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# Assessment of Student Learning and Development

## **MORE THAN A PLUG N' PLAY**

BY MARILEE J. BRESCIANI

**You have heard it before. You may have even said it yourself, "I don't have time to do assessment. Just give me the form to complete or tell me which box to check. I just want to be done with it." These words used to raise my eyebrows, but now I just smile.**

**Every student affairs professional I know is overworked, underpaid, and underappreciated. I truly understand that the last thing you and your colleagues have time for is another responsibility. Yet, one could argue that assessment is not an added responsibility and that high-quality programming has always required an evaluation component to learn if that programming has been effective (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996).**

**This article explains why engaging in assessment is worth your consideration and investment and why assessment requires meaningful reflection, not just a fill-in-the-blank response.**



### **What is Assessment?**

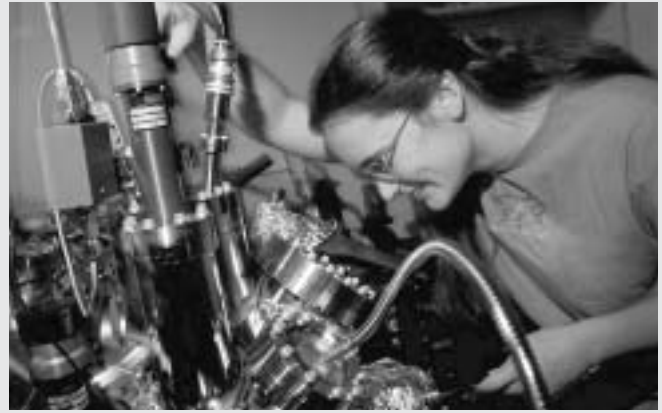
Palomba and Banta (1999) define assessment as the “systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development.” To engage in assessment, simply ask yourself the following questions (Bresciani, 2002) about any of your programs:

- What are we trying to do and why are we doing it?
- What do we expect the student to know or to do as a result of our program?
- How well are we doing it?
- How do we know?
- How do we use the information to improve?
- Does that work?

These questions may seem very simple. When we are busy, we rarely take time to reflect on what we are trying to accomplish. Merely setting aside the time to think about the reasons behind our programs and evaluating end results can immensely improve our day-to-day thinking about assessment. There are some who would advocate that the evaluation process can be completed quickly and dumped into a form. In reality, meaningful assessment requires insightful reflection and an investment of the self.

### **What and Why?**

Many professionals do reflect on “What are we trying to do and why are we doing it?” as they formulate missions and goals for their programs. If assessment were that easy, two boxes from a standard form could be supplied—one for mission and one for goals. You could pop answers into them and continue. However, thoughtful answers can truly inform your missions and goals and ensure that what you have articulated accurately reflects what you wish your programs to accomplish.



## Student Outcomes

Assessment, as you know, does not stop with identifying your mission and goals. The next tough question is “What do we expect the student to know or to do as a result of our program?” While many times the next box to complete asks how we are going to accomplish the stated mission and goals, assessment takes it one step further by asking you to articulate your end result. In other words, if you plan six workshops on leadership development, what will students who attend one or more of those workshops be able to do and what will they know as a result of their participation? Again, assessment asks you to articulate the identifiable, observable, or measurable end result of that program. That measurable end result is called an outcome.

You can always plug in some outcome-like words for a report, but identifying the actual result of a particular task requires reflection. If you are trying to create leaders from your workshops, how do you know the workshops have been effective? How do you know that the participants can examine issues, communicate the problems which were synthesized from the review of information, garner resources for the solution, and influence decision makers to pay attention to the debate?

Many programs improve after meaningful consideration of the question, “What do we expect the student to know or to do as a result of our program?” Resources may be reorganized and time may be reallocated when it is discovered that programs are missing significant pieces of information or include largely irrelevant sections. Programs have been reduced from 15 to six annual workshops because program managers recognized that valued content could be delivered more efficiently and effectively in a restructured format.

