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Assessing Outcomes of Undergraduate Staff Training

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Each fall college campuses come to life across the country. However, before the first students arrive, many institutions prepare for the opening of their residential facilities. In addition to the completion of summer facilities projects and maintenance repairs, this preparation typically includes the training of professional and student staff who will provide the frontline services to residential students. Undergraduate staff training is a vital aspect of residence life programs. A variety of training methods, ranging from pre-service and in-service sessions (Murray, Snider, & Midkiff, 1999; Twale & Muse, 1996; Winston & Finch, 1993) to academic courses (Bowman & Bowman, 1995), provides multiple formats for the preparation of undergraduate students to fill important roles as paraprofessionals.

Resident Assistant (RA) training has received attention in the literature concerning its content and delivery methods (Bowman & Bowman, 1995; Winston & Fitch 1993); however, few studies have explored the outcomes of these training opportunities (Murray, Snider, & Midkiff, 1999). The topics included in RA training often reflect the numerous roles, skills, and responsibilities that are required of students in this position, including role modeling, teaching, peer helping, confrontation, dealing with crisis, teambuilding, and community development (Blimling, 1999; Twale & Muse, 1996). Murray, Snider, and Midkiff found that training sessions, even those limited in duration, can have a positive impact on RA on-the-job behavior.

While literature provides an overview of methods and effectiveness measures, establishing learning outcomes and assessments is still a challenge for student affairs professionals charged with undergraduate staff training responsibilities. Bowman and Bowman (1995) discussed the need to employ a variety of methods including empirical evaluations, observation, and review of work samples to assess our educational goals when training students.

Bowman and Bowman also suggested that student affairs professionals examine training formats and opportunities in order to use resources wisely and effectively to achieve desired outcomes. The purpose of this article is to provide an example of one department's attempts to assess the outcomes of residential undergraduate staff training and the lessons learned through the process.

Outcomes Assessment

Erwin (1991) defined outcomes assessment as a change or consequence occurring as a result of enrollment in a particular educational institution and involvement in its programs. Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) noted that the assessment of outcomes is not limited only to learning outcomes, but can include program and developmental outcomes that are important to student services but not necessarily tied to student learning. While outcomes assessment should be an important aspect of the assessment efforts of student affairs, these assessments are often challenging to “design, implement, and interpret, but in some ways they attempt to answer the most fundamental question of all: Is what we are doing having any effect, and if so, is that effect an intended one?” (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001, p. 14).

One of the most challenging aspects of the outcomes assessment process is “identifying and articulating measurable outcomes” (Bresciani, 2001, ¶ 1). Three types of outcomes can be established for outcomes assessment. Learning outcomes describe the learning that is intended to occur, while program outcomes explore the accomplishments that are intended from a program, and developmental outcomes show the non-cognitive skills and abilities that a program is designed to enhance (Bresciani). Bresciani discussed components of good outcomes, including clarification of what one is trying to assess, provision of a measurable outcome that measures something useful and meaningful, and identification of criteria for ensuring the outcome will be assessed as planned.

Undergraduate Staff Training

The Department of University Housing at the University of Georgia employs over 160 students to serve in three different live-in residential positions: Resident Assistant (RA), C.L.A.S.S. (Continuing the Legacy of African-American Student Success) Advocate (CA), and Village Community Assistant (VCA). These student positions work with an on-campus population of over 6,800 residential students distributed among seven residential communities. Several training opportunities are provided throughout the academic year. Each fall, one week prior to the opening of the residence halls, a week-long training is held for students in these positions to prepare them for their responsibilities in the coming academic year. Another formal training opportunity is offered prior to the opening of the residence halls for the spring semester. Additionally, in-service opportunities are offered each semester to expand staff knowledge on topics related to working with students. Each staff member is required to attend at least one in-service program each semester.

