Making Assessment Easier With the Organizational Effectiveness Model

Savannah C. Heilman and Lance Kennedy-Phillips describe a comprehensive, step-by-step, mixed-methods assessment model.

By Savannah C. Heilman and Lance Kennedy-Phillips

ASSESSMENT. We know . . . it's about as beloved as brussels sprouts. We all know we should do assessment. It even makes sense that showing others how effective our work is can help us to get more funding, staffing, or recognition. At The Ohio State University's Department of Student Life Research & Assessment, we have been helping all 30 departments in Student Life work through a comprehensive, step-by-step assessment process over the past year. The charge from the vice president for student life was to help all departments, from tiny offices like Student Advocacy to huge departments like Residence Life, go through the same assessment process so that at the end of the year, they could showcase the great work they were doing to support student learning. We hope that sharing our process and our model will help others apply it to their own work.

The Organizational Effectiveness Model was originally developed by Lance Kennedy-Phillips and Ellen Meents-DeCaigny at DePaul University and has been adapted to address the needs of The Ohio State University. The model's purpose is to help organizations measure progress toward mission fulfillment and goal achievement. It cascades, with each step building on the step before it. The first two parts of the model are the division's mission, vision, and goals, followed by the department's mission, vision, and goals. These elements had largely been written in the previous year. We aimed for simplicity by aligning department goals with those of the division and avoiding needless work. After a brief review of the division's and department's mission, vision, and goals, we jumped right into our three-step process. Each step was completed in a different academic quarter to make the process more manageable.

Each member of the research and assessment staff worked with four to five departments individually. We met with each department once or twice for each step of the process, starting with identifying major activities and expected outcomes. First we defined what each of these steps meant in the summer and fall of 2009.

STEP 1: MAJOR ACTIVITIES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

MAJOR ACTIVITIES DEFINE what the department does on a day-to-day basis. The mission for each department should assist in defining major activities. Usually they are not a single program, service, or project but are defined broadly and could include multiple items. We encouraged our departments to create three to five major activities that were brief and that could be articulated in one breath. For example, if asked in an elevator what they do, someone from University Residences could say that they (1) create community, (2) enhance learning and development, and (3) help students succeed.

Each major activity is grounded by a set of expected outcomes. The goal is to develop two to four outcome statements for each major activity. The expected outcome is a sentence that generally follows the formula, "As a result of the activities/programs/ services provided by X, students will Y." Outcomes must be measurable and concise. By the end of each meeting, a general framework had been outlined. Each department had three to five major activities with corresponding expected outcomes. Below is an example:

Major Activity 1: Create Community
   Expected Outcomes:
   1. As a result of the activities and services provided by University Housing, residents will engage with the university community.
   2. As a result of the activities and services provided by University Housing, residents will understand the value of global perspectives.

One of the most valuable parts about this process was getting either the whole department or several representatives of a department together for an hour-long chat about what they do and what they expect students to gain from their work. A major challenge for us was just getting all of these people in the same room—but once they were there—we usually had very productive and fruitful conversations. We used whiteboards, huge sticky notes, laptops, or whatever worked for the department to draft long lists of the major activities. We then grouped them into three to five categories

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that the group agreed upon. The same brainstorming process was used for expected outcomes. We asked each department to list everything they hoped students would gain as a result of their work and then edited these into statements and grouped them under the appropriate major activity.

At first, we held one brainstorming session with the department and then turned them loose to choose whatever they wanted as their final write-up. Soon, we realized that having an objective person in the room was vital to the process. We came back and held more meetings with each group until they felt good about the major activities and expected outcomes they had created. Having one person to moderate, take notes, and synthesize allowed the group to focus. The moderator does not have to be an assessment professional, but he or she should be somewhat disassociated from the group. If, for example, the department director is the moderator, the group could be hesitant to disagree or may accept revisions they do not agree with. The process was similar in style, but different in result, for every department. One department needed five meetings to solidify their major activities and expected outcomes, while several other departments needed only one or two sessions.

Another issue we faced was that originally expected outcomes were called *learning outcomes*. Our

Savannah C. Heilman recently received her master's degree in higher education and student affairs from The Ohio State University. She is currently specializing in outcomes-based assessment and residence life/housing assessment in her role as an assessment & learning specialist. She plans on pursuing her doctorate in higher education and student affairs in the near future.

Lance Kennedy-Phillips is the director of student life research and assessment at The Ohio State University. He received his master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Currently, he is national co-chair (elect) for The NASPA Assessment, Research and Evaluation Knowledge Community. His scholarly interests include organizational learning, assessment, and higher education policy analysis.

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service-based departments, like Dining Services and Facility Management and Logistics, felt the work they do is very important but does not necessarily result in student learning directly. We went back to the drawing board and found some excellent resources, thus changing learning outcomes to the more general and global expected outcomes. As Dr. Marilee Bresciani explained in her 2001 *NASPA's NetResults* article, "Writing Measurable and Meaningful Outcomes," there are three different types of expected outcomes. They can be programmatic, developmental, or learning, depending on the activity, audience, and desired result.

- Learning outcomes are what we hear about most in Student Affairs. Learning outcomes focus on the direct learning that students should gain by attending our programming, living in our residence halls, or being a part of a student organization.

- Developmental outcomes delineate the growth or personal development that students should attain as a result of our efforts.

- Program outcomes are slightly different. While it may be ideal to focus on student growth and learning, our offices must also focus on procedural tasks that are important to our work.

