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The Editorial Board of the *Journal of Student Affairs at New York University* promotes the submission of articles that address issues of critical interest to the NYU community and among the larger community of higher education and student affairs professionals. Articles that explore topical issues, suggest innovative programming, and embark upon original research are encouraged. The opinions and attitudes expressed within the *Journal* do not necessarily reflect those of the Editorial Board.
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Additional gratitude is owed to the hard work and dedication of our authors, editors, and all who submitted articles—without their talent, energy, and spirit of inquiry, the *Journal* would not be possible. We are also grateful to the 2007 Executive Board for their guidance at the initial stages and to our printer out in Lincoln, NE, Joe Christensen, Inc., for their fine work in the final stages. Finally, and certainly not least, the Editorial Board would like to acknowledge the administrators around NYU whose assistance has been critical in seeing the *Journal* through to publication in print and on the web: Dennis Clark, Aminata Diop, James Ford, Laura Southall, Dave Eng, and Pamela Stewart.
Letter from the Editor

When I signed on to be the Editor-in-Chief for the fourth volume of NYU’s *Journal of Student Affairs* (or, affectionately, *JoSA*), I knew I had quite a lot to live up to in terms of the entrepreneurial spirit and dedication to high quality, topical articles that had been displayed by the Executive Boards before me. I also had my own ideas for directions I wanted to see the *Journal* go in 2008, and knew I’d need quite a lot of help to bring them to fruition. I have been immensely fortunate to work closely with a committed, brilliant, and truly collegial team of editors: Ashley Skipwith, Content Editor; Amy Harper, Production Editor; Karoline Chrzanowski, Copy Editor; and Paulina Abaunza, Development and Publicity Manager. Karoline and Paulina’s positions on the Executive Board were new this year—we all felt that a greater attention to the nitty-gritty of the editing process and a focus on getting the word out about *JoSA* should be top priorities in 2008, and the entire team has really come through in more ways than I ever could have hoped.

I am very excited to share with you two additional announcements about this year’s *Journal*. First, we are so pleased to be publishing a featured article by faculty member Dr. Kimberly Yousey on the importance of assessment in student affairs practice. Dr. Yousey’s article is the first such faculty feature to be published by the *Journal*, and we are truly excited about the opportunity to share this featured piece with you.

Second, we are pleased to announce that the *Journal* is now online! For the first time in 2008, you can read us both in print and online at [http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/josa/](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/josa/). Our website includes an archive of downloadable editions of past journals, information on becoming a *JoSA* author, and information for graduate students in the Higher Education program on becoming part of the Editorial Board for the 2009 edition. Finally, you will find on our website a special online-only feature piece by *Journal* author Diana Richter, “The Role of the Internet in Students’ College Selection Process and Admissions Recruitment Strategies: A Review of the Literature.”

We hope you enjoy reading the 2008 volume of *The Journal of Student Affairs at New York University* as much as we have enjoyed putting it together.

Sincerely,

Kit Frick
Editor-in-Chief
*Journal of Student Affairs at New York University*
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New Priorities for the American Community College: Revitalizing the Transfer Function

Ben Goldberg

The American community college is a unique institution serving multiple constituencies with varying needs. Among the primary roles of the community college are the transfer function, which has been a part of the community college since its inception and has allowed community colleges to serve as a means for educational advancement for underprivileged students, and the vocational function, currently the more popular of the two and often the locus of much of a community college’s attention. Over 40% of first time freshman currently attend community colleges, and most are served by either the transfer or vocational functions of these institutions. This article will examine these two vital roles and will argue for the restoration of the prominence of the transfer function in the American community college.

The American community college is a unique institution serving multiple constituencies with varying needs. Vocational education, continuing education for professionals, remedial education, adult recreational education, and general education that prepare students for transfer are among the functions of the community college (Dougherty, 1994). Not all of these functions are equal, nor should they be. Currently, over 40% of first time freshmen attend community colleges (Dougherty, 2002). The overwhelming majority of these students will avail themselves of the transfer or vocational function. The transfer function has been a part of the community college since the formation of its predecessor—the junior college—in the early 1900s (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Eaton, 1994). The vocational function is currently very popular and often where much of a community

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college’s focus is placed (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 2002). To the detriment of the transfer function and community college students, the vocational function has greatly expanded, with 50% of community college students enrolled in terminal vocational programs (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). As this article will argue, it is imperative that the transfer function be restored to prominence in the American community college.

Junior and community colleges were created at the beginning of the 20th century as a means to expand educational access. Students who desired more educational opportunities, as well as parents who wanted their children to achieve more than they had themselves, thus realizing the American Dream, strongly supported the development of the community colleges. The students and parents looked at the community college as a place to achieve their ambitions and for the most part, they planned to earn an Associate’s degree and then transfer to another institution to earn a Bachelor’s degree (Eaton, 1994). An emphasis on the transfer function remained until the period between 1950 and 1980 when community colleges greatly expanded; as the community colleges expanded, so did the vocational function of the community college at the expense of liberal arts education and the transfer function (Eaton, 1994). By the mid-1970s, at least half of community college students were enrolled in occupational training programs. Today vocational education has become the dominant community college function (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Development of the Vocational Function

There are multiple explanations for the growth of vocationalization in community colleges. Institutionalists like Brint and Karabel (1989) argued that occupational education was added because of a desire by the community college to prepare its students for jobs while recognizing that the more prestigious and lucrative portions of the job market are already served by four-year colleges and universities. The leaders of community colleges wished to place their graduates in desirable positions within the economy so they chose to vocationalize themselves (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Instrumentalist Marxist critics believe the real social role of the community college is to reproduce the class inequalities of capitalist society (Dougherty, 1994, p. 18). These critics point to business as the primary advocate of vocationalization. They assert that “business has strongly supported occupational education as a means of securing publicly subsidized employee training” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 31). The state has also had a role in supporting vocationalization due to both a general interest
in economic growth as well as political pressures and the desire to serve the social good. All of these explanations have some validity and taken together, they offer an excellent perspective of the growth of vocational education.

Vocational education has many positive outcomes, but it does not peacefully coexist with the transfer function of community colleges. Students are attracted to community college by occupational training. More importantly, vocational education creates revenue for community colleges in terms of state aid and corporate partnerships to train future employees. Consequently, more money is often spent on faculty and modern classrooms and labs for vocational education. This money is not available to hire liberal arts educators or provide classrooms for general education (Dougherty, 1994).

