



Abstract

Assessment to improve student learning and program effectiveness is an essential skill for student affairs practitioners. Empirical findings from a content analysis of the Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) shed important light on reflexivity as a foundational aspect of assessment. Based on these findings, we present a conceptual model that positions assessment and reflexivity at the center of student affairs practice and offer concrete recommendations for reflexive student affairs assessment.

AUTHORS

Andrew J. Ryder, Ph.D.
*University of North
Carolina Wilmington*

Ezekiel W. Kimball, Ph.D.
*University of
Massachusetts Amherst*

Assessment as Reflexive Practice: A Grounded Model for Making Evidence-Based Decisions in Student Affairs

Assessment is ubiquitous in student affairs work. Skilled practitioners use it daily to improve student learning and program effectiveness and, on many campuses, full-time directors of student affairs assessment oversee a seemingly endless cycle of local data collection, nationally normed survey administration, and interpretation of available evidence. Regional and national student affairs organizations frequently offer workshops and full conferences on assessment. Professional organizations also guide this work. For example, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2012) provides standards for training and conducting assessment, and the 2010 ACPA/NASPA *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* (hereafter: Joint Statement) included assessment as a key expected skill. The end result is that student affairs practitioners are frequently told of assessment's importance and increasingly expected to engage in assessment as part of their work.

Despite its ubiquity, student affairs assessment is complex. It has a long history, originating no later than the commitment to continuous improvement enshrined in *The Student Personnel Point of View of 1949* (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). It was not until after the 1980s, however, when governments and accrediting bodies demanded evidence of college outcomes (Birnbaum, 2000; Bowman, 2013; Wall, Hursh, & Rodgers, 2014) and institutions began to tie resource allocation to those outcomes (Middaugh, 2010) that current conceptions of student affairs assessment began to coalesce. Thereafter, a number of foundational statements and publications (e.g., ACPA, 1996; Blimling, Whitt, & Associates, 1999), reaffirmed student learning as the core mission of student affairs and articulated the central role of assessment for demonstrating and improving student learning and program effectiveness. As assessment has emerged as an institutional priority, practical and scholarly publications have also described its transformative potential for student affairs divisions (e.g., Maki, 2010; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Notably, this literature also highlights assessment both as a tool for better understanding the experience of individual students and for evaluating programmatic impact.

CORRESPONDENCE

Email
rydera@uncw.edu

In addition to confusion regarding its purpose, many student affairs professionals view assessment as a burdensome task detracting from their service to students. Literature suggests that the major reason for this sentiment is the perceived cost—in both time and money—associated with well-conducted assessment efforts (Lopez, 2004; Schuh & Associates, 2009; Slevin, 2001). Further, higher education provides an exceptionally data rich environment, and many student affairs professionals find delineating the boundaries of data collection difficult (Thille et al., 2014). Compounding these issues, when done poorly, assessment can legitimately represent a significant distraction or meaningless busywork (Birnbaum, 2000). This ambivalence may diminish the benefits of assessment on many campuses.

In short, student affairs professionals are socialized to believe that assessment has the potential to alter practice for the better, but encounters with haphazard assessment efforts generate some skepticism. To better understand this problem, we examined the Joint Statement (ACPA & NASPA, 2010) to determine how assessment was described and the implications of that description for practice. We selected the Joint Statement because its production brought together leading scholars and practitioners from widely divergent institutional types, career stages, and functional areas. The document also sought to establish a baseline of knowledge for the profession and therefore can be taken as a generic statement of what assessment means within student affairs. More specifically, we explored answers to two questions: (a) How and when is assessment invoked explicitly? and (b) How and when is assessment invoked implicitly? In our discussion of findings, we developed a conceptual model that accounts for the connections among the answers to these research questions.

Design and Methods

Our study design employed techniques drawn from qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) in concert with the epistemological assumptions and analytic strategies common to constructivist approaches to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Content analysis utilizes both qualitative and quantitative techniques to reduce the complexity of textual data and discern meaning from the text(s) (Schreier, 2012). We adopted a summative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) since we had access to a comprehensive, complete data source from which we hoped to discover latent socio-communicative patterns and used numerical frequency only insofar as it was useful to reveal areas for further analysis (Morgan, 1993). Given its emphasis on latent meaning, qualitative content analysis is fundamentally consistent with grounded theory, which is a systematic process of analytic induction based on recurrent patterns in data selected for study (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our grounded theory approach utilizes a constructivist orientation to qualitative data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). We therefore began the study knowing that there were two key ideas that we hoped to explore in greater depth: (a) assessment and (b) student affairs practice. These ideas served as sensitizing constructs for our analysis (Bowen, 2008). As our study progressed, we quickly determined that reflexivity should also serve as a sensitizing construct and added it as a component of our analytic framework.

We conducted our study in seven phases: (1) we separately read the Joint Statement and identified all of the competencies where assessment was directly or indirectly described; (2) we determined which of these identified competencies met our shared definition for assessment; (3) for all of those competencies where we disagreed, we had an extended conversation wherein the cases for and against inclusion were made and then continued the conversation until we achieved consensus; (4) we then subjected the competencies identified in this way to a constant comparative analytic process wherein we examined each individual competency relative to all other competencies and to an emergent coding frame; (5) we produced axial codes—assessment and learning, assessment and program evaluation, assessment as praxis, and the utility of assessment—of competencies with similar meanings; (6) we developed themes, which we describe in our findings section below, by seeking underlying theoretical relationships among our axial codes; and (7) we constructed a grounded conceptual model, which is presented in our discussion below, that contextualizes these themes relative to one another and to the larger literature base on assessment and student affairs practice.

