“Assessment should be used as a feedback loop to tell students how they are doing and where they need to continue to improve.”

Jane Fried

INTRODUCTION

A transition from a teaching-oriented to a student-centered learning environment requires institutional or divisional self-analysis or assessment; turning the results of that analysis into strategies; creating student learning experiences (that is, not just experiences unaligned with learning); and measuring the intended learning outcomes to determine whether the delivered experiences actually contribute to transformative learning in the context of institutional mission. All of these components are based on the answers to critical and sometimes tough questions that must be asked of your department, division and eventually the campus community during the transition process. What are those questions? And can simply asking critical questions be all that is really necessary to advance and guide the transition process? The obvious answer is no—but knowing what questions to ask sets the stage for change.

WHERE AND HOW TO BEGIN?

An increasingly rich literature now offers guidance as institutions begin or strengthen assessment efforts; comprehensive texts like Maki’s Assessing for Learning (2004) offer both leadership and practical advice. A standard practice with which to begin assessments of programs and services within campus departments and divisions is to hold a staff retreat for one or more purposes: to help enhance professional skills, discuss cutting edge trends and their implications for work with students, review progress on the institutional or division strategic plan, or decide what new initiatives or strategies should be undertaken for the coming academic year. Retreats can provide a supportive context for discussion among staff members about the kinds of questions needed to inspire a focused and purposeful assessment process, and, because they generally center on longer term and strategic issues (rather than day-to-day tactics and problem solving), they can promote a richer conversation about divisional and institutional goals.

Some of the critical questions with which to begin framing an assessment process include these:

- Is the term “transformative learning” familiar at your institution? If so, how is it defined and used?

- Who is, or should be, responsible and accountable for identifying and articulating student learning outcomes in the context of transformative learning experience at your institution?

- What are the mutually agreed-upon characteristics of a transformative learning experience at your institution?

- How do you define the term “collaboration” as applied to work shared between faculty
and student and campus life staff at your institution, and how is that collaboration manifested in the development and execution of transformative learning programs?

“Informative learning changes what we know; transformative learning changes how we know.” (Kegan, 2000, p. 50)

Other questions help departments, divisions, and institutions ascertain ways to move from disparate learning experiences to a collaboration or partnership for learning. Expectations about integrating learning experiences may be explored with questions such as:

- Are the expected learning outcomes of both curricular and co-curricular programs at your institution identified and communicated regularly? Are they linked or unified?

- What are the expectations for faculty involvement in co-curricular programs at your institution? Are those expectations reasonable and attainable?

- What are the expectations for the participation of student affairs educators in curricular programs at your institution? Are those expectations reasonable and attainable?

- What are the expectations for student involvement in curricular and co-curricular programs at your institution? Are those expectations reasonable and attainable?

- Are there co-curricular experiences that every student is expected to engage in at your institution, such as a study abroad experience, volunteer service, an organizational leadership experience, a performance in the arts, or an internship? What areas of campus are involved in these experiences?

“Learning is a complex, holistic, multicentric activity that occurs throughout and across the college experience” (Learning Reconsidered, 2004, p.5).

The following suggested questions are designed to help an institution assess its culture and readiness for creating a student-learning environment.

- How is faculty participation in, and support of, co-curricular programs valued and rewarded at your institution?

- How is student involvement in co-curricular programs encouraged or impeded, and supported and rewarded at your institution?

- Does the quality and utility of the facilities at your institution represent the expectations of both the college/university and its students for transformative learning?

- Do administrative and organizational structures at your institution represent the expectations of both the college/university and its students for transformative learning?

- How does the demographic composition of the student body at your institution affect the goal of transformative student learning?


- Are ongoing professional development programs sponsored at your institution that address the concept of transformative learning?
FOCUSING ON STUDENT LEARNING OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM: A CAMPUS EXAMPLE OF SUGGESTED FIRST STEPS FOR ASSESSING THE INTERNAL WORK ENVIRONMENT

One of the first projects that the division of student and campus life at SUNY-Geneseo began under the leadership of a new vice president was to conduct an analysis of the programs and services provided by the division by utilizing the Assessment Inventories based on the *Principles of Good Practices in Student Affairs* (1997) published by ACPA and NASPA. This assessment led the staff to conclude that the strengths of the division were as follows:

- Student affairs educators provide students with leadership training and offer leadership opportunities.
- Student affairs educators use a variety of communication methods to engage students’ different learning styles.
- Students are informed that the institution has high expectation for their academic and personal achievements and active involvement in campus life.
- Students are encouraged to participate in activities that increase self-understanding and self-confidence.
- Programs are offered that address student needs for academic support, co-curricular involvement, and personal growth.
- The institution recognizes outstanding student accomplishments through rewards, honorary organizations, and other forms of public recognition.
- Student affairs educators participate in the development of programs that welcome new members of the community to the institution (e.g., new student orientation, transfer student orientation).