Students who attend community college in hopes of finding a well-paying job quickly have an understandable attraction to vocational education. Graduates with vocational Associate’s degrees have salaries 20% to 30% higher on average than high school graduates and community college graduates with general education Associate’s degrees. However, graduates with Bachelor’s degrees have a 40% higher average salary than any Associate degree holder (Dougherty, 2002). This finding shows that vocational education is a smart decision for students who are seeking higher paying jobs and who do not want to or can not attain a Bachelor’s degree. However, the value of Dougherty’s findings on salaries should not be overestimated; the salaries he refers to are those being earned only a few years after completing an Associate’s degree. Many vocational degrees are highly specialized and strongly dependent on current technology. In fields where technological advances continue to change the industry, vocational Associate’s degree holders can find themselves unqualified for positions relatively quickly. All workers need broad technical skills and solid grounding in the liberal arts (Pincus, 1994). This is what general education Associate’s degree holders have learned. They have transferable skills such as critical thinking and communication which will allow for continued viability in the job market.

As previously noted, the Bachelor’s degree will lead to greater financial reward than an Associate’s degree. Therefore the Bachelor’s degree should be desired by all students concerned with the economic prospects of their education. And yet only about 20% of community college students pursue a liberal arts education and transfer to a four-year institution (Dougherty, 2002). This unfortunate statistic is indicative of a shift in the transfer function and the community college as a whole. The com-
Community college was created as an institution that would provide access to education. Access to education can be measured by how much education a student is likely to receive by attending a specific institution. Using this measurement, community colleges are failing their students because most who attend will only receive two years of education. This is especially true for students in terminal vocational programs; vocational education is access to less education (Eaton, 1994). Overall, students starting at community colleges are 15% less likely to receive a Bachelor’s degree than students starting at baccalaureate institutions when variables of academic aptitude, race, ethnicity, and gender are equally matched (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). All of these variables are rarely equal, making this statistic a best case scenario. This frightening statistic can be improved through transfer education and a focus on access to further education for community college students.

Restoring the Transfer Function

If educational access is the goal of the community college then the current transfer rates are woefully inadequate. A Bachelor’s degree has proven social and economic value (Dougherty, 2002). This valuable achievement is being denied to the majority of community college attendees (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The democratic ideals that the junior college was founded upon have been betrayed. The overrepresentation of minorities and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds that attend community colleges is also deeply troubling. The denial of full access to education to these groups is an issue of social justice. For these reasons, the transfer function must be restored to the community college.

Today students at community colleges are faced with obstacles to transferring. These students are much less likely to continue to the junior year than are students who begin at four-year colleges for a variety of reasons. On average, community college students come from less advantaged families and are less prepared academically than four-year college students. Most community college students are not pursuing a Bachelor’s degree and for many who report that they are, it is a dream and not a plan. When faced with the realities of attaining a Bachelor’s, many community college students are underprepared academically and not equipped with the skills necessary to make this dream a reality (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dougherty, 1994). Furthermore, when comparing students of similar backgrounds, abilities, and ambitions, students at two-year institutions
are still less likely to achieve the baccalaureate than students at four-year institutions. Additionally, there are institutional factors within the community college that lower the transfer rate (Dougherty, 1994).

For example, the transfer function of community colleges can not be discussed without mentioning “cooling out” and “warming up,” which are terms that refer to how students’ ambitions are affected by the community college experience (Clark, 1960). When community college students enter with transferring in mind but later decide to pursue a terminal degree, this decision can be the effect of “cooling out.” Students have lowered their expectations because of institutional factors, such as implicit or explicit messages received from faculty and staff during their attendance at a community college. Burton Clark, who introduced this term, was a proponent of “cooling out” and saw it as a reasonable method of filling middle level jobs. However, “cooling out” has been looked at critically by many who believe that it does occur but it should not (Pincus, 1994). Conversely, a student’s ambitions can be “warmed up” by an encouraging faculty or staff member who assists a student in transferring to a four-year institution.

The primary way that community college educators “cool out” students is by encouraging them to pursue terminal vocational education and not a general education. In fact, the “more vocational a community college, the lower its transfer rate” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 94). Students are often presented with an array of attractive vocational programs in fields such as computer operations, engineering technology, nursing, and allied health professions that are housed in modern facilities and well advertised in catalogs and brochures. Community college students also often encounter faculty who emphasize workforce development over transferring (Dougherty, 2002).

Community college students face many organizational obstacles when trying to transfer to four-year institutions. Chief among these obstacles is the reality that four-year institutions decide which students will transfer. The community college has no control over this. Four-year institutions are often more interested in freshmen than transfer students from community colleges (Dougherty, 1994). Students who are accepted for transfer often find that their coursework will not be counted towards their major or that some credits will not transfer at all. Thus, students who transfer out of community college are often behind in their major or lack junior status. They are understandably discouraged by the prospect of repeating coursework they have completed at the community college (Eaton, 1994). Even when students are accepted for transfer from community colleges, they typically receive less financial aid (Dougherty, 1994). This is particularly troubling because lower socioeconomic stu-
dents are overrepresented at community colleges due to lower prices (Shannon & Smith, 2006). Minority students are also overrepresented at community colleges: 47% of the total population of Black undergraduate students, 56% of Hispanic students, 48% of Asian/Pacific Islander students and 58% of Native American students are enrolled in community college (Shannon & Smith, 2006). Many of these students desperately need financial aid, and if they do not receive it they may not attend the four-year institution to which they were accepted.

Voices outside of the community college are not the only supporters of the transfer function in the community college. Much is being done by community college administrators to encourage and increase the transfer rate. Traditionally the transfer function has been managed in two ways: “reliance on documentation to oversee transfer and reliance on student support services to ensure transfer” (Eaton, 1994, p. 35). A reliance on documentation depends on agreements, both formal and informal, between two and four-year institutions. This entirely bureaucratic model addresses what needs to be done institutionally. However, no consistent positive impact on transfer rates has been proven and these agreements often fail to address the issue of transfer credits (Eaton, 1994).

The student support services method, the other method Eaton (1994) proposed, has been proven to be more valuable. Generally this method includes information availability such as transfer counseling, orientation, course equivalency guides, and visits to four-year colleges. Information availability can combat the fear of transfer that many community college students experience. Students should be urged to visit four-year institutions, participate in their cultural events, and even take a course there. Four-year colleges can also become available to students through recruitment efforts and visiting professors. This aspect is largely passive but student support services can be more active as well. Personal assistance is generally offered to motivate students, aid in transfer decision making, and advise students on how to avoid some of the barriers to transfer. Students can be advised and encouraged to pursue transfer before they ask about it. This personal assistance often comes in the form of a visible transfer officer who does not wait for students but instead reaches out to them (Dougherty, 1994).

