



Common Missteps in Assessment Building Blocks and How to Avoid Them (Part I of III)

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Introduction

In recent years, assessment has become a hot topic in student affairs and in higher education more generally and remains so today. Although the resources for assessment are growing exponentially, many practitioners are just beginning the assessment process and still others have hit bumps in the road. We thought professionals might benefit from a practical top-ten list to help them avoid common mistakes as they proceed in their assessment efforts. Assessment is one of those areas, like so many others in student affairs, in which a person can continually learn new things. Every assessment project brings with it a new set of issues, challenges, and opportunities. Assessment provides wonderful opportunities to learn, particularly because mistakes are frequent but salvageable. In reviewing our assessment experiences, our conversations with colleagues, and other learning opportunities, we found common themes. These themes are captured in the list of common missteps. Although a top-ten list may seem a bit light-hearted, it is meant to serve as a guide of not only what to avoid but, more importantly, it is meant to help professionals get on the path of effective and useful assessment.

Our top 10 list is broken into three segments. The first, which follows, focuses on four common assessment missteps surrounding the ground work that underlie assessment efforts. The second and third segments, to be covered in upcoming articles, include four common missteps related to planning and conducting assessment activities and two common missteps related to reporting and evaluating assessment projects. Throughout these segments, we will include concrete examples, strategies, and alternatives. Our examples come largely from our own experiences and those of colleagues. These examples are meant to begin dialogue and conversation about assessment so we welcome suggestions, feedback and further examples from readers.

Top 10 Common Missteps

The first four common missteps center on issues related to the ground work that underlie assessment efforts. They are often the assumptions that guide assessment and, in some cases, doom assessment. These missteps can cause professionals to become suspicious of any new or continuing assessment efforts.

Misstep 1. Doing assessment just so you can say you're doing assessment rather than doing purposeful and useful assessment to improve practice.

Many areas, departments, and individuals have been required to do assessment or know that assessment is a good thing. Therefore, they proceed with doing assessment. Often assessment is a separate committee or the responsibility of one person who diligently collects and conducts assessment activities and writes up the results. The organization is able to point to their assessment activities as an indication of a quality department. Doing assessment just to do it seems an obvious, easily avoided misstep yet it is probably one of the most common. How often do you see an institution or a department participate in a survey just to have the report sit on the shelf?

As an assessment professional, the most common manifestation of this misstep appears something like this. A department official comes to my office and the conversation goes something like this

Dept: "I need to begin doing some assessment. We thought we would like your help with a survey."

Me: "Okay, what kind of information are you looking for?"

Dept: "Well, we want to show that we are effective?"

Me: "Effective?"

Dept: "Yes. Effective." Me: "Let's back up a step. Why do you want to do assessment?"

Dept: "Assessment is important. My [insert title] thinks we should be doing some."

Me: "Okay, let me ask another question. How are you going to use the information?"

Dept: "[Insert title] wants to see it. If it's good [he/she] may share it with [insert another title]."

In other words, the assessment does not have a clear purpose or, at best, the purpose is unclear to both the speaker and presumably the person heading up the assessment efforts. The supervisor may have a clear purpose in mind but the speaker is doing assessment because he/she needs to do assessment.

Randy Swing (2004) said that we are all too busy to be doing assessment if its only purpose is filling shelves. However, if we do assessment that is purposeful, useful, and reflective, it can actually save us time and make us more effective in our work with students. Thus, a clearly defined purpose is critical groundwork for assessment.

Closely related to the misstep of doing assessment just to do it is Misstep #2:

Misstep 2. Failing to connect assessment with practice rather than creating a culture that integrates and uses assessment as part of practice

Randy Swing (2004) also said that assessment should either (1) reinforce our current practice or (2) provide guidance on what and how to change our practice. Otherwise we should not be doing assessment.

Organizations and individuals need to be clear about why they are participating in assessment and assessment needs to be used to improve what we do. Even in situations where the assessment effort begins as a mandate or a "have to," individuals can still craft assessments that provide value and improve practice rather than just meet the mandate. One way to build value is to determine potential uses for the results before the assessment begins.