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As with any qualitative work, concerns regarding credibility and generalizability are present. To enhance credibility, we provide thick excerpts from the textual evidence we used in our analysis and provide our axial code counts in an appendix to this article (Weber, 1990). We have also shared preliminary and final findings with colleagues in settings ranging from informal conversations to formal presentations to large conference audiences in order to be certain that our findings achieve face credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That widespread sharing and the selection of the Joint Statement, a document intended to represent a professional consensus, as the focus of our analysis provides a limited assurance that our findings have some measure of generalizability within the student affairs profession. However, as Maxwell (1992) has noted, generalizability in qualitative research is based on the utility of research results in interpreting similar situations and not the representativeness of the design. Consequently, the conceptual coherence of the grounded theoretical model that we present below is the best criterion for assessing the quality of this study.

Sensitizing Constructs

As noted above, we began this study with two sensitizing constructs: assessment and student affairs practice. We briefly summarize key literature related to both. In the case of assessment, we focus on key definitional issues and motivations to assess. For student affairs practice, we focus on the development of professional identity. During the course of the study, our analysis also revealed reflexivity to be a latent concept guiding our discussions. As such, we added it to the sensitizing constructs we employed formally and review the term's usage within student affairs.

Assessment in Student Affairs

While maintaining a focus on continuous improvement (Blimling et al., 1999), the student affairs profession uses the term assessment ambiguously. Over time, scholarly and practical literature has introduced new purposes and uses for assessment resulting in a wide-ranging, additive definition of assessment work in student affairs. Earlier practices, many still in use today, included tracking usage and gauging satisfaction with services or facilities, comingling assessment with evaluation in response to accountability and budgetary concerns as well as institutional planning needs (Middaugh, 2010; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Later, more sophisticated methods were introduced to document contributions to student learning (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010), such as assessing students' engagement in "high-impact" social and educational activities (e.g., Kuh, 2008), and contemporary efforts emphasize the need for direct measures of skills or competencies developed through participation in student affairs programs (e.g., Banta & Palomba, 2014; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009). Consequently, what counts as assessment may vary widely among functional areas (e.g., housing, recreational sports, leadership), especially depending on whether data are needed to aid continuous improvement of student learning, program effectiveness, or both. Applying assessment across the spectrum of student affairs functions in partnership with professionals possessing different levels of skill or comfort with doing assessment work (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010) has necessarily generated a number of measures and processes that must remain relatively simple and which further complicate offering a concise definition of student affairs assessment.

However, while the specifics vary, most descriptions of the assessment process share similar elements. Conceptual models present these common elements of assessment as part of a cycle of improvement oriented activities (Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2004). The cyclical model begins by identifying what will be assessed and defining the purpose or measures for assessment, such as a set of learning outcomes or standards of professional practice. The next step in the cycle is gathering data related to these measures. Interpretation of these data guides decisions about what is working well and what changes might yield improvement. Improvements to the object of the assessment are implemented before interest in understanding the effects of these changes restarts the process. A standard conceptual model of assessment is presented in Figure 1.

As demonstrated in this model, each step is inextricably linked to the steps that precede and follow it. Maki (2010) expanded this conceptualization by including a rotating arrow design that clarified the potentially recursive nature of assessment wherein one might

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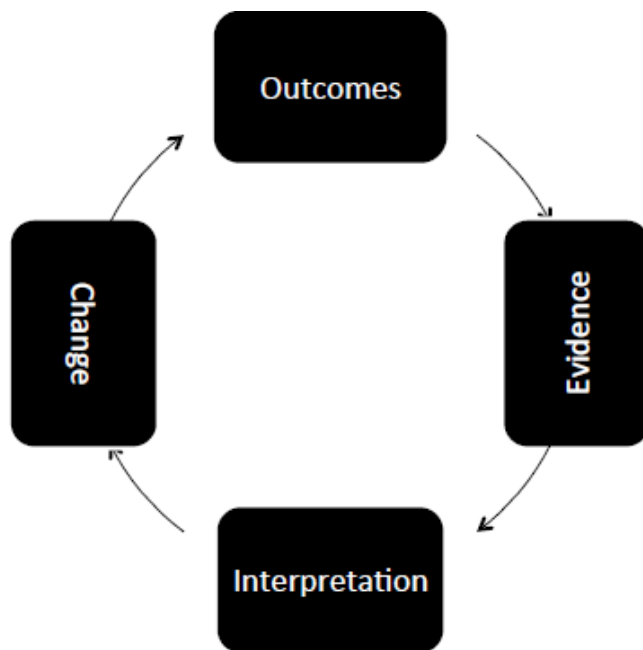


Figure 1. Standard conceptual model of assessment.

need to return to an earlier step as new perspectives emerged. This design demonstrates the importance of practitioner judgment in executing assessment activities and further highlights the need for a reflexive model.