These common methods of raising transfer rates have been created by insiders, including administrators and leaders from within the community college. Critics outside the community college have claimed to be more objective and have suggested other reforms that would restore the transfer function in the community college (Oromaner, 1984). Eaton
(1994) identified two major skills needed for successful transfer that are not addressed by the documentation or student support services method. Community college students need “curricular experiences that prepare them for a four-year institution and experience with performance standards that are comparable to four-year expectations” (Eaton, 1994, p. 36). An academic model must be added that focuses on the curricular and cognitive skills of would-be transfer students. Such a model would rely on increased communication between two- and four-year faculty to bring content and standards closer together. Eaton’s model emphasized a need for a changed relationship between two- and four-year institutions that would create courses that are nominally the same in both extent and level of difficulty. Closer collaboration between two- and four-year institutions would greatly assist community college students in succeeding after they transfer. Mastering more challenging academic material would also increase their self-confidence and willingness to continue on to a four-year institution. This collaboration could also directly influence the superior attitude that is often held by faculty and administrators at four-year institutions towards two-year institutions (Eaton, 1994). A change in attitude would also be beneficial for community college students, as they would not be looked down upon after transferring to a four-year institution.

The institutional separation between community colleges and four-year colleges lies at the root of many of the obstacles to transfer. Eaton (1994) addressed this and Dougherty (2002) agreed that reforms must address this chasm. Dougherty (1994) suggested more radical structural reforms: transforming the community colleges into four-year colleges or converting the community colleges into two-year branches of the state university. If community colleges are transformed into four-year colleges, it will eliminate almost all of the problems faced by transfer students. All credits and courses would transfer, students would not have to adapt to a new environment, and financial aid would continue at the same level. Additionally, the students would be better prepared to meet academic expectations because the faculty in the lower division would be the same as the faculty in the upper division.

While this reform seems favorable, there are many obstacles. There are financial and political problems, as well as the prospect of too many Bachelor’s degree holders. An increased number of Bachelor’s degree holders is perceived as a problem because the increased supply could weaken the power and prestige of the Bachelor’s degree itself, just as the high school diploma has become both more common and less powerful. Also, not all community colleges are large enough to support this change
Transforming community colleges into four-year institutions will not necessarily change their position at the bottom of the higher education hierarchy. If the degree matters more than the institution from which it was attained, as Dougherty (2002) asserted, this is not a problem. However, there have been suggestions to the contrary that look at the added value of attending an elite institution (Brown, 2001; Kingston & Smart, 1990). The largest obstacle is that a four-year community college may not meet the needs of the majority of students who are not baccalaureate aspirants, but rather are pursuing vocational education, remedial education, or adult recreational education (Dougherty, 1994). An overemphasis on the liberal arts and transfer would be unfair to these students just as the current emphasis on vocational education often harms the transfer function.

The more viable option is converting community colleges into state university branches. Branch campuses are better conduits for transfer than community colleges. The clear improvement is that gaining admission and transferring credits would be much easier. The state university is more committed to the education of students in a branch campus than they are to students at a community college. The association between the two-year and four-year branches would also make it easier for transfer students after they transfer. Branch campus students will be better prepared academically because their classes will have been developed with input from the state university. Additionally if the state operates a unified financial aid program that includes all branches, transfer students will not have such difficulty receiving financial aid. Lastly, the branch campus would still have vocational education but would be less likely to seduce students away from the baccalaureate. Less emphasis is placed on vocational education and less is done to entice students to it at branch campuses. State universities could oppose this transformation as well. However, this plan would likely meet with less financial and political resistance than transforming community colleges into four-year institutions (Dougherty, 1994).

Reform is needed immediately because community colleges are in crisis. There is strong empirical evidence that “many baccalaureate aspirants are significantly hindered in their pursuit of the Bachelor’s degree by the fact of entering a community college rather than a four-year college” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 269). It is also known that a Bachelor’s degree has more social and economic value in our society than the Associate’s degree. The community college was and should be a means of access to education. The current rates of transfer are unfair and unjust, especially in
light of the large proportion of disadvantaged and minority students who attend community colleges. Action must be taken to restore the transfer function to the dominant function in community colleges. However, to do so to the detriment of the vocational function would not improve today’s conditions but instead reverse them. The vocational function has merit, as do all the functions of the comprehensive community college. The multiple missions of the community college must be balanced against each other because resources such as faculty, space, and most importantly, money are limited. This is the greatest weakness of Dougherty’s (1994) structural reforms; they will not sustain the varied multiple missions of the community college. Dougherty’s reforms do not provide for the continuance of missions aside from the transfer function.

Community college students will be best served by a return to the prominence of the transfer function. Transfer should dominate the community college agenda but not at the exclusion of other functions of the community college. Eaton (1994) presented three conditions that must be met in order for the transfer function to dominate. First, the importance of liberal arts, generic intellectual skills, and connections with four-year institutions—the values associated with transfer—must be institutional values. Second, these values need to exist even in vocational education. Third, the emphasis on transfer should be “evidenced by increased enrollment in liberal arts or career-transfer programs” (Eaton, 1994, p. 38). These changes are the first step and they can be met immediately. Through more creative use of the traditional documentation and student support services models, as well as incorporation of the academic model, real progress can be made quickly. Radical reforms are not yet necessary to achieve radical improvements for baccalaureate aspirants in the community college, but action must be taken. If changes are not made soon, community colleges will contribute to the growing socioeconomic disparity in this country by failing to provide equitable access to Bachelor’s degrees. This development is tragic because community colleges have the potential and the historical mission to be forces for greater equality. A focus on the transfer function can not solve all problems, but it will surely help.

References


First Generation College Students: Finding an Identity and Fulfilling Dreams

Marcelle Khan

First generation college students are, as their name implies, the first of their families to attend an institution of higher learning. Coming from their unique background, these students therefore have no frame of reference for the college experience. Several researchers have tried to tap into the phenomenon of first generation student status, though few have successfully depicted how first generation college students cope with balancing two priorities: honoring their familial background while simultaneously venturing forth into the new experiences of college. This article will introduce challenges faced by this student population, illustrate the unique experiences of this group, and finally present recommendations for further research.

