From Classroom to Practice: A Partnership Approach to Assessment

J. Patrick Biddix

Assessment training, inclusive of design, methodology, and effective reporting, has become a topic of increased interest in student affairs, most recently articulated by calls for competency (Bresciani and Todd, 2010) reemphasizing existing curricular standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2002). Providing applied instruction to graduate students is an essential first step, as new professionals will be expected to plan and integrate assessment and evaluation into their work as practitioners. Further, assignments that connect students to authentic divisional assessment activities can create valuable instructional opportunities to bridge classroom-to-practice efforts. Such partnerships, carefully supported and guided by faculty, can also yield meaningful contributions to divisional assessment activities.

Creating a “seamless learning environment” (Kuh, 1996) related to assessment not only benefits student learning, but also addresses calls for data in an era characterized by decreasing personnel capacity to generate and use it due to budget cuts, deficiencies in training and professional development, increased job responsibilities, and lack of time (Green, Jones, and Aloi, 2008; Huba and Freed, 2000). Scholars (Kuh and others, 2005; Whitt and others, 2008), largely drawing on recommendations from the Boyer Commission Report (1998), have stressed the importance of creating and sustaining effective partnerships to facilitate effective learning. This chapter relates evidence from a graduate course, taught over three years in two institutional contexts and structured to bridge classroom-to-practice assessment. A detailed course description with three project examples is included.
Course Description

The assessment course described in this chapter has been taught three times by the author, each as a full semester master’s-level course meeting weekly. The first was in spring 2008, then again in fall 2009 at Valdosta State University as LEAD 7820 Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education. The most recent iteration of the course was taught in fall 2011 at the University of Tennessee as ELPS 595 Special Topics: Assessment and Evaluation in Student Affairs. The conceptual framework grounding course development and guiding continual evaluation was drawn from three strands: Whitt and others (2008) principles for academic and student affairs partnerships (all seven practices); CAS standards for graduate preparation programs (2002) related to assessment, evaluation, and research (Curriculum Policies, Part 3, Subparts 5b.2 and 5b.5); and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)’s recently adopted professional competency areas for assessment, evaluation, and research (basic, intermediate, and advanced).

Although each version of the course has been slightly revised or updated, the major components have remained consistent. The purposes of the course are to introduce students to concepts of accountability and effectiveness, to teach students to design and complete a formative assessment project utilizing appropriate research methods to address relevant outcomes, and to aid students in making evidence-based, mission-focused recommendations. The course has maintained four primary objectives: (1) explain the importance of assessment and evaluation in colleges and universities; (2) demonstrate knowledge of various assessment and evaluation methods; (3) utilize professional standards for assessment and evaluation; and (4) design, conduct, and critique an assessment project in a post-secondary setting.

The primary text is Assessment Practice in Student Affairs: An Applications Manual (Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates, 2001). Supplemental readings include journal articles and book chapters focused on assessment theory, practices, or methodology, depending on the weekly class objectives. Course assignments include a major course-long assessment project; minor weekly projects have varied. Assignments also include a standards paper, requiring students to describe a field, its standards, and how the standards might be applied or integrated into assessment activities. Each student also completes an online ethics-training course prior to data collection or analysis.

The major variation in the most recent version of the course was the integration of a weekly data analysis and review assignment. For this assignment, each student was required to bring data from a campus department to class for an instructor-led data analysis. Students were asked to request data previously unanalyzed and were required to submit
an executive summary informing the department of results after analysis. Examples included Welcome Week survey data (quantitative) and open-ended responses to Parents’ Association member questions (qualitative). In most cases, the student provided the instructor with the raw data in advance, the instructor prepared a brief data analysis lesson, and the student provided the class with the data for group or individual analysis, depending on the data. The major assignment for all iterations of the course was a semester-long project, which will be the primary focus of the remainder of this chapter.

**Project Description and Examples**

The next section of this chapter provides a description of the project and three examples of students’ work.

**Project Description.** The assessment project is a team-oriented and instructor-guided assignment. Over the course of the semester, students work with the instructor and a practitioner partner to design an assessment project, conduct research, analyze data, and effectively report results. To set up the project, the instructor meets with the senior student affairs officer (SSAO) to seek assistance with identifying campus partners prior to the start of classes. Next, the instructor attends a staff meeting to introduce the project and answer questions. After the meeting, the SSAO solicits research questions based on departmental or program needs, and then selects a set number of projects based on the number of teams available. The instructor facilitates team assignment and project selection for each group.

