

Assessment and Learning Outcomes In Student Activities

by Del Suggs

There is generally one time when all student activities professionals think about assessment: when they are facing reaccreditation. While that's understandable, and necessary, it's unfortunate that we don't look at assessment as a means of evaluating our campus programs. Let's take a look at assessment, and consider some ways to do a better job with programming on campus.

What Is Assessment? Assessment is an evaluation of learning. It's essentially a measurement process of the learning that has either taken place or can take place. Assessment is all activities that teachers and students undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning. (Black and Wiliam, 1998)

Why Do Assessment? First of all, because Assessment determines the effectiveness of learning. Second, it's a diagnostic tool that can be used to improve learning. And third, because your Boss expects It! Assessment has become an important tool in evaluating the teaching/learning process.

What Does *Learning Reconsidered* Say About Assessment?

It is "important that assessment methods focus primarily on *student learning* rather than on student satisfaction." Remember that the learning is what is being assessed-- not how much students enjoyed the program activity.

"Student affairs professionals need to work closely with their faculty colleagues to help create classroom conditions that support and assess social and personal development as well as traditional learning." We all know that it is difficult to test for learning outcomes in Student Affairs. More accurate and efficient evaluation of learning outcomes from student activities might come from classroom assessment-- if faculty will assist in such assessment. In a perfect world--

or campus-- the faculty would also be assessing learning from student activities. They have the classrooms and testing facilities to do it.

Why Is Assessment So Difficult in Student Affairs?

Because Student Affairs deals with two different sets of students. First, Student Affairs works directly with individual students involved with Campus Activities Board, SGA, and other organizations. It's a little more straight-forward to assess the learning that takes place with these students

Second, Student Affairs provides programs for the entire student body. As you know, it's a real challenge to assess the learning that takes place with students who are attending and participating in a program or event.

It is possible to assess both, but it requires different tools and techniques for each group.

Assessment Begins with Learning Outcomes

Learning Outcomes define what is to be learned. They establish conditions for success, the means of determining that learning has occurred.

Student learning outcomes are truly the first step in intentional programming and assessment. Yogi Berra said it best: "If you don't know where you're going, you'll wind up some where else." Student learning outcomes help you to know where you're going.

Whether you're embracing **Learning Reconsidered** or following the **CAS standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education)**, you'll find learning outcomes to be a valuable road map. It's a simple matter to develop them for your programs. Here are some basic guidelines.

What Are Learning Outcomes?

Learning Outcomes define the goals of learning experiences. They define what a student should be able to know, do, or value as a result of engaging in that learning experience.

Learning outcomes define IMPACT: how has the student changed as a result of the learning experience?

"The Achievement of Learning Outcomes (student success) measures the Institution's effectiveness." (Keeling and Associates 2007)

The ABC's of Learning Outcomes

Audience

Behavior

Condition

Degree of Achievement

(R. Heinich, M. Molenda, J. Russell, S. Smaldino, 2002).

Developing Learning Outcomes

Follow the formula:

Condition Audience Behavior (and sometimes) **Degree**

Here is an example without Degree

(Condition)

"After attending the leadership conference"

(Audience)

"Students"

(Behavior)

"Will demonstrate servant leadership behaviors"

Here is an example *with* Degree

(Condition)

"After viewing the film 'Snow White'"

(Audience)

"the audience"

(Behavior)

"Will be able to name"

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(Degree)
 "At least five of the seven dwarfs."

That's pretty straightforward. Of course, nothing is truly easy, or at least we all seem to believe that. So keep these ideas in mind while you're developing your learning outcomes.

1. Start small. Don't try to develop learning outcomes for your entire schedule of events at once. Select one or two to begin with, preferably reoccurring traditional events. That way you can use those learning outcomes every year.

2. Make a list of what students should know or be able to do or demonstrate after a specific program. Turn that list into learning outcomes.

3. Don't over think. Learning outcomes can be basic, like the "Snow White" example.

4. Keep them assessable. Don't use behaviors like "will understand" or "will appreciate" because they may be too difficult to assess. Use behaviors like "will identify" or "can list" because that is a behavior you can assess simply.

5. Finally, relate your learning outcomes to the larger objectives and outcomes you are seeking. Whether it's *Learning Reconsidered's Seven Student Outcomes*, the six **FALDOs** of the **CAS Standards**, or your own campus' goals and objectives, make sure your outcomes are in line.

Assessment Techniques

There are three main assessment techniques used in Student Affairs: Direct Assessment; Indirect Assessment; and, Program Assessment.

Direct Assessment

Direct assessment is most useful with smaller groups like CAB, SGA, or other

student organizations where the staff member works directly with students.

Direct assessment:

- Should Utilize Learning Outcomes
- May involve locally developed exams
- Include Performance Appraisals by supervisors and/or self
- Cover Experiential and capstone/keystone courses and projects

Indirect Assessment

Indirect Assessment is used to assess the larger groups, such as the student body or the participants in a particular program or activity.

Indirect Assessment:

- Should Utilize Learning Outcomes
- May involve Exit Surveys
- Include a Reflection Component
- May utilize Web Surveys

Survey Techniques

Before creating and using any survey, take the time to learn about surveys. It is a very effective assessment tool when used properly. However, it does involve the accurate use of scientific standards and protocol. Be aware of everything that goes into creating and undertaking a survey.

- Utilize Random Sampling
- Adequate Response Rate: 60% to 80% of those polled
- Do a Pilot Test
- Use Incentives to encourage response (raffles, etc.)
- Create protocol for follow-up

Program Assessment

Program assessment goes beyond your learning outcomes. It deals with the overall effectiveness of your student development programs. It may involve the evaluation of student success in a number of different areas.

Some indicators of effective Student Development programs include:

- Data such as Graduation and Retention rates
- Headcounts at events
- GPA of student leaders
- Level of Student involvement in the Community, etc.

American Association for Higher Education suggests these **Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning**

Number One:

Assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement.

Number Two:

Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.

Number Three:

Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.

Number Four:

Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.

Number Five:

Assessment works best when it is ongoing-- not episodic.

Number Six:

Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.

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Number Seven:

Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.

Number Eight:

Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.

Number Nine:

Through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.

In Conclusion:

1. Incorporate Assessment from the beginning. Always be thinking "How will I assess this outcome?"
2. Start Small with Direct Assessment. Work on your CAB/SGA Officers, and those students you work with directly.
3. Consider Longitudinal Results: Not All Learning Is Instantaneous!
4. Use Your Results To Improve Learning. Afterall, that is the primary purpose of assessment.

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