The population of first generation college students in the United States is ever-growing, and this vastly varied group of students is faced by a unique set of social, psychological, and economic challenges. As the term implies, first generation college students are the first of their families to go on to college and therefore have no frame of reference for the college experience. Multiple studies have been conducted to shed light on the phenomenon of first generation students in the United States and the motivation that allows them to overcome situational adjustments that are distinctive to them, both in their home and academic lives. Yet, few researchers have tried to answer the question of how first generation college students cope with honoring their past while simultaneously charting a course into an unfamiliar world of higher education. This article aims to introduce some of the challenges that this unique group of students face. More importantly, it will illustrate the commitment and perseverance that these students exhibit as they learn to find their identities in their

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family roots, maneuver through life’s hardships, and accomplish a dream that goes beyond self-fulfillment. Lastly, this article will present recommendations for further research.

Challenges of First Generation College Students

Studies have shown that family background and a strong sense of familial obligation during an impressionable period of time lie at the root of issues faced by many first generation college students. According to Orbe (2004) and McCarron & Inkelas (2006), first generation college students are trying to straddle two worlds, keeping one foot in the old world of familial background and one in the new world of higher education. For some students, especially those attending the more selective universities, graduation is viewed as not only a personal accomplishment, but as an accomplishment for the family as well.

Researchers have indicated that as first generation students attempt to integrate academically and socially, they may experience incongruence between their family backgrounds and their new experiences in higher education (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Oldsfield, 2007; and Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). In most cases, parental advice is so limited that sometimes moral support is all that can be offered. Researchers have found that the lack of first hand knowledge of the college experience possessed by parents of first generation college students poses an additional hurdle (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Oldsfield, 2007; and Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). This challenge should not be seen as entirely negative, however, because familial relationships also have positive effects on students.

Over time, research has shown that not only does family involvement contribute to increased matriculation into higher education, but parental encouragement is one of the best predictors of postsecondary educational aspirations, especially when factored in conjunction with the family’s financial situation (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Rodriguez, 2003; and Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Parents are a viable source of motivation and support. This support contributes to the formation of first generation students’ educational goals and aspirations. Support from parents can help students maintain their psychological well being, especially in cases where the confines of lower socioeconomic status can add stress to students’ experiences. Students who benefit from this parental and familial involvement enjoy a sense of belonging that evades the grasp of most first generation college students at their respective institutions (McCarron &
Higher education institutions are an uncharted territory for first generation college students. The world of higher education is unique and brings with it a certain social order that does not exist outside of its sphere. High academic achievement is not the only measure of success; developing social competency is also an important part of student development. Thus, the pressure is high on first generation students who are already navigating two worlds to develop a sense of self. For first generation college students, this social Petri dish is a hurdle that is sometimes incapacitating. As Oldsfield (2007) and Orbe (2004) explain, surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average. Additionally, some first generation college students tend to experience more difficulties adjusting to college than other students and can lose sight of their role as students.

**Search for Identity**

Most students embark on a search for personal identity during their college years. This search can be particularly salient for first generation students. Orbe (2004) observed that although first generation status is not always central to their personal frames of identity, first generation college students face “issues of marginality—on both ends—as they work to bridge the worlds of their homes, families, neighborhoods and college life.” They face a multidimensional sense of identity that has led some scholars to describe the experiences of first generation students as bearing similarity to entering an alien culture. Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer (2004) observed that first generation students are never quite wanting or willing to break with their past. These students exhibit a commitment to a future that encompasses beliefs of the past and treasures lessons learned along the way.

The parental guidance that is a crucial introduction to the intricate world of college is not accessible to first generation students when preparing for college or gathering information about what will be expected of them after they enroll. This group also tends to encounter a lower perceived level of family support, a lower level of importance placed on college by parents, and parents with a lesser knowledge of the college environment and campus values. According to McCarron & Inkelas (2006) and Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco (2005), evidence suggests that first generation students are likely to have unrealistic expectations about college. These heightened or unclear expectations and the ensu-
ing reality can lead first generation students to be less engaged overall and less likely to successfully integrate diverse college experiences. Students in Pike & Kuh’s study (2005) perceived the college environment as less supportive and reported making less progress in their learning and intellectual development than non-first generation students.

Social and Financial Implications

McCarron & Inkelas (2006), Rodriguez (2003), and Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco (2005) suggested that the baccalaureate degree is an avenue of upward social mobility, representing the single most important rung in the educational attainment ladder in terms of economic benefits. Greater numbers of students from non-college-educated families are realizing that in order to gain equal footing with their peers, a college degree is necessary. In addition, students from ethnic minorities and lower socioeconomic backgrounds often see education as the means to better their lives. In an attempt to try to avoid difficulties that may have been experienced by their parents, some students use their educational opportunities to try to move beyond a lower socioeconomic background. In doing this, students make an effort to gain deep understanding of what life may be like in a higher class.

Financial matters and socioeconomic class are at the core of first generation students’ difficulties, and like many others from poor and working class families, first generation students tend to be significantly handicapped in terms of the knowledge they have about the types of college or university that they can attend (Pascarella, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Additionally, Oldsfield (2007) and Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer (2004) pointed out that first generation college students from poor and working-class backgrounds were more receptive to financial aid. Since many first generation college students are adjusting to and exploring the opportunities in their new lives, they realize and understand that their new surroundings will require much more from them than simply achieving good grades.

Equally important, as Pascarella, Pierson, Wolinak, & Terenzini (2004), Woodhouse & Cofer (2004), and Orbe (2004) discovered, educational funding shapes not only whether and where students go to college, but also how they interact within their collegiate environment. The research indicates that first generation students spend almost twice as much time working part- or full-time jobs than other college students.
Additionally, with the shift from grants to loans as the main source of federal financial aid, there is an increased awareness that loan burden may be unbearable for first generation and low-income students.

Socioeconomic status and financial matters have played a crucial role in the experiences of first generation students. Oldsfield (2007) noted that just by being the son or daughter of parents of a high socioeconomic status, a child gains far more of the social and cultural capital needed to perform in formal education at all levels. Cultural capital, as defined by Oldsfield (2007) and Pascarella, Pierson, Wolinak, & Terenzini (2004), is comprised of the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily. Furthermore, they found that compared to their peers, first generation students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about post-secondary education, level of family income, educational degree expectations and academic preparation in high school. Pike & Kuh (2005) pointed out that parents that have not gone to college are unable to help much even if they are so inclined, as they too lack knowledge or cultural capital to assist their children in navigating their way through a world that is foreign to them. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolinak, & Terenzini (2004) and Pike & Kuh (2005) noted that those with college-educated parents have better access to human and cultural capital through family relationships. They asserted that even though some parents are unable to offer advice, the mere experience of having gone to college provides a vehicle for acquiring additional cultural and social capital. Gaining cultural capital and passing it on to their children is an important concern for first generation college students as it will enhance their overall experience and perhaps even increase their sense of belonging on campus.

