From the Editor

As demands for accountability escalate, assessment continues to evolve as a central aspect of student affairs administration. Experience clearly indicates that without a robust portfolio of assessment activities, the services, programs, and activities of a student affairs division are at risk of being reassigned to other organizational units on campus—or, in a tight budgetary environment, being eliminated. This sourcebook is designed to complement existing literature by reminding student affairs educators of the importance of developing an assessment program and by exploring topics that will add depth and richness to such a program.

The authors address topics ranging in breadth from specific metrics to strategies for developing collaborative activities involving academic and student affairs. They show how to integrate valuable resources into the assessment process and how to use that process to enhance the student experience, and they take the largest view, offering advice on developing an institutional culture of assessment. Finally, their collective experience and wisdom is brought to bear on planning future actions that will best serve students during their collegiate years.
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Editor’s Notes

Assessment in student affairs is a topic that has generated increasing interest on the part of practitioners and faculty in graduate preparation programs in recent years, as Sandeen and Barr (2006) have pointed out. While references are made to evaluation and research in the 1937 foundational document The Student Personnel Point of View (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1989), as increasing pressure has been placed on higher education to be accountable to its various stakeholders and to improve, interest in assessment has increased. Lee Upcraft and I were fortunate enough to get in on the ground floor of the assessment movement (1996), and subsequently we published a number of papers and a second book (Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates, 2001) that focused on topics related to assessment in student affairs.

When the third volume on assessment in student affairs with which I was associated was published (2009), I thought the topic had been pretty well exhausted (or maybe that was autobiographical), and I did not think that I would be associated with any more publications that focused on assessment. I was quite wrong in this analysis and have found that, as I have done additional consulting and speaking about assessment, new and, in my judgment, important topics related to assessment in student affairs have emerged. This volume has been developed to explore several of these topics that provide depth to the study and practice of assessment in student affairs. Whether other topics will emerge in the coming years is unknown at the time of this writing. What I am sure of is that the contributors to this volume will continue to study and refine assessment topics, and they will make contributions that will advance their craft.

I selected the topics for this volume based on conversations with student affairs educators and faculty I have encountered since the 2009 volume was published. Certainly my methodology is less than systematic, but these topics seemed to be of interest to practitioners in recent years. In my view, the authors are experts in the subject matter they have contributed. I have heard them discuss their topics at conferences or had conversations with them about their work on a number of occasions and always have been very impressed with their knowledge about assessment in student affairs. I am confident that they have a great deal to contribute to the ongoing discussion about assessment in student affairs, and I am grateful to them for their contributions to this volume.

Gregory S. Blimling frames the volume by discussing contemporary challenges faced by student affairs educators in assessment. Gregory is well placed to lead the conversation. For twenty-two years he was the senior student affairs officer at two institutions, Appalachian State University and...
Rutgers University, and he has been a leading scholar practitioner in student affairs. Gregory is now a faculty member at Rutgers.

Carolyn H. Livingston and Jonathan D. Zerulik from Emory University describe the role of the assessment coordinator in a division of student affairs. Carolyn serves in that role at Emory, and Jonathan also provides leadership for assessment activities at Emory. They have helped Emory University develop an impressive record of assessment in student affairs.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) long has advocated that student affairs educators include assessment as one of their routine activities. In Chapter Three, Laura A. Dean, who is president of CAS and also a faculty member at the University of Georgia, has focused on using the CAS standards in student affairs assessment. Laura has an important message to share about using these standards in assessment.

J. Patrick Biddix has developed a graduate course at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), that is designed to prepare graduate students to conduct assessments in student affairs after they become full-time practitioners. He has nurtured relationships with various departments and programs in student affairs as well as other units, such as the graduate college, at UTK that provide sites for his students to hone their assessment skills. The value, of course, of these assessments is that not only do the students sharpen their skills; they also provide useful information for the units that serve as sites. He shares his experiences in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five describes collaborative relationships between academic and student affairs at UTK informed by an ambitious strategic plan. Melissa S. Shivers and Sally J. McMillan describe how they and their divisions work together to enhance the student experience. They acknowledge that the collaboration between academic and student affairs is not always easy, but they also assert, with excellent evidence, that their working together enhances the student experience.

Ann M. Gansemer-Topf has worked in institutional research at Grinnell College and in admissions at Iowa State University. Now a faculty member, Ann describes how assessment can be used to improve retention efforts. In Chapter Six Ann provides details about the role of assessment in efforts designed to improve undergraduate retention efforts.

