

## Measuring the Impact of our Work (Or, Everything I Know About Assessment and Planning I Learned from a Tomato Farmer)

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*Why do our assessment efforts fail to live up to expectations?* Short answer: a number of different reasons, however ultimately those myriad reasons are connected to one overarching issue – **a lack of focus**. It might be that our planning cycle is too short or long, perhaps we have too much or too little data; maybe we asked the wrong questions, or misjudged the appropriate audience; or maybe we just collected data prior to establishing the very questions we hoped to answer. Regardless, the secret to measuring the impact of your work lies in getting better data, asking better questions, and pairing our questions with the right assessment tools. The extent to which our assessment efforts are crafted to provide valid and reliable evidence of impact should be at the forefront of evaluation design and planning.

Let's say you owned a farm and grew tomato plants in California, but due to the recent drought, had only a limited supply of water for your crop. It would be impossible to water and feed an entire plot of tomato plants all season. In fact, doing so would likely cause all of the plants to die because any given plant would not receive enough water to thrive. As a farmer you must strategically determine how many plants you can entirely provide food and water to, in hopes of increasing their chances of thriving and producing fruit. You will get more fruit when concentrating the resources on a few plants than by spreading your resources broadly over dozens of plants.

The issues that face fraternity and sorority professionals aren't too dissimilar from the problems of the California tomato farmer. The food and water is analogous to our various available resources (namely time and money), and the mistake we see young professionals make too often is spreading their resources too widely over too many priorities. While this practice often makes them very busy, their efforts are rarely productive, because not enough resources have been invested in the places that matter to actually make a difference. There is a big difference between being *busy*, and being *productive*, and the two should not be confused.

This article identifies nine steps to help fraternity/sorority professionals plan their assessment efforts with a focus on measuring *their* impact and demonstrating *their* value as a professional in a way that will help them make the most *productive* use of their resources.

- 1. Establish an appropriate timeframe.** As a professional, you should consider how long you intend to be in your position. For argument's sake, let's assume the average new professional will likely be in their role for two to three years. Therefore, a three-year planning window makes the most sense. Strategic planning from year to year does not allow time for change to occur, nor does it really reflect a trend over time. Alternatively, a five to ten year cycle makes sense in an organizational structure that supports institutional knowledge (the same key

people) in their roles for that duration. *Think: How long do you want to be farming tomatoes? Why set goals as part of a planning cycle that lasts years beyond when you plan to be in your current job? Your planning should take place in cycles of two to three years, because that cycle is long enough to allow you to see the impact of your work, but short enough to allow you to see it through.*

2. **Identify the major issues.** Begin by getting all of the major issues on the table, and then strategically sifting them down into the most critical subset. There are a number of places they might come from, such as previous assessment data, environmental scans (e.g., SWOT analysis), gap analyses, attitudes and perceptions, and reasoned observation (i.e., common sense). *Think: How many tomato plants do you have?*
3. **Prioritize.** Sift through the issues by considering risk vs. reward, return on investment, university or divisional priorities, bright shiny objects (i.e., the emergent issues or immediate priorities), and political pressures. Then, determine the three to five areas you want to focus on as part of your planning process. *Think: Which tomato plants do you want to feed and water?*
4. **Select the issues and identify the target populations.** From your ranked list of issues, determine how many and which you will feasibly commit to address. Identify the target audience for each issue, which may vary by issue. This is important for developing effective tactics/activities to address the issue with the identified populations. *Think: Tag the tomato plants so that you know which will get water and food, and which will not.*
5. **Select the measures and methods of assessment.** The measure is what you would look at; the method is how you would look at it. Measures should be capable of producing data that are reliable and valid. They could be qualitative comments or observational notes, student work artifacts that are created (deliverables), attitudes, demonstration of skill, metrics, participation rates, or even dates and dollar figures. These measures might be harvested using a variety of methods, such as focus grouping, interviews, observations, rubrics/checklists, surveying, or counting. *Think: What will you measure about the tomato plants over time to make sure they are healthy and growing?*
6. **Collect baseline data.** Did you have prior data when considering this issue? Are those data appropriate to the issue at hand because they were measured in a similar way recently and remain relevant to the issue? If not, consider Year 1 as your benchmark year. This will allow you to have a starting point from which you can evidence impact over time. *Think: How have you grown tomato plants in the past? What will you compare to in order to better understand how productive your tomato harvest is?*
7. **Determine targets (desired outcome levels).** Targets are also thought of as desired levels of outcome performance. They may involve a certain amount of

participation, metric score, deadline date, theme emerging from qualitative inquiry, or rate of performance. Good targets stretch you but remain realistic and attainable. Baseline data are also very useful in determining target levels. *Think: How much fruit do you hope the tomato plants will produce?*

8. **Develop tactics.** It is at this step that we transition from strategic planning into operational planning. Tactics are the activities and action steps that comprise your implementation efforts toward the established outcome. At the highest level, an activity map should document the major tasks during the multi-year implementation. What programs will you develop? How will you prioritize your advising time? What environmental factors will you tackle? Don't forget to map out assessment, and remain strategic: do not assess everything all of the time – assess just enough to be able to track your progress. *Think: What will you do to ensure the tomato plant has the best possible chance to produce your desired level of fruit?*
9. **Analyze, revise, and repeat.** As data become available, analyze them appropriately and assess expected vs. actual performance. Did you move the needle? If a significant difference exists between desired/expected performance and actual performance, what likely contributed to that gap? It is important in this stage to maintain an attitude of continual improvement. You may decide to revise things, or you may choose to “stay the course” and monitor progress without significantly changing anything. There is great power in the saying “if it ain't broke: don't break it!” *Think: How much fruit did the tomato plant actually produce, and what will you do next year to improve?*

It is vital for fraternity/sorority professionals to become experts at demonstrating their impact and, more importantly, demonstrating their value to their employers. Much was made of the recent revelation that campus-based fraternity/sorority advisors are generally the lowest paid administrators on a college campus. We suspect the reason for this is that we do a poor job prioritizing our time in ways that allows us to demonstrate our effectiveness. In other words, we substitute business for effectiveness. When we measure our success simply by how busy we are, we do a poor job advocating for ourselves and our work. So, want to make more than \$56,045 in this field? Start focusing your efforts, stop trying to do everything, and do a better job measuring your impact. Nothing will advance your career more than being able to demonstrate your worth by demonstrating your impact.