

Through assessment, educators gain valuable information that will enable them both to answer questions asked by leaders outside higher education and to determine from within whether their educational efforts are making a difference.

Using Assessment to Achieve Quality in Student Affairs

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There is increasing public outcry for more accountability and quality in higher education institutions. This plea comes from parents paying higher tuition bills, legislative leaders facing greater public demand for services and programs, and students choosing their postsecondary institutions. Business and industry leaders, not wanting to spend millions in retraining college graduates, expect their new employees to think for themselves and to be good problem solvers. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) believe that the public impression is that colleges and universities are not producing intelligent, competent, and capable graduates.

Assessment can be used to determine how quality is achieved in higher education. This chapter explores the idea of quality, what it means to educators (student affairs professionals in particular), and the role assessment plays in measuring quality. How assessment is used within TQM to measure quality from a customer or stakeholder perspective is examined and compared to traditional uses of assessment. Assessment's place in the TQM movement is also discussed.

What Is a Quality Education?

Since the 1980s, increasing numbers of people in the public sector have begun to believe that colleges and universities have defined the goals of a quality education for themselves for too long. Government and other public officials have also questioned the value and cost of a college education (Erwin, 1991); in 1986, The National Governor's Association called for the identification of measures of educational effectiveness (see Alexander, Clinton, and Kean, 1986).

report by the Southern Regional Education Board (1985) warned that "the quality and meaning of undergraduate education [have] fallen to a point at which mere access has lost much of its value" (p. 231). At least forty states have established some form of mandatory assessment directed at questions of quality in higher education (Marchese, 1990). The basic question being posed from outside education is, What is the value of a college education?

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) list four factors in the current environment that contribute to the public's questioning of higher education's quality and accountability: First, there are too many college graduates who cannot effectively read, write, compute, or think; second, the rising cost of education has led many to question the price versus value received for a college education; third, the quality of instruction at many institutions has declined with larger classes, less faculty who actually teach, and poor academic advising; and fourth, although higher education has become more inclusive and diverse, many within underrepresented groups have lower graduation rates.

In essence, higher education officials are on the defensive and are being asked to prove that they are accountable and that higher education is worthy of public trust. To this end, educational leaders have turned to the assessment of student outcomes as evidence that institutions are progressing on the right path. Colleges and universities want to show higher graduation rates, a well-trained workforce, and more important, evidence of student learning-and development from the college experience (Erwin, 1991). Assessment's two major goals are improvement and accountability. Through assessment, educators can answer the questions asked by leaders outside higher education and at the same time determine from within whether their educational efforts are making a difference.

What does the public's questioning of the value of higher education and higher education's search for quality mean for student affairs? Now more than ever, student affairs professionals are being asked to demonstrate that the programs and services they provide make a difference in students' lives (Hanson, 1991), contribute to the success of the institution, and make a positive contribution to the achievement of student outcomes expected by the institution.

In order to affect important student outcomes, student affairs professionals must focus on how and why students learn. They must be able to demonstrate how programs in housing and residence life, counseling, career services, student activities, and so on contribute positively to student outcomes.

Student affairs personnel play a dual role in an institution's success: They offer essential services (housing, health, counseling, and so on) and contribute to the learning and development of individual students. The primary purpose of student affairs according to Upcraft and Schuh (1996) is to contribute to the academic enterprise and to meet the institution's needs for basic services.

On a more practical level, student affairs divisions are being asked by their critics if their services and programs are essential and worthy of funding (Mayhew, Ford, and Hubbard, 1990). If the services they provide do not contribute to the success of the institution, then they may be dropped or considered for privatization. Even if services and programs are considered essential, questions

regarding quality must still be answered. Assessment helps student affairs professionals make the connection between what they do and how they contribute to the institution's mission.

Assessment's Role

Chaffee and Sherr (1992, p. 1) state that although higher education professionals are for quality, the bigger question for many people is whether we actually "do" quality; assessment helps educators answer this question. We adopt Upcraft and Schuh's (1996) definition of assessment: "Assessment [is] any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence that describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (p. 18). This definition covers a variety of areas and is not limited to student learning outcomes; it includes program and source evaluation, needs analysis, student satisfaction, and so on, and applies to the institution's total effort (all component parts of the institution) whether it be academic affairs, student affairs, business affairs, university advancement, or other-institutional concerns.

Assessment has been used by student affairs to determine student needs, student satisfaction, and to make judgments about the effectiveness of services and programs. Efforts have also been made to use assessment to understand the campus environment and to compare student services and outcomes at different institutions (benchmarking). Finally, student affairs departments have used assessment to measure effectiveness of functional work areas against professional standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), 1986). Through assessment strategies, student affairs administrators are able to demonstrate that services and programs affect the desired outcomes of the institutions, that services and programs are essential to the institution, and that student affairs is able to show continued improvement in its services and programs over time.

