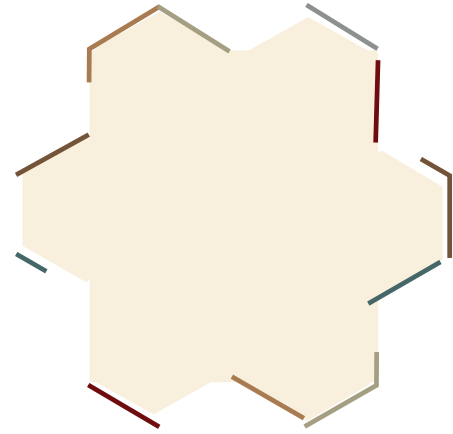


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Advances, Contributions, Obstacles and Opportunities in Student A airs Assessment

A. Katherine Busby & Robert W. Aaron

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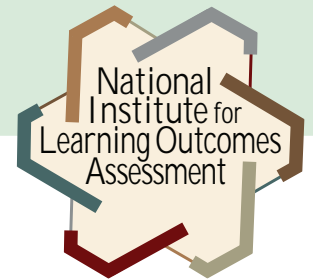
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NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.



Abstract

Just over ten years ago, John Schuh and Ann Gansemer-Topf authored NILOA Occasional Paper #7, *Assessing Student Learning: A Call to Action* (2010). The authors identified contributions and challenges for student affairs assessment and called on student affairs professionals not only to develop meaningful programs and services, but also to verify that those experiences add “value to the student experience at the institution” (p. 6). A decade has passed since student affairs professionals were called to demonstrate student learning through their initiatives and some questions come to mind. How did student affairs professionals respond to this challenge? How did they implement their assessment efforts over the past ten years? Moving forward from 2020, how will student affairs professionals respond to the challenges now facing higher education including challenges induced and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and calls to address institutionalized racism? In this paper, we examine some of the advances student affairs assessment professionals have made to student learning, the contributions they made to the field of assessment, the obstacles they overcame, and the opportunities that lie ahead.

Advances, Contributions, Obstacles, and Opportunities in Student Affairs Assessment

A. Katherine Busby & Robert W. Aaron

Just over ten years ago, John Schuh and Ann Gansemer-Topf authored NILOA Occasional Paper #7, *Advancing, Aligning, and Assessing Student Learning and Development in Partnership with Academic Affairs* (2010).

The authors identified contributions and challenges for student affairs assessment and called on student affairs professionals not only to develop meaningful programs and services, but also to verify that those experiences add “value to the student experience at the institution” (p. 6). Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) recommended that student affairs professionals link the student affairs mission to the broader institutional mission and related strategic initiatives to demonstrate student learning, form partnerships with faculty and academic administrators, and share their expertise in the areas of student learning and development with campus partners. The authors recognized the importance of practical matters and acknowledged that leadership, resources, sustainable assessment practices, and collaboration were necessary to advance student affairs assessment. Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) also challenged their audience to ask “more difficult questions” (p. 12) and gather evidence that student affairs initiatives contribute to student learning and development.

A decade has passed since student affairs professionals were called to demonstrate student learning through their initiatives and some questions come to mind. How did student affairs professionals respond to this challenge? How did they implement their assessment efforts over the past ten years? Moving forward from 2020, how will student affairs professionals respond to the challenges now facing higher education including challenges induced and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and calls to address institutionalized racism? In this paper, we examine some of the advances student affairs assessment professionals have made to student learning, the contributions they made to the field of assessment, the obstacles they overcame, and the opportunities that lie ahead.

Advancing, Aligning, and Assessing Student Learning and Development in Partnership with Academic Affairs

Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) encouraged student affairs professionals to find opportunities to collaborate across student affairs and academic affairs to understand “students’ total learning experience” (p. 8). Roberts (2016, 2017) reiterated this point and called on faculty and student affairs professionals to remove barriers that prevent students from maximizing learning opportunities between their curricular and co-curricular experiences. By removing these barriers, faculty, staff, and assessment professionals can more fully capture students’ learning and development across these experiences.

Student affairs professionals have made notable contributions advancing, aligning, and assessing student learning and development through partnerships with academic affairs. For students to attain institutional learning outcomes via out-of-classroom learning experiences, alignment is necessary between academic and student affairs. Platt and Syegh (2015) offered a practical framework to demonstrate learning outcomes alignment across divisions of academic and student affairs. The framework guides leaders from both divisions to begin with institution-wide learning outcomes and identify those outcomes that both

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divisions impact. Once academic and student affairs leaders identify the outcome(s), they can inventory the learning opportunities associated with the outcome through a joint curricular and co-curricular map (Oaks, 2015; Platt & Syegh, 2015). Jankowski and Baker (2020) also provided a practical and informative example of mapping learning in the co-curriculum. Faculty and staff can use such maps as a basis for a robust discussion about the gaps and overlaps in learning opportunities for students, how best to assess learning and interpret those findings, and ways to increase accessibility, scale, or promote such opportunities for students. A few examples of what this might entail are offered below.