Because most students have little or no prior research training, the course features instruction on research skills. This limitation necessitates methodological uniformity, though the method chosen, focus groups, has been beneficial for supplementing existing departmental quantitative data. Focus groups were initially the predetermined method to address the nature of the questions partners wanted answered, which involved process, how, or why questions to assess program or department learning outcomes. This focus allows learning outcomes assessment to become an emphasis of the course, providing students with more direct experience in writing, assessing, interpreting, and evaluating outcomes-based research. It should be noted that a few teams have created and distributed surveys, but only after experiencing difficulty with recruiting participants. This will be discussed in more detail at the end of the chapter. Also, because the project fell into the category of action research/evaluation at both institutions, institutional review board (IRB) approval was not required.

The project is structured so that each team consists of four members, each assigned to a specific role. The purpose for this rigidity is to provide each student with defined responsibilities to the team. Further, this organization allows the multiphase assignment to be scaffolded so that each
student is responsible for his or her own specific section contributing to the overall construction of the project. Team selection has varied with each class: Students were permitted to self-select for the first class, were assigned to groups based on role preferences for the second class, and were arranged based on work schedules for the third. Each selection process has had its strengths and challenges. The individual roles for the team members include a project liaison, a client liaison, a focus groups liaison, and a technology liaison. Duties for each are described next.

**Project Liaison.** The project liaison acts as the team leader and is primarily charged with correspondence with the instructor. This includes scheduling regular progress reports as specified in the syllabus. Project reports include a discussion of progress to date, future plans, and current and anticipated issues.

**Client Liaison.** The client liaison serves as the primary, and sole, contact with the practitioner partner. This is to ensure that the practitioner partner receives consistent updates about the project and knows whom to contact for questions. The client liaison is instructed to contact the practitioner partner only to set up the project, to obtain approval, and to present results, unless otherwise requested.

**Focus Group Liaison.** The focus group liaison is responsible for scheduling focus groups and ensuring that data transcription and coding take place in a timely manner. The description of this position states that all team members must participate in recruiting participants, conducting focus groups, and transcribing and coding data. The focus group liaison is charged with ensuring that these activities are proceeding.

**Technology Liaison.** The technology liaison is charged with coordinating regular weekly updates about the project using social media (for example, Twitter). Each team creates an identity and is expected to post updates following all activities related to the project (for example, group meetings, focus groups, completion of tasks). The technology liaison also aids the focus group liaison in coordinating focus group participant recruitment.

Following team, role, and project selection, students begin the assignment by reviewing the eleven steps outlined in Chapter 2 of *Assessment Practice in Student Affairs: An Applications Manual* (Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates, 2001, pp. 18–23).

1. Define the problem.
2. Determine the purpose of the study.
3. Determine where to get the information needed.
4. Determine the best assessment methods.
5. Determine whom to study.
6. Determine how data will be collected.
7. Determine what instruments will be used.
8. Determine who should collect the data.
9. Determine how the data will be analyzed.
10. Determine implications of the study for policy and practice.
11. Report the results effectively.

The purpose of following this strict set of directions is to provide students with a simple and easy working guide for conducting an assessment using a commonly familiar format. Students submit the project in several sections related to the steps. The duration of the project is approximately twelve weeks, beginning in week two of the class following team selection and ending with presentations during week fourteen. Steps 1 to 6 are submitted during week four of the class, Steps 7 and 8 during week six, Step 9 during week eight, and Steps 10 and 11 during week thirteen. Students are given written and oral feedback at each step and are expected to revise previous steps in the working document before submitting the next step due. While much of the work for the project takes place outside of class, some time during each class session is devoted to instruction, meeting time, or questions related to the project.

The final paper consists of a cover page; a final version of all steps; a three-part appendix (an approval letter from the client, a copy of the interview protocol, and a copy of transcriptions); and an executive summary. Each section must include at least one paragraph, though most are considerably longer. All submissions adhere to American Psychological Association (APA) format. Students are permitted to choose any organization for final class presentations, but are told to treat classmates as an audience of practitioners to whom they are delivering a five- to ten-minute final report. The brevity of the presentation is intentional. During the most recent version of the class, students presented results at the student affairs divisional meeting, as well as at a poster session during a division-sponsored assessment workshop.

Example Projects. Assessment projects completed by students have involved a variety of campus units; some have been from departments traditionally considered student affairs, while other projects have extended into traditional support and administrative services areas. Partnerships have included student orientation and leadership development, multicultural student life, career services, student health services, the counseling center, campus recreation, freshman year experience, the access office, the graduate school, the department of higher education, admissions, and the student success center. Each year, there have been more requests than the course can accommodate. Three example projects are presented in the following pages. These have been summarized considerably to provide an overview of representative projects.

