

Assessment Methods for Student Affairs

John H. Schuh and Associates

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series](#)

[List of Tables](#)

[Table of Figures](#)

[Table of Exhibits](#)

[Foreword](#)

[PREFACE](#)

[Purpose of This Book](#)

[Audience for This Book](#)

[Some Caveats](#)

[Overview of the Contents](#)

[About the Contributors](#)

[A Final Word](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS](#)

[Chapter 1 - ASSESSMENT AS AN ESSENTIAL DIMENSION OF
CONTEMPORARY STUDENT ...](#)

[The Current Press for Accountability](#)

[Linking Assessment to Organizational Functions in
Student Affairs](#)

[Getting Started in Assessment](#)

[Framing Questions](#)

[Some Illustrations of Assessment in Student Affairs](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Chapter 2 - USING EXISTING DATABASES](#)

[Case Study](#)
[External Data](#)
[Internal Data](#)
[Conclusion](#)

[Chapter 3 - PLANNING FOR AND IMPLEMENTING DATA COLLECTION](#)

[Surveys and Questionnaires](#)
[Interviews—Individual and Group](#)
[Individual Interviews](#)
[Focus Groups Interviews](#)
[Observations](#)
[Document Review](#)
[Conclusion](#)

[Chapter 4 - SELECTING, SAMPLING, AND SOLICITING SUBJECTS](#)

[What Is Sampling and Why Is It Important?](#)
[Sampling Strategies for Focus Groups](#)
[Survey Fatigue](#)
[Conclusion](#)

[Chapter 5 - INSTRUMENTATION](#)

[Retention at Midwest State University](#)
[Creating a Plan](#)
[Selecting Quantitative or Qualitative Instruments](#)
[What Type of Quantitative Instrument Is Best](#)
[Identifying Published Instruments](#)
[Developing Local Instruments](#)
[Determining Quality for Quantitative Instruments](#)

Challenges to Selecting and Developing Quantitative Instruments

Qualitative Approach

Qualitative Instruments

Challenges to Using Qualitative Instruments

Conclusion

Chapter 6 - DATA ANALYSIS

The Quantitative Path

What Do We Do with the Data?

What Kinds of Things Can We Do with Student Affairs Data?

An Example: Cross-Tabulation Analysis for Learning Communities and Student Retention

Statistical Software

Qualitative Data Analysis

Getting Started

Organizing and Preparing Qualitative Data

Read Through All the Data

Start Analysis with a Coding Process

Generating Descriptions of Participants, Setting, and Themes

Determine How Categories and Themes Will Be Represented

Interpreting and Making Meaning of the Data

Responding to the Assessment Objective(s) or Research Question(s).

Ensuring Goodness, Trustworthiness, and Rigor in the Findings

Conclusion

Chapter 7 - WRITING REPORTS AND CONDUCTING BRIEFINGS

Assessing Academic Advisor Effectiveness at Mid South University

Preparing the Written Report

Preparing and Presenting the Oral Report

Conclusion

Chapter 8 - ETHICS

A Conceptual Framework for Thinking About Ethics in Assessment

Informed Consent

Other Selected Issues Related to Ethics

Conclusion

Chapter 9 - USING A MIXED METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT

Alumni Development at Easternmost College:
Background Information

Learning More About EMC Alumns: A Quantitative Study

Learning Still More About EMC Alumns: A Qualitative Study

Mixed Methodologies: Some Final Thoughts

Chapter 10 - LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF ASSESSMENT

Increased Accountability

Increased Use of Institutional Databases

Increased Use of Other Databases such as the
Integrated Post Secondary ...

Increased Use of Comparative Data and Data Exchanges

Increased Levels of Accountability Will Require More
Time for Collecting and ...

