An Evaluation Case Study of an International Student Services Office: Assessing Satisfaction and Productivity

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Multinational student involvement has emerged as an important feature to US education. Along with dramatic growth, the demands on colleges and universities to provide services and support to international students from a myriad of backgrounds has increased. This study explores the use of evaluation approach by researchers of an international student services office housed within a public university in the central US to explore international student satisfaction of an international student services office.

Keywords: International Student Services, Evaluation & Assessment, Performance Improvement

Multinational student involvement has emerged as an important feature to United States (US) education providing mutual benefit. Rudenstine (1997) noted, "There is simply no substitute for direct contact with talented people from other countries and cultures. We benefit from international students; they drive research and teaching in new directions that are very fruitful" (p. 3). The numbers of international students attending US universities has been expanding continually with only a recent downturn due to post-September 11th reactions by the US government. From 1954 to 1997 international college and university student enrollment increased by 1,200 percent (Davis, 1997) and the overall growth remains relatively stable into the new millennium.

Along with dramatic growth, the demands on colleges and universities to provide services and support to international students from a myriad of backgrounds has increased. This numerical growth, and the commitment of many higher education institutions to further increase their student populations, creates complex demands on college and university service personnel in support of students from around the world. Additionally, by admitting increasing numbers, colleges and universities have an obligation to welcome, serve, retain, and involve international students while ensuring that they follow appropriate immigration related procedures (Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, & Nelson, 1999). As the numbers and variety of international students increases, many international student services (ISS) offices find themselves in need of ways to assess both the status quo and future needs for serving a growing international student body in an environment with increasing demands. Despite this identified need ISS offices have had difficulty integrating evaluation into practice (Tillman, 1990).

Authors of HRD-related research have been active in exploring a wide array of approaches and contexts associated with evaluation as an important step in the performance improvement process (Nilson, 1999; Pedler, 2002). This study explores the growing arena of international student services (ISS) offices in college and university contexts with particular focus on improvement-oriented evaluation implemented in an ISS office at a university in the central US. A review of the literature and discussion of the evaluation of an ISS office conducted by the authors precedes an exploration of more general need for comprehensive ISS evaluation approaches.

Problem Statement

Throughout the US, ISS offices are adjusting to the increased workload caused by changing immigration regulations that involve tedious monitoring, increased reporting, and greater demand in the advising of international clientele. As with most university offices that serve students, international student services offices strive to provide quality service; however, the new demands to meet federal regulations, coupled with limited resources, have caused great strain. Like other organizations, university international student services offices are struggling to survive amidst ongoing change. The use of assessment and evaluation is thought to assist organizations to increase their overall effectiveness (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995). However, training of ISS employees often does not include education in evaluation or related areas.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study explores the use of an evaluation approach by researchers of an international student services office housed within a public university in the central US to explore international student satisfaction of an ISS office. We explore what was learned through the evaluation process, actions taken by stakeholders in response to evaluation and feedback, and suggestions for general approaches to ISS evaluation. The research questions forwarded in this study include: (1) What are the critical elements or framework(s) identified in the literature for the evaluation of student satisfaction within a college or university international student services office?; (2) What is the applicability of evaluation findings in the current case study to performance improvement? (3) What are some of the unique challenges and opportunities in conducting evaluations in ISS contexts and what considerations should be made?

Review of Literature

The following section provides a review of related literature associated with this study, including literature on Student Services, Student Affairs, and HRD Assessment and Evaluation.

Student Services

Although there have been several HRD publications exploring student related issues, we found only one student services related article in the HRD literature. Brewer and Clippard (2002) explored burnout, and job satisfaction of a population of general student service workers at a large US university. Findings from this study indicated a significant inverse relationship between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction, a significant positive relationship between personal accomplishment and job satisfaction, and an overall significant relationship between three identified components of burnout and job satisfaction among student support personnel.

