Make Assessment Easier Than You Think:
Understand Assessment Data Concepts and Their Application
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As students depart campuses for the summer break, conversations among campus-based fraternity/sorority professionals often evolve from program implementation to program enhancement. Summer is not only a time to recharge our "professional batteries," but it also allows us to reflect on the year and make adjustments to the ever-evolving programs and services we offer to our students.

Many associate assessment with other "A" words, *accountability* and *accreditation* (Jacobson, 2010-11), and consider it as a checklist item that has to be done once a year. While some see assessment as a way to satisfy the university administration, some feel assessment is abstract, difficult to understand, and out of reach. If we truly want to use assessment to help us do our jobs better, we need to change our mindset and make assessment meaningful.

This article will (1) explain what assessment is and why we do it, (2) introduce some common data concepts in assessment, and (3) provide practical assessment examples that have improved the quality of fraternity/sorority life on our campus. This article intends to help you become more comfortable with the assessment process.

What is Assessment and Why Do We Do It?

In the higher education setting, assessment is a systematic framework that monitors on-going *institutional effectiveness*, or how well an institution is doing as a whole (Bresciani, 2011; Hatfield, 2009). It is similar to *quality control/assurance* in the business sector and *evaluation* in the non-profit sector. Assessment allows us to account for what we have done and to determine if we can do it better.

As the cost of higher education rises and funding becomes limited, the state, accrediting bodies, students, parents, and the public have made institutions more accountable than ever. Regional accrediting bodies require institutions to demonstrate institutional effectiveness through assessment; therefore, assessment is necessary. In some cases, assessment may even help justify additional resources for program enhancement.

Assessment Cycle

Assessment is an on-going process and is often outcomes-oriented (Jacobson, 2010-11). The following steps are repeated for continuous improvement in the assessment cycle. The steps are similar to what you would do in an experiment, except that the conclusion is used to implement changes for improvement.

1. *Identify intended outcomes.* This step is basically goal-setting. The intended outcomes need to be clear and measurable. If you want to determine the effectiveness of an academic workshop for fraternity/sorority members, an example will be "At least 70% participants will rate the academic workshop as effective." Sometimes, it is difficult to set up an intended outcome. You may check with your peers in similar institutions or professional standards for reference. You may also consider collecting baseline data before setting your intended outcomes.

2. *Develop plans to achieve intended outcomes and to collect data.* You probably know how to make a good plan to execute your programs. It may take you some extra time to think through what evidence/data you will use to measure the actual outcomes. For the academic workshop example, you may use a short survey asking participants to rate the effectiveness of the workshop. If you choose to do a short survey, it is a good practice to research how others have asked similar questions on surveys before writing your own survey item.

3. *Execute plans and collect data.* This step is straight-forward. You execute the program according to your plans. In addition to the details of the program, you want to pay attention to data collection because, in some occasions, you only have contact with the participants once, and it becomes difficult to collect the data at a later time. The better data you acquire, the better assessment you can perform.

4. *Examine if intended outcomes are met.* This step requires honesty and objectivity. You compare the collected data to the intended outcomes set in step 1. You will be able to make the judgment more easily if the intended outcomes are clear. For the academic workshop example, if more than 70% participants rated the academic workshop as effective, the intended outcome was met.

5. *Use results to improve outcomes.* This is an important step to review how the actual outcomes came to place. For the academic workshop example, if more than 70% participants rated the workshop as effective, you will want to reflect on what made the intended outcome possible. You may be able to apply some positive program elements to other programs. You may also consider raising the bar of the intended outcome in the future. On the other hand, if fewer than 70% participants rated the workshop as effective, you will want to find out why and come up with ways to improve the workshop, or evaluate if the original intended outcome was set too high. In either case, the purpose of this step is for continuous improvement.

Common Data Concepts in Assessment

Even though assessment is becoming more important in higher education, there is not a consistent set of terms for assessment. The terminology for assessment varies across accrediting bodies, universities and colleges, and even divisions and programs (Hatfield, 2009). It is important for you to learn the assessment terms used at your institution. However, some

data concepts in assessment are commonly agreed upon, and understanding them will help you better learn the assessment terms at your institution. The data concepts include student learning outcomes, functional outcomes, direct measures, and indirect measures.

Student Learning Outcomes (SLO)

Student learning outcomes focus on the students' competency of specific knowledge or skills upon completion of some types of instruction (e.g. credit courses, degree programs, training, etc.). SLOs are often used by academic programs to demonstrate students' competency; however, if your programs aim to provide students with certain knowledge or skills, you will consider the knowledge or skills as SLOs. To better state SLOs, Bloom's Taxonomy is often used. The taxonomy describes different levels of competency: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. You may use the Bloom's Taxonomy verbs to write clear intended outcomes. An example will be "After completing the risk management training, members will be able to *choose* (a Bloom's Taxonomy verb at the application level) appropriate risk management strategies for their chapter" (See Resources for a list of Bloom's Taxonomy verbs).

