

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enhancing the professionalisation of student affairs through assessment

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Abstract

The past decades have seen an increase in the attention and focus of student affairs work in Africa. As the profession works to strengthen its reputation and value within higher education through conferences, organisations and publications, student affairs professionals can also raise the stature of the profession through work on their individual campuses. Engaging in assessment may be one such opportunity. As a way to create a common language regarding student affairs assessment, this paper provides an overview of the definitions, types and purposes of assessment. The thought is that viewing assessment as an integral, rather than ‘extra’ aspect of student affairs and incorporating these activities within their work, student affairs professionals will not only improve the effectiveness of their work with students but also can help legitimise the field as a profession.

Keywords

assessment, student affairs, best practices, higher education.

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Describing the role of student affairs within higher education can be difficult. Whereas most individuals understand the role and importance of faculty and administration within an institution, student affairs professionals may struggle to articulate the role they play within institutions to someone unfamiliar with higher education or student affairs. Most could explain that faculty members are responsible for educating students and for creating new knowledge through research; administrators are responsible for the bureaucratic aspect of the organisation, providing leadership to the institution. Student affairs professionals, ironically, may be involved in all of these activities, yet because they may not be attached to an academic department nor directly reporting to chief administrators, their work may be misunderstood or overlooked. As Sandeen and Bar (2006) question “even in the earliest years of the profession, student affairs struggled with its identity on the campus. Was it

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part of the faculty, part of the administration, or did it occupy some ambiguous position between the two?” (p. 33).

The past 15 years have seen an increase in the attention and focus of the work of student affairs professionals in Africa. Documents such as the UNESCO-sponsored *Student affairs and services in higher education* (2009) also helped to communicate the important work of student affairs:

Student affairs and services professionals, along with teaching faculty, bring to the academy a particular expertise on students, their development and the impact of their learning environments ... They are closely aligned with the academic mission and serve as invaluable links between students and the institution. (Ludeman & Strange, 2009, p. 8)

The World Higher Education Declaration (1998), creation of the IASAS (IASAS, n.d.), and annual conferences of the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) and African Student Affairs Conference suggest an interest by student affairs professionals in becoming more recognised and valued within African higher education.

In addition to these large-scale organisational activities, student affairs professionals can also raise the stature of the profession through their work on their individual campuses. This paper posits that engaging in assessment activities may be one way to enhance the professionalisation of student affairs. This paper will focus on the definitions, types and roles of assessment in student affairs. The purpose of this paper is to develop both a common language of assessment and illustrate the versatility and flexibility within assessment. The purposes of assessment will be described as a way of demonstrating the value of assessment in enhancing the stature of and respect for the student affairs profession.

The title ‘student affairs professional’ implies that student affairs is a profession. What constitutes a profession? Greenwood (1957) listed five characteristics of a profession: a) basis in systematic theory, b) authority recognised by clientele, c) broader community sanction and approval of that authority, d) ethical code regulating relations with clients and colleagues, and e) professional culture sustained by professional associations. Klegon (1978) examined the evolution of professions from a sociological perspective and suggested there are two dynamics at play in the development of a profession. The internal dynamic is the “efforts of practitioners to raise their status, define services which they perceive only they can perform properly, and to achieve and maintain autonomy and influence” (Klegon, 1978, p. 268). The external dynamic relates to the larger social and institutional forces that either contribute to or detract from the view of the work as a practice or true profession. Larger social and organisations structures need to value and be enhanced by the work of the profession (Klegon, 1978).

These characteristics provide insights into student affairs’ evolution from ‘practice’ to ‘profession’. Within the United States, student affairs has developed in response to the expansion of higher education and increasing complexity of the universities. In many cases, student affairs professionals were called upon to take on work that faculty members were no longer able to do and, in other cases, were created to meet the increased needs

and expectations of students and the larger public (Nuss, 2003; Sandeen & Barr, 2006). Simultaneously, more formalised positions and organisational structures were created as the number of student affairs practitioners increased and a professional community composed of professional organisations, journals and other professional development opportunities developed to provide ongoing support, training and discussion (Nuss, 2003). The first professional organisation, now known as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) was created in 1919 (Rhatigan, 2000).