Common to all examples was the use of focus group methodology. The use of standardized instruments codeveloped with practitioner partners, the duration of data collection (four to six weeks), and the number of
focus groups (four to six) and participants (twenty-five to thirty-five) were relatively consistent study elements between groups. All student researchers completed an online ethics-training course prior to data collection, but no other requirements were requested by the respective institutional review boards. Two researchers participated in each focus group, one serving as moderator and one taking notes and operating the recording equipment. Data were transcribed and coded by the research team members, who completed the coding individually and then compared results. Variations to these common procedures are discussed in each example.

Office of Multicultural Student Life (2011). Staff of the office of multicultural student life (OMSL) had recently revised the mission statement of the office to articulate a more inclusive goal for programs and services. Part of the challenge of implementing the new mission was reconsidering activities for a broader cultural audience. Specifically, the practitioner partner wanted to know why non-underrepresented students did not utilize OMSL services. For the purposes of the project, OMSL defined underrepresented students as Caucasians and requested that the assessment be delimited to sophomore students. The majority of participants were recruited at random from in-person solicitations at the campus university center. One focus group was held with a group of sorority members recruited with the assistance of a campus adviser. Pizza and raffle items were offered as incentives. Students were interviewed about knowledge of OMSL activities and services as well as reasons for nonparticipation using a predetermined list of open-ended questions approved by the practitioner partner.

Four major themes emerged from the data, which the researchers considered alongside the research problem and mission statement to create recommendations and suggestions for implementation. The first theme was the need for a rebranding campaign to increase OMSL visibility. Students recommended intentional collaborations with the student orientation and leadership development (SOLD) office, office of study abroad, and international programs. Each had recently undergone a similar mission shift and, particularly in the case of SOLD, reached a sizable audience meeting OMSL’s target demographic. The second theme was also related to rebranding and conveyed the need for giveaways to increase interest in programs. Students recommended food, T-shirts, and smaller items such as sweatbands to help bring students to events, generate buzz, and create reminders for students. The third theme was the need for a visible advertising campaign. Students recommended that OMSL staff organize events in more visible but less traditional locations and sponsor higher-profile activities during the first weeks of the semester. Students also recommended more aggressive strategies such as a T-shirt campaign showcasing different designs and cultural representations. The fourth theme was anxiety, a sentiment expressed in nearly all focus groups as a primary reason they did not attend OMSL-sponsored events. Put simply, students perceived they would be the only visible representatives of their type of diversity. Students recommended
including “buddy” language in event marketing, encouraging students to “grab a friend and come out.”

**Graduate Assistant Orientation (2009).** Staff of the graduate school desired to know about the effectiveness of the graduate assistant orientation program. This problem was important to understand given the expansion of the graduate assistantship opportunities on campus resulting from a new institutional strategic plan and funding commitment. To ensure a broad representation of graduate assistants from different departments on campus, the researchers solicited participants by e-mail, using a listserv provided by the graduate school. Follow-up requests for participation were also sent to individuals holding positions in specific areas as a means of purposive criterion sampling. Students were interviewed about their satisfaction with the program using a predetermined list of open-ended questions developed in accordance with the goals articulated for the study. Results were organized into preorientation and orientation sections.

Strengths of preorientation included the online application process and materials checklist. The primary weakness was inconsistent communication about the orientation prior to the event; most participants did not know what documents they needed to bring, and many did not receive their orientation packet in a timely manner. To avoid delays and promote efficient and sustainable practices, the researchers recommended that materials be converted to electronic format and e-mailed to participants immediately following acceptance of an assistantship. This information should also include a checklist with all necessary items, a save-the-date or RSVP link for orientation, and any other relevant information to allow participants to make the necessary logistical arrangements to attend.