Dashboard indicators increasingly can be found on websites of institutions of higher education. I thought it would be useful to provide a discussion of how dashboard indicators can be used as an assessment and management tool in student affairs. Joshua J. Mitchell and Andrew J. Ryder have worked with dashboard indicators over the past few years and provide a lucid discussion of them in Chapter Seven.

Lance C. Kennedy-Phillips and I worked together on an assessment project at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, in October 2012. During our work, he described the role of assessment in the development of a major initiative at Ohio State
University. I found his story to be captivating and asked if he would share it in the form of a case study. He and Kellie J. Uhrig generously agreed to do so, and the case is included as Chapter Eight.

What are the characteristics of student affairs organizations that have integrated assessment into their routine practice? I explore that topic in Chapter Nine and provide a dozen characteristics that I think are part of a culture of assessment.

After all the chapters were written, I invited noted assessment expert Marilee J. Bresciani to write an afterword, and she agreed to do so. In her contribution she presents challenges that those engaged in assessment need to consider as their work moves forward.

I trust that this volume will help stimulate ongoing conversations about assessment in student affairs. Best wishes as your important work as student affairs educators contributes to the learning of our students.

John H. Schuh  
Editor

References

Challenges of Assessment in Student Affairs

Gregory S. Blimling

Assessment is not a new topic for student affairs professionals. As far back as the publication of The Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937), educators have argued for improving programs and services for students through a process of evaluation and research. Since that time, student affairs professionals have undertaken various forms of research and assessment. Some did so to improve the educational experience for students, whereas others did so to demonstrate that student affairs contributed to the education of students and was not merely engaged in entertaining students and keeping them out of trouble. Today, assessment in student affairs is more important than ever. In this chapter, I explain why. I begin by placing assessment in the context of the current climate of accountability in higher education. I then discuss some of the challenges in motivating student affairs professionals to engage in assessment and suggest a decision-based management approach to assessment. I conclude the chapter with suggestions about the types of easily obtained assessment information and a discussion of several personal experiences about navigating the politics of assessment.

For the purpose of this chapter, I have defined assessment in student affairs as the process of collecting and analyzing information to improve the conditions of student life, student learning, or the quality and efficiency of services and programs provided for students. This definition includes assessment done to improve programs and to provide information necessary to answer questions that hold student affairs accountable for the expenditure of student funds. It does not include various forms of personnel evaluations, which could be part of an overall assessment plan.
The Climate for Assessment in Higher Education

To understand the need for assessment, one needs to appreciate the current climate of concern about the cost and effectiveness of higher education. Demand for greater accountability in higher education is not a new topic. It is part of the reform movement in higher education that started in the mid-1980s (Levine, 1996) and produced dozens of reports calling for quantifiable measures of what institutions produced. The consequences of this scrutiny have been an increase in institutional reporting requirements imposed by the U.S. Department of Education, by many state governments, and by virtually all regional accrediting agencies.

The source of the most recent wave of criticism about higher education comes from escalating student loan debts, the increasing costs of higher education, and concerns that what students learn in college does not necessarily translate into employment after college. High unemployment rates for recent college graduates since 2008 have heightened demands for greater accountability.

The average cost for an undergraduate student attending a four-year public university in-state and living on campus for the 2010–2011 academic year was $20,100, and the annual cost was $39,800 at a four-year nonprofit private institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The cost of a college education has been increasing at a rate higher than inflation for the past decade (College Board Advocacy & Policy Center, 2011), leading 75 percent of Americans to believe that college is too expensive and 57 percent to believe that college is no longer a good value (Pew Research Center, 2011). The response to the increased cost of higher education has been for an estimated 69 percent of families to eliminate higher education because of cost considerations, which is the highest percentage since this data was collected (Sallie Mae and Ipsos Public Affairs, 2012). To save money on college, more students than in previous years are attending community colleges for the first two years, and more of those who are attending four-year institutions are staying home and commuting to save on the cost of room and board (Sallie Mae and Ipsos Public Affairs, 2012).

The increased cost of higher education has translated, at least in part, into increased student loan debt. This can be summarized by two trends: More students than ever are borrowing to help finance their college education, and those who borrow are borrowing more. These trends are evidenced by the increase in the average amount of debt students have incurred and by the increased percentage of students who borrowed money to help finance their education. From the 1999–2000 academic year to 2009–2010, average debt per borrower among public college bachelor's degree recipients increased at an average annual rate of 1.1 percent beyond inflation. The percentage of graduates with debt increased from 54 percent to 56 percent. For private, nonprofit college bachelor’s degree recipients during that same period, the average debt per borrower increased at an