The assessment exercise revealed that some of the work of the division was already oriented toward student learning, especially leadership training and the development of self-understanding and self-confidence. It also identified a number of areas where the staff felt it was deficient and that needed improvement. Many staff members felt that some important principles of good practice did not characterize the student affairs program at their campus:

- Collaboration with faculty is promoted to integrate civic responsibility and service into the curriculum.
- Students are expected to understand and respect other students’ experiences and perspectives.
- Faculty and students are included in developing the processes for adjudicating student misconduct.
- Student affairs educators are actively engaged in research to assess student learning outcomes.
- Research data is used to help student affairs educators understand what students are learning and to improve programs and services.
- Research priorities of the student affairs division are included in the institutional research agenda.
- Research results and their implications are communicated on a regular basis to faculty, staff, and students.
• Staff development programs are offered to assist staff in understanding and applying current research findings both on and off campus.

• Staff members are active in professional associations and present research findings both on and off campus.

• A strategic plan exists that links fiscal and human resources to desired educational outcomes.

• A systematic evaluation process is used to ensure that programs and services are cost effective.

• Student needs are assessed on a regular basis and resources are allocated accordingly.

• Resources are secured to incorporate new technologies into programs and activities.

• Educational outcomes are used to determine the design and use of indoor and outdoor learning spaces.

• Faculty and administrative staff from other divisions are routinely invited to student affairs staff meetings to discuss campus issues and program planning.

On other campuses, similar assessment discussions are generated by completing departmental self-assessment guides (SAGs) linked to the CAS Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2003). CAS, with representatives from more than 35 associations, has developed more than 30 standards that support assessments of the internal environment in student life programs and services; see www.cas.edu.

CREATING STRATEGIES, OBJECTIVES, AND GOALS

A common challenge for an institution, division, or department is to make good use of the assessment data collected for a particular purpose or project. Assessment data often remain in a summary report without further intentional attention; this is a waste of resources. Whatever assessment is undertaken to determine institutional readiness for transformative learning must be linked to action steps that can enhance strengths and address identified challenges.

Here is an example: Armed with the information garnered by asking the assessment questions described earlier, the vice president for student and campus life at SUNY-Geneseo charged the staff with the responsibility to create a series of key documents at divisional level, including vision and mission statements, goals, and learning outcomes that articulated the division’s intent to place student learning at the center of its work. Once these major documents were drafted, critiqued, revised, and agreed upon by the staff, each department was asked to develop (or revise) its individual mission and goal statements, keeping in mind that each department’s mission statement and goals had to flow from the division’s mission statement and the broad goals previously developed.

• Mission statement: The Division of Student and Campus Life has as its primary function the advancement of the mission of the College through the provision of a broad range of educational, social, and recreational programs, facilities, and fundamental services that foster the optimum living and learning environment on campus, facilitate the overall development of each student, and enhance the sense of community at the College.

• Vision statement: The Division of Student and Campus Life seeks to maximize the learning potential inherent in the programs
and services it sponsors. As a learning-centered organization,

• Learning is our top priority.
• Learning is broadly defined.
• We have high expectations for learning.
• Learning is understood to be an active process based on the acceptance of responsibility to be both a learner and a teacher.
• Learning is understood to be an interactive process that takes place through community involvement with others regardless of title, role, or group affiliation, as all members of the community can be teachers and learners.
• Learning is understood to have a cumulative impact and is not merely a product to be consumed.
• Learning is understood to encompass the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the classroom, in structured co-curricular activities, and in informal interactions with others.
• Learning is facilitated by free and effective communication among all members of our community.
• Learning results from what we say and what we do as well as what we know, since teaching takes place through example.
• Learning is enriched by the diversity and inclusivity of the community.
• Learning is strengthened when what has been learned is applied to roles and situations that enable students to serve as ethical members of this and other communities.
• We aim to provide a foundation for a lifetime of learning.

• Goals:
  • Students will assume responsibility for their own intellectual and social development.
  • Students will successfully complete the transition to college life.
  • Students will take full advantage of the opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom to learn from every member of the campus community.
  • Students will successfully prepare for post-graduate educational and occupational opportunities.
  • Students will become more fully self-aware.
  • Students will develop a personal values system consistent with the ideals of ethical citizenship.
  • Students will grow in their social and communication skills as evidenced by their ability to live and work collaboratively with others, engage in respectful relationships, and assume shared responsibility for the common good.
  • Students will develop leadership skills, and apply them in both the collegiate setting and in their communities upon graduation.
  • Students will develop an understanding of the global nature of our society and the interdependency of all people, and will demonstrate appreciation of the similarities and differences we all embody.
  • Students will develop habits consistent with a healthy lifestyle.
  • Students will develop an interest in and appreciation of the fine and performing arts.
  • The staff of the Division of Student and Campus Life will advocate for the rights and responsibilities of students.
ASSIGNING AND PERSONALIZING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The authors of the *Student Learning Imperative* stated, “...if learning is the primary measure of institutional productivity by which the quality of undergraduate education is determined, what and how much students learn also must be the criterion by which the value of student affairs is judged” (American College Personnel Association, 1994, p. 2).