For instance, a colleague has been involved in a grant funded social-norming effort. The purpose of the project is to affect the perceptions that students have about alcohol use on his campus. It would have been easy for him to do assessment just because the grant requires assessment. He could have done a survey of a small sample and shown that students' perceptions of alcohol use are different than they were when he began his project. The grant agency would have been happy and he would have been done but the results would have sat on the shelf. Instead, he decided to conduct an assessment that would be useful to him. He wanted to see if there were ways to improve his program. So we worked together to create a survey focused on student awareness of particular publications (newspaper ads, posters, fliers, etc.) and student perceptions about formatting, display, and messages. With this assessment, he could please the grant agency and gather information that would be useful in his future efforts.

Overall, doing assessment to do assessment is relatively easy; yet it is a waste of time, energy, and talent. Similarly, when assessment is not linked to practice, then it merely serves as an educational exercise. Without creating any benefits, it draws resources away from projects and activities that are the core of an organization. It also reduces the support for assessment and leads people to believe that assessment is a burden. If your campus/department/organization has already fallen into these ruts, the best way out is a small, successful assessment project to illustrate the potential of assessment. Nothing motivates people more than simple

assessment projects that speak directly to what they are doing.

Once people are motivated about assessment, it is easy to fall into the next two missteps.

Misstep 3. Believing one workshop, paper, or presentation makes you an assessment expert rather than understanding that assessment requires training and expertise.

Misstep 4. Doing assessment by yourself or in isolation versus using the individual or departmental expertise and assistance that may be available to you on your campus.

These mistakes often happen when someone attends a really good presentation and gets all excited about the possibilities. We believe that presentations, papers, and workshops are a great way to develop skills but striking out solo after one presentation may not be the best course of action.

Basically, there are three problems with this approach. First, not all presentations, papers, and workshops are created equal. Some are done by other novices who are also just beginning the process. Some are restricted by time or format. Some are outstanding. As a novice, it may be difficult to tell the quality, thoroughness, and appropriateness of the materials. For example, numerous presenters have suggested that focus groups with 20-25 students are appropriate and that there is no need for a designated note taker or tape recorder. We personally have found that 20-25 students is too many to have a good discussion and most experts in the field suggest between 6-10 participants (e.g., Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger, 1994) We have also found that our own notes or memory of a focus group discussion are not thorough and often miss important points. This is not to say that professionals must do focus groups our way but that if a professional relies on the information of one presentation, it can lead to overwhelming assessment situations and discouraging results, which in turn can lead to frustration with assessment.

The second problem with relying on one source of information is that every situation is different. We know this when it comes to campus programs – what works on one campus may not work on another. The same is true with assessment. One size does not fit all campus environments, program objectives, or even audiences. Strong assessment takes into account campus culture, program objectives, available resources and expertise, participant motivations, and more. It is thoughtful and well-planned. Therefore, listening to a presentation may give you ideas but it will seldom give you all the answers or ensure a successful process. Multiple perspectives can enrich what you do.

The third reason professionals should not rely on one source is that it assumes that assessment is simplistic. In fact, assessment is the topic of books, the subject of semester-long courses, and the focus of entire careers. It can involve theories of learning, qualitative research methods, surveys, focus groups, information reporting, statistics, human behavior, and technical writing to name just a few.

We do not wish to suggest that professionals in all areas should not get involved in assessment. We just want to remind everyone that seeking out information and using multiple resources is smart. Instead of relying on one source or trying to do everything ourselves, we need to find the professionals who specialize in assessment, the texts related to assessment, the journal articles which describe assessment activities, the workshops that discuss techniques, and the conferences that focus on or include assessment related topics. With so many resources, professionals would be remiss if they chose to ignore multiple perspectives and the diversity of opinions when engaging in assessment efforts on their campus.

Getting on Track

Here are some proactive strategies for establishing the groundwork of our assessment efforts.

1. Spend time upfront or frontload work.

2. Integrate assessment activities with your practice, your decision-making, and your programs. In other words, make assessment a part of what you do.
3. Utilize all the available resources, including textbooks, conferences, professionals, etc.

Next Steps In the next article in this three part series we'll discuss four common missteps related to planning assessment projects.

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