Most models also acknowledge the importance of distinguishing between formative and summative assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2014). Summative assessments help determine if an activity or program should be expanded, consolidated, suspended, or terminated (Schuh & Associates, 2009). In contrast, formative assessments assist in making incremental, ongoing improvements and are more readily aligned with student affairs practitioners' responsibilities for improving student learning and program effectiveness and their desires to improve upon their current practices (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Schuh & Associates, 2009). Results are used to determine changes in procedures, realign educational activities with desired outcomes, or adjust deployment of resources to improve results (Schuh & Associates, 2009). Essentially, an assessment process is formative when it will be followed by future iterations, and summative when it will not. In either case, however, the purpose of the assessment is improvement. The capacity to foster improvement of student learning and program effectiveness has established assessment as central to "good practice" in student affairs (Blimling et al., 1999, p. 206) and a key skill for all student affairs professionals (ACPA & NASPA, 2010; Waple, 2006).

Further, persistent accountability demands and funding pressures have elevated the importance of assessment skills for student affairs practitioners. While the conflation of assessment results and evaluative decisions has been critiqued as a drift away from the true purpose of assessment, political realities mean assessment results will be used for both formative and summative purposes. Assessment of program effectiveness often impacts the allocation of increasingly scarce fiscal resources and institutional planning (Middaugh, 2010). Institutions have responded by purposefully assessing gains in knowledge from classroom-based learning, as well as changes in attitudes, values, and psychosocial development that may occur across students' college experiences (Bresciani et al., 2009). However, student affairs professionals have not been as quick to address these challenges in a way that demonstrates the key role they play in promoting student learning and success (Bowman, 2013)—sometimes, as noted above, viewing assessment as detracting from direct service to students. Nonetheless, assessment can be used to both improve and demonstrate the need for student support (Culp, 2012).

Student Affairs Practice

The work of student affairs professionals is traceable to the disciplinary role played by early college presidents and tutors in fostering residential community (Geiger, 2015). The profession itself evolved gradually as these roles grew in complexity to the point where they could not be maintained in tandem with other administrative and teaching responsibilities (Cagle, 1998). Among the very earliest positions that can be definitively associated with current student affairs roles were the dean of men and women (Nidiffer, 1999). As these positions became increasingly stable, systematic academic training for those in or aspiring to such roles was introduced and a formal body of knowledge grew to be associated with the profession (Cagle, 1998). However, from very early on in the scholarship of student affairs problems have been raised with underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions of this work (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994; Love, 2012). Further, the field—unlike true professions—continues to have low barriers to entry and to struggle to articulate its broader importance. As a result, the field has repeatedly produced documents designed to assert its legitimacy and articulate the essential knowledge of the profession (Evans & Reason, 2001).

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In the midst of this uncertainty regarding the soundness of its professional foundations, the major student affairs professional organizations—ACPA - College Student Educators International (ACPA) and NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA)—charged a group of leading scholars and practitioners with articulating “the broad professional knowledge, skills, and, in some cases, attitudes expected of student affairs professionals regardless of their area of specialization or positional role within the field” (2010, p. 3). The *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners* were the result of lengthy discussions and reviews of literature. The Joint Statement established a “basic list of outcomes under each competency area regardless of how they entered the profession” in addition to higher-level competencies that might serve as inspirations for specialization (p. 3). More specifically, the Joint Statement proposed three competency levels—basic, intermediate, and advanced—across ten different areas—Advising and Helping; Assessment, Evaluation, and Research; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; Ethical Professional Practice; History, Philosophy, and Values; Human and Organizational Resources; Law, Policy, and Governance; Leadership; Personal Foundations; and Student Learning and Development.

Reflexivity in Student Affairs Practice

A long tradition of student affairs scholarship has advocated the importance of reflexivity in student affairs practice (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 2011; Bensimon, 2007). As has been shown elsewhere, the application of theory to problems of practice is one of the defining characteristics—and challenges—of student affairs practice (Reason & Kimball, 2012). The Joint Statement spoke to this impulse by suggesting the need for “naturally occurring reflection processes within one’s everyday work” and the use of “theory-to-practice models to inform individual or unit practice” (pp. 25-26). This sort of reflection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of reflexive practice. In his classic work on reflexive practice, Schön (1983) advanced two related definitions for reflexivity: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. According to Schön, reflection-in-action occurs as an experience is underway and allows a person to make mid-course corrections to their plan of action and understanding of the experience. In contrast, reflection-on-action always follows the completion of an experience. Whereas reflection-in-action can be reflexive for mindful practitioners, reflection-on-action requires a more sustained commitment to the thoughtful consideration of intention, impact, and learning. Therefore, reflection-on-action becomes a form of reflexive practice.

Reflexivity promotes mindfulness and intentionality through sustained attention to how student affairs professionals’ values, beliefs, and assumptions influence practice. As defined by Bolton (2010), reflexivity is the use of “strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others” (p. 13). It is a reciprocal process that asks practitioners to consider the relationship between their beliefs, experiences, the environment, and others. To assist with this complex reflexive work, models such as case analysis (Stage & Dannells, 2000) and structured writing (Bolton, 2010) have been advanced in the literature. Significantly, we

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have previously explored the role of reflexivity in student affairs both together (Kimball & Ryder, 2014) and separately (Reason & Kimball, 2012), given our familiarity with this work, these models structure much of our thinking about reflexivity and require a brief summary.