STEP 2: PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

IN THE WINTER QUARTER OF 2010, we met with our departments again to focus on performance indicators (PIs), progress measures for each expected outcome. Essentially, they are management tools for the department. Most commonly, PIs are numeric and can be measured as cost, magnitude, or satisfaction. Frequently, departments listed elements they could count, and we realized we had ten or more elements for each expected outcome. Since the goal was to have three to four performance indicators per expected outcome, we grouped these together thematically. The most important part of this step is to list only the elements that can easily be collected or are already being collected. For example, University Residences was already counting the number of students who were attending their programs on wellness, alcohol, and other drugs. We could combine these into "wellness." We did not want to make any additional work for our departments, but we did want them to have clear numbers.

At the end of this meeting, we added performance indicators to our original framework. Below is an example of one of University Residences' major

activities with corresponding expected outcomes and performance indicators:

Major Activity 1: Create Community
    Expected Outcomes:
    1. As a result of the activities and services provided by University Housing, residents will engage with the university community.
    Performance Indicators:
        a. Relevant Housing Outcomes and Measurement Evaluation (HOME) Survey questions
        b. Relevant Staff Survey questions
        c. Number of experiential learning/community engagement opportunities offered
        d. Number of housing renewals (returning upperclassmen)
    2. As a result of the activities and services provided by University Housing, residents will understand the value of global perspectives.
    Performance Indicators:
        a. Relevant HOME Survey questions
        b. Relevant Staff Survey questions
        c. Number of global perspectives learning opportunities offered

STEP 3: OUTCOMES-BASED ASSESSMENT

IN THE SPRING QUARTER OF 2010, we met with the departments once again. This time, we went through the third and final phase, developing an outcomes-based assessment. The vice president for student life wanted each department to be able to "tell their story" through at least one in-depth assessment per year.

One way we were able to describe this was through performance indicators, which are meant to show a snapshot, in numbers, of the department's impact. It is a black-and-white photograph. An outcomes-based assessment, however, allows people "to color in the lines" of the snapshot, giving color and depth to the picture. We started, as always, by defining and explaining outcomes-based assessment for our departments.

Outcomes-based assessments are used as growth tools that lead to growth of the department and improvement of overall practices. These assessments can be either qualitative or quantitative, depending on the question. We encouraged the departments to focus on one in-depth outcomes-based assessment project each year. We now have one narrative from each department that, combined, "tell the story" of the entire division.

Reflection and Change

THE LAST STEP OF THE PROCESS is reflection and change. Departments in Student Life conducted their outcomes-based assessments in the spring and reported their performance indicators this past summer. From this point forward, the major activities, expected outcomes, and performance indicators will remain relatively stable for the next several years, with minor tweaks and changes each year. However, each year every department will choose an expected outcome to focus on for the outcomes-based assessment. This fall, we will meet with our departments one more time to go over their 2009–2010 assessments. After reviewing this year's results, each department can identify areas where they can improve. At this meeting, we will also choose an expected outcome to focus on for the 2010–2011 school year.

The Model in Action

WE'VE PROVIDED EXAMPLES of how each element works individually, but how does the model work successfully in one department, start to finish? Here are two examples.

The Student Wellness Center based their one Outcomes-Based Assessment for the year on the Major Activity: "Sexual Violence Education and Support" and the Expected Outcome: "As a result of 'It's Abuse'education, students will be able to recognize signs of relationship abuse." Because the following describes an Outcomes-Based Assessment (in-depth and not numbers-based), there is no corresponding Performance Indicator (numerical representation of success). Following a viewing of the first *Twilight* movie, a popular young adult movie about vampire, werewolf, and human romantic relationships, the Student Wellness Center conducted informal focus groups with students as part of their "It's Abuse" campaign. The staff had scripted questions to ask students, but they allowed the conversation to flow naturally. They recorded these discussions on small voice recorders. Student workers helped transcribe the discussion, and these notes were analyzed to identify themes. The Student Wellness Center, with very little time and effort, garnered excellent information about what students know about relationship abuse, how they feel about it, and what they learned from the movie and discussion.

Not all departments within Student Life offer direct programming for students, however. One of the most successful stories of the past year was from Facility Management and Logistics. This large group produced a very different Outcomes-Based Assessment. Their project was nested under the Major Activity: "Planning facility needs" and the Expected Outcome: "Providing appropriate levels of building system services shall result in increased satisfaction level ratings from Student Life facilities occupants and users." They conducted student opinion polls using borrowed handheld clickers. They gathered a group of residence hall students and asked them to choose between proposed facility upgrades. For example, one question asked which the students wanted more, air conditioning or pod bathrooms. The students pointed their clickers at the screen and chose A or B. The computer generated instant results that were recorded by the staff. The clickers and the software associated with them were a minimal expense, and the students did not even view this experience as assessment. To them, it was fun and interactive (and they got free pizza), and the Facility Management and Logistics department got valuable input about which upgrades will increase occupation satisfaction the most.

These assessments took very little additional staff time and produced very valuable results. Assessment techniques like this can be used in any educational setting, from large and complex Student Affairs departments to a single professor trying to make an intentional change in his or her courses. The assessment process should be manageable, meaningful, and measurable. The goal here is to follow a plan and showcase a story through numbers and words. Most readers probably already do this in a myriad of ways. We hope that our model provides a strong framework to showcase great work, so that others will begin to notice the impressive ways in which higher education professionals help students to learn and grow every day.

Notes

Bresciani, M. J. (2001, October). Writing measurable and meaningful outcomes. *NASPA's NetResults*, pp. (1–5).

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