A review of student services literature revealed few studies applicable to assessing the adequacy of services to international students by ISS offices. One relevant study by Selvadurai (1991) assessed the adequacy of academic and personal services to international students attending the New York City Technical College (NYCTC), City University of New York. Survey results showed that students were not satisfied with academic services provided in any of the areas surveyed (English language proficiency, academic advisement, instructional practices, format of examinations, and grading practices). In the area of personal services (finances, cultural adjustment, and personal problems) satisfactory levels of services were found only in the areas of financial aid, immigration, and tax counseling. Selvadurai noted that the study based its conclusions on the perceptions of international students on the selected variables and that different samples studied at a different time might reveal different results. Selvadurai also concluded that, because international students' needs change, dependent on a number of factors, ongoing assessment of student satisfaction is necessary.

Tillman (1990) argued that, in many cases, higher education institutions that enroll international students do not provide the necessary support services to meet the needs of this unique group and that "[t]he development of effective support services for international students is tied to the commitment of the college to an overall strategy and set of clear goals in support of international education activities" (p. 97). The need for the designation of a specific unit to be responsible for coordinating the services provided to international students was identified as one of the determinants in gauging the effectiveness of services to international students along with provision of services to encompass international students' experiences—from arrival to the US and arrival on campus through students' pursuits of studies and their preparation for return home (Tillman, 1990). According to Tillman (1990) the ideal array of services should include: 1) administration of the foreign-student advising office; 2) consultation and advisement with faculty and staff; 3) development of programs; 4) participation in academic-guidance programs; 5) coordination of financial aid; 6) fulfillment of immigration requirements; 7) advising and counseling, 8) coordination of community relations; 9) development and support of student activities; 10) maintenance of liaison with non-university agencies; 11) coordination of response to emergencies; and 12) provision for personal services.

The Student Services Program Review Project (SSPRP) (1986) was a unique, voluntary effort on the part of many California community colleges. Its purpose was to develop evaluation models to measure the efficacy of the various student services programs provided by the colleges. The SSPRP included the development of evaluation models, data collection, data analysis, and information-reporting procedures that could be widely disseminated for use in community colleges. The SSPRP study notes that there are certain criteria, which are essential to any evaluation. These include: 1) the evaluation should produce information which is useful to the program participants, administrators, and other intended users; 2) the program evaluation should be developed so that it can be done within the resources of the institution; 3) the evaluation being conducted should be appropriate to the institution and to its purposes; the college should be asking questions to obtain the appropriate information; and 4) the evaluation should be conducted with concern for attention to validity and reliability of the data being collected (p. 99)

The ISS office at a large US university was the target of this study. Samaha (1997) recognized that ISS is a service provider to a unique population with special needs. Samaha identified four key issues that need to be addressed by international student services offices: academic, legal, economic, and social. Major differences addressed by international student services offices are related to institutional foreign academic credentialing systems (study requirements, course equivalents, grading systems, etc.), student language proficiency, and perceptions about relationships with faculty. Additionally, international students face legal problems related to immigration restrictions and economic limitations related to visa status. Samaha (1997) considered intercultural and cross-cultural differences, such as moral values, social life, customs, involvement in group activities, and expectations related to "friendship," as the most pervasive and overwhelming challenges for foreign students. Thus, international students have special needs for counseling and help in making adjustments to the change in their academic and social environment.

Grieger (1996) argued that, in contemporary pluralistic society, educating an increasingly diverse group of students in multicultural competencies is central to the educational mission of US colleges and universities. Schuh and Upcraft (2001) presented successful models for the assessment of student services and critically questioned the rationale, importance, and results of such evaluations. For the purposes of our study we defined *assessment* as "any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness" and *evaluation* as "any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional, or institutional effectiveness" (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, pp. 18-19). Upcraft and Schuh (2001) referred to designing an evaluative investigation in academic settings as an art, where the translation of logic into procedure depends upon context, purpose, and the expected payoff. Thus, meticulously following the scientific study design and methodology may be inadequate in guiding the evaluation process; for any evaluation study many good designs can be proposed and both, qualitative and quantitative research methods would provide useful information (Upcraft & Schuh, 2001).