Responding to the need for reflexivity in student affairs practice, Reason and Kimball (2012) proposed a theory-to-practice model that utilized a series of feedback loops to allow for adjustments in theory application. A version of that model is included in Figure 2.

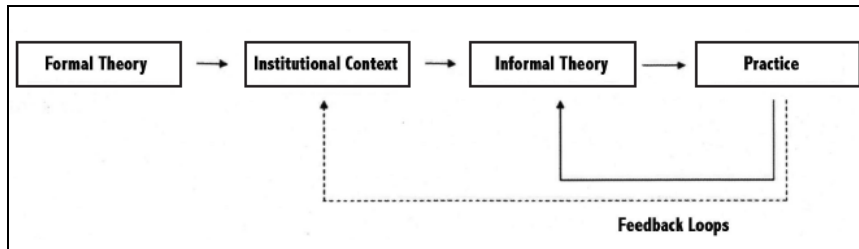


Figure 2. Theory-to-Practice Model (Reason & Kimball, 2012).

According to their work, a structured approach to theoretically informed interventions enhances the effectiveness of student affairs practice. More specifically, Reason and Kimball suggested that when developing programs or planning interventions student affairs professionals should (a) systematically consider and adopt relevant scholarly knowledge [which they call formal theory]; (b) generate a nuanced understanding of their work environment and the student populations with whom they work [institutional context]; (c) parse, and if necessary reconstruct, selected formal theories to better fit the environment within which the theory will be applied using their own experiences as a guide [informal theory]; (d) and adopt intentional developmental interventions that are consistent with their understanding of formal theory, institutional context, and informal theory [practice]. While these components of the theory-to-practice model were presented linearly, Reason and Kimball also demonstrated the recursive nature of their model by indicating that student affairs professionals should use lessons learned in the course of their daily work to refine their own thinking [reflexive practice feedback loop] and to refine their understanding of the institutional context—including the goals and objectives of specific programs [assessment feedback loop].

In contrast to the linear model proposed by Reason and Kimball (2012), Kimball and Ryder (2014) have argued that the natural state of student affairs practice is changing and that models for promoting reflexivity must take this into account. Instead, the process model proposed by Kimball and Ryder for the use of history as a tool for reflexive practice assumed that often reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action occurred with little-to-no demarcation from practice or one another. Represented in Figure 3, Kimball and Ryder's model captured the messiness of reflexive practice.

In essence, Kimball and Ryder demonstrated that practice, reflexivity, and planned change could function as concurrent, mutually reinforcing processes wherein they become an organic part of a holistic student affairs practice.

Findings

In this section, we summarize key findings from our qualitative content analysis of the Joint Statement, which form the basis of the grounded conceptual model presented in our discussion. More specifically, our analysis demonstrates that the Joint Statement describes assessment in three distinct ways: as reflexive, contextual, and functional. While the environment-specific nature and task-orientation of assessment are well documented (e.g., Stevens, 2014; Wall et al., 2014), findings regarding assessment and reflexivity are a unique contribution of this paper. Furthermore, our analysis of these findings demonstrates that these attributes of assessment are interdependent and mutually reinforcing; that is, the operational details of doing assessment are inseparable from the context in which assessment occurs and the reflexive orientation of the practitioner undertaking said assessment.

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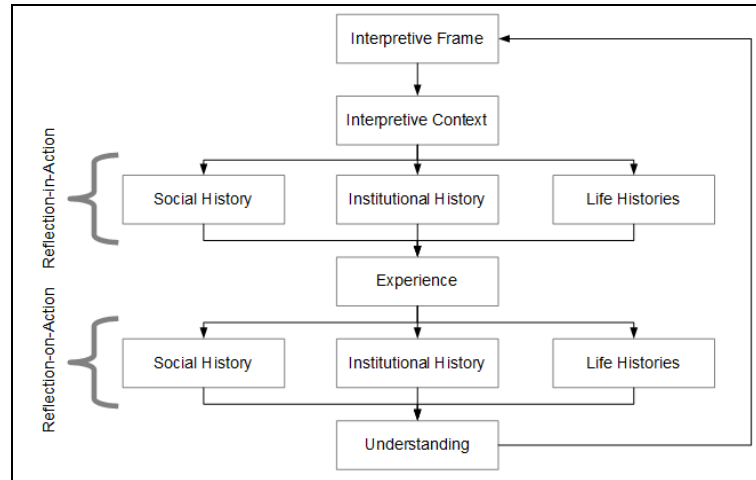


Figure 3. A model for the use of history as a reflexive tool (Kimball & Ryder, 2014).

Assessment is Reflexive

As a theme, the underlying thinking regarding the reflexive nature of assessment is most closely connected with the axial code “assessment as praxis.” However, examples of the role of reflexivity are drawn from the “assessment and learning” and “assessment and evaluation” axial codes as well. Broadly, the Joint Statement claims that a reflexive, contextual understanding is a precondition for the full use of assessment results. This reflexivity serves as the foundation for communication and decision-making leading to concrete organizational changes.