Implications for Future Research

Though every study addressed here has delved into the world and experiences of first generation students, coping mechanisms for dealing with cultural, familial and identity issues that occur during their college years have not been explored. Also, there is very little research on the everyday existence of first generation students within their very unique circumstance of dwelling between worlds. More research needs to be conducted on these two topics in order to illustrate how this student population manages to self-identify and maintain relationships within their two worlds. There are many obstacles facing this dynamic group of students.
and it is important that student affairs professionals not only understand where they are coming from, but also what it takes for these students to get where they want to go. A greater understanding of the day-to-day experiences of first generation students and their ways of coping will help students affairs professionals to better serve first generation students and will hopefully provide students with the tools that they need to raise the bar for those in their families and communities who are to follow.

References


From Mexico to American College Campuses: Hispanic Immigration, Interpersonal Relationships and Identity Formation

Diana Richter

In order to interact, understand and appreciate students of different backgrounds, and in order to prepare students to do the same, intercultural competencies are essential to student affairs educators. This narrative draws from intercultural experiential learning in Puebla, Mexico to reflect on a culture that has a growing presence on American college campuses. Examining Hispanic immigration to the United States, the centrality of family in Hispanic culture, and the broader theme of identity, this paper weaves college student development theory, a comparative case study, and themes from a student’s college application essay. The article concludes by arguing that understanding how young Hispanic adults experience and make meaning of the world is of great value in recruiting, advising, and programming for co-curricular education.

“Who am I? What will I be?” These are questions college students frequently ask of themselves, and they can be answered in an infinite amount of ways: I am black, I am white, I am multiracial, I am tall, I am short, I am religious, I am proud, I am lost, I don’t know who I am, I will be a mother, I will be famous, I will be an engineer, I will be successful, I will be well-traveled, and the list goes on.

As student affairs practitioners, we seek to help college students answer these questions, rhetorical as they may be. We encourage students

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down a path of self-discovery, guide their preparation to meet a variety of academic and professional goals, and hope that they will achieve these goals and be content with their sense of self. The changing landscape of American higher education makes these tasks increasingly complex; once reserved for the homogeneous elite as a training ground to enter positions of economic and political power, colleges now seek to enroll students that are racially, ethnically, socioeconomically and ideologically diverse. To interact with, understand, and appreciate students of different backgrounds, and to prepare students to do the same, it is undeniable that intercultural competencies are essential to student affairs educators.

Intercultural experiential learning has helped me to develop these competencies. In particular, traveling to Puebla, Mexico for a course in cross-cultural counseling, touring its historical and cultural sites, visiting schools, universities, community centers and clinics, has provided me with the opportunity to reflect on a culture that has a growing presence on American college campuses. My travels in Puebla leave much in the way of applying theory to practice; this article, however, departs from esoteric deliberations. Because it seems almost paradoxical to discuss personal experience and themes that are so intimate from a distance, this article instead blends wanderlust and workplace observations with journalistic, creative non-fiction, college student development theory and reported trends in higher education. It assumes that to connect with students we must actively engage in their narrative, and thus examines Hispanic immigration into the United States, the centrality of family in Hispanic culture, and the broader theme of identity, while simultaneously exploring implications for practice.

Immigration and Enrollment

“Levante su mano si usted tiene padres o parientes en Nueva York.” The entire classroom of middle school students in San Bernadino Chalchuhuapan raised their hands, responding to the prompt that asked who had parents or relatives living or working in New York. “Levante su mano si usted planea ir a Nueva York.” Again, every student raised a hand; they all planned to go to New York when they would be old enough to work. When a school official told us that the school’s electricity, water and supplies had been primarily funded by relatives sending money from New York, and that only 10 percent of students continue on to secondario, or high school, with the rest going to New York, statistics on Mexican immigration into the United States became more
than just numbers; they became personal stories and uncertain futures.

The economic structures and lack of viable employment opportunities in Mexico have affected its social system, causing family members to be separated by national borders. Tobar (2005) explained that although Hispanic immigrants to the United States are finding that their identities are transnational, their bodies and souls able to live between two countries, they are also finding themselves culturally dislocated and oppressed. In the United States, where education is often deemed the path to social mobility, individuals without high school diplomas and college degrees find themselves holding down one or more low-paying, manual, “dead-end” jobs, with little hope of promotion. For many of these immigrants, the immediate need to financially support family members makes working a priority above pursuing education; since completing a higher level of education is linked to income potential, the oppression is cyclical.

Schmidt (2003) reported on the cyclical nature of the Hispanic immigrant experience, writing, “the Pew Hispanic Center has found that foreign-born Hispanic teenagers are more likely than other immigrants their age to have come to the United States to work rather than study” (p. A8). Moreover, for Hispanic families that immigrate illegally and want to pursue higher education, most state public colleges require undocumented immigrants to pay a higher nonresident tuition while they are ineligible for federal financial aid and most scholarships. The structure of the system makes it difficult to get ahead.

For U.S. born children of Hispanic immigrants, educational prospects improve considerably. Even so, Hispanic students face significant challenges. Schmidt (2003) explained that “their problems begin in their early years, when Hispanic children receive little exposure to English, and they are much likelier than white children and nearly as likely as black children to live in poverty” (p. A8). The schools they attend tend to be poorly financed and lacking resources; thus, when students from these school systems enroll in college, they often find themselves academically unprepared, leading many to fail to complete their degrees (Schmidt, 2003).

The call to action for college administrators is heard loudly. Given that Hispanics have become the largest minority group in the country (Greico & Cassidy, 2001), the fact that Hispanic students are underrepresented and underserved in higher education means that more must be done to recruit and retain Hispanic students. How can we overhaul admissions practices and student services to be more attentive to Hispanic needs?
Interpersonal Relationships and In Loco Parentis

In order to better serve Hispanic students, it is critical that we consider characteristics of their culture. Speaking with students at the Private University in Mexico (PUM) and visiting administrative offices on the campus, it became clear immediately that even at a residential college, interpersonal relationships with family take precedence and are an influential component of the student experience. For example, the parents of students at PUM have access to their children’s files—academic grades, policy violations, health and wellness issues. While PUM is modeled after the American college standard and encourages independence and self-sufficiency, the open line of communication between the university and parents meant that students remained accountable to their parents, even while away from home.

