

“Let Me Be Direct”: Using Direct Assessments With Student Leaders

Nathan Lindsay, Aimee Hourigan, Jennifer Smist, and Larry Wray discuss the benefits of direct assessment of student learning in a variety of co-curricular programs.

By Nathan Lindsay, Aimee Hourigan, Jennifer Smist, and Larry Wray

“Please indicate your level of agreement with the following: I have a better understanding of the information covered in this workshop.” Another survey question might ask, “How likely are you to apply what you have learned today?” In student affairs assessment, questions such as these are routinely used to gauge the effectiveness of student training. However, do these types of questions actually indicate whether or how much the students learned?

Barbara Walvoord, a leading expert in assessment, asserts that a primary goal of assessment is to deliver truthful and clear information that can be used to inform and improve outcomes. Although there are multiple ways to achieve this goal, common approaches can be broken down into two major categories: direct and indirect assessment. Indirect assessment typically relies on general measures and students’ self-reports of what they have learned. Linda Suskie, another national leader in assessment, contends that direct assessment, on the other hand, is a good way to observe very tangible evidence of assessment outcomes. Suskie defines direct assessments as those using “structured, predetermined response options that can be summarized into meaningful numbers and analyzed statistically” (p. 32).

Whereas indirect assessments provide a picture of student perspectives, direct assessments indicate what they actually know or are able to do. For example, indirect assessments might ask students whether they thought they learned certain principles at a workshop, whereas a direct assessment would test them on these principles. Direct assessment can take many forms, such as quizzes, commercial tests, and portfolios. All of these direct assessments share a common theme of being able to demonstrate the students’ learning.

Conducting direct assessment can provide assessment data that are viewed as more valid and legitimate by both staff and faculty alike. For example, Barbara Glesner-Fines, a law professor at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, states: “So often students learn some of the most important lessons in college from their co-curricular experiences. Direct assessment sends a message about the seriousness of their role. It also provides a reality check that can be so critical when students are in leadership roles. My experience as a faculty member tells me that without some kind of external direct assessment, students do not have a basis for accurately assessing their own learning. Especially where the students are engaged in the teaching process as peer models, mentors, and instructors, we need to be sure they really know what they think they know.”

In the sections that follow, we outline how three separate departments at the University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) used direct assessments to develop a better understanding of what their students knew, as well as to enhance their trainings and workshops.

HOUSING AND RESIDENCE LIFE

The mission of the Department of Housing and Residence Life (HRL) is “to appropriately challenge residents to develop to their full potential by supporting their educational growth and personal development.” The number of students living on campus has nearly doubled in the last seven years, growing from 21 percent to 38 percent. This growth has had a huge impact on the sense of community and school spirit on campus. It has also required more effective organization, collaboration, and training to ensure that all HRL professionals and paraprofessionals possess the required knowledge and skills.

The HRL staff used a series of direct learning outcome assessments (i.e., quizzes) to gauge resident assistants’ learning on a variety of training topics, including crisis response, programming knowledge, diversity education, and student conduct procedures. Resident assistants (RAs) were given a 30-question pre-test before training started, a post-test at the end of the one-and-a-half-week training, a post-test at the midyear winter training, and a final post-test at the end of the academic year in May. The object of providing multiple post-tests was to gauge the resident assistant staff’s retention of vital knowledge surrounding the training topics throughout the year.

The following results were observed: (1) RAs scored an average of 9.8 points higher from pre-test to the initial post-test, suggesting significant learning occurred as a result of training; (2) The second and

third post-test results were slightly lower but consistent, so RAs appeared to be retaining information throughout the academic year at a consistent level; and (3) RAs from various staffs were scoring low from the beginning of the year to the end of the year on a consistent group of questions. It was also noted that returning staff members scored significantly higher on the pre-test (+12.6 on average), but the average difference on all post-tests was very similar between the two groups.

The direct assessment data were much more useful than previous indirect data because they specified more accurately the knowledge deficiencies among the resident assistants. The residence life staff used this information to redesign and strengthen RA training by improving individual training sessions, providing feedback to returning presenters, creating more consistent messages between full departmental training sessions and individual staff training sessions, and choosing better methods of instruction in some areas of training.