Functional Outcomes (FO)

Functional outcomes focus on the services provided or functional tasks accomplished by areas with administrative functions (e.g., business office, public relations office, police/security, etc.). Compared to SLOs, FOs are more straight-forward and tap into the *quality* of services or *quantity* of accomplished tasks. The intended outcome example of academic workshop given in the assessment cycle section is an FO addressing quality (measured by effectiveness). An example of an FO addressing quantity is, "The fraternity/sorority community population will increase by 3%."

Direct Measures

Direct measures of SLOs often require students to perform specific tasks in order to show the degree of competency. Some examples of direct measures are: portfolios, pre- and post-test, essays, standardized/licensure exams, capstone projects, and specific exam questions. Sometimes rubrics are used to determine the level of competency. FOs focusing on the quantity of accomplishments also use direct measures. For the FO example of increasing fraternity/sorority population, the actual number of members will be used to determine the intended outcome is met.

Indirect Measures

Indirect measures are based on students'/clients' perceptions or reflection of the instruction or services they received. Some examples of indirect measures are surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Like direct measures, indirect measures may be used for SLOs and FOs. Indirect

measures of SLOs are often students' self-rated competency of certain knowledge or skills, while indirect measures of FOs tend to capture students'/clients' opinions on specific services.

It may take you some time to digest these data concepts, but do not make them more complicated than they are. These concepts help us formulate intended outcomes that are clear and measurable. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has established standards and guidelines for fraternity and sorority advising programs. You may review some standards when you are considering your intended outcomes. In addition, Dr. Dan Bureau has an article in *Perspectives*, proposing to use the CAS learning domains and dimensions as SLOs in fraternity/sorority life (Bureau, 2011).

Putting Assessment into Practice

At Midwestern State University (MSU), assessment is done annually by each division, administrative department, and academic program. Fraternity/Sorority Life is part of the Office of Student Development and Orientation, and the assessment of Fraternity/Sorority Life is integrated into the Office's assessment plan. Some examples below are done in the annual assessment, while others are additional works for self-assessment, and all examples try to improve Fraternity/Sorority Life on campus.

New Panhellenic Council Recruitment Program

A new recruitment program was implemented for new members of chapters in the Panhellenic Council. A recruitment survey was administered to all matched new members. It measured their ability to identify their values, confidence of choosing the right chapter, and overall satisfaction with the program (indirect measures). The data showed that the vast majority of the new members' experiences were positive. The findings supported that the addition of the new program was effective and should be continued or expanded to other areas of Fraternity/Sorority Life programming.

Impressions of Fraternity/Sorority Life on Campus

Wanting to know how MSU students who were non-members viewed the fraternity/sorority community, we used a survey to collect data on perceptions of the fraternity/sorority community (indirect measures). The positive impressions were not at the intended level. After analyzing the data, a marketing/branding campaign for the fraternity community was developed. This campaign focused on the areas that were confusing or viewed in a negative light from the non-members on campus. Additionally, conversations at the council level were more intentional about the impact the fraternity/sorority community has on the greater campus community and created increased efforts to move more events and programs on campus rather than off campus.

Retention and Graduation of Fraternity/Sorority Members and Non-members

MSU enrollment has declined in the last few semesters, and different units on campus have tried to explore factors that influenced enrollment. Other than recruiting new students, retention of current students and graduation rates influence enrollment. Institutional data informed us that the number of new students and retained students has decreased, and that the number of graduates has increased over time. By comparing retention and graduation of fraternity/sorority members to non-members (direct measures), we tracked 6 years of first-time college students, and we found that fraternity/sorority members were more likely than non-members to be retained and to graduate on time. Furthermore, conversations with chapter/council advisors and leaders gradually evolved from discussing simply grades and GPA averages to how fraternity/sorority membership can help with keeping more students in school and encouraging members to graduate on time.

Conclusion

Assessment is a systematic framework that monitors how well we do our jobs and promotes continuous improvement. With the increasing demand for accountability, assessment is inevitable, and is more beneficial if we make the assessment process meaningful. If you take advantage of the assessment process and data, you can make authentic program enhancement. If you are ready to take advantage of assessment, below we have provided a list of easily accessible resources.

References

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Resources

Bloom's Taxonomy Action Verbs, complied by Clemson University's Office for Institutional Assessment.
http://www.clemson.edu/assessment/assessmentpractices/referencematerials/documents/Blooms%20Taxonomy%20Action%20Verbs.pdf

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Student Affairs Assessment Leaders, Assessment Resources.
http://studentaffairsassessment.org/assessment-resources

University of Central Florida's Operational Excellence and Assessment Support, Administrative Unit Assessment Handbook. http://oeas.ucf.edu/doc/adm_assess_handbook.pdf