



Common Missteps in Assessment Planning and How to Avoid Them (Part II of III)

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October 12, 2005

From NASPA's NetResults

Part II: Planning Missteps

This is the second article in a three part series that explores the common missteps in assessment and how to avoid them.

When doing assessment, most people like to move quickly from planning to implementing. We all like action and it can feel more productive to craft a survey then to discuss what we want to accomplish. However, the step of planning is critical to the success of assessment. This article will focus on the missteps associated with planning.

The fifth misstep is rushing through the planning process or failing to plan.

Misstep 5: Rushing into conducting assessments rather than creating a thorough, well organized, assessment plan.

An assessment plan can refer to two things. First, it can be a departmental plan. These often have various assessment activities (e.g., needs assessment, satisfaction evaluations, learning outcomes, etc.) and cover multiple years. For example, a Residence Life department might have a departmental plan that describes a cycle of assessment with biannual satisfaction or quality of life surveys, a yearly learning outcome evaluation, a review of all forms every three years, and a comprehensive program review every five years. A departmental assessment plan organizes the cycle of assessment and is unique to the needs and interests of the specific department.

According to Palomba and Banta (1999), an assessment plan should also be developed for each assessment activity. They suggest that an assessment plan should consist of (1) the subject matter, including goals, purposes, and scope, (2) the methodology, (3) a timeline, (4) the use of assessment information, (5) the provisions for assessment administration including roles and responsibilities, and (6) a plan to evaluate the assessment. Although some plans are informal, individuals and departments first beginning assessment activities may be best served by writing out concrete, specific plans to ensure that a step is not left out or accidentally ignored. Regardless of the formality of the plans, the issues of planning are important to an effective and successful assessment.

An assessment plan addresses so many issues that its importance cannot be overstated. Because a departmental plan describes all activities, it can illuminate activities that duplicate efforts, it can provide structure to the planning process, and it answers the "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How?" questions. A plan for each assessment activity provides an opportunity for the department and staff to think through the specifics of what they want to do and how to do it. It also provides the reflection time before, during and after an assessment activity.

A key to a good assessment plan is a clear purpose. Misstep 6 emphasizes the importance of linking the purpose of an assessment with the goals of a program.

Misstep 6. Doing assessment that is disconnected from the goals of the program rather than linking assessment activities directly with the goals.

There are two questions that ensure a link between assessment activities and goals:

1. What is it that we say we are doing?
2. Are we doing what we say we are doing?

Mission statements, values statements, learning objectives, strategic performance indicators, and goals can all be used to answer the first question. The second question is often the one that assessment is designed to answer. For instance, if a departmental goal is to “instill a high level of civic engagement,” then an appropriate assessment question is “Do students leave this program with a high level of civic engagement?” Examining what you are trying to accomplish is an obvious first step in planning assessment and it provides a foundation for every subsequent decision.

Another concrete example may be useful. In housing and residence life, almost every campus does a quality of life survey or a general satisfaction survey. What is included on this survey should reflect departmental goals. If a department’s goal is maintaining an overall quality of life, then the department would focus on general satisfaction questions such as “How satisfied have you been with your residence hall experiences?” They might also ask about areas such as satisfaction with student staff, facilities, programs, and housing options. The results could then be used to determine which areas may need attention. However, if a goal of the department is to provide high quality service then the questions would need to focus on service, specifically how available, accessible, knowledgeable, and approachable the residence hall staff are. On the other hand, if the residence life department is focused on learning objectives, a quality of life survey may need to focus on learning experiences and self-reported growth. By thinking about the goals and objectives, a department can better craft their assessment to impact their program.

Misstep 7 focuses on another big decision in assessment planning – method.

Misstep 7. Choosing the method before the purpose rather than letting the purpose guide the choice of method.

If a purpose is clear, it can be used to select a method. Yet, assessment efforts often begin with a statement such as “We’ve decided to do a survey this year.” If the method is chosen before the purpose, it may or may not be appropriate, useful, or effective. We have found that people often make the mistake of choosing the “easiest” method – either the method folks are most comfortable with or the method that requires the least effort or resources. But think about it. If you want to know what students have learned in the residence halls, a survey may not touch the complexity of learning that has occurred. On the other hand, if you have a program aimed at educating students about a sensitive topic such as sexual behavior, an assessment that involves group discussions or personal interviews might not be appropriate. Students may be uncomfortable or guarded in their responses and thus not give the information you need. Each assessment method has advantages, disadvantages, and trade-offs that need to be considered when choosing a method. The purpose of the project can provide a strong measure for weighing those trade-offs.

Even when we are clear about our goals and have matched the method with the purpose, it is easy to slip into investigating a topic just because it is interesting. This leads us to Misstep 8.

Misstep 8: Collecting “interesting” data versus collecting “useful” data.

Here are examples of this misstep from meetings we have been in:

“I’m interested in finding out what their experiences were before they got here.”

“What do students mean when they say they agree?”

“I wonder if this result would be the same across subpopulations. Maybe we should compare...”

These questions may all be valid, interesting, and possibly important but often they are not useful. Because the purpose of assessment is to improve what we do, the questions we ask and the information we provide must be useful. One method for handling the “interesting” issue is to consider, during the planning process, how you plan to use the information. If there is not a clear use, then it may not be important to spend time and energy addressing the issue.

Recently, a committee was interested in conducting a needs assessment about childcare needs. Because the topic was important to the group, the initial list of possible questions was extensive. We were faced with the “interesting versus useful” dilemma. We began by discussing what we planned to do with the data and decided that, if we found people had childcare needs, we wanted to use the information to find internal and external support for campus childcare. Then we looked at each item from our possible list and asked if the item would tell us about current childcare needs and could be used to substantiate the need. Our long list was quickly reduced to a manageable survey.

Overall, planning assessment activities is critical. Time spent in the planning helps to ensure that time spent doing the assessment is worthwhile and productive.

Getting on Track

Here are some proactive strategies for planning our assessment efforts.

1. Spend time creating an assessment plan.
2. Confirm that your project is connected to the goals of your program by asking, “What is it that we say we are doing?” and “Are we doing what we say we are doing?”
3. Select a methodology that will gather the best information for your purpose, even if it is not the easiest, or the one you are most comfortable with.
4. Determine if you are collecting useful information or interesting information by asking, “If I collect this information, how am I going to use it?”

Next Steps

In the third article in this three part series we’ll discuss two common missteps related to reporting and evaluating assessment projects.

References

Palomba, C. A. & Banta, T. W. (1999). *Assessment essentials: Planning, implementing and improving assessment in higher education*. Jossey-Bass, Inc.: San Francisco, CA.

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