Faculty and student affairs professionals at the University of Mississippi (UM) engaged in alignment and mapping conversations about critical thinking skill development within and outside of the classroom. Critical thinking is a general education competency at the institution, and critical thinking learning opportunities exist throughout the curriculum and outside of the classroom. In addition, critical thinking is the topic of **inkFORWARD** (see: <https://thinkforward.olemiss.edu/>), a current initiative focused on improving student learning and student success (University of Mississippi, 2020). As UM faculty and staff developed **inkFORWARD**, student affairs professionals identified co-curricular programs and opportunities offered by the division through which students could learn, develop, and apply critical thinking skills beyond the classroom. Student affairs professionals informed faculty about their efforts to introduce and reinforce critical thinking in professional departments. The Office of Learning & Campus Life (OLCL) at the University of Mississippi (UM) is a division that provides support and resources for student affairs professionals. The Office of Learning & Campus Life (OLCL) at the University of Mississippi (UM) is a division that provides support and resources for student affairs professionals.



demonstrate learning in the co-curriculum for accreditation purposes, the Division of Student Affairs followed suit. After a rigorous literature review and content analyses of peer institutions, the student affairs staff adapted the PULs to work with the out-of-classroom learning environment by adding two new domains focusing on intrapersonal development and interpersonal relationships, thus creating the Principles of Co-Curricular Learning (PCLs) (Aaron & Davenport, 2014). Then, staff in student affairs identified learning opportunities across the various departments comprising the division and mapped these opportunities to a primary and secondary PCL, mirroring the faculty mapping efforts with undergraduate classes. The result was a seamless link between academic and student affairs across efforts to enable connected student learning both inside and outside of

setbacks, including salary cuts and layoffs, in United States higher education due to the Great Recession (Wolinsky, 2009). It is likely that senior student affairs officers chose to maintain or increase the investment in student affairs assessment because they relied on the resulting data to navigate that very difficult time.

In the early 2000s, student affairs assessment professionals found support at national meetings and conferences such as Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) and College Student Educators International (ACPA). Student affairs assessment professionals not only presented their assessment practice, research, and scholarship at these conferences, but also provided their peers with valuable professional development opportunities. The Assessment Institute in Indianapolis also developed and expanded a special track for student affairs assessment focusing on student development, diversity, and student programs and services (Busby, 2017). During this time, professionals involved in student affairs assessment formed a grass-roots network through these conferences. That network developed into what is now the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) (Student Affairs Assessment Leaders, 2020). SAAL (<http://studentaffairsassessment.org/>) initially provided a listserv for professionals to exchange ideas, information, and resources and now offers professional development opportunities including structured conversations, webinars, and an online open course.

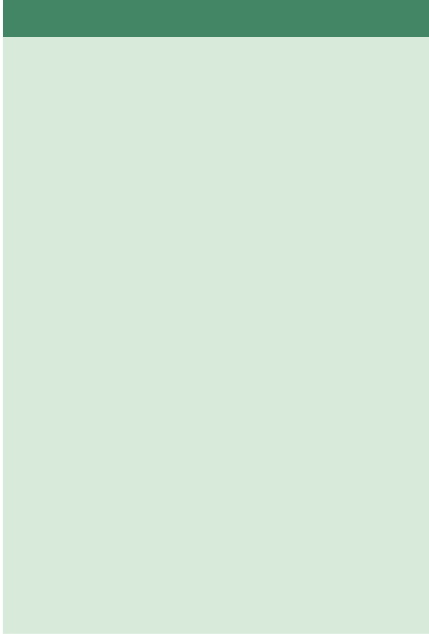
Student affairs assessment professionals not only established a dedicated professional organization, but also they



Challenges in Assessing Co-Curricular Learning

Over ten years ago, accreditors began to call upon universities to incorporate assessment data from divisions of student affairs into routine accreditation activities. In other words, the accreditors began to require institutions of higher education to provide evidence of student learning in the co-curriculum for the first time (Aaron & Davenport, 2014; Busby, 2015). In turn, senior institutional leaders worked with student affairs staff to determine the intersections between co-curricular and curricular learning. Together they





and promote the use of the data in a variety of ways toward continuous improvement of programs and services.

