

Using Direct Measures in the Cocurriculum

Pamelyn K. Shefman

STUDENT AFFAIRS EDUCATORS need to know if the programs and services they provide contribute to student satisfaction and student learning. If students are learning, there is momentum to share and scale the wheres and hows of this learning. This focus, albeit critical to the student affairs professional, cannot be undertaken without regard for how learning is measured. This discussion is in-

What Is a Direct Measure?

Direct measures include “performance assessments that require students to demonstrate their competence in one or more skills” (Banta and Palomba 2015, 79). Direct measures are often also described in opposition to indirect measures, which rely on students’ reflections on their skills or competences. For example, a direct measure in the cocurriculum includes

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tended to showcase the work of student affairs educators using direct measures of learning in the cocurriculum.

There is a skill gap at our institutions—between a student’s demonstration of adequate skills and the implied outcomes of postsecondary education. Stansbury (2016) asserts that “despite having the highest levels of educational attainment of any previous American generation, Millennials, on average, demonstrate relatively weak skills in all skill sets” (para. 3), including the cocurricular learning outcomes of communication and problem solving. Direct assessment of students’ skills and competences is vital to telling cocurricular student success stories on our campuses and can assist in narrowing of the aforementioned skill gap.

an observation of a student leader delegating to peers, whereas an indirect measure could be student leader’s self-reporting on their delegation skills in response to a survey question. Because of the observation and/or demonstration of learning that has occurred, direct measures are often preferred to indirect measures.

To address some of the inherent challenges to providing organized information on the effectiveness of the cocurriculum, Suskie (2015) calls for a simplification of assessment strategies, flexibility in approach, and using information that is already available. Often, data that are readily available to the student affairs educator are direct measures (e.g., observations and demonstrations) of skills in leadership, communication,

problem solving, innovation, and so on. Therefore, using direct measures in the cocurriculum may provide an opportunity to simplify assessment strategies through data mining rather than additional data gathering.

Why Should We Assess Using Direct Measures?

Student affairs educators have several reasons for employing direct measures. One reason is to align the provision of evidence of student learning, development, and achievement in the cocurriculum with accreditors’ requirements. Another is to inform stakeholders of outcomes. Student affairs educators also can use direct measures as an acknowledgment of confidence in the demonstration of student learning and development. Finally, engaging in direct measures may minimize student fatigue in the assessment of cocurricular outcomes.

The focus of assessment has shifted from examining learning outcomes, to determining access to educational opportunities, to measuring persistence and completion, and will (or even is) returning to a review of learning outcomes (Suskie 2016). Suskie (2016) reasons that because these shifts in focus have “defensible standards for student learning and achievement” (para. 15), this is what accreditors will be expecting across an institution. Using direct measures is helpful in accreditation (Henning 2013) and provides significantly richer data and insight. Busby (2015) encourages institutional researchers to partner with

student affairs educators as the access to students in the cocurriculum allows for exploration of demonstrated skills and competences outside the classroom. Although the perception may be that it is easy to create a questionnaire and ask students their opinions on the cocurriculum, measuring these outcomes indirectly will not elicit strong confidence in the results. “The more direct the measure of learning, the more we can be confident that students have achieved the intended outcomes” (Schuh et al. 2016, 89). Furthermore, the readily available requested indirect measures, both on and off campus, raise serious concerns about survey fatigue as students are constantly bombarded for their opinions.

What Do Direct Measures in the Cocurriculum Look Like?

Professionals working in the field of student affairs assessment utilize a variety of techniques to measure student learning in the cocurriculum and evaluate the effectiveness of cocurricular programs and services. Recently, I polled members of Students Affairs Assessment Leaders (studentaffairsassessment.org) to determine the ways in which they use direct measures. In the poll, I asked them to indicate which, if any, direct measures they use at their institutions (Shefman, personal communication, August 18, 2016).

Among the forty respondents, 77.5 percent employ direct measures in their division of student affairs. The most common direct measure is a rubric: 89 percent of those with direct measures reported using rubrics. Respondents also utilize pre/mid/post tests and quizzes, essays, reflections, observations, and performance evaluations (listed in order from most selected to least selected). Note that even observations and performance evaluations comprised 70 percent and almost 60 percent, respectively, of the direct measures identified, and these are preexisting data sources

used first to improve student performance on a task or job then assigned a dual purpose to assess outcomes of interest.

What Are Some Examples of Using Direct Measures?

At the University of Houston, thinking innovatively about existing data sources and informing practice with reliable measures of outcomes are encouraged. Staff members in the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Services have endorsed direct measures as a reliable method to improve the work they are accomplishing. The offices of Student Conduct, Fraternity and Sorority Life, Campus Recreation, and Financial Aid are just some of the areas where direct measures are employed. Student affairs professionals at the University

culture of excellence. The Fraternal Excellence Program at the University of Houston uses review of chapter narratives to evaluate fraternity and sorority chapter performance on the standards of Intellectual Development, Leadership Development, Service and Citizenship, Brotherhood/Sisterhood/Siblinghood, and Ritual and Values. Narratives are assessed using a rubric for each area, then students are interviewed, and again an evaluator completes a rubric based on the responses. Chapter-level outcomes are tracked, and aggregated data can be used to identify actions needed to assist all chapters in meeting or exceeding the established standards.