CROSSROADS

UNCW has dedicated resources and staff positions to substance abuse prevention and education since 1988. The CROSSROADS department is dedicated to a harm-reduction approach, assessment, and collaboration with on- and off-campus partners to address substance abuse from an environmental management perspective. CROSSROADS hires students as peer educators who develop and execute comprehensive educational programs; facilitate presentations for classes, residence halls, and student organizations; advocate for a healthy campus environment; and act as role models for other students.

The goals for the CROSSROADS peer educators are to develop a working knowledge of alcohol and drug effects and protective strategies to reduce risks related to their use; to effectively deliver programs to target populations; to improve problem-solving, public speaking, communication, listening, referral, and conflict resolution skills; and to reduce their own high-risk drinking behaviors and related consequences. We evaluate the peer educators’ achievement of these goals through a direct assessment of content knowledge and behavior change, presentation rubrics, self- and peer-ratings of their skills, observation, and focus groups.

Findings from the direct assessment given immediately after training in August 2009 indicated that the 14 peer educators learned most of the required material, but we identified specific areas that needed more attention during both the initial and ongoing training throughout the year. The average overall score was

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70 percent, with individual averages ranging from 50 percent to 86 percent. After reviewing these data, the August 2010 peer educator training included a more in-depth training on drugs as well as an interactive game to supplement the training the peers receive through reading articles and developing programs. The 2010–2011 peer educators demonstrated a great deal of improvement after the revamped training, with an overall average score of 82 percent and scores ranging from 63 percent to 95 percent. Instead of showing the peer educators were satisfied with the training program or felt confident in their knowledge related to the position, we were able to demonstrate their learning and mastery of the material through this direct assessment. These results aid us in ensuring program fidelity, knowing that the peer educators are providing accurate information in their educational programs and presentations.

LEADERSHIP UNCW

The Leadership UNCW program provides intentional learning opportunities for students to become engaged, ethical citizens by promoting inclusivity and self-empowerment. Students have the choice to participate in one of more than 30 different leadership workshops or in a defined series of workshops to work toward earning one of nine Leadership UNCW certificates.

Direct assessment methods have been implemented in the workshop evaluation process. At the conclusion of each workshop, students complete a brief paper evaluation. Starting in 2009–2010, each workshop evaluation asked two direct assessment questions to specifically address the learning outcomes and key concepts of the workshop. Some questions have a single correct response, whereas others ask students for a broader response. For example, the evaluation for a Leadership for Social Change workshop asks students to respond to the following two questions: (1) List the seven C's of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development and (2) What is one reason for getting involved in social change? Another example from a workshop on officer transition asks students the following: (1) What is one approach that your organization can utilize to identify and engage potential new leaders? and (2) What can your organization do to ensure for a smooth officer transition?

Overall, these direct assessment questions yielded responses that closely aligned with the material presented in the workshop. Prior to including the direct assessment, the workshop evaluations contained quantitative and qualitative questions that focused primarily on student satisfaction. By using direct assessments, we were able to demonstrate student learning through their demonstrated understanding of the key elements of the workshop curriculum.

CONCLUSION

In summary, it is important to consider the extensive benefits that direct assessments can provide in improving our services and programs in student affairs. In support of this point, Drew Bergerson, a history professor at UMKC, stated the following: “Direct measures are an important part of a broad umbrella of assessment practices; the ideal case is often what can be learned by combining direct with indirect measures.” He further suggested that “co-curricular programs should cast their net widely in terms of gathering information in order to be able to identify the issues that are helping or hindering student learning, precisely because they could be found in many places.”

As Marilee Bresciani, Carrie Zelna, and James Anderson note about indirect and direct assessments, “While both types of data are helpful, there may be more value in providing direct evidence of learning and development versus providing information indicating that students say they are learning and developing” (p. 27). Conducting such assessments more regularly will help us know what students still need to learn in order to prepare for lives of purpose.

NOTES

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