It asks 10 questions, each related to how the board operates and how staff members interact with each other, and uses a five-point Likert scale.

7. SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) Analysis: Students are asked to reflect upon their experiences with and perspectives of the organization, and to identify different influencing factors for each. It's used regularly in strategic planning, often as part of semester trainings.

8. New Event Preference Survey: This short survey can be administered either at promotional tables in the student union building or on the central quad, or electronically to a sample of undergraduate and graduate students. It asks four to five questions regarding possible events or artists, and encourages students to submit suggestions.

9. Marketing Assessment: This is a brief survey, asking one to four questions, including where the participant learned about the event, satisfaction with advertising on campus, and preferences regarding advertising. It should take no more than one minute to complete.

10. Semester and Annual Reports: These are compendia of all assessment data gathered during the semester, including organizational highlights, event overviews, campus initiative involvement, professional development opportunities, collaborations, budget usage and analyses, event analyses, and ticket sales analyses. The annual report includes meta-analyses of the semester reports and overviews of each assessment project. These reports, and the associated data, help STATIC tell its story, showcasing its positive impacts on campus.

In each of these assessment methods, STATIC has clearly stated goals for use, as well as questions or problems it attempts to answer or resolve. Each methodology is concretely implemented and vetted by institutional researchers for reliability and validity. Each produces actionable outcomes and supports improvement in programming and operations.

What Does It All Mean?

For student affairs educators, what makes assessment effective? Upcraft and Schuh (1996) defined effective assessment as connecting to institutional values and mission; assisting in the development of learning outcomes; identifying goals and action steps at its conclusion; establishing a process, and following the process as outlined; informing future assessment activities; representing all students fairly; treating all students ethically; remaining usable by staff; promoting change; and sharing responsibility across the department, division or program.

Walvoord (2010) asserts that the "end" of assessment is always action. That action, through changes, revisions or additions of policies and programs, will subsequently require further study, by way of assessment. Our work in student affairs is ever evolving, and our students never remain the same. We must remain nimble and consistently examine the impact and effectiveness of our offerings.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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