Assessment, TQM, and Student Affairs

Assessment is not a new issue for student affairs and is an important part of TQM. Student affairs professionals want to satisfy customers (student, parents, and the institution) with the level and variety of services offered while promoting student development concepts and student learning in the framework of those services and programs. Student affairs professionals use assessment to measure student outcomes and the level of service extended through student satisfaction assessment tools. Through assessment, they try to show how student affairs programs and activities support institutional effectiveness; at the same time, they must assess how their programs and services contribute to the desired outcomes expected by students.

Whether educators like it or not, individuals and groups outside higher education are asking them to confirm that colleges and universities are delivering their promised product: education (Terenzini, 1989). Educators answer

their external customers by using assessment to measure student outcomes and improvements in educational effectiveness. Likewise, student affairs educators are being asked how they contribute to desired student outcomes and educational effectiveness. Again, assessment aids student affairs professionals in deciding how they help the institution and how they can make ongoing efforts to improve services and programs that serve the institution. With increasing pressure for quality and accountability, it is difficult for student affairs professionals to know what areas of assessment and TQM to embrace.

Assessment in Student Affairs

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) took nine principles of good practice for assessing student learning (Hutchings and others, 1993) and adapted them to the assessment of student affairs. A discussion of the adaptation of these principles and their application to quality and TQM in student affairs follows.

PRINCIPLE 1: *"The assessment of student affairs begins with educational values." (p. 22).*

The most important institutional goals are the ones that are closely linked to the institution's overall educational mission. Educators must test or assess programs, activities, or services that they believe will make an institution more effective. Student affairs staff must constantly assess their programs and services to learn if they are successfully promoting student affairs values.

There are important goals within TQM, such as continuous quality improvement (CQI), employee empowerment, integrity, and so on; however, most formal TQM assessment involves changes made to a process for quality improvement. There have been few efforts at formally assessing the development of values within a TQM organization. There has been greater reliance on leadership and training to emphasize desired values within the TQM movement. For example, W. E. Deming's first TQM principle emphasizes "constancy of purpose for improvement of product and service," but it does not emphasize values. In Deming's model, TQM seeks to measure how the customer (in this case, the student) feels about the staff in residence halls as students move in and how this reflects on perceptions of service in the residence halls, but TQM would not necessarily seek to measure the resident staffs' role in promoting self-discipline and developing a sense of community as a value.

PRINCIPLE 2: *"Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of organizational outcomes as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time" (p. 22).*

This statement reminds us that there are many parts to the organizational puzzle that contribute in a variety of ways to a desired outcome. The recognition

of this complexity is important in determining how to appropriately assess the organization.

TQM is very compatible with this principle because it achieves its goals by looking at the key processes of an organization and how they help the organization achieve its purposes. For instance, TQM might use various charts, graphs, and methods to outline how students register for classes to fully understand that process. Then recommendations would be made for changes in how students register in order to improve the process. Finally TQM would use assessment to ask students if the registration process was actually improved.

By examining and assessing key processes in a student affairs division, staff can both improve their services and programs and also incrementally and continuously affect the outcomes of an entire institution. Assessment of programs and services helps staff to determine just how effective they are in contributing to an institution's mission. By doing this repeatedly over time, staff not only adhere to good principles of assessment but also promote CQI.

PRINCIPLE 3: *"Assessment works best when it has clear, explicitly stated goals" (p. 23).*

Simply put, the clearer institutional goals can be stated, the easier the assessment of whether those goals have been achieved. Usually, the clarity of a goal statement suggests what must be measured (or how to assess).

TQM emphasizes the need not only for a vision of what an institution hopes to become but also for a mission statement outlining the purpose of the institution (Hutton, 1994). TQM strives to assess changes in the key processes that promote an organization's mission; it also promotes stating changes in clear measurable terms. TQM would not, for example, allow for a goal that reads, "Our college hopes to change its image as a suitcase college by offering more weekend activities." Rather, TQM would restate the goal in a different manner: "By offering two major events each semester, the college hopes to keep more students on campus during weekends." This goal can now be measured and can provide feedback for improvement.

Student affairs, as stated earlier, must articulate in a clear manner just how it can help an institution achieve its mission. Erwin (1991) suggests that each student affairs unit should have a clear Mission statement that specifies the particular learning objectives it hopes to promote and how it will assess its objectives.

PRINCIPLE 4: *"Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also, and just as important, to the processes that lead to them" (p. 23).*

TQM emphasizes that changes in quality come through continuous changes in the processes of an organization (Juran, 1989). This is congruent with Upcraft and Schuh's (1996) principle. If the focus is only on outcomes and not on how programs affect desired outcomes, then there is difficulty in improving or

achieving the same outcomes over time. For example, an institutional goal or outcome might be improvement of student retention between the first and second years. TQM assesses this goal by looking at retention figures from each year as part of Deming's constancy-of-purpose principle. Of more importance in a TQM model would be what key process changes took place to improve retention rates. Thus TQM might assess the orientation or advisement of incoming first year students by looking at how the orientation or advisement process was altered and what effect it had on retention.