Internationally, the formalisation of the professional student affairs organisation is more recent. Although initial discussions regarding an organisation started in 2000, the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS) was officially founded in March 2010 (IASAS, n.d.). Student affairs professionals exist in many different departments across institutions and many have participated in other national student affairs organisations such as the Association for College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) and the National Association of Student Affairs Administrators (NASPA). Other conferences have been specifically focused on African student affairs professionals. The South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) has hosted 14 yearly professional conference (SAASSAP, n.d.) and a national African student affairs conference was first held in Africa in 2011 (African Student Affairs Conference, 2011). The Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACHDHE), as a part of the Society for Student Counselling in Southern Africa (SSCSA), has existed since 1978 but is also entering its “professionalism phase” (Van Schoor, n.d.).

The need for student affairs work was legitimised in the World Declaration on Higher Education for the 21st century (1998). This document called for increased access for underrepresented groups, student involvement and “services ... to assist students in the transition to higher education” (World Declaration on Higher Education, 1998, p.1). Letseka and Maile’s (2008) report on high university drop-out rates also provides evidence that students affairs work – with its “consistent and persistent emphasis and commitment to the development of the whole person” (Nuss, 2003, p. 65) is needed to improve student success. In reflecting on the current context of higher education abroad, Ludeman *et al.* (2009) summarised, ‘there is increasing evidence that higher education also must address the basic personal needs of students by providing a comprehensive set of out-of-classroom student services and programmes commonly referred to as student affairs and services’ (p. iv).

Given the definitions of a profession listed above, it is evident that student affairs in Africa – with its development of professional organisations, legitimacy by internal and external stakeholders, and the larger society recognition of the need to improve college student access and success – is becoming more professionalised.

While the broader higher education community is demonstrating the need for student affairs professionals, how is this need perceived at the institutional level? Past research has verified the importance of student affairs work on student learning and success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) yet at the institutional level student affairs professionals may continue to struggle to articulate and demonstrate their value (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Since many

student affairs professionals are not teaching in traditional classroom settings, submitting grades for student's performance, or submitting manuscripts for publication, their impact on student success and student learning is less visible, and consequently often overlooked. The challenge, therefore, is to engage in practices and activities that do demonstrate learning and success. As mentioned previously, external organisations play a critical role in defining professionalism. If student affairs professionals are not seen as being integral in helping achieve the institutional mission, their value and status as a 'profession' may take longer to develop. Assessment – the practice of gathering and using data to make decisions and illustrate impact – is one way to achieve and maintain professionalism.

Definitions of assessment

Within higher education, assessment has been defined in a variety of ways. Palomba and Banta (1999) defined assessment as “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programmes undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development” (p. 4). Huba and Freed (2000) provide a more comprehensive definition of assessment, emphasising the content and application of learning:

The process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experience; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve learning. (p.8)

In their book *Assessment methods in student affairs*, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) define assessment as: “any effort to gather, analyse, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (p. 18). Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2012), also writing from a student affairs perspective, offer a definition of outcomes-based assessment: “a systematic and critical process that yields information about what programmes, services, or functions of a student affairs department or division positively contribute to students' learning and success and which ones should be improved” (p. 16).

The similarities and differences among definitions provide insight into assessment work. All definitions view assessment as a formalised process: assessment requires intentional planning with an articulated purpose and a set of guidelines that should be followed to meet this purpose. The assessment process involves an investment of time, resources, and reflection and requires both action and patience. The definitions of assessment are also similar in their focus on gathering evidence and utilising this evidence. Assessment necessitates the collection of data, interpreting the data, and then acting upon the data. In other words, simply disseminating a survey and tallying the results is not assessment. The true usefulness of assessment is then utilising the results to provide insight or make improvements to the entity being assessed.

Assessment, similar to profession, has its own language, definitions and constructs. If student affairs professionals proclaim that they contribute to student success, assessment is the vehicle by which these claims can be substantiated.