In the United States, the dynamic between parents and colleges is notably different. Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws prohibit parental access to student information without student consent. Additionally, colleges are combating what they see as “helicopter parents”—parents who are heavily involved in their student’s residential college experience. Many colleges offer parent orientation programs, using the face-time with parents as an opportunity to discourage them from calling the school the moment their student has a problem. Rather, parents are encouraged to let their students navigate the college system on their own and to trust that the college will serve in loco parentis, taking over some of their roles and responsibilities as guardians. For a Hispanic family belonging to a culture with relational self-concept, where the strength and health of relationships has much to do with personal satisfaction, the deliberate distancing from parents may be a turn-off and pose a threat to persistence in higher education.

Schmidt (2003) cited a survey that reported that 9 out of 10 Hispanic parents expect their children to attend college. Therefore, what is hindering Hispanic students from achieving higher degrees is not a lack of family support. In some cases, strong family ties pose a challenge to completing higher degrees because students are less willing to travel long distances to colleges (Schmidt, 2003). The President of the University of California at Bakersfield, Tomás Arciniega, supported this notion by arguing, “the biggest challenge that these kids have to face is, how do they balance what they see as their responsibility to help out at home now that they are young adults and, at the same time, follow their dream of going on to college?” (Schmidt, 2003, p. A8).
A student affairs practitioner who understands the importance of family and interpersonal relationships to a Hispanic student will be better positioned to guide the student through transitional challenges. Referring students who are having trouble balancing their new roles and changes in family dynamics to a social support group set up by an advising office or first-year experience program may prove beneficial. Also, universities can be proactive in communicating with Hispanic parents and making them feel a part of their student’s new experience. Using bilingual communications, creating bilingual programs at admissions events and open houses, and employing bilingual employees at the university call center will help student affairs professionals manage the expectations surrounding the challenges the families may face in the upcoming months. Simultaneously, better communication will help Hispanic families feel more connected to the campus and more committed to seeing their students through the college experience.

Identity Formation

As an admissions counselor, I spend a great deal of time learning about the values, goals, and origins of applicants and incoming students. Undergraduate essay questions are deliberately broad and open-ended, intended to be flexible enough for applicants to write about anything. Even so, students consistently choose to write about their family history and ethnic identity. One Hispanic prospective student’s essay stands out vividly. Sharing details of growing up in Mexico, he focused on his mother, her sacrifices, her spirit, and the long-hour, low-wage jobs she worked in order to support him. He paid particular attention to the limited job opportunities and frequent political turmoil that left the family caught in a cycle of poverty. Recalling when his mother immigrated to the United States and when, at a later time, he joined her, the student divulged the fear and frustration that came with assimilation, and the life lessons he learned about risk-taking and the importance of family. I keep a copy of the essay tacked to the bulletin board above my desk, and note that it is an honorarium to his mother, and a pledge to himself and his family that he will achieve beyond what his past would have permitted. Its last few lines deliver the message, “a college education is important to me, but the biggest reason I want to continue my education is to make my family proud. They have sacrificed so much to get me where I am right now, and they deserve to be happy, they deserve everything I can give back” (Anonymous, personal communication, Fall 2006).
I hypothesize that so many students share these types of stories because understanding one’s self in a social, historical and cultural context is critical to identity formation. Chickering and Reisser (1993), who offered a framework for examining college student development, expanded upon and questioned this notion of establishing identity, saying:

While every student’s self-definition is shaped by genetic predisposition, family norms, cultural traditions, and experience as a member of a majority or minority ethnic group, little research has been done on minority student development. How is the identity of an African-American student affected by the legacy of racism? How does a Native American student balance membership in the life of a tribe, where he or she may literally have a different name and a different perspective on time, nature and the American Way, with life in a campus population of predominately middle-class white students? . . . How do traditional Hispanic norms about community, religion, family, and gender roles affect students’ evolving sense of self? (p. 188-189)

Identity then, while fluid, is rooted in the stories of family and community members who came before. It is convoluted by permutations of gender, geographic, and socioeconomic diversity that ensure individuals of the same sub-group interpret their identities and articulate their experiences differently. It can be as confusing as it is celebratory, sometimes even a source of cognitive dissonance for students. With this in mind, what programs can student affairs administrators make available to students to help them connect to and explore their identity?

Students should be offered ongoing opportunities to learn about and celebrate their heritage and identities. Racial and ethnic minority students often experience a clash between their home cultural values and those of the college environment in which they are enrolled. Rather than choosing between conflicting norms and values, students of color can achieve success within the dominant culture, while still retaining beliefs associated with their home cultures. On many college campuses, this opportunity comes in the form of student organizations and campus-wide themed heritage months. While some educators believe that these activities promote segregation more than they do intergroup dialogue, Tatum (1997) argued that many times a college student is “unlearning the internalized stereotypes about his or her group and is redefining a positive sense of self, based on affirmation of one’s racial group identity. . . [Students] need safe spaces to retreat to and regroup in the process of dealing with the daily
stress of campus racism” (p. 76). It follows then that ensuring intergroup dialogue and the pedagogical benefits of diversity programming falls into the hands of student affairs educators. As students prepare to become citizens of a society that is increasingly international, and employees in an economy that is ever more global, student affairs practitioners must incorporate multicultural education into the classroom and student life.

Conclusion: ¿Quién soy?

Before leaving for Mexico, each graduate student in our class was asked to answer the question “Who am I?” by stating to the group his or her sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and religion. The responses were fairly cut and dry, with some of us traversing several categories of race, religion and even class. To each of us, though, our answers were loaded terms, characterizing how we experience the world and how we make meaning of ourselves.

In cross-cultural counseling, particularly in the context of higher education when many students are on a path of self-discovery, the same holds true. It is crucial to remember that culture, like identity, is dynamic and ever changing: it is observed, absorbed and perpetuated. It comes to life through self-authoring experiences, and is often most poignant when experienced as an outsider, be it as the member of a minority group or as a student partaking in an intercultural learning experience. From immigration to interpersonal relationships to identity formation, understanding how young adults—in this case, Hispanic young adults—experience and make meaning of the world is imperative in an educational environment that strives for diversity.

Connecting with students means that we must actively engage in their narrative and consider our own. It means that we must draw lines between how practices in higher education reinforce hegemonic value systems and expectations, and prohibit the persistence and achievement of outliers. As student affairs practitioners, we are uniquely positioned to bend these lines into more inclusive structures. By becoming interculturally competent and considering the characteristics of cultures and stories of individuals, we stand prepared to revamp recruiting, advising and co-curricular programming, ultimately helping students of all backgrounds to maximize their undergraduate experience.
References


As the diversity of our student body increases, the work we do in student affairs is being challenged both in size and scope. Our programs and services are expected to reach a larger number of students with a variety of demographic groups. A new era of accountability, access and a renewed focus on student learning makes it essential for all student affairs professionals to have a strong foundation in assessment. Student affairs assessment, a means of gathering information about our students and services, offers an immediate, practical and context-driven means of conducting research. This article serves as an introduction to student affairs assessment and why it is important to your practice. It discusses why assessment is important in the context of higher education today, examines how to design systems of assessment, explores the challenges found in assessment, and finally, discusses implications for practice.