At the most basic level, student affairs professionals should be able to “explain to students and colleagues the relationship of AER [Assessment, Evaluation, and Research] processes to learning outcomes and goals” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 8). That communication served as the foundation for an intermediate level of practice wherein assessment foregrounded institutional decision-making via processes that were “sustainable, rigorous, as unobtrusive as possible, and technologically current” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 8). In essence, the Joint Statement (2010) argued for an unceasing assessment process that would produce better decisions. To that end, student affairs professionals were also admonished to “facilitate the prioritization of decisions and resources to implement those decisions that are informed by AER activities” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 9). The clear message from the Joint Statement was that assessment is an ongoing process informed by context and resulting in organizational change.

As presented in AER, assessment was still a discrete and separable task of student affairs work. Only in the way that assessment was described—both explicitly and implicitly—in other parts of the Joint Statement did it become clear that reflexive assessment practice is inextricably linked to reflexive student affairs practice and therefore does not represent a separate competency at all. Our examination also included language from other parts of the Joint Statement. This analysis demonstrated assessment’s integral relationship to other areas of student affairs practice and further, that even when assessment was not directly invoked, student affairs practice would be strengthened through its systematic, reflexive use. In addition to its sustained treatment in AER, six additional competencies specified the key role of assessment: Advising and Helping; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; Human and Organizational Resources; Leadership; Personal Foundations; and Student Learning and Development. When the importance of assessment was overtly noted, its outcomes typically fell into one of two categories: increased awareness of self and colleagues, and increased understanding of the impact of interventions of practice on individuals and groups of students.

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A basic element of Personal Foundations encapsulated the importance of assessment when it highlighted the need to use “ongoing feedback” to “craft a realistic, summative self-appraisal of one’s strengths and limitations” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 24). Other competencies elaborated on this idea by connecting self-awareness with group performance. For example, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) emphasized the need to “assess and address one’s own awareness of EDI, and articulate one’s own differences and similarities with others” while Advising and Helping indicated that a student affairs professional’s knowledge of her own “individual professional development needs” could serve as the foundation for “group assessment of organizational needs” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, pp. 10, 6). Finally, both Leadership and Human and Organizational Resources clearly connected individual and group assessment with organizational change—noting respectively that assessment is based on “a culture that advocates the appropriate and effective use of feedback systems . . . for improving individual leadership and team performance” and that “professional development initiatives that regularly assess the strength and weakness of professionals” provide an opportunity for growth (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, pp. 18, 23).

Similarly across other competencies, the verbs employed to convey the work of student affairs professionals demonstrated the vital role that reflexive assessment could play in ongoing work. While a full lexical analysis would go beyond the scope of this paper, even brief examples make clear assessment’s role. For Human and Organizational Resources, key verbs included identify, demonstrate, implement, forecast, interpret, determine, evaluate, anticipate, and align (ACPA & NASPA, 2010). In addition to repeated instances of these words, the Leadership competency added “compare, critique, and apply” as well as “plan and organize” (pp. 22-23). Finally, Personal Foundations added “recognize” and “analyze” (pp. 24-25), while Student Learning and Development contributed “design” and “utilize” (pp. 26-27).

Assessment is Contextual

The thematic finding regarding the importance of context in assessment hinges on axial codes related to its role in praxis and its utility. Returning once again to AER, assessment was consistently defined in terms of reflexive practice with an associated skillset that emphasized the translation of findings into contextually appropriate actions. For example, at the basic level of competence, student affairs practitioners were encouraged to “identify the political and educational sensitivity of raw and partially processed data and AER results” and to “align program and learning outcomes with organization goals and values” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 8). At higher levels of competence, the role of contextual understanding and sensitivity became more important still. Intermediate practitioners were expected to think about “the appropriate design(s) to use in AER efforts based on critical questions, necessary data, and intended audience(s),” while the most advanced practitioners were expected to acknowledge and advocate for the view that assessment is “central to professional practice” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, pp. 8-9).

In other competencies, this same commitment to assessment can be seen in both individual and group outcomes. In Advising and Helping, advanced practitioners were expected to “assess responses to counseling interventions” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 7). Likewise, basic level competency in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion required “assessing progress towards successful integration of these individuals into the campus environment” (p. 10). The Joint Statement also offered a clear focus on program-level outcomes, which was established as a key prerequisite for Leadership and was infused into other competencies. For example, in Human and Organizational Resources, advanced practitioners were encouraged to “participate in developing, implementing, and assessing the effectiveness of the campus crisis management program” (p. 19). Meanwhile, Student Learning and Development consistently created a tripartite link between planning, practice, and assessment—noting that skilled student affairs practitioners “create and assess learning outcomes to evaluate progress toward fulfilling the mission of the department, the division, and the institution”; “teach, train, and practice in such a way that utilizes the assessment of learning outcomes to inform future practice”; and “evaluate and assess the effectiveness of learning and teaching opportunities” (pp. 26-27).

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This description placed the competency squarely within assessment’s tradition of continuous, data-informed improvement outlined above in deliberate contrast to definitions of evaluation that privilege measurement and valuation as well as research methods based on the production of original knowledge derived via scientific principles.

In both cases it would doubtless be possible to engage in high quality student affairs practice without undertaking systematic assessment, but by incorporating reflexive assessment into regular practice, the impact of any intervention would be demonstrated more clearly and likely enhanced in successive applications.

