

**GUEST EDITORIAL:
FROM ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION TO ACTION**

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Assessment and evaluation are essential for the credibility of higher education programs including fraternity and sorority affairs. Both of these practices serve as foundations for research to help promulgate a body of knowledge on a specific topic. In *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners*, Schuh and Upcraft (1996) detailed several reasons why assessment is of particular importance in student affairs today, including legitimizing student affairs' existence, strategic planning, and determining the quality of our programs and services.

Schuh and Upcraft differentiate assessment and evaluation in the following way; "assessment is any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (1996, p. 18). Evaluation is described as "any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, department, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (1996, p. 19). Assessment should be viewed as a three-step process: assessment, evaluation, and action. Although the above definitions would imply evaluation inherently involves action, the power of assessment is in using the information that is gained.

So why do we conduct assessment and/or evaluation and fail to act? Why do we study the research and not apply what we have learned to practice? Many factors influence how we work as practitioners, but in my over 15 years of serving as a student affairs practitioner, I've identified themes as to why we choose to not use or forget to apply what we learn through assessment and evaluation.

It Is So Familiar To Us, We Forget!

I served as the assessment coordinator for our division for several years. One of my biggest challenges was to help the division understand that we were already using assessment and making decisions based on evaluation. An opportunity came as we completed a five-year update for our accreditation agency. Our institutional research expert helped us reframe our task by asking one simple question: In the past two years, what is something you have changed in your services/programs/organization and why? This question got us to look at the assessment, evaluation, and action process in a different way.

I distinctly remember a division leadership meeting where one director answered the above question. It became perfectly clear that she had assessed the program, had used that data to evaluate it, and, as a result, had made changes to improve our student services. It seemed as obvious as she outlined it. Looking at the process of assessment with the end in mind really does help us remember that action/practice is the main reason we assess. For example, the establishment of substance-free housing served as a response to data that fraternity and sorority members drink more than non-affiliated students. In addition, senior retention was a growing concern in fraternities and sororities, so the decision to move to substance free housing was

examined through a series of possible actions and based on the data, several organizations felt it essential to adopt this practice.

Data Are Our Friends!

Too often, we assess and then stop. We spend a good amount of money on an instrument; get the shiny binder with all the information, and then we let it sit on a shelf until we have “enough time” to make sense of it all. Alternatively, we hold a focus group, take great notes, have someone transcribe the tapes, and the transcripts sit in our reading box waiting for the day when we will have the time to review them. In order to make the best of assessment and move into evaluation or, better yet, practice, we need to get to know our data. If you have used an instrument from Educational Benchmarking (EBI), for example, you will immediately recognize the shiny, big binder comment. You should also recognize, however, that there are some excellent reports already pre-formatted to help us make sense of the data. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data we become paralyzed and make no use of it. One strategy I use to prevent data from entering the perennial black hole is to look at it immediately, involving a few others to quickly determine what we want to know more about and what the data tells us that we can begin to act on immediately. Make a commitment to tackle at least one question highlighted in your assessment results. The first step is usually the most difficult.

You Are a Professional

Finally, you need to remember that one of your jobs as a professional is to improve continually programs and services for the betterment of your students. You may collect data in a variety of ways: formally or informally; quantitative or qualitative; locally or nationally. In the end, you are the person making or helping to make the decisions for the area you oversee. You know your students best. You know your campus and you know whether you are giving in to the status quo because your data “looks pretty good” or if you are judging your area too harshly based on some simple information collected on paper. You need to accept ownership for the assessment of your area and realize that great responsibility comes with being a professional. Professionals are able to analyze information and make decisions as needed. They are also able to ask for help when necessary. Most importantly, professionals will use sound assessment efforts in making decisions affecting their areas and ultimately their students.

Therefore, the future begins now. Let the articles in this issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors* serve as a catalyst for your assessment efforts. First, Wall, Reis, and Bureau reveal some important work in the area of alcohol assessment in relation to pacing behaviors. For years, campuses have created programs to address alcohol abuse among students. These programs have been created because of knowledge of the issues related to alcohol abuse by college students. What are the real issues related to alcohol abuse on your campus? How could this article help inform your programs?

Next, Roberts and Johnson provide an overview of the Fraternal Futures program. Their theoretical background in how students learn is very insightful and reminds me of how important it is to engage students in our day-to-day as well as strategic planning work. How have you

approached making students a part of re-shaping the future of fraternity and sorority life on your campus?

In the article *Assessing Student Learning and Development in Fraternity and Sorority Affairs*, Strayhorn and Colvin provide some helpful information on creating assessment agendas. Professionals, such as these authors, work on each of our campuses. How can they help us shape an assessment and action agenda for our fraternity and sorority community?

In *Perceptions of Leadership* by Harms, Woods, Roberts, Bureau, and Green, the authors address assumptions through the understanding of multiple approaches to leadership. Each of our fraternity and sorority communities espouses the virtue of leadership. Maybe it is time we use data, such as that presented, to better prepare our members for leadership roles and what that really entails. Does your fraternity and sorority community use multiple perspectives to train leaders? How can you use this information as you develop your programs?

Finally, we have reprinted important work about the outcomes of fraternity/sorority members in comparison to non-members published previously in the NASPA Journal. Through their research, Pascarella, Flowers, and Whitt challenge us to examine the important question of cognitive development in fraternity and sorority members.

As you read this issue of *Oracle: The Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity Advisors* make it a goal to put at least one component of this research or your own assessment and evaluation, into action. Your task: take this knowledge and use it to guide your programs. How can, and will you, use this information? What does it mean for your campus? If we fail to apply information gleaned from assessment and evaluation, can we be more successful at influencing the fraternal movement? My response is “no.”

Reference

Schuh, J. H., & Upcraft, M. L. (1996). *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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