Strengths of orientation included informative presentations about the campus and community as well as seminars on available resources. Weaknesses were largely logistical, having to do with miscommunication about when and where sessions were to take place and some confusion about days or times. Overall, there was a perceived lack of organization at the orientation that contributed to anxiety among participants stemming from unnecessary information, excessive waiting for misplaced paperwork, and lack of preparation for relevant paperwork. Researchers recommended sending copies of this paperwork in a preorientation packet to promote efficiency. Another logistical weakness was the position of the informational tables, which had the potential to offer additional valuable resources for students; however, the tables were placed out of traffic patterns, they contained little information, or participants were not provided with enough time between sessions to stop at the tables. Researchers recommended repositioning the tables and providing longer breaks or an informational fair. Finally, researchers identified a need for job-specific seminars to the extent possible, and recommended that the graduate school seek intentional partners to match trainings to primary job responsibilities (for example, research, teaching, administrative).
Student Success Center (2008). The Student Success Center (SSC) was established in 2006 and charged with a mission to promote academic success by fostering effective peer/faculty/staff interactions leading to active learning and positive attitudes toward academic life. The scope of SSC programs and activities included academic advising, peer tutoring in core classes, campus job information, and counseling referrals. As they embarked on their first strategic plan, staff members of the SSC desired to understand tutoring services as experienced by student participants. A staff member worked with the client liaison to generate an e-mail pool of potential participants balanced by gender, age, race/ethnicity, academic major, class standing, traditional and nontraditional enrollment, and the frequency of the student’s use of SSC tutoring services. The researchers developed an interview protocol endorsed by the practitioner partner, which included an overall framing question (“Tell me about your experience with tutoring at the SSC”) and follow-up questions with additional probes.

Overall, participants lauded the patience and help provided by tutors, particularly their ability to provide alternative ways to complete course work. Students insisted that the hours of operation were satisfactory, and were content with present practices for obtaining tutoring services. Each of these sentiments was independently consistent among all groups interviewed. After reporting these findings as part of the executive summary, the research team focused on areas of concern, which included the following: hours of operation during finals, tutor matching, facility concerns (noise level and layout), and the need for location and promotional service marketing. Each area of concern included at least one recommendation and idea for implementation. For example, to address the need for extended hours, researchers suggested utilizing adjunct instructors and implementing a recognition process for their volunteer work.

At the time of the study, the SSC was located in an auxiliary lobby of a residence hall. During data analysis, the learning environment emerged as a major concern for students. The researchers recommended working with campus facilities to develop a solution for soundproofing a wall that seemed to be the primary source for a problematic noise level. Also, students recommended that SSC staff reconsider space designation to relocate study and work spaces to improve traffic patterns that contributed to interruptions. This solution was more cost-effective than rebuilding the offending wall, and researchers walked the space with students and staff to provide direct suggestions on space realignment.

Evaluation and Revisions

In addition to course evaluations, the instructor requests additional feedback on the course from students and practitioner partners and maintains a teaching journal. This “assessment assessment” includes questions about course readings, in-class time, projects, and partnerships. A major revision
to the course resulting from student feedback has been the implementation of the weekly data analysis and review assignments, which are intended to expose students to research problems in other campus departments, provide additional experience in data analysis (qualitative and quantitative), and give additional experience with data reporting formats. In addition, a two-class session sequence was created to provide additional guided instruction on qualitatively inquiry, formulating research questions, and focus group practice.

A major revision following feedback from practitioner partners was a midproject instructor check-in in addition to the final project evaluation. This was added after the second iteration of the course. Instructor self-reflections on course activities and assignments have led to a refocus of course time from the initial lesson plans. Specifically, in-class discussions for the first half of class are focused more broadly on assessment practice at different levels to supplement the department-focused efforts students complete as part of the project and weekly reviews. Readings and guest speakers were added to provide insight on efforts at departmental-, institutional-, and professional-level activities. Updates to reading assignments have resulted from the recent surge in publications on assessment activities in the field, and focus on utilizing professional standards, assessment issues, and outcomes-based assessment.

Evaluated holistically, student assessment, practitioner partner feedback, instructor reflection, and teaching experience with the course have led to several major considerations for implementing a similar course. This chapter closes with a brief discussion of each.

Considerations for Implementation

This section of the chapter provides considerations for implementation derived from instructor experience teaching the course as well as student and departmental partner feedback.

Defining Partnerships. The success of the assessment course documented in this chapter is critically dependent on partnerships. Practitioner partners trust that the projects will be conducted ethically and that the student researchers will follow the mutually agreed project goals. Student researchers trust that practitioner partners will make time for scheduled meetings, will provide the necessary background materials, and will follow through on commitments for assistance such as participation incentives. Holding these partnerships together is the central importance of a partnership between the instructor and the SSAO. The involvement and support of divisional leaders are among the first and most consistent recommendations for successful practice in the literature (Green, Jones, and Aloi, 2008; Huba and Freed, 2000; Maki, 2004).