Only Ethical Professional Practice; History, Philosophy, and Values; and Law, Policy, and Governance did not explicitly mention assessment as critical to successful operationalization of the competency. However, when we expanded our inclusion criteria to include specific parts of the competencies where assessment may be implied, our analysis also supported the contention that assessment is inextricable from otherwise competent student affairs work. For example, within History, Philosophy, and Values, student affairs professionals were encouraged to “actively apply historical lessons to one’s future practice” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 17). Elsewhere, Kimball and Ryder (2014) have demonstrated that this idea actually calls for the reflexive use of historical lessons to reframe student affairs practice—a model closely akin to traditional definitions of assessment where interpretations of evidence inform changes to practice. Likewise, those fulfilling the Ethical Professional Practice competency were told to “identify and seek to resolve areas of incongruence between personal, institutional, and professional ethical standards” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 13). Though it is certainly possible that this process could take place with only a standard definition of reflexivity to serve as guide, the level of rigor imparted by a systematic assessment process seems desirable for such a weighty task. Finally, within Law, Policy, and Governance, student affairs professionals were encouraged both to “use data appropriately to guide the analysis and creation of policy” and to “implement best practices of the profession to advance one’s institution with respect to access, affordability, accountability, and quality” (p. 21). Both of these objectives are best pursued within a framework that emphasizes cyclical re-evaluation of a policy intervention’s impacts.

Assessment is Functional

Our findings from the axial codes concerning assessment’s relationship to learning and to evaluation reveal the Joint Statement’s description of assessment as a discrete set of task-oriented behaviors. AER is placed alongside touchstones of the student affairs profession like Advising and Helping; Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion; and Student Learning and Development. As stated in the description for the AER competency:

The [AER competency] focuses on the ability to use, design, conduct, and critique qualitative and quantitative AER analyses; to manage organizations using AER processes and the results obtained from them; and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses on campus. (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 8)

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Furthermore, our model demonstrates that reflexive practice and assessment are inseparable by depicting reflexive practice as a prerequisite for good assessment work.

Furthermore, the need for reflexive assessment was also documented by competencies that already include a discussion of more traditional examples of assessment. For instance, within the Advising and Helping competency, student affairs professionals were warned of the need to “identify patterns of behavior that signal mental health concerns” (ACPA & NASPA, 2010, p. 7). As noted above, this form of pattern recognition is consistent with the organic approach to assessment frequently advocated for student affairs professionals. The Joint Statement also echoed the need to “identify systemic barriers to equality and inclusiveness and then advocate for and implement means of dismantling them” established by the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion competency (p. 12). In both cases it would doubtless be possible to engage in high quality student affairs practice without undertaking systematic assessment, but by incorporating reflexive assessment into regular practice, the impact of any intervention would be demonstrated more clearly and likely enhanced in successive applications.

A Model for Reflexive Assessment Practice

The Joint Statement positions assessment as integral to contemporary student affairs practice and, in its description of the associated skillset, establishes assessment as simultaneously functional, contextual, and reflexive. Our review of the literature above finds elements of each of these themes but also acknowledges that assessment does not always realize its potentially transformative impact on individual campuses. In response, we propose

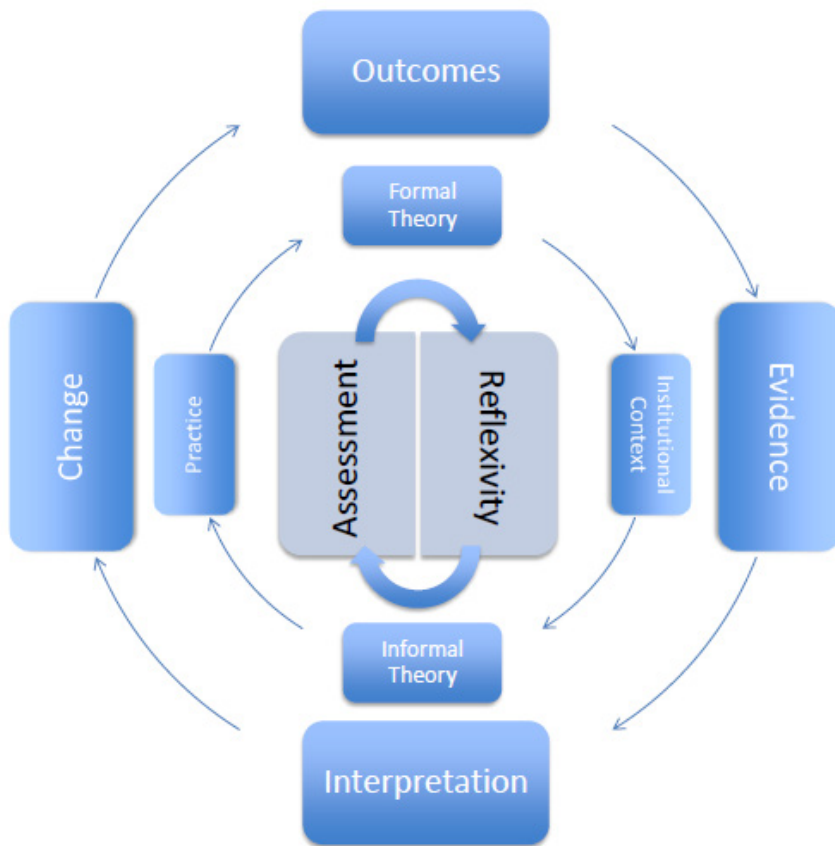


Figure 4. A model for the use of assessment as a reflexive tool.

a new model of reflexive assessment practice that integrates theory-driven interventions and systematic assessment with the judgment of a skilled student affairs professional. To do so, we distinguish between formal assessment, which involves highly structured assessment practices undertaken in addition or parallel to ongoing student affairs work, and reflexive assessment, which emerges organically from practice.