As the diversity of our student body increases, the work we do in student affairs is being challenged both in size and scope. Our programs and services are expected to reach a larger number of students with a variety of ages; ethnic, sexual, religious and spiritual identities; socioeconomic statuses; and abilities. Added to this challenge is a new era of accountability, access and a renewed focus on student learning which makes it essential for all student affairs professionals to have a strong foundation in assessment. “Without assessment, student affairs is left only to logic, intuition, moral imperative, goodwill or serendipity” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 12).

A strong foundation in assessment begins with a curiosity to learn

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about our students and how they relate to the programs and services we are providing. The articles in this journal present examples of practitioners’ curiosities and questions that arose from their work with students. Whether it concerns community college students, first generation college students or Hispanic students, the authors in this issue asked questions about how these students were interacting with the college environment in order to learn more about students’ needs and identities, and how they interact with services on our campuses. It is this feedback loop of knowledge and information that is of growing importance in the work that we do. Articles in this journal present reviews of existing literature and reflections on academic and professional curiosities; student affairs assessment, another means of gathering information about our students and services, offers an immediate, practical and context-driven means of conducting research. This article serves as an introduction to student affairs assessment and why it is important to your practice. It will begin with talking about why assessment is important in the context of higher education today, then it will examine how to design systems of assessment, explore the challenges found in assessment, and finally, discuss implications for practice.

Why is assessment important in student affairs?

Recently several drivers have called attention to a need for assessment. Some drivers have been external, such as the federal government. In A Test of Leadership Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education (2006) report or “The Spellings Commission Report,” the Commission focused on six elements in higher education that they claim need drastic attention: access, cost and affordability, financial aid, learning, transparency and accountability and innovation. Of these, it is the area of transparency and accountability that calls for the creation of organized assessment systems. “Better data about real performance and lifelong working and learning ability is absolutely essential if we are to meet national needs and improve institutional performance” (A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education, 2006, p. 14).

The increased focus on student learning and accountability in The Spellings Report has caused a shift in higher education accreditation to a larger focus on assessment and learning outcomes. Accrediting bodies are no longer interested in statistics, such as the number of volumes in the institution’s library; instead, they are interested in knowing what learning outcomes your campus is achieving and how you are using data to inform
decisions and improve programs. “This moves assessment from the ‘nice to have if you can afford it’ category to the ‘you had better have it if you want to get accredited’ category” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 7).

An additional external source of inspiration for conducting assessment has been offered by national organizations in student affairs. Publications such as Learning Reconsidered (2004) and Learning Reconsidered 2 (2006) produced by The National Association of Student Personnel Administrations (NASPA) and College Student Educators International (ACPA), among other organizations, called for student affairs practitioners to consider themselves educators. In designing experiences in student affairs around learning and learning outcomes, student affairs as a profession positions itself as essential to the academic mission of our institutions. This focus on student learning brings the need for assessment from an external motivation such as accreditation and The Spellings Report to an internal need to learn about our students. “Far too often, institutional assessment is motivated by external variables . . . rather than by staff and faculty’s internal motivation to determine when, how, why and where their students learn” (Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience. NASPA-042, 2004, p. 26). They went on to state that “student affairs professionals have a unique opportunity and responsibility to lead and participate in the comprehensive, systematic and consistent assessment and evaluation of student learning in all domains” (p. 26).

It is this responsibility that ultimately leads practitioners to create a consistent and systematic way of assessing students, programs and services. Often assessment is conducted in isolation in an ad hoc manner. As assessment becomes more integrated into the profession, it will also become an essential part of the culture in each institution. Ultimately, what Love and Estanek (2004) called an assessment mindset where “an individual’s view of the world is one in which assessment is a filter that shapes the view of the world and an individual’s experience in it” (p. 90) will develop. This assessment mindset begins with creating a systematic process for conducting assessment, through which practitioners begin to function with an assessment mindset in all that they do. Assessment cycles help to create a system of assessment.

What are assessment cycles?

Basing your assessment process on an assessment cycle helps to create a systematic assessment plan that stays connected to your practice. Several
assessment cycles and models have been created; this section will review some of the more commonly known assessment cycles as well as examine a comprehensive cycle in full detail.

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) presented a comprehensive assessment model that is based on a continuum, starting with the simplest models of assessment and growing more complex. The simplest model involves usage numbers, or merely counting how many people use services each day, week, month, semester, year, etc. The model then proceeds to include student needs assessments, student satisfaction, environmental studies, learning outcomes, comparable studies or benchmarking, and finally, use of national standards. Basing your assessment on this model would involve determining at which level of complexity you hoped to examine an issue and devising an assessment plan based from that level. While the model does give a clear picture of the level of complexity of an assessment, it does not provide firm guidelines on how to carry out the assessment.

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) then provided a set of questions to guide the assessment process more closely. The set begins with identifying the problem and purpose of your assessment and then moves to a series of twelve questions regarding the who, what, where and how of conducting an assessment. Questions such as who will be studied, what is the best data collection method, how to analyze the data and what is the best way to report results are included.

Maki (2004) proposed a simpler cycle of assessment. Her model contains the mission, purpose or educational objectives of your office at the center of a circle. Around that center is a circle containing the process of identifying outcomes, gathering evidence, interpreting evidence and implementing change. She also emphasized that “the collaborative process has no universal model that fits all institutions. Rather, individual institutions embed or evolve practices that enable them to sustain a culture of inquiry” (Maki, 2004, p. 4).

Yousey (2006) suggested using the practical inquiry approach when planning student affairs assessment. Practical inquiry is a form of formal research that combines the basic process used in formal research but applies it to a local, specific context similar to the assessment process. “Through practical inquiry, practitioners gather data about a specific aspect of their work with the goal of determining appropriate next steps to improve that work” (Yousey, 2006, p. 23). It begins with identifying the topic, figuring out what you want to know about the topic, identifying data collection methods, analyzing data, determining implications and circling back to identifying a new topic or the beginning of the cycle.
Upcraft, Schuh, Maki and Yousey all presented assessment models and cycles that contain similar formats, using different terms and varying levels of detail. In order to simplify the assessment cycle, a comprehensive model was created by Yousey, Elkins and Timm (2007) that combines the elements of each model into an easy-to-use format. This assessment cycle begins with the mission, purpose or education goals at the center of a circle. The model then builds a series of five steps around the outside of the circle that include the essential elements in planning assessment: 1) identifying your outcome, 2) planning your assessment, 3) collecting data, 4) analyzing data and 5) reporting and using data.

