5 Steps to Building a Comprehensive Assessment Plan

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Introduction

Often, assessment initiatives are not something an administrator chooses to do freely (unless you are a data nerd) but rather something that is expected by your supervisor for annual reports or accreditation reviews. Sometimes it can seem like a daunting task but this ebook will break the assessment planning process down in five easy steps to help you tackle your assessment projects. Let’s start with some questions:

What is Assessment?

Before we can really figure out how to start assessing things, we have to define what we mean by assessment. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) stated, “Assessment is any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (p. 18). For the purposes of this eBook we are defining assessment as: a systematic process to acquire an accurate, thorough, picture of the strengths and weaknesses of a program, department, or division.

Check out our other eBooks on Assessment!

Why is it important?

More so than ever before, campus leaders are challenged to document how resources (time, money, staffing, etc) are allocated to demonstrate the value of the student affairs divisions to the overall student experience. This demonstration is done not just by conducting assessment but analyzing the data and making the results available (NILOA Report, 2010)

How do you start?

While no model will work perfectly on every campus (Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, & Dean, 2012), we’ve developed the following 5 steps that are easily replicable on most campuses. You start by taking one step at a time! By breaking down assessment into multiple steps, it is easier to understand how to navigate the assessment cycle. So what is the assessment cycle? That’s the next chapter!
The Assessment Planning Process

Just like many things in higher education, assessment is cyclical and will continually occur throughout the entire academic year.

The Assessment Cycle

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So what is the assessment cycle?

From planning your next assessment project to collecting and analyzing your data, you will start to build an environment of continual evaluation on campus. The cycle can be split into three phases and our five steps fit into the entire cycle:

**Phase One: Plan**
- Step One: Collect Stakeholders
- Step Two: Create Timeline
- Step Three: Develop Materials

**Phase Two: Execute**
- Step Four: Execute Assessment

**Phase Three: Analyze**
- Step Five: Analyze and Report Results

Just like any other good project, the majority of the work happens in the planning phase. By properly planning, you increase your chance of a successful assessment plan.

As your process gets fine-tuned through several repetitions it will become easier to manage. Always remember to weigh the cost of your assessment efforts with your return on the data (Swing & Coogan, 2010) Now let’s get started!
Choose Your Subject!

We're not at the five steps just yet, we still have one more thing to do before we get to those. As we all know, learning is better achieved through interactive exercises so as you go through this eBook, we encourage you to choose a subject on your campus to assess and try to frame each step around that subject. Not sure what to pick? We recommend one of the RAS topics!

Return on Investment

Choose an initiative on campus that appears to be taking a lot of money or staff time to make successful. You'll be able to determine if the outcomes of that initiative are providing you a good return on your investment. Think about:

1. What do you consider your investment (i.e., money or time spent)?
2. How will you define success in relation to what you are assessing?
3. How will you use the information to change investment?

Learning Outcome Achievement

Choose a program or initiative on campus where you have specifically designed learning outcomes for participants to achieve. Think about:

1. Which learning outcome(s) will you focus on?
2. What evidence will you use to determine how well participants are achieving the selected outcomes?
3. How will you use the information to improve your program?

Customer Satisfaction

Customer doesn't have to be a dirty world in higher education. The business world does great things around customer satisfaction assessment. Choose a service within your department that may seem to need some improvement. Think about:

1. Which service of your department are you looking to evaluate?
2. What evidence will you use to evaluate performance of that service?
3. How will you use the information to improve your customer service?

In order to make the assessment planning process easy, just follow the following five steps to successfully build a comprehensive assessment plan for your functional area.
Step One: Collect Stakeholders

You can’t just jump into an assessment project solo. It hardly ever involves just you and a diversity of ideas and opinions helps you think about things in a different way. When it comes to thinking about who should be involved, first ask yourself why you are conducting your assessment:

1. Are you responding to complaints or known issues?
2. Are you in a place where you can now begin to address issues or enact change?
3. Is there a true vested interest from a department perspective and not a personal perspective?

These questions will help you start to brainstorm the internal and external stakeholders who need to be brought to the table.

One of the biggest indicators of a stakeholder with a vested interest is to ask yourself what parties will be affected by the results? If a department or an individual may be involved in questions you are asking or if the results may influence their work, you need to make sure you involve them or a representative in the process.

Remember, sometimes people just want to be informed the assessment will be happening. Not everyone wants to be actively involved in the process, just being informed is one of the best olive branches you can offer.
Working in higher education is one of those fields where something new comes up on a daily basis. Whether it is a student needing assistance or a parent looking for information, the one thing you can count on is things may not always go according to plan. Think of it like home remodeling, something will always come up and the project may get delayed. With that said, you want to try to build as solid of a timeline as possible to ensure the success of your assessment plan.

Ask yourself these two main questions:

1. **How much time does your team have to commit?**
   Often we overestimate the time we have to give to an assessment project. Unless your role is specific to assessment, it tends to be something that is easily overlooked or allocated a small percentage in effort reporting. Make sure you are realistic about how much time you and your stuff can commit to the project.

2. **When do you need your results?**
   When building your timeline, it’s often easiest to start at the end and work your way back. Think about when you need to have your results analyzed and able to be reported to your stakeholders. This date gives you the endpoint and you can more realistically start to think about how long conducting the assessment will take – more about that in the next step.

You can’t finalize your timeline until you figure out your materials so before you can complete step two, you will need to make some decisions about what type of assessment you’ll be doing.

The next step talks about building your materials so we recommend reading that and coming back to this step to finish your timeline.

**TIP**
Think about potential barriers & opportunities to your plan based on what else is going on at your institution (e.g., homecoming, commencement, etc.).
Step Three: Develop Materials

Were you surprised this wasn’t the first step? Many times administrators who are new to assessment or who receive the assessment directive start with their materials first. Often you’ll see someone design a survey before they’ve even gathered their stakeholders. You want to be sure you don’t start with your materials because they will be heavily influenced by your stakeholders and your timeline.

The big thing to think about with your materials is deciding how you will be conducting your assessments based on how much time you’ve allotted yourself. The chart below indicates how time intensive each method is to execute so you can go back to step two and finish building your timeline.

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<td>Online Survey</td>
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<td>Focus Groups</td>
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<td>One-on-One Interviews</td>
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When you decide your method, make sure you keep that method in mind as you building your materials. For instance, keep your online surveys relatively short and make sure you include logic so people don’t have to answer irrelevant questions. For focus groups, make sure you’re asking questions that allow participants to feed off each other and not just respond with a simple “yes” or “no.”

Top three things to think about when building your materials:

1. Ensure materials have integrity.
2. Ensure measure is:
   - Valid - yields consistent results
   - Reliable - measures what it is supposed to measure
3. Avoid:
   - Leading questions - don’t put assumptions into your items
   - Double ended - only ask one question in each item
   - Ambiguous questions - make sure they know what you’re asking

TIP

The best assessments will incorporate different types of materials in your plan. This could happen through online surveys and then select follow-up interviews with individuals or groups.
Step Four: Execute Assessment

Executing your assessment is more than just administering your survey or conducting your focus group. There are several things you have to focus on during this step of the process.

Consider the marketing and incentives for participants.

Participating is necessary to make any assessment happen. Make sure you consider the following:

1. Determine if you will use incentives and what effect those may have on participation or results.
2. How will you reach out to stakeholders? You need to ensure you have a diversity of participants.
3. How will people know? Will it be advertised or invitation only?

Manage participation as the assessment progresses.

Do not assume you are done when the survey/interviews start. You probably have a goal in mind of how many surveys you’d like returned or how many interviews should be conducted. Answer the following questions while monitoring your process:

1. How will you ensure everything is staying on track?
2. What is your plan if you notice a low response rate?

TIP

Incentives don't always have to be monetary. Think about what your students want and what you (or another area) may be able to offer. Creative incentives we’ve seen include:

- Premiere parking passes
- Tickets to on-campus concerts
- Lunch with senior executives
- Early registration for classes
Step Five: Analyze and Report Results

The data analysis and reporting step is one of the most important steps of the process but sadly, it is often overlooked or never completed due to running past the deadline. Sometimes people just aren’t sure how to analyze the results in a meaningful way.

Before you begin analyzing data, you need to take a step back and think about if you are actually the best person to be doing the analysis. Do you have any personal bias regarding the assessment? Do you have the necessary data manipulation skills to conduct the analysis? It’s okay if you aren’t the one doing the actual analysis – you will be one of the people turning the number crunching into meaningful reports.

Top 3 Things to Remember:

1. Data should ideally be analyzed by a skilled individual with no personal interest in the results.
2. Always include aggregate results along with data that has been drilled down for specific results.
3. Make sure to keep basic statistics in mind - yield, significance, etc.

**TIP**

Always make sure your report relates back to what you are assessing, the results, and the actions or next steps. Your report should always reference your departmental or institutional goals.

When you’re ready to report your on your assessment, we recommended creating the following:

### Full Report
Create one, large, report including all analysis regardless of whether or not results were significant. It should outline the whole process including goals and results.

### Stakeholder Reports
Customize shorter reports for different stakeholders. You don’t to create a full report for each stakeholder but you may want to customize an executive summary relating the results to them. This report is especially important if your report may reveal negative results about them or you may be asking them to change something.

### Presentation
You should always offer an open presentation to your stakeholders. Make sure you are visualizing your data in interesting ways and it isn’t slide after slide of tables and charts. Be creative!
Conclusion

Remember, start with something you know you can handle (Schuh, 2009) so the assessment process won’t seem so intimidating. As you continually develop a culture of assessment on campus, you’ll find areas where you will tweak the process so it works best for you. Finally, remember changing your institutional culture toward one of assessment takes time and you make experience challenges and setbacks but in the end, your programs, and ultimately students, will be better off for it.

References


