

Assessment, Evaluation and Research Relationships and Definitions in the Field of Student Affairs



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The terms assessment, evaluation, and research can mean many things to many people. There is not one agreed-upon definition in higher education for each of these terms, but, as the field of student affairs has evolved, and, as the emphasis on using data to make decisions has become an expectation, conceptual agreements and distinctions are emerging in the field. It is important for those coordinating division or unit assessment efforts to be cognizant of the distinctions and for campuses to agree upon and utilize the definitions that work best in their campus culture.

Research

The term research is not tied to a specific field or discipline and, when used generally, can be defined as “a truth-seeking activity which contributes to knowledge, aimed at describing or explaining the world” (Coryn, 2006, p.1). Gall, Gall, & Borg (2007) provide this definition of research for the field of teaching, learning, and educational administration:

A form of inquiry in which (1) key concepts and procedures are carefully defined in such a way that the inquiry can be replicated and possibly refuted, (2) controls are in place to minimize error and bias, (3) the generalizability limits of the study are made explicit, and (4) the results of the study are interpreted in terms of what they contribute to the cumulative body of knowledge about the object of inquiry (p. 34).

Educational research eventually leads to the improvement of educational practice when practitioners make decisions informed by research and implement evidence-based practices and programs.

Evaluation

“Even though evaluation and research provide information about questions of interest, they are typically undertaken for different reasons” (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009, p. 8). “Evaluation as a discipline draws on other disciplines for its foundations, and especially the social sciences for its methods” (Mathison, 2006, p. 183).

Evaluation is a form of inquiry that seeks to address critical questions concerning how well a program, process, product, system, or organization is working. It is typically under-taken for decision-making purposes, and should lead to a use of findings by a variety of stakeholders (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009, p. 6).

Evaluation refers to the process of determining the merit, worth, or value of something, or the product of that process....The evaluation process normally involves some identification of relevant standards of merit, worth, or value; some investigation of the performance of evaluands on these standards; and some integration or synthesis of the results to achieve an overall evaluation or set of evaluations (Scriven, 1991, p. 139).

For student affairs, Upcraft and Schuh's (1994) evaluation definition is commonly utilized: “Any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional or institutional effectiveness” (p. 19).

Evaluation can be applied to many aspects of an organization, including programs, initiatives, processes, strategies, and systems (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009). In student affairs, we often use the term program review to include many of the concepts embodied in the term evaluation. Many student affairs divisions utilize the standards and processes set forth by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) to conduct their program review process. Below is a definition of program review used by Western Michigan University:

Program Review is a collaborative process that allows the department to focus not only on the stated mission and goals, but also on how well we are accomplishing those goals by measuring efficiency, effectiveness, satisfaction, resource allocation, learning outcomes and other items. Program review assists us with continuous improvement of our programs and services, demonstrates our department's effectiveness, holds us accountable to our students and the university, and helps us better understand the satisfaction and learning outcomes of our students. The resulting self-study and external review forms the basis for the action plan for change and improvement. Program Review is one component of the Strategic Planning and Assessment initiatives in Student Affairs.

Assessment

The term assessment may pose the most confusion, even though it is used most often by student affairs practitioners. In education, the term assessment is often used to describe the measurement of what an individual knows and can do (Banta & Palomba, 2015, p. 1) and, particularly outside of student affairs in the academic arena, the term has come to mean the assessment of student learning very specifically (Suskie, 2009). With that focus on student learning in higher education, the term outcomes assessment has come to "imply aggregating individual measures for the purpose of discovering group strengths and weaknesses" (Banta & Palomba, p. 1); however, in practice, many people eliminate the term outcomes and use assessment to describe the specific concept of the assessment of student learning.

In student affairs, the term assessment is often used more broadly to include the entire assessment process or cycle. It includes assessment of student learning as well assessment of programs, operations or services. In the foundational publication *Assessment Reconsidered*, Keeling (2004) defines this integrated concept in student affairs:

The assessment of learning explores how effectively engagement with the institution increased students' ability, skill or competency in various domains as a result of various learning experiences – a curriculum, academic major, certificate program, course, specific classroom activity, student development experience, or experiential learning activity.

One of the most commonly used definitions of assessment in student affairs is Upcraft & Schuh's (1996): "Assessment is any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness (p. 18). They distinguish between assessment and evaluation by noting that assessment is focused on effectiveness while evaluation is focused on using that assessment evidence for improvement. Banta (2002) provides this succinct definition that includes the concept of assessment as a process or cycle: "Assessment is a multi-stage, multi-dimensional process – a vehicle – for bringing clarity and balance to an individual activity or set of activities."

Assessment, Evaluation, and Research – Similarities with Distinctions

Upcraft and Schuh (2001) distinguish between assessment and research, noting that research guides theory development while assessment guides practice; research most often has implications for the field of student affairs and higher education, while assessment most commonly has implications for a single unit or institution. Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009) distinguish between evaluation and research, noting that they employ similar data collection and analysis methods, but they are often initiated for different purposes, involve and respond to different questions and audiences, and report their findings in different ways. Mathison (2008) notes that "evaluation and research are different – different in degree along the dimensions of particularization-generalization and decision-oriented-conclusion-oriented" (p. 195).

The charts below (adapted from Russ-Eft & Preskill's Figure 1.1, p. 8) outline some similarities and distinctions between the terms and associated key elements. While identifying and articulating the distinctions is important, "what matters most is that when we engage in [evaluation or assessment] work, we strive for conducting our work in ethical and professional ways that produce high-quality processes and findings that are used by the organization and its members" (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009, p. 8).

Assessment, Evaluation, and Research: Similarities with Distinctions

	Similarities	Assessment/Evaluation Distinctions	Research Distinctions
Design, Data Collection and Data Analysis	Systematic processes using qualitative, quantitative, and/or mixed methods techniques	Often bounded by the institution's time and resource limitations, organizational context and politics, and implementation limits. "Evaluation [and assessment] discipline uses the unique criteria of utility, feasibility, propriety, and inclusion of stakeholders" (Mathison, 2008, p. 195). "Good enough" and "doable" (Upcraft & Schuh, 2001). Designed in ways that will be credible with intended audiences (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002).	Based on researcher's timeframe and available funding. Reliability, validity, trustworthiness.
Role of the researcher	Knowledgeable, accurate, ethical	Active, including making recommendations	"Not to say what is to be done but rather to say what has been done" (Campbell, 1991). Quantitative studies: theoretically non-existent; instrument and design replicable. Qualitative studies: Data mediated through human instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).
Reporting Results	Describe methods, findings, and limitations.	Make evaluative conclusions. Wide variety of reporting mechanisms for different stakeholders (web, social media, reports, visualizations). Sometimes external publication and conference presentations.	Make empirical conclusions. Publication in scholarly peer-reviewed journals. Make suggestions for future research.
Ethics	Appropriate actions related to rights of people providing data or participating; access and use of data; sharing of data and information; data analysis.	Respect autonomy; do no harm; benefit others; be just; be faithful (to the assessment purpose) (Kichener, 1985). Maintaining integrity of data in a politicized environment.	Research ethics as defined by Institutional Review Boards and research discipline.

Assessment, Evaluation, and Research: Differences

	Assessment/Evaluation	Research
Purpose	Provides information for decision-making and learning (intention is use); decision-oriented; guides good practice	Develops new knowledge; theory development; concept-testing; conclusion-oriented
Audience	Internal and external institutional stakeholders (often at a single institution)	Other researchers; contribution to the field/discipline
Focus	Particularity; institutional use	Generalizability and confirmability

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