



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

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This is the third article in a three-part series that explores the common missteps in assessment and how to avoid them. This article focuses on two missteps involving reporting and evaluating assessment efforts, and on the importance of completing the entire assessment cycle.

Often, a department completes an important assessment project but the power of the results is lost because of ineffective reporting. Ineffective reporting can include presenting the material in complicated or inappropriate ways, failing to share the results with key decision makers, or providing results without clear links to practice. Therefore, misstep number nine focuses on reporting issues.

Misstep 9: Reporting results ineffectively rather than targeting your information and reports to specific audiences and situations.

Schuh & Upcraft (2001) sum up this misstep with the following quote:

“More studies end up filed under ‘I’ for ‘Interesting’ or gathering dust on someone’s shelf because we fail to package results in ways that move decision makers to make changes based on the study. In fact, how a study is formatted and distributed may be more important than its results,” (p. 23).

The typical survey has more than 50 items that can be analyzed in an infinite number of ways. We have all received a summary report or binder that is comprehensive, thorough, and full of statistics. While this format may be appropriate for an institutional researcher, it can often be overwhelming and unsuitable for many professionals. Despite good intentions, many of us cannot and will not be able to digest the materials, and, thus, the binders sit on our desks or shelves taking up space instead of contributing to what we do.

Assessment reports can be the only point of contact that an audience has with an assessment project. Thus, reports need to serve the function of describing the purpose, methods, and results of an assessment activity. They must also be clear, easy to read, and targeted to the audience. An example of strong reporting is Ball State University’s Making Achievement Possible reports (Woosley, Whitaker & Knerr, 2003). For instance, specially designed reports target students, academic advisors, hall directors, faculty, and administrators. Hall directors receive narrative reports. Administrators receive statistical reports. The length, format, style, and information in each type of report were specifically chosen after careful conversations with key stakeholders about what they needed to make information easy to apply.

Overall, the same assessment should generate different reports that connect to the needs of various constituencies. Part of the planning for assessment includes determining the audiences. In the reporting process, a department needs to consider what information would be most vital to each audience, and present that information in a way that highlights the key points. If reporting is done this way, then practitioners can easily digest the information, have conversations about the results, and make good decisions.

The final common misstep is the failure to complete the cycle of assessment, which is to evaluate the assessment activity.

Misstep 10: Failing to evaluate an assessment project rather than taking time to assess the assessment and improve the entire process.

This is such an easy misstep to make because once a project is complete and the results are reported, it is natural to want to focus on the actions and suggestions that come from the assessment. In other words, student affairs practitioners like to focus on practice. We like to jump from, “What do the results say?” to, “What do I need to do?” However, as assessment becomes a regular part of our culture, we need to reflect on our assessment practice. We need to ask, “What did I learn about the assessment from doing it?” and, “What changes would I make in the future?” We need to use past assessments to improve future assessments.

An example might help to illuminate the importance of this step. One department decided to do an assessment of student learning with regard to departmental learning objectives. It chose to interview more than 100 students using a script of more than 30 questions. Because the department wanted to get everyone involved in assessment, it had all of the staff members conduct interviews resulting in more than 300 pages of handwritten notes. At the end of the process, the department evaluated the assessment, and made recommendations for future assessment activities. These recommendations resulted in more clearly defined research questions, fewer and more targeted interview questions, specific criteria for selecting interviewees, formalized training for interviewers, and detailed note-taking instructions. In other words, the department learned from the process and improved its assessment activities.

Reflecting and evaluating assessment practice can also cause us to change the method we use, point us in new directions in our assessment, and show us what is missing from previous assessment activities. For example, survey results may need to be fleshed out with focus groups. To evaluate the assessment, we must look at all parts of the assessment process. Returning to Palomba & Banta’s (1999) assessment plan, an evaluation of the assessment should examine

1. The subject matter, including the goals, purpose, and scope
2. The methodology
3. A timeline
4. Use of assessment information
5. Provisions for assessment administration including roles and responsibilities
6. A plan to evaluate the assessment

Perhaps the evaluation will lead to something as simple as changing a room location for a focus group, or maybe it will lead to something as extensive as changing the purpose. Plus, as we do more assessment, we need to think about which assessments are necessary and how often we need new data. Perhaps collecting data every other year is sufficient and the alternative year can be used for other projects.

When time and resources are limited, it makes sense to evaluate what we are doing even when that means assessing the assessment. If we take the time to reflect and debrief at the end of an assessment cycle, we provide ourselves a head start on the next cycle.

Getting on Track

Here are some practical strategies for reporting and evaluating our assessment efforts:

1. Determine audiences’ needs
2. Choose the information, format and style of the report based on the audience
3. Review all aspects of the assessment plan and make recommendations
4. Keep notes

In Conclusion

Overall, we have made a somewhat informal attempt to address common missteps in assessment. These were not meant to be all encompassing as we know, from experience, that other missteps exist. Instead, we wanted to capture the common themes and areas where novices, both departmental and individual, can go astray. We described what the missteps look like and ways to proactively avoid them.

Ideally, what we hope will come from this series is more discussion about assessment. By talking about missteps, we hope that professionals will be more confident in taking their first steps in assessment.

References

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