## Intended Results

After articulating outcomes, the next logical question is “How well are we doing what we said we would accomplish?” Merely posing this question causes reflection and invites professionals to examine their programs and to identify opportunities to capture evidence. Many times, what students should know and do as a result of the program are not communicated in a measurable manner. The end results of programs reside in the unattainable, unidentifiable, ineffable

realm. Answering the question “How well are we doing?” (e.g., outcome) causes reflection on the end result of a program, what the result will look like, and how professionals will know it when they see it.

The conversations that emerge from identifying the end result cause many professionals to refine their outcomes as they begin to discuss what each intended result looks like. Many derive lists of criteria or rubrics identifying valued and desired learning and development traits in students. Such conversations encourage program refinement to ensure that the criteria linked to the end result are delivered somewhere in the program.

The answer to the end result question assumes that professionals will build data-capturing devices into the body of the program, thus ensuring the collection of evidence. This step typically requires some additional reorganization and reworking of services. You can see why filling in a template with a pull-down box is not necessarily the most effective assessment planning process.

## Data Collection

Similar to the question “How well are we doing?” is the question “How do we know?” The “how do we know” piece infers that evidence gathered from the “how well we are doing” step is analyzed and interpreted. Many professionals fall down at this step and do not always plan the time to look at the data and reflect on what it is demonstrating. It is easy to plug the numbers into a spreadsheet and then slide them into a canned report. It is quite another process to look at what the data is saying and to determine if a program is working.

It may be necessary to seek assistance in interpreting the data—this can save you time and should be planned for if needed. While statisticians are available on most campuses to run analyses, interpretation of that data is often difficult for an outside contractor. You know your program best and you know what you are trying to accomplish. The statistician can tell you if you are interpreting the numbers correctly, but you must apply that interpretation to the “how do you know” question. Otherwise, the meaningful portion of assessment—the application of evidence to decisions about outcomes—may fall apart.



## Program Improvement

If you are conducting assessment and have used a template in which you have entered words and numbers with little reflection on their meaning, you most likely will be very frustrated at this stage of the assessment process. As you can see, for assessment to come full circle, reflection is required at each step of the process. All of the time you have invested begins to pay off.

At this stage in the assessment process, you must document the decisions you have made for a particular outcome based on the evidence you have collected and interpreted. Here is where you begin to come full circle, often referred to as “closing the loop” (Maki, 2001). You make decisions to either change the “why” or “what” of the program and document your plans to refine the implementation or assessment process. It is also the place to celebrate your accomplishments.

You can slap a decision into a template, but if it was a decision you knew you would make before gathering any assessment data then why waste your resources on the assessment process? Make decisions as a part of the assessment planning process and then design your evaluation methods to determine whether those decisions were effective.

## Does It Work?

Finally, the question of all questions, “Did the changes you made based on your assessment evidence work?” This does not mean that you need to assess the same things every year. Once you make a decision to change something in a program, the ability to make a change and to see the effects of that change will take time. Immediately reassessing the outcomes may be a waste of resources. Completion of this portion of the assessment template is very difficult without reflection.

## Reflection and Resources

The need for reflection is the primary reason why assessment can not be a “plug-n-play.” It is difficult to place the end result of meaningful reflection in a box. Many professionals need help understanding how to engage in the assessment process.

There are a number of informational resources to assist you with the assessment process. If you need more time, there is no such thing. You may need to reallocate time spent on other activities to time spent on assessment. In addition, you can leverage time and expertise from your students—both student leaders and those students who cause you to question why you are in this field.

Banta, Black, and Kline (2001) write that student affairs professionals “need to provide credible evidence of the value and effectiveness of their programs. More importantly, assessment is a means of discovering new information about our programs that will help us improve them.”

Think of assessment as discovery and improvement. Understanding how to develop your program not only requires meaningful reflection on “why” and “what,” but also careful planning. While there are many tools and templates to assist you in implementing your program and its evaluation, those tools have little value to you, your program, or your students if you simply pick them up and drop them into place with no regard for your institutional culture and climate. Reflection is inevitable. Done well, your investment in assessment will have many valuable uses. ♦

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