Greater Use of Data in Decision Making

Greater Demand for Transparency

[More Sophisticated Studies Will Be Conducted](#)
[More Mixed Methods Studies](#)
[Upgrading Skills Will Be a Growth Industry](#)
[More Use of Technology in Collecting Data](#)
[Human Subjects Scrutiny Will Continue to Increase](#)
[Students Will Suffer from Survey Overload and Fatigue](#)
[Conclusion](#)

[Appendix 1 - EXAMPLE OF A FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL](#)
[Appendix 2 - USING MICROSOFT EXCEL TO DEVELOP A
RANDOM SAMPLE AND A STRATIFIED ...](#)
[Appendix 3 - LISTING OF COMMONLY USED INSTRUMENTS,
PURPOSE, AND INFORMATION COLLECTED](#)
[Appendix 4 - COMPUTER SYNTAX CODE FOR](#)
[Appendix 5 - FURTHER EXPLANATION OF](#)
[Appendix 6 - SAMPLE METHODS PARAGRAPH](#)
[Appendix 7 - INFORMED CONSENT CHECKLIST: BASIC AND
ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS](#)
[Appendix 8 - CODES OF ETHICS OF RELEVANT
PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO ...](#)
[Index](#)

Table of Figures

Figure 3.1 Suggestions and Considerations for the Successful Interview

List of Tables

Table 2.1 IPEDS Information Categories

Table 3.1 Process and Outcomes

Table 3.2 Examples of Specific and General Questions

Table 3.3 When and When Not to Use a Focus Group
Interview

Table 3.4 Role of the Observer

Table 5.1 Resources for Selecting Published Instruments

Table 6.1 Crosstabulation of Student Learning Community
Participation with Whether Student Is Retained from First Fall
to Second Fall Semester

Table 6.2 Chi-square Measures of Association Between
Learning Community Participation and Undergraduate
Student Retention

Table of Exhibits

Exhibit 4.1 Checklist for Developing a Sample

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989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741—www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schuh, John H.

Assessment methods for student affairs/John H. Schuh and associates.

p. cm.—(The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7879-8791-6 (cloth)

1. Student affairs services—United States—Evaluation. 2. Educational evaluation

—Methodology. I. Title.

LB2342.9.S38 2009

378.1'97—dc22

2008027254

HB Printing

The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series

FOREWORD

When my colleague and friend John Schuh asked me to write a Foreword for this book, I had two reactions. The first was “We wrote a book on assessment just a couple of years ago; isn’t it too soon to write another?” Then (at John’s insistence) I did the math, and sure enough, our last book was about eight years ago, so another is definitely very timely and needed. My second reaction was “Is there that much new in the field of assessment in the last eight years to write another?” And once again, John was right. After reading the manuscript, I concluded that more than enough has been learned over the past eight years by both scholars and practitioners to justify an update.

John and his colleagues attempted to meet an almost impossible challenge. On the one hand, there must be enough of the “basics” of assessment in student affairs to inform those practitioners who may not know much about the topic. On the other hand, those practitioners with more knowledge and experience with assessment will want a book that “takes them to the next level” in developing and conducting assessments that inform policy and practice.

I believe this book successfully meets this challenge. For those with little or no familiarity with assessment, John and his colleagues have restated, extended, and updated basics of assessment, beginning with the most important question of all: “Why are we doing this assessment?” Other basics include the many different types of assessment, getting started, data collection, selecting/sampling/soliciting subjects, data analysis, and perhaps most important, communicating assessment results in ways that influence policy and practice.

But this book is not simply a badly needed review and update of assessment practices. It also includes many topics that deserve far greater attention than they have received in the past. For example, too often practitioners assume that assessments require collecting new data, while in fact there may be already existing local or nationally accessible data that could answer the assessment question under consideration. Moreover, practitioners sometimes assume that the methodology question is “either/or” while in fact a mixed methodology study may yield the most useful and useable results. Instrumentation is always a moving target, with new and more psychometrically sound instruments available. And the ethics of assessment are often overlooked, with sometimes negative consequences, particularly for students. All of these and many other topics previously neglected in the literature are highlighted, discussed and explained in this book.

As the authors of this book correctly point out, the assessment “movement” has come a long way since the early 1990s, when the whole notion of the importance of assessment was questioned, the tools to conduct assessments were less sophisticated and accessible, and many student affairs practitioners were naïve about or intimidated by the prospect of “doing” assessment. Thanks to John Schuh and his colleagues, this book is an excellent “next step” in the continuing effort to make assessment a necessary and routine part of informing, influencing, and framing student affairs policy and practice.