The first step, identifying the outcome or goals of your assessment, includes writing learning outcomes or identifying what you want to learn from your assessment. This can come in many different forms, such as creating a research question or using learning, program or operational outcomes. The second step, planning your assessment, involves two primary processes: 1) determining the best data collection method and creating an instrument, and 2) planning the logistics of the assessment such as the who, what, where, when and how of the process. The third step, collecting your data, involves putting your plan into action. The fourth step is analyzing the data. This can be accomplished in many different formats, but it is important to keep in mind the “good enough” standard. Because of the nature of assessment, exact social science methodologies are almost impossible to follow. Instead, authors such as Upcraft and Schuh (2001) argued for the “good enough” standard. “In many circumstances, it is difficult or impossible to conduct impact evaluations using what are ideal terms, the best possible design” (p. 220). Upcraft and Schuh went on to say that “we assert that the ‘perfect’ research study always evolves into a ‘good enough’ assessment study for many of the following reasons” (p. 6), such as resource limitations, time limitations, organizational contexts, implementation limitations and political contexts. “Good enough” in data analysis means using non-technical processes such as means and percents instead of highly technical statistics. The fifth and final step is reporting and using your results. Reporting results requires an understanding of the intended audience and using results is essential in sustaining assessment efforts.

As a whole, assessment cycles have one aspect in common – they are cyclical. This allows for a feedback loop in which one assessment effort will feed another, keeping assessment flowing and moving at all times. While in an ideal setting there would be a lively culture of assessment and each assessment project would move smoothly through the assessment cycle, the reality for most is that there are challenges that are met along
the way. The next section will discuss a few of the larger challenges faced by assessment efforts.

What are the challenges to assessment?

One of the largest challenges to assessment can be found within the fabric of student affairs’ culture. Student affairs as a profession has been talking about assessment through books, newsletters, conference presentations, departmental meetings, etc. for over a decade. Yet:

For all the action and rhetoric, the struggle continues for most student affairs professionals and programs to move beyond discourse and beyond the individual assessment projects or programs focused on particular problems to integrating and incorporating assessment as a fundamental aspect of effective student affairs practice. (Love & Estanek, 2004, p. 83)

In order to put the rhetoric of assessment into action, Love and Estanek suggested adopting an assessment mindset where we “consciously and intentionally gather, analyze and interpret evidence” (p. 90) in order to form and change our practice. However they also recognized that there are challenges in adopting this mindset, including limited skills and abilities, that many practitioners face when they need to conduct assessment.

A second challenge to assessment is the politics involved in conducting assessment. “All assessment is political” (Upcraft, 2003, p. 570). Because it is political, results will only be used if the assessment project is planned and conducted in ways that build support from many different interest groups. Sanders (1994) explained that:

The [assessment] should be planned and conducted with anticipation of various interest groups, so that their cooperation may be obtained, and so that possible attempts by any of these groups to curtain [assessment] operations or to bias or misapply the results can be averted or counteracted. (p. 71)

Political challenges come to the assessment process when assessments appear to have biases, do not take into account power structures, or do not allow groups to give feedback throughout the process. Politics can also arise when interest groups feel that the assessment process is not transparent. However, one of the largest challenges is conducting a study that no one wants. Facing this challenge is often long and strenuous; Upcraft (2003) suggested not conducting the study in this situation.
A third challenge to assessment is based in the culture and resources of each institution. A campus culture that resists assessment or one in which there is not a commitment from institutional leadership is not uncommon. Reasons for this may include not seeing the value of assessment or being afraid of possible findings (Upcraft, 2003). While this challenge can be difficult to face, taking on assessment projects that will show value to institutional leadership may cause a change in how campus leaders value assessment. In addition, a lack of resources in time, money or human expertise can present large barriers to conducting assessment. Finding ways to complete assessment that capitalizes on all of the resources available and keeping projects simple to meet the needs of the audience are effective ways of using resources wisely.

With barriers come solutions. The next section will look at implications for practice and will address how one can take the information in this article to start to overcome various challenges to assessment.

Implications for Practice

As the need for assessment continues to grow, it is time for student affairs professionals to lead the way in creating a culture of assessment on their campuses. This starts with beginning an assessment dialogue with colleagues across institutions. This dialogue should entail how assessment is currently being used to inform practice and decision-making, what types of information and data are already available, and how best to collect new data. First and foremost, the conversation needs to begin with an important question: what do we want to know? External pressures from accreditation and reactions to The Spellings Commission would want to know how your students are learning, what they are learning and how you know they are learning. If your institution or department does not have common learning outcomes or goals, this may be an ideal place to start the conversation.

In addition to talking about assessment, it is also important to start doing. For many student affairs professionals, this means acquiring new skills so that they may plan and carry out assessment in a reliable manner. Perhaps the hardest part is to determine what skills are needed. National organizations such as College Student Educators International (ACPA) are a good place to start. Members of ACPA can download at no charge the Assessment Skills and Knowledge, or ASK Standards, a list of 13 skill sets needed by student affairs professionals in order to practice assessment. This document and others like it can assist student affairs professionals in
assessing individual skill sets and then pursuing professional development opportunities in areas where needed. Learning about assessment can happen in many forums such as participating in courses and workshops offered on your campus, attending conferences focused on assessment skills, working as an assistant on a project with a more seasoned professional or faculty member, or taking part in an online learning course.

Finally, conducting assessment in a systematized manner helps to keep your efforts focused on what is most important but also conserves time and resources. As assessment efforts grow, so does the need to ensure that a cohesive process is taking place divisionally or even institution-wide. Being aware of what is taking place in an institution will help avoid the pitfall of over-assessment. Making sure each assessment is being conducted intentionally and sharing data where it is appropriate will help in avoiding over-assessing students and ending with too much data that cannot be processed or utilized in a timely way.

This article serves as a reminder to all professionals that it is important to constantly continue to learn about our students, services and programs. Whether we respond to external pressures or internal motivations, creating assessment systems that are built on strong outcomes or research questions is essential in the work that we do. While the challenges to assessment can often be great, it is worthwhile—even crucial—that we create assessment dialogues on campus in order to meet those challenges and, ultimately, use assessment to maximize the utility and opportunity in student affairs programs, services and student learning.

References


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