Student Affairs

The role of student affairs in supporting international students through campus programs has been identified by Peterson et al. (1999) to: recruit, provide a welcoming environment, develop exchange relationships between US and international students, support intercultural development of US services personnel, and to create co-curricular experiences focusing in multicultural awareness and exchange. Although international student services offices face a number of unique challenges, they also bear a number of similarities to other student oriented university functions. Evaluation studies conducted in this realm may provide insight into assessment within an international student services office. Mines, Gressard, and Daniels (1982), presented a "metamodel framework for selecting evaluation models in student affairs and student services in order to assist practitioners in determining the merits, limitations, and utility of the various models and to guide decision-making of which model to choose in evaluating a particular program or organization" (p.195). This model provides specific questions regarding the intent, involvement in and formation of the evaluation purpose and procedures.

Pope (1993) proposed Multicultural Organizational Development (MOD) as a planned, proactive, comprehensive, systematic, and long-range model for introducing change for student affairs offices committed to transformation into multiculturalism. Pope (1993) developed a checklist, consisting of 58 items organized in 11 categories, based on MOD theoretical model to serve as a guide in the transformational process. The development of the checklist followed qualitative rather than quantitative procedures, where each category reflected an issue that has been repeatedly discussed in academic journal articles. Major categories in the MOD checklist are: mission, leadership and advocacy, policies, recruitment and retention, expectations for multicultural competency, multicultural competency training, scholarly activities, student activities and services, internship and field placement, physical environment, and assessment.

Evaluation

Evaluation has been identified in the HRD literature as a strategic process important to researchers and practitioners (Holton, 1996; Phillips, 1994; Swanson, 1994). Systematic evaluation and needs assessment have been identified as critical to performance improvement efforts, which can be utilized in support of an organization's strategy and objectives (Brinkerhoff & Gill, 1994; Robinson & Robinson, 1995). "Evaluation" can be defined as the process of specifying or identifying goals, objectives, or standards of performance; identifying or developing tools to measure performance (Gardner, 1977). Evaluation is identification and judgment of actual outcomes irrespective of goals, standards, etc. and/or the "concerns of constituents", where the principle focus of evaluation is professional judgment or an expert opinion of qualified professionals (Gardner, 1977).

According to Philip (1981), the purpose of the evaluation system is intended to aid in improving service (assure excellence), identifying weak services (those which lack viability), and providing an informed rationale for administrative decisions regarding expansion, deletion or modification of services The primary use of evaluation is

to obtain information that will aid the improvement of existing programs and the design of new services and programs. This information can help administrators, managers, trainers, and designers to make decision about the future (Pfeiffer, 1988). Stake (1974) proposed a guiding framework for conducting an evaluation. Stake proposed the "prominent event cycle" to guide any evaluation process: 1) talk with clients, staff and audience; 2) identify program scope; 3) overview program activities; 4) discover purposes and concerns; 5) conceptualize issues and problems; 6) identify data needs according to identified issues; 7) select, observe, and analyze data using appropriate instruments; and 8) prepare and deliver presentations and formal reports. Because the researchers for this study had limited access, the approach used was implemented with the intent of educating the client as to the importance of larger systematic considerations in both continued evaluation as well as in the utilization of the findings from the evaluation. The recommended long-term approach is similar to that suggested by McLean and Sullivan (1989), and Swanson (1994).

Methodology

The approach to evaluating student satisfaction used for this study was a practical approach for ISS assessment. The research team had representatives from four different countries. This approach explored the perceptions of the international students, administrators, and support staff of ISS using surveys of ISS stakeholders. The choice of using a survey was a result of the access and time limitations for this initial evaluation. Given limitations provided to the evaluation team, surveying was thought to be an important first step helped to collect and document information about the services rendered to international students at the ISS, and to provide opportunities for clarification of direction, reasoning, and justification for the activity under scrutiny.