Lee Upcraft

PREFACE

In 1976 while I was working as assistant director of housing at Arizona State University, the department received a notice from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) announcing that a workshop on the ecosystems approach to environmental assessment was going to be held in Phoenix. Representatives from WICHE member institutions were invited to attend this workshop at no cost. It was to be led by Dr. Ursula Delworth, a WICHE staff person. Since the topic was interesting, I organized a team from ASU to attend. The only obligation we had to fulfill was to try to field test the model the next academic year. We agreed to do that and attended the workshop.

That experience was my introduction to assessment in student affairs. The footnote to the experience was that we did field test the model during the next two academic years, and then I moved on to Indiana University, where we applied the model each of the next nine academic years. I also used it several times in my days as associate vice president at Wichita State.

In the early 1990s I had an idea that a *New Directions for Student Services* sourcebook might be written on assessment in student affairs. I approached Peggy Barr, one of the editors at the time, about the project. She referred me to Gale Erlandson, the editor for books on higher education at Jossey-Bass, who had been in communication with Lee Upcraft about doing a book on assessment in student affairs. Gale then brought us together and asked that we consider collaborating on a book on assessment in student affairs. We agreed to undertake the project, and that led to our first book on assessment, *Assessment in*

Student Affairs (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). A few years later she asked us to prepare a companion volume, *Assessment Practice in Student Affairs* (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). In the intervening years Lee and I wrote several articles and conducted a number of workshops on assessment practice at professional conferences, as well for specific campuses.

Over time I began to focus less on trying to convince the participants at our workshops that conducting assessment projects is a necessary element in student affairs practice and more on how to conduct assessment projects. Specific issues addressed were how to deal with the nuts and bolts of conducting assessments, including exploring such issues as how to get started, how to select an instrument, how to collect and analyze data, and how to present information in a meaningful form to the various stakeholders of the assessment project.

Based on that experience I concluded that a book on assessment methods was needed. That is, practitioners were seeking ideas about how to conduct assessment projects. They had moved beyond the “convincing” stage in their thinking about assessment and needed practical advice about how to conduct assessments. With that in mind I proposed a third book in what has become an assessment series. David Brightman, Gale’s successor at Jossey-Bass, quickly agreed, and this project was launched.

Purpose of This Book

The book discusses the methodological aspects of conducting assessment projects. It is designed for the student affairs practitioner who is ready to conduct assessment projects but is not quite sure how to manage the technical aspects of the project. With that purpose in mind, the book should help student affairs staff who are not sure how to address sampling issues in assessment projects, how to collect and analyze data, how to report results, and so on. Our writing team has provided much more detail about the “how to” aspects of assessment projects than Lee and I did in our previous volumes. We see this book as complementary to the previous books that we prepared on assessment, as well as providing an update on the methodology of assessment.

Audience for This Book

The book is written primarily for student affairs practitioners who are preparing to undertake assessment projects. In preparing the book I have made several assumptions:

1. That the readers of the book are ready to conduct an assessment project. That is, they do not need to be convinced that conducting assessment projects is a worthwhile use of their time and resources.
2. That the readers are interested in ideas, suggestions, and recommendations for how to conduct assessment projects. In short, they are looking for useful advice about the process of conducting assessment projects.
3. That readers have institutional assets in place or such assets can be secured to conduct assessment projects. By that I mean that they can secure help as is necessary to complete a project. An example might be that although the person conducting the assessment may not be an expert on statistical techniques, the person knows where to go on campus to get this sort of help.

The secondary audience for this book is graduate students in student affairs preparation programs who want to learn more about assessment techniques. This volume can be helpful to graduate students once they understand the basic elements of the research process, which they should learn in a foundational course. It is not a primer in statistics, nor does it claim to be a foundational publication in qualitative methodologies. Instead, it focuses on solving practical problems related to assessment in student affairs.

The book is not written for statisticians, qualitative methodologists, theoreticians, psychometrists, or others whose careers are centered on the development or

refinement of various research paradigms. Rather, it is prepared primarily by practitioners for practitioners, based on our combined decades of experience with assessment projects.

Some Caveats

We offer some caveats about what this book is and is not.

First, this book does not discuss theory. We understand that theories are foundational in the work in assessment and evaluation, but our purpose for the book was to focus on practical issues and practical problems. Topics such as sampling theory, theories under girding statistical techniques, instrument development, and various theoretical foundations that support qualitative inquiry are not addressed. We recognize that an extensive and important body of literature provides the theories that support work described in this volume but we saw no reason to repeat that information. Part Two of *Building a Scholarship of Assessment* (Banta & Associates, 2002) provides an excellent discussion of theoretical foundations of assessment, and I recommend that resource to readers interested in the topic.