Student affairs departments generally use a variety of assessment techniques to determine how their programs and services affect the entire campus effort. Since the early 1970s, student development programs have increasingly used assessment tools. Now data exists to support how we contribute to an institution's goals through various activities, programs, and services.

PRINCIPLE 5: *"Assessment works best when it is ongoing, not episodic"*
(p. 23)

As expected, one assessment done sporadically adds very little to the legitimacy of any program. Tracking progress of a program over time lends credibility to the results of program assessment.

TQM focuses on continuous improvement. If measurements or assessments are not done with each change in a process, it becomes impossible to verify that continuous improvement is ongoing. Many of the goals of student development and learning that student affairs professionals seek to implement can only be viewed over time. Without ongoing assessment, the effects of changes to specific programs and services would be difficult to determine. Fortunately, student affairs divisions in recent times have typically done well in the ongoing assessment of student satisfaction with services, programs, and staff response to their needs. A philosophy of continuous improvement is readily acceptable in the student affairs culture.

PRINCIPLE 6: *"Assessment is most effective when representatives from across student affairs and the institution are involved"* (p. 23).

By including others in assessment efforts, student affairs not only improves those efforts, but engenders a greater understanding of student affairs values, mission, and vision with the campus in general. For example, members from all areas of the campus involved in orientation (faculty, academic administrators, business affairs staff, student affairs professionals, students, etc.) should be included in the review of this key process. This cross-functional team would recommend those changes to the orientation program that would make it a better process for students and parents. These recommendations could only be made after in-depth discussions and consensus from various areas of the campus represented on the team. Ultimately an assessment of the new changes to orientation would be a part of the TQM technique. The learning that took place among members of the cross-functional team because of the discussion

of the orientation process is reflected in Upcraft and Schuh's sixth principle. The fact that others from around the campus were involved in making the changes to orientation only strengthens their view of orientation and the results of the assessment.

This principle illustrates the need for student affairs to establish its programs in conjunction with both the customers (students) and stakeholders in order to increase the credibility of assessment results and increasing quality of services.

PRINCIPLE 7: *"Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about"* (p. 24).

Educators often keep an abundance of statistics, charts, and surveys that relate very little to what may be considered important. For example, if a president or chancellor questioned the level of student activity on their campus and student affairs staff quickly assembled charts, graphs, and statistics showing how many programs had been implemented with attendance figures over the past several months, what would this illustrate? The important information is not how many programs are offered and not how many students attended different events but rather the average student's satisfaction level with what was offered and the overall quality of the programs.

TQM methods are compatible with this principle because TQM emphasizes making changes to those key processes that will greatly affect the customer and thus reflect on the institution.

PRINCIPLE 8: *"Assessment should be part of a larger set of conditions that promote change"* (p. 24).

Assessment is no substitute for leadership in an ongoing effort to improve student services and programs. Assessment simply helps us to know if we are on the right track. How assessment is used is what really counts.

Seymour (1992, p. 15) says that 'there is no substitute for leadership when it comes to quality.' There may be many areas in student affairs on a campus involved in assessment but it is leadership that focuses those assessment efforts into something meaningful for both student affairs and the institution. It is also leadership that approves the changes to key processes and empowers people to make changes outlined as key elements of TQM.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, student affairs must contribute to the student outcomes expected by the institution and at the same time must improve essential services such as housing, health services, counseling, and so on. This is not a new idea for student affairs professionals who recognize that at any given moment the cleanliness or level of noise of a residence hall may be far more important to students, parents, and administrators than another long-range student outcome. TQM emphasizes that leadership is still necessary to determine what is important at a given time.

One of the lessons for student affairs is that although we believe we make a significant contribution to student learning and the educational outcomes sought by the institution, we are often judged on the simple results of the daily services we render.

PRINCIPLE 9: "Through assessment, student affairs professionals meet responsibilities of students, the institution, and the public" (p. 24).

Assessment is a means to an end. It gives us the information required to show what and how we are assisting with institutional effectiveness. By offering the best services and programs, we help students, the institution, and the public.

TQM uses its goal of continuous improvement as a way of offering services and programs that satisfy the needs of customers and stakeholders. Assessing customer and stakeholder satisfaction determines if continuous improvement is occurring and if quality is improving.

Conclusion

Student affairs departments and professionals are being held accountable by the public and by many governmental agencies for the quality of higher- education institutions. At another level, students are asking for more in terms of services and programs considering the tuition and fees they pay. Furthermore, educators are being asked to prove that what they are offering is worthy of support.

With increasing pressures for accountability and improvement, many institutions are considering a variety of strategies to show progress. TQM is one way to address the many issues facing higher education. Using assessment is another way of responding to questions of improvement and accountability. The difference is that TQM methods may help us to achieve our goals if properly implemented and embraced. But nothing will be achieved if we cannot demonstrate that we are becoming more effective organizations. This evidence can only come through assessment.

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