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Qualitative and Quantitative Data Collection Methods

There are many benefits to both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. The main reasons student affairs professionals use quantitative methods are to provide validity and statistical evidence to their assessment and be able to make generalizable statements. Henning and Roberts (2016) note, "Quantitative methods are often used in assessment because numbers are compelling to decision makers and statistics are a valuable component to these methods. Statistics comprise methods for making sense of quantitative data, making sure that analyses and interpretations are valid and understood" (p. 136). Understanding that many stakeholders require quantitative evidence as part of the assessment process is important and using statistics can "help student affairs professionals better understand the students and their needs; challenge assumptions; and provide evidence about needs, processes, and outcomes" (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 136). Another benefit of the quantitative data collection is that you can use a sample population to represent larger populations. This can reduce the time it takes to collect data as you are collecting data from less students. However, you must consider that that sample should reflect the makeup of the population. For example, if the campus has 45% male population and 55% female population the assessment should attempt to match that ratio. The use of quantitative data in reporting can be beneficial in that it is often easy for stakeholders to clearly understand the results. For example, percentages are often used because "Comparisons of the raw numbers do not make the differences between the groups as clear as do the percentages" (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 137).

Qualitative methods "provide greater depth in the data and can offer a rich description of what is happening." (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 150). The purpose is not to just show there is evidence, but to also "…understand how people make sense of their experiences, construct their worlds, and attribute meaning to their experience" (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 150). This approach allows for the assessors to develop deeper relationships with the participants and stakeholders, through building rapport and a focus on the individual versus the general population. Qualitative assessment data are words, stories, and narratives (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 151) which means that it takes the context of a situation into consideration, something the quantitative methods struggle to do. For example, the case study approach can be used to investigate how higher education systematically favors the success of some students but seems to impede the success of others (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 156). Kuh et al. (2015) warn us that a "Focus on reporting may also lead to a compliance mentality in which assessment is seen as an add-on to regular teaching and learning processes and, thus, not consequential." (p. 81) With a focus on the stories, it seems that the qualitative methods do a better job keeping the improvement of student learning and experiences center to their goals, versus a quantitative approach which could more easily be seduced into a compliance mentality. In practice, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods provides a clearer picture of the results of an assessment versus using only one method.

Assessment Considerations

The first thing to consider about assessment is "Before undertaking any assessment project, assessors should be sure they are assessing something important, something over which they have control, and something that stakeholders support." (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 235). Without those three things, the assessment project is set up for failure. The second is there are multiple roles and tasks, responsibilities to divide, coordination across the institution to perform, and the actual implementation of assessment to enact, but there is no perfect approach, and assessment is often organized differently within each higher education institution (Kuh, et al., 2015, p.74). Consensus has been elusive except for the fact that many believe the assessment goals should be tied to the institution and division goals. There is also some agreement that successful assessments perform certain tasks.

Making use of external data that has been previously collected by professional associations is a common practice in assessment because it provides external validation (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 221). The CAS guidelines for facilitating a program review that will result in evidence for improvement ask us to: assemble the team; educate the team; conduct rating; complete the action plan; prepare the report; and close the loop (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 225). By following guidelines set by experts in higher education we can ensure that our assessment practices will yield results. However, many of our readings highlighted the struggle student affairs professionals have when trying to implement improvements. Understanding that using the data to make improvements is often a challenge that many institutions struggle to meet means that we must be more intentional when planning how to use our end results. To stay focused on improvement Henning & Roberts (2016) suggest setting a goal for how the assessment results will be used at the beginning of the assessment process (p. 217). Additionally, we must consider outside influences, such as values, resources, politics, stakeholder opinion, benchmarking, "best" practices, etc. and their effect on performing and executing an assessment (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 217).