A New Outlook on Training

In the summer of 2004, the Department of University Housing hired a new Coordinator for Undergraduate Staff Development. When preparing for the ensuing fall undergraduate staff training, the coordinator was given an extensive document describing the training that had taken place the previous year. With little formal assessment data from training the previous year, he began to work toward planning the training sessions. A week before the 2004 training was to begin, a mandate to establish learning outcomes for undergraduate staff training was given (H.S. Lemmons, personal communication, September 28, 2006).

The learning outcomes for that year were written after many of the training sessions had already been developed, and the efforts to assess these outcomes yielded a lengthy assessment

that produced little in the way of understanding whether the staff members had understood the material and achieved the desired learning outcomes. Most of the questions in the assessment measured affective aspects of training such as level of comfort with the topics covered. The professionals responsible for staff training felt that this information was of little help in answering questions about the level of knowledge that student staff members gained during training or in providing guidance about how to structure a comprehensive training model for the department (H.S. Lemmons, personal communication, September 28, 2006).

Winter staff training in 2005 shifted in the use of learning outcomes, with the planning committee having developed learning outcomes before planning these training sessions. This training was used as a supplemental training opportunity, and informal assessment methods such as observations were used to measure the learning outcomes and assess the content of the training sessions. Creating learning outcomes before the training sessions allowed the subsequent assessment to yield more useable data for the selection of spring in-services topics (H.S. Lemmons, personal communication, September 28, 2006).

For Fall Semester, 2005, the focus of training began to shift to place more emphasis on the transmission of job-related knowledge needed by undergraduate staff members to be successful in their positions. With little useable data from the assessment of previous trainings to evaluate the impact of training on the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities, other sources of assessment data such as performance evaluations were used to establish topics to be covered during undergraduate staff training. Additionally, a new on-line training pre/post test was developed to measure the achievement of learning outcomes for the fall 2005 staff training. In previous years, all training assessments were paper instruments that were tabulated by hand. With the number of staff employed by University Housing and the time of the year when staff

training occurs, the results had previously not been available until November. This timeline for distributing the assessment results led to an issue of having to plan winter training and in-service sessions without access to data collected in previous training sessions (H.S. Lemmons, personal communication, September 28, 2006). The more recent improved assessment efforts provided justification to continue to make changes in the structure and content of training.

The Focus on Learning

After a few years of working on the challenges of developing learning outcomes, including shifting the focus of the material covered in training and creating usable assessment instruments, questions arose concerning the format of the training sessions and the consistency of information delivery (Lemmons & Pennington, in press). These questions led to a revision in the method of training from a decentralized process, where most information was transmitted to staff at the residential community level, to a centralized system with staff trained by all members of the professional and graduate staff of University Housing. To achieve this shift in training philosophy, the entire system of training had to be reconsidered.

In the early part of the Fall Semester, 2005, a committee was convened to plan the Fall, 2006 training schedule. One of the most intimidating tasks facing this committee was the development of a list of all conceivable topics that staff would need to know when serving in their specific roles (Lemmons & Pennington, in press). The result was a list of 13 major topic areas, including confrontation, mediation, emergency procedures, diversity, and administrative tasks, that became the basis for the creation of learning outcomes and training sessions (Lemmons & Pennington). These major topic areas and their subtopics became the foundation for assessment of the University Housing training learning outcomes. Data collected from previous assessments of staff training helped shape the committee's planning process because

“the evaluations conducted after training... showed that the staff retained more information based on shared experiences during training - such as team-building activities - instead of the content of the training or enhancing job performance skills” (Lemmons & Pennington, ¶ 8). The challenge for the committee was balancing the shared experiences and group development aspects of training with the newfound focus on preparing and enhancing job-specific skills.

Assessment data from previous years helped establish the structure of the new training format. Knowing that staff rated the opportunity to interact with other staff members outside their respective areas as an experience that they would like to enhance provided an opportunity to use assessment data to plan the format of training (Lemmons & Pennington, in press). A logical step for the committee was to divide the undergraduate staff into assigned groups, mixing staff from the various residential communities, and have them attend sessions in the mornings on the major topic areas presented by graduate and professional staff members; time was then provided in the afternoons for residential community staffs to meet together. This format allowed staff to meet others outside of their communities and also allowed staff to bond within their communities.