In the model shown in Figure 4, we include both the standard assessment cycle we described previously and the theory-to-practice model advanced by Reason and Kimball (2012) as concentric circles around a reflexive assessment process. This model thus emphasizes the extent to which formal assessment and theory-to-practice conversions are mutually reinforcing processes with similar elements. At the level of outcomes and informal theory, the student affairs professional considers issues of intended design. Evidence and institutional context begin to uncover the extent to which design decisions fit within a particular work environment before interpretation of evidence and consideration of informal theory ask the student affairs professional to make a decision. Finally, at the level of change and practice, concrete action occurs.

In this conceptualization, each of the formal assessment steps can be seen as informing the corresponding theory-to-practice stages. An understanding of desired and past outcomes can help a student affairs practitioner better select appropriate formal theories; the ongoing collection and analysis of evidence is the best way to understand the institutional context; interpretation of past assessment results can be a critical element of good informal theories and a way of eliminating undesirable implicit theories, which Bensimon (2007) defined as an unexamined set of assumptions or stereotypes; and the relative successes of past changes in practice can help inform present plans. This framing works, however, only by holding both theory-to-practice and formal assessment processes to be concurrent with one another and a holistic part of a reflexive student affairs practice. Consequently, we anchor our model with the central process of reflexivity-informed assessment.

In response, we propose a new model of reflexive assessment practice that integrates theory-driven interventions and systematic assessment with the judgment of a skilled student affairs professional.

We propose that assessment, reflexivity, and practice are part of the same continuum and that rigorous assessment can help us to better understand our own values, beliefs, and assumptions; institutional context; and the students with whom we work.

Notably, the model that we describe here clarifies the Reason and Kimball (2012) model by elaborating the way in which the assessment feedback loop can easily be implemented concurrently with newly planned programs or interventions—regardless of the intentionality or intended permanence of the new activity. Furthermore, our model demonstrates that reflexive practice and assessment are inseparable by depicting reflexive practice as a prerequisite for good assessment work. In so doing, it also makes it clear that assessment is the logical, formalized extension of reflexive practice. In contrast, Reason and Kimball described a linear process with several feedback loops, which might reflect the reality of theory-to-practice conversions in student affairs but may also understate the connection between assessment and reflexivity. We suggest that the idealized image of student affairs practice should instead be a recursive loop wherein both reflexivity and assessment inform the understanding of outcomes before closing the loop back to formal theory. As a result of this argument, understandings of both formal theory and informal theory development are the result of ongoing reappraisal based on continuous, rigorous assessment. Consequently, our model closely resembles existing models of assessment synthesized with recent thinking on theory-to-practice conversions.

Implications

From the discussion above, it should be clear that we believe both reflexivity and assessment are necessary skills for student affairs practitioners. We also think they work better in tandem and the place for that dynamic pairing is at the core of student affairs practice. We propose that assessment, reflexivity, and practice are part of the same continuum and that rigorous assessment can help us to better understand our own values, beliefs, and assumptions; institutional context; and the students with whom we work. We now provide a series of recommendations for using our model as part of ongoing reflexive assessment practice in student affairs.

Make Doing the Basis for Teaching Assessment

Our description of reflexive assessment as a type of skill is deliberate: as a skill, it must be learned, rehearsed, and exercised to feel like a natural part of a holistic student affairs practice. Consequently, student affairs graduate preparation programs should include a course that not only teaches students how to do assessment, but infuse that teaching with concrete experience—both in assessment and in student affairs practice. Traditional courses usually include information on the purposes and principles of assessment, including designing an assessment plan and collecting and interpreting data, as well information on accreditation and ethical and political challenges. Such courses should also require students to apply their learning by doing assessment in the context of work environments that they already understand well. Hands-on learning enhances students' abilities to make connections between assessment and day-to-day student affairs practice and dispel myths that assessment is overly complicated. Moreover, learning assessment by working through the process teaches reflexive practice by encouraging course corrections through mindfulness of what is working and what is not (reflection-in-action) and seeing the benefits of improvements made using assessment results (reflection-on-action; Schön, 1983).

Build Assessment on a Foundation of Reflexivity

The core of a good reflexive assessment process is the commitment to better understand oneself and one's work environment in order to improve. The instinctive curiosity of most educators to distinguish between intention and results can overcome inertia that could stifle an assessment project before it begins (Jonson, Guetterman, & Thompson, 2014). While we agree with this thinking, we believe a truly reflexive assessment practice goes further: by situating innate curiosity at the core of assessment work rather than at the periphery and acknowledging the connection to the sense of self throughout both training in assessment and the ongoing practice of assessment. We noted that the Joint Statement recommends assessment not only to improve student learning and student affairs practice, but also as a

Making reflexive assessment routine requires slight recalibration of our ongoing conversations about assessment and student affairs practice.

means to better understand and continuously improve upon practitioners' individual and collective strengths and limitations. Reflexive assessment then emerges from specific core values of student affairs work—learning and continuous improvement—and can thus help to satisfy the need for ethical assessment practice as well (Stevens, 2014; Wall et al., 2014).