Because a focus on student learning requires that a staff be able to assess its impact on student learning, the staff was then directed to complete an inventory of ongoing assessment initiatives in each department. This inventory revealed that while a number of assessment activities were taking place, many needed to be more intentionally focused on student learning. To orient the staff to the idea of the assessment of student learning, a professional development workshop was held with these major items on the agenda:

- Discussion of the difference between assessment of student learning and assessment of student satisfaction,

- Review of assessment efforts already taken in division, and

- Discussion of the five components of an effective assessment process.

After the workshop, the staff was assigned to investigate the kinds of instruments available to them to assess the fulfillment of the core functions (mission and goals) and learning outcomes of their departments. They were also requested to develop an assessment plan to measure their effectiveness in fulfilling their mission and goals and learning outcomes in their departments before the end of that academic year. In a memorandum, the vice president identified the need to include these components of an effective assessment process:

- The needs of our students related to your professional responsibilities

- The use of the services you provide and participation in the programs you offer

- The achievement of your mission, goals and learning outcomes

- Behavior changes in students over time that result from participation in your programs or the use of your services

- Student satisfaction with participation in your programs or the use of your services.

In the following academic year, the outcomes of the *Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs* assessment exercise were used as the basis of the development of a statement of planning priorities for the Division of Student and Campus Life. The staff agreed upon the following priorities:

- The Student and Campus Life staff will explicitly identify the learning outcomes of the programs and services it sponsors, and routinely assess the usage of its services and their effectiveness in promoting student learning.

- The Student and Campus Life staff will develop relationships that result in the sponsoring of learning oriented programs and services that involve collaboration among staff within and outside the Division and between faculty and staff.

- The Student and Campus Life staff will foster a sense of community that reflects an understanding of the role of the institution’s commitment to diversity.
- The Student and Campus Life staff will utilize the College’s information technology network and other means to communicate an accurate understanding of the programs and services it offers to students and the commitment of the staff to excellence in program management and to student learning.

- The Student and Campus Life staff will foster community by facilitating an enhanced understanding of the role of Greek life at Geneseo.

**ASSESSING THE INTERNAL WORK ENVIRONMENT**

The templates that follow are illustrations of tools that can facilitate assessments of the internal work environment. As noted earlier, CAS provides self-assessment guides that can be used to assess more than 30 programs and services in student affairs.
Template A
Self-Assessment of a Student Affairs Practitioner

How do I contribute to student learning at my institution?

How do I contribute to integrated learning at my institution?

Is integrated learning one of my top daily priorities?

One example of an integrated learning program at my institution is ___________________________.

One example of a new program I would like to help establish to promote integrated student learning is _______________________________________________________________________________.

My involvement in integrated learning opportunities on my campus is constrained by my lack of awareness or knowledge of ________________________________________________.

My involvement in integrated learning on my campus is constrained by the following environmental factors: ________________________________________________________________.

In what specific way will I work this year to collaborate with a faculty member to promote integrated learning?

What are the programs that I facilitate that I know (based on research and assessment) contribute to student learning?

What are the programs that I am responsible for that have been shown to have a tenuous impact on student learning?

How do I model a commitment to integrated learning in fulfilling my daily work responsibilities?

Have I taken the initiative to create opportunities to establish and maintain professional relationships with faculty and academic administrators on my campus?

Have I exploited opportunities to demonstrate my interest in and support for faculty work?

Have I thought about what I can offer faculty members to assist them in fulfilling their instructional goals?

Do I facilitate a regular flow of information from my department on the student learning that we facilitate?

Do I regularly analyze institutional data on the student learning that occurs through the program and activities sponsored by my department or area?

Source: Author compilation.
Template B
Self-Assessment of a Faculty Member

How do I contribute to co-curricular student learning at my institution?

One example of an integrated learning program at my institution is ___________________________.

One example of a new program I would like to help establish to promote integrated student learning is _______________________________________________________________________________.

My involvement in integrated learning opportunities on my campus is constrained by these personal factors: __________________________________________________________________________.

My involvement in integrated learning on my campus is constrained by the following environmental factors: ______________________________________________________________.

In what specific way can I work this year to remove a barrier that has prevented me from fostering integrated learning?

In what specific way will I work this year to collaborate with a student affairs staff member to promote integrated learning?

Have I taken the initiative to create opportunities to establish and maintain professional relationships with student affairs administrators on my campus?

Have I exploited opportunities to demonstrate my interest in and support for student affairs work?

Have I thought about what I can offer student affairs members to assist them in fulfilling their educational goals?

Have I evaluated the educational impact of my actions as a club or organization advisor?

Source: Author compilation.