In examining the international student services office under study, we used the steps outlined by Upcraft and Schuh (1996): 1) define the problem; 2) determine the purpose of the study; 3) determine the appropriate assessment approach; 4) determine the outcomes; 5) identify control variables; 6) identify environmental variables; 7) select measurement instruments; 8) determine study population and sample; 9) determine modes of statistical analysis; 10) develop and implement plan for data collection; 11) record the data in usable form; 12) conduct appropriate analyses; 13) evaluate the analysis for practical implementations; and 14) develop strategies for utilization of the results. The outlined model was followed in conducting the evaluation. Some of the steps were modified by the research team to better fit the office activities that we studied.

Design of Questionnaires

Limited time and the difficulty of in-person access to a large population of international students determined the web-based survey method as the best option. The survey instrument was developed by the researchers based on the literature review. The survey was designed and administered to the international student population at a public university. The survey assessed the 17 closed-ended questionnaire items on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where "1" represented "very dissatisfied" and "5"represented "very satisfied." A "non-applicable" answer also was a valid option. The three open-ended items in the survey instrument were used to request the respondents' comments and suggestions. Five experts in the field of human resources and student services were asked to evaluate the content validity of the survey questionnaires. Ten international students at the university were asked to evaluate the readability and terminology used in the survey. The final survey questionnaire contained 19 items. Six items were used to measure the participants' general perceptions toward the international student services office's services, and 11 items were used to measure the participants' satisfaction regarding the programs.

Population and Sample

The international student services office at the university under study approximately 3,500 international students from over 100 countries. The international student services office staff consisted of ten full-time staff members: one administrative position, seven advising positions, and three support staff positions. A randomly selected sample of two hundred and fifty international students was surveyed using an on-line instrument. The response-rate was 80% with a total of 199 respondents. In order to eliminate any gender or racial/ethnicity/nationality bias, no information regarding the ethnicity or gender of the participants was requested.

Data Analysis

In order to establish the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was used to assess the reliability of the scale and was determined to be .90. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The quantitative data were analyzed using inferential descriptive statistics (mean, mode, and frequencies).

Limitations

The results of this study may have been limited by two factors: the disadvantages of using a web-based survey and the influence of self-report measures. Through the on-line survey, sampling bias may occur since some students

may be uncomfortable using the Internet. In addition, delivering the items by using an interactive homepage on the Internet may add bias to student answers (Hanson, 1997). Furthermore, the study is limited to the willingness of the international students to participate in the study, as it may reflect their perception toward the services of the international student services office. The finding may also be influenced by the bias present in self-reported measures (Dooley & Linder, 2003).

Evaluation Findings

The quantitative results indicated that students were most satisfied with the information/news provided and most dissatisfied with the response time by staff. Responses revealed that students were mostly satisfied with the services; however, there were a substantial number of neutral and negative responses in each of the areas. Clear satisfaction was shown in the area of provision of special programs for clientele, degree level changes, and support letters for international students. Tables 1 and 2 (below) report the results of the questionnaire descriptive statistics analysis. Throughout the survey, even when the results revealed many "satisfied" responses, a high number of "dissatisfied" and "neutral" responses could be found. Student responses in the qualitative portion of the survey lent insight to why this may have occurred.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics: Student General Perceptions of ISS Service*

Items	Mean	Median	SD
Satisfaction with response time by the ISS staff when you requested assistance	2.96	3	1.26
Courtesy and friendliness of the ISS staff who helped you	3.08	3	1.38
The ISS staff's overall knowledge in assisting you to identify and resolve your problems	3.24	3	1.21
Satisfaction with the information, news, and polices that keep you up to date	3.71	4	1.21
The practices and policies of ISS were consistently applied to all students	3.23	3	1.21
Your overall satisfaction with the service you received from the ISS	3.04	3	1.26

Note: 1= Very dissatisfied, 2= Dissatisfied, 3= Neutral, 4= Satisfied, and 5= Very Satisfied

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics: Overall Satisfaction with ISS services*

ISS services	Mean	SD	Not Applicable (N)
Immigration services	3.14	1.20	143
Changes of status and degree level changes	3.31	1.37	147
Transfer to and from TAMU	3.04	1.21	171
Concurrent enrollment and full course of study waivers	3.14	1.26	164
Lost document replacements	3.64	1.26	152
Letters of invitation, certification and expense statements	3.36	1.22	160
Review and endorsement of immigration documents for travel aboard	3.34	1.30	146
Personal advising services	3.28	1.16	62
International students liaison services	3.12	1.24	64
Community and campus outreach activities	3.16	1.11	90
Special programs for international students.	3.52	1.17	63

Note: 1= Very dissatisfied, 2= Dissatisfied, 3= Neutral, 4= Satisfied, and 5= Very Satisfied.