Student Affairs Assessment During the Global Pandemic

Student affairs assessment professionals experienced unexpected and dramatic changes to their work when the COVID-19 global pandemic struck the United States in spring 2020. These professionals typically would be involved in a routine of data-collection efforts to assess the operations, programs, and learning opportunities of student support services, but spring 2020 was anything but typical. Because student affairs professionals are well positioned to have close connections with students and understand student concerns, they responded to the ever-changing crisis by meeting the immediate needs of students during the disrupted term. Next, they were called upon to provide information and insight regarding the impact of the pandemic on operations planned for the fall term. Throughout the fall, student affairs professionals executed operations as planned whenever possible or with necessary modifications due to changes in student participation, COVID-19 protocols, and/or institution, local, or state requirements. Student affairs professionals now have experience executing their operations during the pandemic and will use that experience to improve the delivery of services and co-curricular learning opportunities in Spring 2021. In between, they postponed or modified existing assessment projects in lieu of immediate pandemic-related priorities, initiated new studies of the impact of the crisis on students, and examined existing data, even though almost every metric would need to be marked with an asterisk to represent the differences in trends due to COVID-19. Student affairs assessment professionals remain as nimble as ever to keep up with ever-changing demands. In other words, student affairs assessment must be resilient. “Resilient assessment requires planning, collaboration, flexibility, and focus on the elements necessary to understand student learning and development to be successful through any possible disruption” (Busby, 2020).

In spite of the instability created by the pandemic, it is essential for the student affairs assessment profession to continue with its planned assessment work, and share its expertise to the greatest extent possible. Student-focused needs assessments are more important than ever before and understanding the student experience during these times remains of paramount importance. Recent national trends are pointing to what many of us are seeing at our home institutions: the pandemic situation is tougher for marginalized populations than it is for the majority (Jankowski, 2020). Student affairs assessment professionals understand these nuances because they see systematic differences when disaggregating data. Therefore, they may be called upon to conduct focused needs assessments beyond those in the typical annual routine. Alongside the expertise of professionals in diversity, equity and inclusion—education work typically found in student support services at colleges and universities—student affairs assessment professionals support this important work by collecting and analyzing relevant data to help determine needs in the moment for student support. For example, some institutions conducted short needs assessments at the beginning of the stay-at-home orders in March and they also conducted similar ones immediately prior to when students returned in the subsequent fall and winter terms. While data were collected at a higher frequency than normal, student needs are constantly changing, and it is important for college and university administrators to have the latest information.



Similarly, student affairs assessment professionals may find themselves involved in the more technical aspects of gathering, analyzing, and reporting COVID-19 related data such as tracking individual student whereabouts for purposes of contact tracing or determining the numbers of students who seek housing on campus. At times, the reasons for needing housing are different from what one would expect. For example, just prior to spring break in 2020, Northwestern University tracked its 4,000 residential students to determine their housing needs for the upcoming spring quarter, after the decision was made to offer spring classes in an online modality. A team of student affairs professionals analyzed the results of a survey looking into the reasons for why students requested remaining on campus during the stay-at-home orders. Through deep analyses and extended discussions with individual students, the team was able to dig into data supplied by student affairs assessment staff to help students with individualized needs related to health and wellbeing, assisting the university's crisis intervention efforts for its students.

Institutionalized Racism

In addition to the global health pandemic, we find ourselves facing the painful reality of racial injustice as related to a long history of institutionalized racism in the United States. As has long been stated, institutional research staff are often among the first to see evidence of institutionalized racism in a variety of data sources they maintain (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In institutional research work specific to student affairs, there is an even deeper commitment to social justice, as the work around diversity, equity, and inclusion education is often embedded into divisional strategic plan values statements that provide

Right Place and Right Time: e Opportunities Ahead

In 2010 Schuh and Gansemer-Topf described the role of student affairs professionals in assessment and challenged student affairs professionals to uniquely contribute to the assessment of student learning and development at their institution. Since that time student affairs assessment professionals have engaged with academic affairs in assessing student learning and development, advanced their profession, and contributed widely to their campus decision making and higher education scholarship. Much has been done, but more remains and this is the right place and right time to seize the opportunities that lie ahead. Building on the foundation that has been set, student affairs professionals have the opportunity to:

- foster true partnerships not only with academic affairs, but also institutional research and information technology;
- disaggregate data to better understand the impact of programs and services; and
- align participation/satisfaction data, student information, and student learning data to foster student success.

A partnership between academic affairs and student affairs requires that both parties contribute to the association. We encourage faculty and academic administrators to



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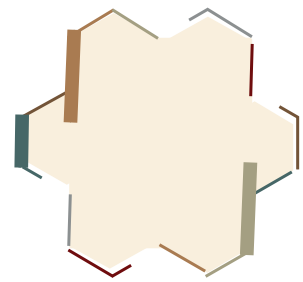
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About the Authors

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