Second, we do not use the terms *assessment* and *evaluation* interchangeably (see Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). For the purpose of this book, we define *assessment* as we did in our previous volumes: “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 18). We define *evaluation* as “any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 19).

Third, this is not a text about research methods, even though we use the term *research methods* from time to time in this book. Lee Upcraft and I differentiated *assessment* and *research* years ago (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002). I reiterate that we understand the difference between research and assessment, but we wanted to develop a volume that focuses on assessment in student affairs, which has a practical framework, and not deviate from our focus.

Fourth, we do not have a preference in terms of our methodological approach to assessment. Our view is that the problem being assessed should drive the decision about the methodological approach to employ. Therefore, the kind of data that are necessary to provide answers to the questions framing our inquiry should determine the methods employed. This book is not intended to advance a particular methodology; if readers are looking for advocacy in favor of qualitative or quantitative methods, they will be disappointed. Both methodological approaches have great value in our view, and the decision to choose one over the other in an assessment project hinges on the dynamics of the project and its goals. In fact, we advocate the use of mixed methodologies, as is explained in detail in Chapter Nine.

Fifth, I have used the “royal we” extensively. When I use the term *we*, I am referring to the collective thinking of Lee Upcraft and me. Lee and I worked closely for the better part of a decade on the development of literature focusing on assessment, and in the end, it became impossible for us to identify which ideas were his and which were mine. Although he is not an author of this book, his ideas can be found on virtually every page. Lee’s thinking on assessment is brilliant, and I want to acknowledge his contributions to the assessment movement in general and to my thinking and learning in particular.

Finally, the book is not about assessing student learning that is part of students' classroom or formal curricular experiences. Although student affairs practitioners may teach classes or contribute to the formal curriculum in many ways, this book focuses on student learning that occurs under the purview of student affairs practitioners, who, typically, are not members of an institution's teaching faculty. We think this learning is central to a student's education, as has been demonstrated at many colleges and universities (see, for example, Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Wonderful resources are available to assess student learning in the context of the formal curriculum, among them Suskie (2004), Huba and Freed (2000), and Angelo and Cross (1993).

Overview of the Contents

We have organized the contents of this book differently than had we prepared a research report or taught a class on appropriate steps in writing a dissertation. The book has been organized more closely to resemble the assessment process rather than an assessment report. For example, in an assessment report you would describe the selection of participants, choice of instrument, and then data analysis methods. However, when you begin the assessment process, it is important to think about the bigger picture—what methodological approach would most likely answer your assessment goals, what data are currently available, what instruments should be used, and who are the participants.

Fundamental to our approach is the nature of the assessment that we are contemplating, and it can be explained best with an illustration. If, on the one hand, we were responsible for a study abroad program that involved

ten students spending a month in another country, we would not consider conducting a quantitative assessment of their experiences. Rather, we would consider some combination of qualitative methods, including, but not necessarily limited to, conducting a series of focus groups with the participants before, during, and after their experience, perhaps asking them to keep journals of their experiences and possibly using other techniques, such as photographic inquiry. On the other hand, if we wanted to collect baseline data related to the perceptions of a student body consisting of 20,000 undergraduates regarding a proposed new food service program, we probably would want to conduct a survey.

We begin the book with getting started in assessment in student affairs. We present various reasons for conducting assessment projects, introduce some ideas about how to begin assessment in student affairs, and identify different types of assessment projects. We conclude Chapter One with a few success stories from campuses that have been very successful in conducting assessment projects.

Sometimes data are available and ready to be mined for assessment projects. Kevin Saunders and Darin R. Wohlgemuth provide details about using databases in assessment projects in Chapter Two. Their perspective is that many offices on campus are potential sources of data and resources for assessment projects and should not be overlooked as wonderful institutional assets. They also identify national databases that can be accessed through the World Wide Web.

In Chapter Three, R. M. Cooper presents strategies about how best to develop and implement data collection from students and other student affairs constituencies. The author presents advantages and disadvantages of various data collection techniques.

Ann M. Gansemer-Topf and Darin R. Wohlgemuth examine topics related to sampling and attracting subjects to assessment projects in Chapter Four. Typically, assessment projects are about people, and securing their participation can be challenging but is absolutely essential in the success of an assessment project. The authors also discuss problems with survey fatigue and use of incentives to increase participation.

Kevin Saunders and R. M. Cooper examine the challenges of identifying appropriate instruments for assessment projects in Chapter Five. They discuss using commercially prepared instruments or developing local instruments for quantitative studies, and they also take a look at developing protocols for interviewing participants, reviewing documents, and conducting observations in qualitative assessment.

R. M. Cooper and Mack C. Shelley, II address data analysis in Chapter Six. They provide examples for various data analysis procedures and present a number of choices (that is, statistical procedures) for quantitative data analysis. Our thinking is that in reviewing these choices, if a person is not deeply versed in statistics, after selecting the statistics of interest, assistance can be identified to work through the technical aspects of the analysis. The authors also discuss data analysis in qualitative studies.

The next step after analyzing the data is to share the information with interested stakeholders. In Chapter Seven we present ideas about preparing reports and conducting briefings, with a special emphasis on identifying recommendations for practice and change. Those engaged in an assessment project should take the initiative in setting the agenda for change, based on the findings of the study.

The ethical dimensions of assessment are central in any project. This includes protecting the participants from risk

and adhering to federal and institutional requirements. In Chapter Eight we provide detailed information about the ethical dimensions of assessment.

The use of mixed methodologies can result in particularly rich assessment studies. This means that the methodologies are complementary and can be used to inform each other. In Chapter Nine we offer a case study that uses mixed methodological approaches.

Finally, we present some ideas about the future of assessment in Chapter Ten. Institutions will be called upon to engage in assessment projects at an increasing rate in the future, and student affairs practitioners will need to meet this challenge. We think that they are well positioned to provide institutional leadership in meeting the demands for accountability in the future.

About the Contributors

The writing team that was assembled for this volume consists of faculty and administrators at Iowa State University. The team's members have been engaged extensively in assessment projects over the past decade, and much of their current work focuses on using data to inform decision making and professional practice. They advise practitioners on assessment projects on a routine basis and conduct studies of their own. I am very grateful to each of them for contributing their ideas to this publication.

A Final Word

At the beginning of this introduction I noted my first exposure to assessment in 1976 through attendance at a workshop led by Ursula Delworth. Her thinking about how to

conduct assessment projects has influenced me over the past thirty years. I will always be grateful to her for her assistance and encouragement. My colleagues at Arizona State University, Indiana University, Wichita State University, and Iowa State University have been extraordinary with their help, guidance, expertise, and support as I have taken on assessment projects with them to improve the experiences of college students. Gale Erlandson and David Brightman have been so helpful in encouraging me to put my ideas regarding assessment on paper, and without their help, none of these books would have been published. But most of all I want to acknowledge and thank my colleague and friend, Lee Upcraft, from whom I have learned so much about assessment and student affairs practice over the years.

John H. Schuh
Ames, Iowa

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John H. Schuh is distinguished professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Iowa State University. Previously he held administrative and faculty assignments at Wichita State University, Indiana University (Bloomington) and Arizona State University.

Schuh is the author, coauthor, or editor of over 235 publications, including 24 books and monographs and over 60 book chapters and 110 articles. His most recent books are *One Size Does Not Fit All: Traditional and Innovative Models of Student Affairs Practice* (with Kathleen Manning and Jillian Kinzie), *Student Success in College* (with George D. Kuh, Jillian Kinzie and Elizabeth Whitt), and *Promoting Reasonable Expectations* (with Thomas E. Miller and Barbara E. Bender). He is coauthor of *Assessment Practice in Student Affairs* and *Assessment in Student Affairs* (both with M. Lee Upcraft). Currently he is editor-in-chief of the *New Directions for Student Services* sourcebook series.

John Schuh has received the Contribution to Knowledge Award and the Presidential Service Award from the American College Personnel Association, and the Contribution to Research or Literature Award and the Robert H. Shaffer Award for Academic Excellence as a Graduate Faculty Member from the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. Schuh received a Fulbright award to study higher education in Germany in 1994.

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