While attempts were made to examine the content and format of undergraduate staff training, these attempts actually focused more on the theme of training rather than the substance or structure of training (Lemmons & Pennington, in press). Though the training committee had successfully accomplished the revision of training content, one area that still presented a challenge was how to assess the 13 major topic areas and learning outcomes for the new training structure. Previous assessments and evaluations of training received criticism for focusing too specifically on affective dimensions of training and participant satisfaction. This data proved useful in helping to restructure aspects of training; however, the data did little to help show the

impact on learning job-related skills, knowledge, and abilities that are necessary for students in critical frontline positions (H.S. Lemmons, personal communication, September 28, 2006). A variety of methods to measure the actual knowledge gained from training experiences were considered, including work samples, observation, and knowledge assessments. While each method offered a way to measure the learning outcomes of staff training, the issue of feasibility for any or all of these methods caused some hesitancy about how best to proceed.

The initial planned assessment of learning outcomes used knowledge assessments, which asked participants to answer content-specific questions at the conclusion of each training session. The intent was that each knowledge assessment could be scored and given to each participant's supervisor for follow-up or additional training as necessary. Additionally, presenters of the information would be able to review the knowledge assessments for their sessions to see what improvements were needed in content of the session or what alterations were needed in the mode of information delivery. Though this method would provide a measure of the knowledge attained, there were challenges in both the perception of this method and in its implementation.

As the summer approached, the need to establish an assessment of the learning outcomes for training grew more urgent. The committee decided that for the initial year of this new training format, an online pre/post-test assessment would be sufficient. While this method of assessment as designed would only measure perceived knowledge gained from training, it would examine the reported effect of the new training strategy, provided that questions were closely related to the major topic areas.

The establishment of the major topic areas and identified subtopics in the initial stages of the training restructuring provided a guide for drafting learning outcomes. Each topic and subtopic was reviewed, and wording was added to transform them into learning outcomes and

questions for the training assessment. For example, the area of work orders under the major topic of facilities was given the learning outcome of “students will know how to use the web to submit work orders.” The pre/post test would then include a question such as “I know how to submit a work order using the work order website.” Breaking down the major topics and the areas included within them created an assessment instrument with over 140 questions measuring perceived knowledge both before and after the fall 2006 undergraduate staff training.

Early in August the pre-test was distributed to the undergraduate staff via a web link in an email from the Coordinator of Undergraduate Training and Staff Development. The response rate for the pre-test was approximately 86%. At the conclusion of training, another email was sent from the Coordinator of Undergraduate Training and Staff Development with a web link to the post-test. The response rate for the post-test was approximately 56%. The results of the assessment showed significant perceived gain in knowledge.

Discussion

Changes in the training format for the student staff in University Housing were found to have positive impact on the perceived knowledge that is gained through participation. Learning outcomes have been created and assessment results have given future training planning committees areas to explore for continual improvement of the program. These gains have not been without challenges. Creating a new training format, working to establish a consistent set of learning outcomes for staff training, and developing an assessment of those outcomes has taught the Department of University Housing a few lessons that may assist others who want to assess the learning that takes place during staff training.

Moving to a focus on learning is a cultural shift.

Returning student staff who have previously experienced training may not understand the shift in focus; they may wonder why they are not again being trained in the manner to which they were accustomed. Additionally, assessment may be important to administrators who work with the results, but the instruments may seem like tests, quizzes, or other tasks with no perceived benefit to the participants who are asked to complete them. Learning outcomes can be a part of the lexicon for a department or a staff, but it is also important to spend time addressing the concept of outcomes assessment with student staff. They have a vested interest in the training process, and including them on the planning committee or addressing the changes through staff meetings before they occur can help students feel ownership in any decision.