When considering participants and stakeholders involved in the assessment, Kuh et al. (2015) suggest our focus should be on where students learn across institutions and that we collect and integrate data from different sources "…to capture that learning in various forms to provide meaningful evidence to various actors, including students" (p. 82). To ensure that stakeholders trust our findings requires us to share any negative results of our assessments, but it is recommended that you include suggestions for improvements for those negative results when you report your assessment results (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p.229). Finally, we must keep in mind that assessment is a continuous process that requires us to communicate our findings, suggest improvements, act on the improvements, and re-assess the program once the improvements have been made to understand if, how, and why those improvements were successful or unsuccessful (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 233). Then we start the process over again.

A Culture of Assessment

The success of an assessment hinges on whether there is a system that supports assessment work. Barham and Scott (2006) highlight that the student affairs profession is under increasing pressure to prove the performance of their programs and the work they do for students. Barham and Scott (2006) believe “To infuse a culture of assessment and implement a user-friendly practice, a comprehensive assessment model is needed” (p.217). The assessment model that Barham and Scott (2006) present supports a culture of accountability through the interconnectivity of the pieces of the model. For example, Barham and Scott (2006) state, “The base or foundation of the model heralds the mission of the university, the mission of student affairs and a division’s strategic goals” (p. 212). In basing the assessment model in the foundational mission and strategies, they are encouraging student affairs professionals to consider those first before moving beyond to the arrows. Once a philosophical area is selected to assess (service, development, or learning) student affairs professionals can link those areas and the objectives, etc. to the foundation. Ending the assessment model with evaluation, in essence re-starting the assessment process, supports a culture of accountability as it asks us to review and make improvements continually and systematically.

Providing enough financial and personnel resources is often a challenge facing an assessment project and Kuh et al. (2015) recommend that resource and budget allocation is a key feature of any assessment (p. 77). Identifying leadership looks different for every institution and can be difficult without the proper culture in place. To create a culture of assessment, Kuh et al. (2015) suggest “While leadership is critical, for assessment to be productive, embedding its work throughout an institution is equally critical (p. 77). By embedding assessment work throughout an institution, we encourage everyone that interacts with students to understand their role in supporting assessment and accountability. One benefit to an assessment culture is “Cultures of evidence provide a degree of financial protection for student affairs professionals, as they document with hard data the significant contribution student affairs makes towards the institution’s mission and goals” (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 218). Henning and Roberts (2016) advise we can do this by: using and linking results to the structures, processes, and cultures of divisions and or the institution; connecting all assessment processes; considering how assessment results can inform strategic planning; and building assessment into the accreditation process (p. 215). Kuh et al. (2015) also advise integrating assessment work into the institution’s governance and organizational structures and using professional development as an opportunity to reinforce and provide training for assessment activities (p. 78).

Ethical Considerations

When performing assessments, it will be important to keep in mind any ethical issues that might appear during your assessment work. There are some professional organizations such as NASPA, CAS, and ASK Standards that provide lists of what they consider to be ethical principles related to assessment. For example, using culturally appropriate terminology and methods to conduct assessment (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 246). Another area to consider ethics will be in data collection methods, for example, using audit trails, bracketing, member checks, and triangulation to address bias in qualitative assessment (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 163). Complying with the practices, such as gaining approval from Internal Review Boards (IRB) to conduct a study will also be a part of ethical practice. Protecting participants anonymity and identity is paramount to assessment work, unless you have received consent to share their information. We also have the responsibility to be open with participants and stakeholders about the purpose of our assessment and how the results will be used (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 245). Because we know assessment does not operate in a vacuum, Henning and Roberts (2016) remind us that “Power dynamics, hidden agendas, and methodological decisions can all have ethical implications” (p. 252). This means that we will need to be aware of how these political environments could possibly affect the assessment project and any suggestions for improvement.

Resources

Barham, J. D., & Scott, J. H. (2006). Increasing accountability in student affairs through a New comprehensive assessment model. The College Student Affairs Journal, 25(2), 209- 219.

Henning, G. & Roberts, D. (2016). *Student affairs assessment: Theory to Practice.* Sterling, VA: Stylus

Kuh, G., Ikenberry, S., George, K., Jankowski, N.m Cain, T., Ewell, P., Hutchings, P., & Kinzie,J. (2015). Using evidence of student learning to improve higher education. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass