

Week x Lecture: Program Evaluation

In previous lectures, we have discussed both assessment in general and student outcomes assessment. For the purpose of a brief review, let's revisit the definitions of assessment and evaluation. "Assessment is any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 18). "Evaluation is any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 19). So, assessment is a critical element of the evaluation or review process. "Another way of looking at the relationship between program review and assessment is that program review is a coordinated and purposeful system by which assessment results and other data and information are interpreted in relation to each other and to the unit/program as a whole" (Pomerantz, 2003a, p. 2). Assessment provides the mechanism through which data and information are collected about programs, services, or the organization as a whole; evaluation then utilizes this data and information to improve or enhance a program, service delivery, or the organization.

For the purposes of this lecture, program evaluation will mean an evaluation of a unit, department, or division (for example, a career services operation) rather than a particular program (for example, a job fair) provided by a unit, department, or division. The focus of program evaluation is to determine the effectiveness of a program based on the attainment of pre-determined priorities and goals or standards (like the CAS Standards). This evaluation process identifies strengths, weaknesses, and areas that need improvement or enhancement (www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/ae0). A program review thereby operationalizes the result of assessment and pursues constructive change or quality improvement for the unit.

A program review or evaluation provides the opportunity for us to understand or verify the impact of our work on students. It also offers information on how to improve delivery mechanisms to be more efficient, less costly, and of higher quality. Additionally, we can confirm if we are doing what we think we are doing and really consider what our program is all about (our goals, how we meet them, and how we know this). In the face of budget cuts, we can also use a program evaluation to decide which programs should be retained, as well as examine and describe programs for duplication (“best practices”) elsewhere (McNamara, 1998).

What types of assessment does your division, department, or unit conduct? How are these data utilized to improve the division, department, or unit?

Elements of a Comprehensive Program Evaluation

A comprehensive program evaluation should utilize both formative and summative evaluation. A formative evaluation collects data about service delivery while they are being developed and implemented with the intention of improving both service delivery and the program or unit. Formative evaluation looks at how different components of the program are working, and makes decisions on what needs to be enhanced or improved as well as what needs to be added or deleted. Summative evaluation collects conclusive data on how effective the overall program or unit may or may not be. This data is then used to make decisions whether to continue the program or unit or not. These types of evaluation permit us to demonstrate how assessment has informed planning and program and service delivery (Pomerantz, 2003a).

Does your division, department, or unit employ formative and summative evaluation? In what form?

Types of Program Review

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) indicate that a program review is an assessment mechanism, which often uses a process of external peer review employing established criteria to determine if the unit or program meets its goals. It is a quality improvement process because through assessment we collect data, which can be used to add value to the program or unit's work. It is important to note that external does not necessarily mean external to the institution. A team of peers or colleagues within the institution can conduct this process as easily as an external team of reviewers or consultants and at less expense of money though often at greater expense of time that could be devoted to serving students.

Program evaluations can examine different elements of program. These include an examination of goals, processes, and outcomes. These different types of evaluation are briefly described below.

Major Types of Program Evaluation (McNamara, 1998)

1. Goals-Based Evaluation looks at the extent to which a program is meeting pre-determined goals or objectives.
2. Process-Based Evaluation helps to develop a complete understanding of how a program works. It examines the specific processes and function of the program and the effectiveness and efficiency of these individually and collectively.
3. Outcomes-Based Evaluation explores whether we are really providing the necessary specific programs and services to bring about the outcomes we have verified are needed by students.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) is a consortium of more than 30 professional organizations that has developed “best practice” criteria against which institutions can test the quality of their student affairs programs and services (Miller, 2002). These criteria allow institutions to evaluate to some degree the goals, processes, and outcomes employed by a particular unit. Each set of standards is available in the CAS Blue Book and in the individual functional area Self-Assessment Guides (SAG). The Self-Assessment Guides are printed in a format that allows you to easily conduct a self-study of a particular program.

Has your institution conducted regular program reviews in student affairs or academic units? Have these been effective?

Steps in a Program Review

As you prepare to conduct a program review, you should consider the purpose, process, and progress of the program review. The purpose helps provide a clear and realistic picture of why you plan to conduct a program evaluation (Pomerantz, 2003b). There are three key reasons for conducting a program review. These include planning or program improvement, accountability or documenting success, and budget or justifying resource allocation. The process explains the what, who, how, and when of the program review. Through the process, we identify criteria to evaluate the program or unit; determine as a team who will conduct the review, when they will conduct it, and in what format it will occur; and how data or recommendations will be reported and prioritized (Pomerantz, 2003b). Finally, the progress of the program review puts in place a system of responding to and prioritizing recommendations put forward or concerns raised during the review process (Pomerantz, 2003b). Due to time constraints or budgetary reasons, some concerns or recommendations may not be able to be immediately addressed, if ever.

Once you have put together a team to chart the course for the program evaluation, the group should answer the following questions.

Questions Regarding the Program Evaluation Process (McNamara, 1998)

1. For what purposes is the evaluation being done? What do you want to be able to decide as a result of the evaluation?
2. Who are the audiences or stakeholders for the information from the evaluation? How will you involve them in the program review?
3. What kinds of information are needed to make the decision in question one and/or to educate your intended audiences or stakeholders? What are the best methods for collecting this information? In what format should we present the data collected to our various audiences or stakeholders?
4. From what sources should information be collected (people, documents, etc.)?
5. How can that information be collected in a reasonable and timely manner?
6. When is the information needed?
7. What resources are available to assist with the data collection and evaluation processes?

A program evaluation allows us to improve and enhance our work with students, faculty, and staff. It holds us accountable and keeps us on our game. A process of regular, ongoing program evaluation ensures that staff do not sit idly waiting for the next five-year program evaluation to occur. Quality improvement is a continuous process and requires the involvement and input of the entire organization to enrich our work with students.

Assignments

Go to www.blinn.edu/ProgramEval/ and review their materials on conducting a program evaluation. How useful did you find this information?

Read the case study about Midlands Technical College (Banta et al., 1996).

Who could offer you support, assistance, and information necessary in a sound program evaluation?

Other Resources

Schuh, J.H., & Upcraft, M.L. (2001). *Assessment in practice in student affairs: An application manual*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

References

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- McNamara, C. (1998, February 16). *Basic guide to program evaluation*. Retrieved on May 24, 2004 from (www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm).
- Miller, T.K. (2002, April 8). Using professional standards for program assessment and development. *NetResults* [Online]. Retrieved on May 24, 2004 from www.naspa.org.
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