Common types of assessment

The differences in the assessment definitions acknowledge the multiple contexts in which higher education assessment is conducted and recognises the various ways assessment results can be used. Assessment can be focused at the individual, programme, department or university level. It can range from viewing the portfolios of a small group of students to measuring the university graduation rate of its students.

The definitions also imply that there are many different types of assessments that can be conducted. A few of the most common types of assessments are discussed below: measuring participation, needs assessment, satisfaction assessment, and outcomes assessment (Schuh, 2009).

Measuring participation assessments

Measuring participation – perhaps the least difficult type of assessment – is simply counting who may attend events, enrolment numbers, students who live in residence halls, join student organisation, apply for a specific scholarship, etc. This type of assessment can be useful when planning an activity, justifying the continuation of an event, or as in the case of enrolment numbers, provide a way to benchmark to past and future successes (Schuh, 2009).

Needs assessments

Needs assessment is the process of establishing if a need or problem exists and suggesting ways to reduce the problem or need (Fitzpatrick, Saunders & Worthen, 2011). For example, in the development of a new student centre or recreational facility, students may be surveyed to provide their opinions on the services or space that would best suit their needs. But, as Schuh (2009, p. 12) cautions, in doing needs assessment it is critical to remember that “needs are not the same as wants”.

Satisfaction assessments

Satisfaction assessment as it implies, is the process of understanding if participants are satisfied with their experience (Schuh, 2009). What did they like or dislike about a programme, a course, a leadership retreat? A caution applies here as well: measuring satisfaction is not the same as measuring learning. For instance, student members may be asked to participate in leadership training. In providing feedback they may suggest that the session on policy and procedures was “dull and boring” but the social events were “engaging and entertaining”. However, assessing what students learned as a result of these two sessions may provide different outcomes. While students may have mentioned that the policy and procedures session was ‘dull’ it may be the session in which students learned critical information to be successful in their positions. In conducting satisfaction assessments, professionals need to be cautious in interpreting results and be able to distinguish between what students like and what students learn.

Outcomes assessments

Assessing what students learn is a form of outcomes assessment. Outcomes assessment involves examining the extent to which the outcomes of a particular programme, course, or intervention were met (Bresciani *et al.*, 2012). These assessments can be challenging for a number of reasons.

One, in many cases programmes or courses or interventions have not specified the outcomes they hope to achieve. Course instructors, for instance, may provide a syllabus outlining what students are to do in a course but may not articulate what learning should occur as a result of completing the work. Programmes or departments may be developed without clearly outlining what they hope to accomplish or how they benefit the larger institutional community.

Secondly, when outcomes are identified, many times they are too vague to be adequately assessed. This introduces another challenge for outcomes assessment: developing strong outcome statements. For instance, a department may state that their students, as a result of their programme, will be global citizens or develop critical thinking skills, but without operationalised definitions of these terms, assessment can be difficult. A strong outcome is one that is clear and measurable (Suskie, 2010) and is written in a way that can be properly assessed.

A third challenge arises in the interpretation of the outcome measure. There is a tendency, as Astin and Antonio (2012) articulate, to equate outcome with impact. In other words, to infer a causal relationship between a programme or experience and the outcome. For instance, it is different to say that students who lived in the residence halls had a higher grade point average (GPA) than students who did not rather than it is to say that living in the residence halls caused students to have a higher grade point average. While living in residence halls may have positively influenced students' GPA, there may be other contributing factors.

However, by confronting these challenges, outcomes assessment, specifically those assessments that measure student learning, can be a powerful tool for student affairs professionals. In their article, "The role of student affairs in student learning assessment", Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) concluded:

Student affairs staff members need to have more than programs, activities, and experiences they think would contribute to student learning. They need to have the empirical evidence to be confident that these programs, activities, and experiences actually do contribute to student learning. (p. 12)

While many times this notion is assumed, outcomes-based assessment requires staff, faculty, and students to articulate what they hope to achieve and to measure these results (Dean, 2013). This process is especially critical when a programme has been taking place for several years. Outcomes-based assessment provides an opportunity to revisit why the programme was created in the first place and if it continues to be effective. With the turnover in positions and departments, the outcomes sometimes may be the consistency that continues to guide and direct.

