

Measuring Student Learning in the Co-curricular: Developing an Assessment Plan for Student Affairs

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The Office of Student Life at Maryville University of St. Louis has adopted an assessment plan that meets department directors at their various levels of comfort with assessment while contributing to the university's efforts to create a culture of assessment. When I applied for my current position as Assistant Dean of Students and Director of the Office of Multicultural Programs, the fact that the primary responsibility of the new Assistant Dean of Students was developing and implementing an assessment plan for the Office of Student Life was quite attractive to me. I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was excited because at that time in my professional career I was looking for a position that would allow me the opportunity to focus more on assessment. I was also nervous because I wasn't sure how I would develop, let alone implement, an assessment plan for an entire division.

PAST EFFORTS

The Office of Student Life is responsible for the oversight of 7 departments; Office of Multicultural Programs, Personal Counseling, Health and Wellness, Office of Student Involvement, Campus Ministry and Community Service, Residential Life and Athletics. As a division, we have had our share of assessment tries and misses. A few years prior to creating the Assistant Dean of Students position, the entire division participated in a CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education assessment project for each unit within Student Life. As with many assessment efforts, data were collected, reports were written, and layers of dust settled on top of those reports. What happened? Despite best efforts the division was no better off than when it partook in the assessment endeavor.

It was soon realized that a position needed to be created with a primary focus on assessment, and so the Assistant Dean of Students position came about. Its purpose was to break the cycle of meaningless assessment endeavors and enact initiatives where directors use what they learned to prove and improve student learning in the co-curricular.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

My first year in the position was spent educating my colleagues just on the differences between evaluation and assessment. Going into year two, I felt quite discouraged that maybe I was in over my head. After some serious thought and reflection, I decided to focus the second year on helping them gather all the data collected up to this point. What I soon learned was that the majority of the data that had been collected was program evaluation data, not assessment. I put together a report of each department; the tool used to measure student learning and/or program satisfaction, and sent it to my colleagues. We then discussed what the data was telling us and what it was not.

After two years of working with my colleagues, I started to get a clear picture of the needs of my team. I guess you can say I used my assessment data to create an assessment plan. The assessment data I collected helped me realize several things. First, my colleagues were all at different levels in terms of their understanding of assessment. In the past I had been working with them in group settings. What they needed was a more individualized approach. Second, they needed more direction than I had been giving. If this were going to work I needed to follow up with them regularly and provide them with due dates throughout the year. In essence, I thought I was providing the team with easy to follow directions, but we were not all on the same page. Last, for reporting purposes, there needed to be more guidance on how to analyze the data and what was important to report.

THE PLAN

I took all the information I had learned about my team and used it to customize an assessment plan to fit their individual needs. I first started by scheduling individual meetings with each director to explain assessment and evaluation. This one-on-one time allowed them to ask questions based on their level of understanding. The first meetings were all a half-hour to 45 minutes. In each meeting I used the analogy of teaching and the various necessary pieces to creating a successful course to make my point. Since all of the directors had taught at least one course, this analogy was extremely helpful. In order to help them ease into the practice and not feel so overwhelmed, they were asked to choose one program to assess for the upcoming school year. I came prepared to the meeting with suggestions of a program based on what I now knew about their areas. Like a course, they needed to choose a program where they had a group of students for an extended period of time allowing them to measure student learning.

The next step in the plan was to create assessment modules that would walk them through the assessment plan, but at their own place. Four modules were created using PowerPoint and disseminated at different intervals during the summer. The modules were:

Module One: Writing Learning Outcomes

Module Two: Developing Learning Activities

Module Three: Assessing Learning Outcomes

Module Four: Analyzing and Reporting Assessment Results

Each module was sent out including a report template with sections that correspond to the modules. Each section was to be completed after going through the corresponding module and returned to me for review. After each module and report, I scheduled individual follow up meetings with each director to discuss the report and to provide them with feedback for that section. When the modules were sent, not only did they receive the report template, but I completed the section of the template with my own assessment project prior to sending it as an example of how the report should look. This plan allowed for consistent and concise reporting. It also allowed each director to have time to complete the modules at their own pace, provide clear definitions and examples of each step, and individual time to address concerns specific to their needs.

FINDINGS

What did we learn about our programs? We learned that the work we do in Student Life adds value to the collegiate experience of the students with whom we work. While not all learning outcomes were achieved within the first year, many of them were. We learned the importance of both formative and summative assessment tools in order to continue program improvement for optimal learning.

What have we learned about ourselves? We learned that we are able to assess student learning just like our colleagues in academic affairs, but in ways that are best suited for student affairs. We learned that while assessment takes more time and effort, it assists us in being better professionals for our students and the departments we oversee.

What have we learned about assessment? We learned that assessment is not as scary as we originally thought. We learned that if we take it piece by piece it is an endeavor that can be accomplished and can be rewarding. We learned that assessment data is integral to the work we do with our students. It is the only way of knowing if what we think students should be learning is actually taking place.

NEXT STEPS

The success of the assessment plan has been encouraging. The directors and their staff have found the modules to be quite beneficial. In the future, additional modules will be created. Those modules will focus on continuing to link the curricular with the co-curricular. As the assessment plan for the university continues to evolve, so will the plan for student life. In the meantime, though, a fifth module is being developed; writing Rubrics. This module will help directors write rubrics that are in line with those implemented by the university; and will also assist them with using rubrics in the assessment process.