The open-ended responses (N=228) revealed a number of themes: 1) perceived insensitivity of staff to language and cultural issues (6.9%); 2) long waiting times for appointments/advisors (9.2%); 3) perceived staff knowledge (20.7%); 4) perceptions of staff being rude and not helpful (20.7%); and 5) low service/dissatisfaction with service (10.3%). Analysis of historical data kept by the international student services office revealed that there was great demand placed on the office and very limited resources with which to meet these demands. The international student services office, in general, faces a number of unique challenges. The ISS must strive to provide quality service to a large, diverse group, must be able to assist students with a variety of language and cultural barriers, and must serve students with diverse educational purposes, pursuing a number of different majors and degrees (requiring knowledge of the various policies and requirement of the different departments and degree levels). In addition, the office was, during the time of this study, in a time of transition, as new immigration regulations (that required a number of fundamental changes in the way that the office operated) had recently become effective. Since the office was funded almost entirely by fees paid only by international students, financial resource limitation was the primary hindrance in meeting these challenges

Applicability of Findings toward Performance Improvement

The results of the assessment showed that there were a number of issues that warranted further review. First, the study revealed a need for better communication. The office needed to build staff communication skills in order to be

able to effectively communicate with students from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and languages. The study results emphasized the need for greater cultural sensitivity and better understanding of the cultural needs of the international student population. Next, clientele perceived that there was a need for improved staff knowledge of immigration regulations in order to be able to assist with special immigration regulations and requirements. Finally, access and response time were concerns for international students. The office needed an improved approach to dealing with student issues (many of which may be time sensitive) by providing greater access to advisors. Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations were made to the international student services office: 1) change in workflow; 2) redesign of the office structure; 3) address students' negative perceptions of the international student services office; 4) establish consistency in office policies and procedures; 5) increase the capabilities of the reception desk to meet students' needs; and 6) increase interaction of international student and staff in informal settings.

At the conclusion of the study, a presentation was made to the lead administrator of the office. Although her first response was guarded, the lead office administrator found that the assessment was accurate and would be useful to the office. The overall response by university administration was very positive and the response by office staff was mixed. Following the presentation, several changes were made in response to the report. To increase the capabilities of the reception desk, the office established a drop-off procedure for applications and placed an advisor at the reception desk. Communication was improved by requiring the use of name-tags, and staffing the reception desk with advisors on an as-needed basis for enhancing student access to advising resources. The researchers recommended that a follow-up study be conducted to determine if these changes in the ISS operations have increased student satisfaction.

The researchers also recommended that further organization development changes be implemented in the ISS. This study serves as a potential first step in the refinement of assessment tools and processes that could further benefit the ISS office under study, as well as other university offices. Future work in the development and improvement of the process reported here is currently underway.

Lessons Learned and Considerations for Future ISS Evaluation: Unique Challenges and Opportunities

There are three major insights that the researchers believe are important for HRD practitioners in conducting ISS evaluations: 1) it is beneficial to take a systems-oriented approach in evaluating ISS offices; 2) evaluation capacity building is an important long term goal for ISS offices; and 3) continuous improvement in the integration of multicultural understanding in evaluation and services is essential.

Systems-Oriented Evaluation

As previously mentioned, the researchers in this study approached the initial evaluation with some significant limitations in terms of access to stakeholders and resources. Despite these shortcomings, the evaluation was framed as an early stage of a systematic approach to service evaluation (Holton, 1996; McLean & Sullivan, 1989). As authors featured in our literature review have identified, it is important to recognize that evaluation will have little impact without being integrated into the larger system. This means that work performance and results must be tied to areas needing improvement and overall work processes.

