

## **Getting Close To A Full Picture In Assessment**

### **- a theoretical discussion of assessing student services**

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A brief visit to the Accreditation history reveals that colleges have been performing comprehensive self-studies of their institutions religiously. However, what these self-studies often do not reveal is the extent and rigor student services have been assessed. As the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) is moving toward outcome based self-study, the student services personnel feel increasingly under pressure to assess student services. And yet, a simple survey of 15 community colleges in California indicated that seven of them do not think their student services were self-studied as rigorously as instruction, if at all, and only two of the 10 colleges have some sort of an experimental model in response to outcome based assessment.

From a budgetary point of view, student services traditionally share about 20% of the total expenditure. From a service utilization perspective, a typical student is half-time taking two or three classes and the fact is no matter how many classes s/he takes, s/he definitely interfaces with the Student Services. S/he must apply for admission, seek counseling, go through assessment testing and orientation (if s/he is taking more than 3 credit units), visit the health services if needed, purchase text books, eat at the cafeteria, look for parking space, discuss career and transfer issues at the career or transfer center, and apply for financial aid. The list can go on. Even though not all these services are considered student services in all colleges, they represent a large part of the interaction between the college and the students that has traditionally remained hidden and un-studied. The limelight has always been on teaching, grades, and learning outcomes- namely, instruction.

It has become clear that a student's college experience is no longer defined by time spent in the classroom. Their experience starts the moment they apply for enrollment, further enhanced by their interaction with counseling, assessment, financial aid, and others - all

before they even start their first day of class. They will continue to interact with these services and at times, rely on these services to continue their study. The nature of this interaction largely determines their learning outcome. For example, before they obtain counseling, they must receive good orientation so that they know where to go for help. If they do not receive quality counseling, they will end up taking the wrong classes and possibly prolong their time-to-degree. If they are placed in the wrong class, they will be wasting their time. In sum, there will be no quality instructional outcomes if a learner is not well informed and adequately serviced.

Higher education is gradually moving out of the traditional in-class lecturing mode to an *anytime anywhere* mode as evidenced by burgeoning on-line learning and distance learning. Students may never appear in a traditional classroom at all. In order to successfully conduct the transfer of knowledge in this changing world, successful instruction has to rely more and more on services that it used to treat as supportive and secondary. These services ought to be viewed as essential components for they determine the effectiveness of course delivery. In the past, a college's reputation was determined by outcome measures developed for instruction, which largely concerned with instructors' ability to teach. Now, a need exists to establish outcome indicators to measure the effectiveness of non-instructional services, particularly student services.

What is a good way of assessing student services? First, assessing student services needs not to re-invent the wheel, and most existing evaluation methodologies should apply. Second, successful assessment of student services needs to begin at the individual component level, i.e., counseling, registration. It is the sum of individual components of student services that collectively determines the institutional effectiveness, which manifests in terms of transfers, graduates employability, degrees awarded, success and retention, among others.

What is to assess in each component? Again, wheels don't have been re-invented. Since evaluation in essence is about answering the question of whether a particular goal has been achieved by the person/entity that has said to achieve it, then the correct approach is

to examine the processes and results of the achievement of goals, or objectives set forth by each individual component. The goals or objectives set by the components are contracts and essential obligations they have between themselves and their service recipients, in this case, registered students. Assessment of student services then is the on-going process of examining what the service provider promises to provide and what the service recipient receives. Just to provoke more thinking on this subject, following is a conceptual model of the steps it takes to assess a student services component in a typical community college in California.

#### STEP ONE: INFORMATION COLLECTION - *Who are we?*

This step is the background information gathering, which is crucial to understanding who the individual component is.

- Historical review of the component (e.g. how and when established)
- Organization chart
- Personnel (full-time, part-time, student, volunteers)
- Summary of duties (e.g. scope of authority, qualifications of employees, ratio, etc.)
- Equipment (e.g. technology, etc.)
- Hours of operation

#### STEP TWO: ACCOUNTABILITY - *What do we do?*

This step traditionally takes place first, but it would remain highly abstract without knowing first the "who". This step includes the following:

- Mission or philosophy
- Specific goals and objectives
- Relationships with students and other student services and instruction of the college

#### STEP THREE: ASSESSMENT - *How have we done?*

This is broken into two parts: Process and Outcome. Process is an examination of the process of service delivery - "Have we done what we planned to do?" This part solicits lots of "yes" and "no" answers. It is followed by quantitative and measurable data, which

help to answer the question, "How have we done it?" Outcome asks the questions: Are students satisfied? What areas have been rated high or low?

Process translates the *objectives* decided by the component in the Mission and Goals Step into questions that need a "yes" or "no" answer. Outcome concerns statistics, e.g. specific numbers for using services such as admission, health services), service feedback surveys, e.g. interest, needs, satisfaction, awareness, etc)

#### STEP FOUR: PLANNING - *How can we do better?*

This is the last step to close the loop of Planning, Implementation and Evaluation. It materializes in the form of a report, which we are richly experienced to write. However, the report can only be meaningful if the previous steps are done well. The report should contain the following:

- candid evaluation of service delivery both process and outcome,
- future needs
- Recommendations/ new goals
- Resources needed (e.g. dollars, materials, personnel, facilities, etc.)
- Timetables and persons responsible

These four steps help illustrate the basic flow of the process of conducting student services assessment.

About 14 years ago, a document entitled, "They Said It Couldn't Be Done" was published. It was a joint effort of close to 1,000 personnel, both practitioners and institutional researchers, in the California Community College System. This particular document is still being cited today as a comprehensive and reasonable approach to evaluating student services. It contains a section that argues many of the points in this essay and it also has sample survey forms that help guide the practice. The web site for this document is at: <http://www.cabrillo.cc.ca.us/oir/ssevaluation/sservpg1.htm>

Assessing student services needs immediate attention from the colleges that are taking a comprehensive approach to college assessment. Assessing student services helps to complete the entire picture of assessment of learning. This task can be accomplished if the practitioners and institutional researchers work together. This theoretical discussion provides some basic structures and ideas about how to start evaluating the task at hand and it conceptualizes a process that is based on the nature of the student services and the best practices in assessment.

## **Bibliography**

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