Numerous on-campus student employment positions provide additional opportunities to use direct measures. For example, Campus Recreation em-

The local and national standards of fraternities and sororities serve as one foundation for building a cross-campus culture of excellence.



of Houston, much like the respondents noted in the poll I conducted, use standardized rubrics to measure outcomes and to provide greater consistency across raters. However, as indicated in the following examples, other direct measures are also in use. Within the Office of Student Conduct, students may write reflection papers as one of the final sanctions. Though the content of the reflection papers may vary, students provide their perception of what they learned through the process. Reflection papers are scored based on the content and actions described, thus gathering both direct and indirect evidence to measure a student outcome. Sanctions and their outcomes can now be tracked to improve the student conduct process.

The local and national standards of fraternities and sororities serve as one foundation for building a cross-campus

employs students in almost four hundred various roles, from lifeguards and office staff to customer service representatives and intramural officials. As employees, students are evaluated during the semester either through a situational observation or in a summative performance evaluation. In the former, students are quizzed on the safety protocols needed to perform their roles and are given specific and direct feedback. In the latter, a supervisor meets with the student employees at the end of the semester to discuss how well they are fulfilling expectations. Both of these tasks are part of the regular operations for the recreation staff, and using these existing data to track outcomes demonstrates to other departments that assessment need not be an “add-on” task.

(continued on page 12)

the project itself yielded important evidence related to our outcomes, it also offered an important opportunity for college personnel to engage with students in one of their preferred modes of communication. ■

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Using Direct Measures in the Cocurriculum

(continued from page 5)

Finally, financial aid offices might struggle to get actionable data on how students gather information on the financial aid processes and regulations that comprise their work. Historically, the staff tracked the number of aid verifications completed by year as a proxy measure of student learning. Now staff conduct cognitive interviews with students while they navigate financial aid websites. **Results** from the interviews provide valuable **feedback** to improve how financial aid information is shared and to measure what students know about the financial aid process.

Recommendations for Getting Started or Maintaining Momentum

This article represents a small sample of the work taking place to incorporate direct measures in the cocurriculum and is intended to open the dialogue for all student affairs practitioners. If you are looking for ways to incorporate direct measures, begin with what you are already doing. Look for data and data

sources you already have, such as student evaluations, shift reports, and advisor observations. This approach can foster new assessment efforts or build upon existing ones. If data collection is already part of someone's role, the process becomes more sustainable.

Additional resources may still be needed to engage in direct assessment of the cocurriculum, even if existing data are used. For example, the increased use of rubrics requires additional time and effort on the part of student affairs staff to develop and use the rubrics effectively. There are free and purchased resources for rubrics that will make the work easier. However, whatever you choose, time is a resource that has a salient limitation. Therefore, thoughtful consideration of when and how to add rubrics should be given to make adoption smooth.

Student affairs educators at the University of Houston, as well as other institutions of higher education, use direct measures in the cocurriculum to demonstrate the connection between

programs and services that touch the lives of students and result in learning and development. The examples presented here demonstrate how direct measures can advance the stories of student achievement and the impact of the field of student affairs. Mine data you may already have, leverage direct measures if you are not already doing so, and share the stories of success broadly. ■

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Editor's Notes: Rediscovering the Importance of Student Learning Outcomes

(continued from page 3)

compared with those of similar existing programs to ascertain that the program being proposed represents a true innovation on that campus.

This saga of my continuing education on the importance of SLOs contains an even more recent chapter. In 2013 a student in my summer graduate course on outcomes assessment who worked in our law school approached me with remarkable news: the American Bar Association (ABA) had revised its Standards for Approval of Law Schools to require that law schools develop SLOs and implement assessment thereof! This would be the very *last* of the accreditors of programs at IUPUI to adopt such requirements. I began immediately to work with concerned, responsive, and innovative colleagues in the McKinney School of Law to develop their responses to the new standards. Faculty came together and in a few months developed a half-dozen SLOs to guide the McKinney juris doctor degree.

Seeing these initiatives take off on such a sound footing in the McKinney School did not prepare me for an e-mail message I received in July from a law professor in another state. He asked, "Are there any controlled studies of the effects on student learning of articu-

lating learning outcomes at either the institutional or the course level? I've looked at all the sources on which the ABA appears to have relied and some of the general literature on assessment and haven't found a single reference to a controlled study." I did not have an immediate response, so I offer the following references in case they may be helpful to anyone else who is asked for evidence of the value of SLOs.

When new programs are proposed by academic units, the chief academic officer asks that SLOs for the new program be compared with those of similar existing programs to ascertain that the program being proposed represents a true innovation on that campus.



First, I found a 2013 article in *Change* by Ernie Pascarella and Charlie Blaich, in which they reported findings from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. That study involved first-year full-time undergraduates in nineteen colleges and universities. The students were assessed three times: upon entry in fall 2006, at the end of the first year in spring 2007, and at the end of the fourth year in 2010. The students completed several instruments that measured aspects of cognitive and

personal development. The authors found statistically significant positive associations between students' perceptions of being exposed to clear and organized instruction in their courses and retention to the second year as well as four-year gains in critical thinking.

I wrote to Charlie Blaich to ask if he had continued this line of research, and was delighted to learn that he and Kathy Wise have another article in the July–August 2016 issue of *Change* that contains even stronger evidence of the link between clear and organized instruction and positive outcomes of college! In fact, Charlie said, "... clear and organized in-

struction had the strongest impact over four years of all of the different good practices we measured in the Wabash Study" (personal correspondence, August 30, 2016). Blaich noted that "clear and organized instruction" includes "not just clear goals, but clear assignments, well-organized classes, and some other basic teaching practices." Hundreds of focus group interviews with students provide evidence that perceptions of clear and organized instruction are associated with positive effects on GPA,