The various types of assessments demonstrate the flexibility within which assessment can be done. Assessments that measure student learning may be most useful in communicating the role of student affairs in student learning, yet other types of assessments that evaluate need, gauge students' satisfaction or provide data by which to benchmark progress are also valuable. When communicated appropriately, assessment results can contribute to the institution's educational mission. Demonstrating their contributions to institutions' educational missions can be a critical component in raising the stature of student affairs professionalism.

Assessment as professionalism

Given the many responsibilities of student affairs professionals, it is not unusual that assessment is often neglected. In a US based study of student affairs professionals, Bresciani (2010) found that even at institutions that were committed to assessment, a majority of student affairs were reluctant to engage in this work or "struggle with the logistics of designing and implementing such a culture at their institutions" (Culp, 2012, pp. 2–3.) Frequently cited reasons for not engaging included lack of time, resources, and expertise (Bresciani, 2010; Culp, 2012; Schuh, 2009). As student affairs professionals cite many reasons why they cannot afford to engage in assessment, Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) offer a counter challenge, "How can we afford not to do assessment?" (p. 10). Writing primarily from a US context in which institutional and federal funding were closely tied to performance, departments and activities that were shown to improve student success were more likely to receive funding (Schuh, 2009). As student affairs professionals work to increase their recognition and elevate their status as a profession, this question is still worth considering: can you afford not to do assessment?

Successful student affairs professionals rely on the respect and support of others within the institution. Garnering this respect and support requires departments to demonstrate that they are stewards of resources, communicating how their work is critical to the educational mission and purpose of the institution and illustrating that continuous efforts are being made to reflect on one's work and improve.

Ewell (2008) concisely summarised two paradigms of assessment: accountability and improvement. Similar to Klegon's (1978) description of a profession, Ewell's paradigms have both an internal and external focus. The improvement paradigm is focused within the institution and its role is primarily formative assessment – assessment done with the purpose of improving. Data collected for improvement purposes can be quantitative or qualitative and can be used to track progress over time or compare individual units within an institution. Results are used to provide feedback to those most closely associated with the programme. Accountability is focused on those external to the institution – the public, government, policymakers. Data is primarily quantitative and used for reporting purposes or in benchmarked as a way to compare across institutions. Rarely, however, does this type of data get at the 'why' or make specific suggestions for improvement (Blimling, 2013).

These dual purposes illustrate the potential of assessment in enhancing the professionalisation of student affairs. In the US, student affairs professionals began to merge in the mid-1850s (Nuss, 2003) but the profession's focus on assessment is much more recent (Schuh, 1996). The call for assessment was in response to the profession's concerns that resources would be diverted away from student affairs unless the profession could more intentionally illustrate their value on college campuses. Heading this call and building this culture of evidence on campus has improved the stature of student affairs not only within individual intuitions but within the profession.

The African student affairs profession, even in its early development, has acknowledged the importance of assessment. Conference proceedings from the SAASSAP's (n.d.) annual conference (see, for example, Schreiber, 2012) and the UNESCO-sponsored, 'Student affairs and services in higher education' (Ludeman *et al.*, 2009), highlight assessment as a critical and integral role of student affairs professionals.

Nevertheless, simply acknowledging the importance of assessment is not enough. Engaging in assessment, while challenging, provides benefits not only for individual institutions and their students but also can enhance the reputation and respect of the broader profession.

Viewing assessment as an assumed expectation rather than 'add-on', student affairs professionals begin building a culture of evidence that illustrates how their work matters and how it contributes to the institution's mission (Culp, 2012). This approach, when based on a commitment to student success, can benefit those students for whom the work is intended. Assessment, when done well, encourages student affairs staff to improve their programmes and services and to demonstrate how their work develops well-educated and productive citizens. Assessment signals to both internal and external stakeholders that student affairs is a respected profession that plays a vital role in improving higher education and student success.

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