Professional and graduate staff members are also important constituents who may not understand the shift from old methods. The hope of learning is to improve the student experience. Developing learning outcomes can be challenging (Bresciani, 2001) and staff may need added support as they wade into the learning outcome waters.

Defining what should be learned takes time.

Training residential student staff and considering what they should learn from such an experience are no small undertakings. Brainstorming and seeking feedback from all parties involved in a training process are important in developing a list of skills, knowledge, and abilities that must be mastered. When shifting to a focus on learning, set aside time in the beginning of the process to determine what is fundamental to success in the position, and build your training efforts from that foundation.

Writing learning outcomes can be a difficult process.

Do not expect immediate results when writing learning outcomes. Writing learning outcomes is a process. The Department of University Housing started with over 100 learning outcomes for undergraduate training and is in a continual process of refining those learning outcomes. Bresciani (2001) suggested that when writing outcomes, you should decide whether the outcome is meaningful, measurable, and manageable. Having 100 learning outcomes may be meaningful, but is it manageable or measurable? If larger numbers of outcomes are identified, remember that assessment should be a systematic process and each outcome may not need to be measured each year (Erwin & Sivo, 2001; Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001).

There are more outcomes than just learning outcomes.

As the Department of University Housing continues to review its training program, one area for continued exploration is the identification of other desirable outcomes of a training program. The focus in the past few years has been on learning, but as the Division of Student Affairs has adopted a new assessment model that divides outcomes into the three categories of service, development, and learning (Davis & Scott, in press), University Housing will be asked to explore these as outcomes of its training program. Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) suggested that there are other important outcomes not connected to student learning. Issues of increased interpersonal competencies (a possible developmental outcome) or staff satisfaction with the training experience (a possible program outcome) are examples of other areas that need to be explored in outcomes assessment of training.

There are multiple ways to measure outcomes.

Choosing a way to measure an outcome can be as difficult as writing the outcome. Often the choice to use a survey because of its ease can overshadow the identification of the best

methods to measure an outcome. Work samples, observations, and focus groups serve as examples of other forms of assessment. Activities, which allow student staff to practice skills they have learned during training, provide excellent assessment opportunities. Skills such as mediation, crisis management, and peer helping are just a few that can be assessed during these activities. Seeing assessment as more than a survey can assist in the development of multiple measures of learning and other outcomes.

Choose an assessment method that works for you.

With any assessment method, there are issues such as usability and feasibility that need to be considered. The Department of University Housing's most recent staff training assessment included approximately 143 scaled items. While the pre-test response rate was extremely high, the timing of the post-test during one of the busiest times of the year for staff resulted in a significant drop in the response rate. Even if the response rate had been consistent, the number of items on the instrument creates administrative challenges in reporting and applying the results. Keeping in mind the use of the results, the timing of the administration of the measure, and the feasibility of using the data collected can aid in the selection of the most appropriate measure of the outcome.

Use the data collected and the results.

Writing any outcome for a program and then assessing it can provide rich data that can be used for a variety of purposes. While there are many possible uses of the results, it is imperative to make sure that the results are, in fact, used. Depending on the information that is desired and the assessment method used, results can be used not only to determine program content, but also to aid in professional development sessions geared at increasing the presentation and teaching skills of trainers. The data collected can also be of benefit when taking

a systematic review of a department's training program and its desired results. Additionally, information should be shared with supervisors, residential staff, and other constituents that are invested in both the training program and its outcomes.

Future of Outcomes Assessment in Training at UGA

As the training program in University Housing continues to evolve, there is a commitment to maintain its current form for at least three years to provide for some measure over time and allow for the growth of the current structure (Lemmons & Pennington, in press). A regular review and refinement of the outcomes expected from training will continue to be an annual task. Additionally, the current pre/post test design of the training assessment may not be the most effective way of measuring the outcomes. Exploration of other methods and refinement of the current instrument are areas for University Housing to consider as it expands its assessment efforts for undergraduate staff training.

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