Evaluation Capacity Building for Long-term Success

According to Trevisan (2002), the concept of evaluation capacity has just begun to emerge. Milstein and Cotton (2000) defined evaluation capacity as "the ability to conduct an effective evaluation; i.e., one that meets accepted standards of discipline" (p. 1). Evaluation capacity building refers to the integration of evaluation into practice in a manner that includes elements from the following framework recommended by Milstein and Cotton (2000):

- *Forces*: Policies, tacit expectations, and incentives that drive an organization toward evaluation;
- *Organizational environment*: Properties of the agency in which evaluation is conducted;
- *Workforce and professional development*: The knowledge and skills of those who conduce evaluation;
- *Resources and supports*: Funding, models, and methods for example, that an evaluator uses to ensure evaluations are effective and efficient; and
- *Learning from experience*: Lessons learned during and after evaluation activities that can positively impact future evaluation work.

By utilizing the above framework as an inventory to identify and assess factors impacting evaluation capacity in ISS, focused plans to strengthen both future evaluations and the integration of evaluation findings into a performance improvement system can be accomplished. Without such considerations, evaluations of ISS efforts will be haphazard and disconnected from meaningful practice activities.

Extending Multicultural Awareness

As a study team consisting of individuals from four different countries, we would like to highlight the importance of continuous pursuit of multicultural perspectives in ISS evaluations. Because of the study limitations, we were unable to utilize demographic information and did not undertake cross-national or cross-ethnic comparisons. In addition to pragmatic assessment problems such as the manner in which individuals may interpret survey items intercultural considerations such as those forwarded by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) are important elements to consider during evaluation, analysis, and in taking action to address issues associated with student questioning and feedback. Kluckholm and Stodtbeck emphasize that individuals vary in the manner in which they order the complex principles and considerations "which give order and direction to the ever flowing stream of human acts and thoughts as these relate to the solution of human problems" (p. 4). How respondents organize their perceptions regarding their primary relationships, community, and authority may influence the way in which they interpret evaluation questions and processes in which they are involved.

Contributions to HRD

This research filled a gap in HRD research (in regard to evaluation in international student service offices) and helped the organization to identify the areas, which needed to improve their efficiency. The study helped construct a framework for assessment through evaluation in international student services office. Evaluation was based on determining the effectiveness and efficiency of the service provided by international student services offices and student perceptions about the services rendered by those offices. Scherer (1984) argued that effective HRD practitioners use their familiarity with the content and the learners (including the context in which assumptions seem warranted in a particular instance) to explore the importance of any assessment. It was evident from the study that formal assessment procedures can help in identifying important discrepancies between participants' current and desired proficiencies, as perceived by themselves and others. Assessment and evaluation help HRD practitioners to bridge the gap between the current and desired proficiencies and identify both implicit and explicit needs in strengthening the organization.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the framework identified by Upcraft and Schuh (1996) for assessment in student affairs is applicable to the evaluation of student satisfaction within a college or university international student services office. Evaluation findings did prove applicable, in the current case study for performance improvement within the organization. The research team was able to use the study findings to identify a number of potential issues. Based on the study results, recommendations were made for the improvement of the organization. The study identified a number of unique challenges and opportunities in conducting evaluations in an ISS context. The primary challenge related to finding a means to assess such a diverse group of students and retrieve accurate results. In addition, developing realistic recommendations that could be implemented by the ISS office also proved challenging, given the limited resources of the ISS office. When developing and conducting an evaluation study within an ISS office both aforementioned issues should be taken into consideration. Furthermore, using a systems-orientation, building evaluation capacity for long-term success and extending multicultural awareness need to be considered. Researchers need multi-faceted knowledge and experience, as well as a diversity of practical and theoretical knowledge. Finally, the high response rate by respondents reveals a great opportunity in conducting future evaluation studies. Students appear to show great concern and desire for involvement in assisting ISS offices toward performance improvement.

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