Make Reflexive Assessment Routine

Unless it becomes habitual to work and thinking about work, reflexive assessment may only be episodically reflective. Perhaps the most routine element of student affairs work is having too much work to do, yet sustained mindfulness and reflexivity can enhance work outcomes through more intentional theory-to-practice conversions and deepen personal meaning-making amidst the busyness of work (e.g., Baxter-Magolda & Magolda, 2011; Bensimon, 2007; Reason & Kimball, 2012). Making reflexive assessment routine requires slight recalibration of our ongoing conversations about assessment and student affairs practice. For example, time constraints often reduce supervision and professional development in student affairs to recapitulation of duties or give-and-take about the challenges of being overworked and under-resourced. Since they represent reality, these conversations are inevitable, but they leave little room for a traditional conceptualization of assessment. It would be quite easy, however, to include a regular discussion of reflexive assessment by asking questions such as: What were your goals? Based on your experience, how might they need to change? What are you learning from your experiences? What will you do differently moving forward? How did the experience affect your underlying thinking about students and about yourself? Answering those questions does not require the sort of data collection and analysis that characterizes formal assessment, but it does require thoughtful and systematic reflection of the sort that reflexive assessment can deliver.

In fact, our model holds that reflexive practice is a prerequisite for good assessment work and further that assessment is the logical, formalized extension of reflexive practice.

Integrate Reflexive Assessment across the Student Affairs Division

Having read many assessment plans, all too often they consist solely of a series of functional responsibilities and associated outcome measures. No doubt these plans are helpful, but our analysis of the Joint Statement revealed many espoused competencies and commitments that would benefit from integrating reflexive assessment across student affairs divisions. For example, eliminating structural barriers and cultivating inclusive campus climates to support Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion would benefit from ongoing awareness, observation and reflection to adapt behaviors and practices toward these goals. Continuous improvement of student learning and program effectiveness requires habitually inquiring how department- and division-level activities align to and support institution-level mission and outcomes (e.g., Blimling et al., 1999; Schuh & Uperaft, 2001). Reflexive assessment may be achieved division-wide by blending formal activities as part of the assessment plan with data from a disparate range of sources (e.g., supervision, informal judgments of skilled practitioners, student feedback on social media) and guided by a broad based commitment to reflexivity. Once the full range of available information about the topics of interest is conceptualized, an integrative approach to reflexive assessment requires clear communication of the information and processes for aggregating and sharing new understandings across the division.

Standard models of assessment focus on the rigorous, systematic application of assessment to problems of practice; in contrast, our model suggests that assessment should be seen as a seamless part of what we already do.

Conclusion

Our study's empirical findings reveal the importance of context and reflexivity in the successful completion of tasks typically associated with student affairs assessment. Based on these findings, we propose a model for reflexive assessment based on Reason and Kimball's (2012) theory-to-practice model. Notably, however, our grounded model expands on this past work by acknowledging the lack of linearity inherent in student affairs work. In fact, our model holds that reflexive practice is a prerequisite for good assessment work and further that assessment is the logical, formalized extension of reflexive practice. In contrast, Reason and Kimball described a linear process with several messy feedback loops, which might reflect the reality of theory-to-practice conversions in student affairs but may also serve to understate the connection between assessment and reflexivity. We suggest ideal student affairs practice should instead be a recursive loop wherein both reflexivity and assessment inform ongoing understanding.

While assessment is often utilized for understanding our contributions to student learning and improving program effectiveness, we seldom pause to consider its reflexive nature. Our model links assessment with reflexivity to improve daily student affairs practice by capitalizing on the innate desire of student affairs professionals to do good work. Standard models of assessment focus on the rigorous, systematic application of assessment to problems of practice; in contrast, our model suggests that assessment should be seen as a seamless part of what we already do. By supporting a continuous cycle of reflexive student affairs practice, our model builds on a long tradition of work within student affairs that emphasizes the connection between the values, beliefs, and assumptions of student affairs professionals and the impacts that they have on students (Baxter Magolda & Magolda, 2011; Bensimon, 2007; Schön, 1983).

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Appendix

Table 1
Coding Frequencies by Competency Level and Axial Code

Competency	Frequency by Level			Frequency of Axial Code			
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Learning	Evaluation	Praxis	Utility
Advising & Helping	2	2	2	3	1	3	2
Assessment, Evaluation, & Research	4	3	4	4	7	4	4
Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion	1	5	6	3	6	6	4
Ethical Professional Practice	2	3	2	1	2	5	1
History, Philosophy, & Values	0	1	1	0	0	2	2
Human & Organizational Resources	1	7	12	2	12	7	9
Law, Policy, & Governance	0	2	0	0	2	0	2
Leadership	7	3	4	0	7	9	5
Personal Foundations	4	4	3	1	0	11	2
Student Learning & Development	3	5	3	8	3	4	3