It is vital for the instructor and senior staff to negotiate and agree on the parameters of the project before it begins. This helps to alleviate reserva-
tions practitioner partners may have for participating in the project. Given that assessment “always occurs in a political context” (Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates, 2001, p. 7), having the support of senior staff is critical. Allowing the SSAO to solicit and make the final choices about the potential projects helps keep prioritization at the supervisory level. The SSAO then becomes an advocate for the project, which contributes to a positive “culture of assessment” (Seagraves and Dean, 2010) among current staff and future practitioners who see senior staff commitment to such efforts.

Clarifying Roles. Related to defining partnerships is the importance of clearly defining roles. The instructor should be responsible for initiating and fostering partnerships among all stakeholders: instructor/student, instructor/SSAO, instructor/practitioner partner, and student/practitioner partner. He or she serves as the classroom educator, partnership facilitator, projects coordinator, and issue adjudicator (between students within teams and team members and practitioner partners). Above all, the instructor must maintain consistent, available lines of communicate with all stakeholders. Student roles are defined by the project assignment, but teaching students the value of working collaboratively is also important to accomplish assessment work. Roles are simply a means to add structure to the major activities. The entire team is responsible for the conduct and presentation of the final project, and it is crucial that members learn the value of individual and collective effort as a means of achieving a shared goal.

The practitioner partners are required to meet with students three times. Despite this expectation, there may be significantly more contact between the client liaison and the partner during the course of the project—especially when the partner has agreed to provide some form of help (for example, multiple drafts of an instrument, room space for interviews, incentives for participation such as pizza). The mutual benefit of assessment results is not devoid of commitment from practitioner partners, so it is important for partners to follow through with pledges made regarding the project as well as to feel comfortable contacting the instructor with any issues. Some of the most valuable project feedback leading to process revisions has come from candid communication between the instructor and practitioner partners.

In addition to soliciting and selecting projects on behalf of the instructor, the SSAO should facilitate opportunities for the instructor or students to visit divisional meetings. The instructor typically makes a preclass visit to a divisional meeting to discuss the project, makes a midterm project update, and attends a final meeting with students to present results publicly.

Recognizing Opportunities. Some of the most valuable learning experiences during the course have resulted from incorporating unanticipated opportunities. For example, during one year the course was offered, the institution was undergoing a strategic planning process. As a
result, course content was slightly refocused on this process (for example, readings on planning were incorporated along with guest experts). Consequently, projects were aligned with strategic goals, and students saw the results of their efforts immediately contribute to or reshape institutional efforts. Another year, the partnering division was focused on understanding an underutilization of services by certain demographics, as revealed by recent usage data. The SSAO solicited research questions related to this problem, and all student projects were tied to this focus. The projects selected saved practitioner partners considerable time in answering the “why” question revealed by the usage data.

While focus group methodology has been the primary research design, a few groups have employed different methodologies for data collection, largely arising from circumstance. In one case, a practitioner partner had recently conducted focus groups and desired that a survey instrument be derived from responses, distributed to a wider audience, and analyzed. In a related case, a practitioner partner expressed the need for a survey instrument as a final product from a focus group study. Finally, another practitioner partner requested that a previous study on a different population be replicated and the results compared. To accommodate this shift, the instructor worked individually with the groups by vetting supportive resources for methodology, offering optional workshops on quantitative analysis, and reviewing the project steps more often.

Much like research, not all aspects go as designed. Departure from the plan can be a teaching and learning opportunity if both the instructor and the students are amenable to change. Communication is critical. If an aspect of the project needs to shift, it is important that all stakeholders are aware of the change, agree to it, and can support it. For example, an opportunity that arose in the last project was a public presentation. In addition to the final written report, the SSAO invited students to present their findings at the semester-end departmental meeting. This venue offered students a greater sense of the overall value of their work, gave them experience in presenting findings publicly in an appropriate format, and showed them the importance of transparency in research. As a result, the final class, typically consisting of presentations, was canceled and students made their presentations in a real setting.

**Accepting Challenges.** The project and other aspects of the course related to assessment design, data collection, and analysis have not been without challenges. A primary one has been project scaling. Given that many students in the course are using research techniques for the first time, the course has to quickly survey the basics of methodology and continue blending the theory and conduct of assessment work throughout the course and concurrent with the project. Given that some students are initially more skilled or interested in using research techniques than others are, scaling the instruction can be challenging.
A related and significant challenge is fitting a beginning-to-end project into a single semester averaging fourteen weeks. Currently, this challenge necessitated a realignment of in-class time so that only the first hour can be devoted to a discussion of readings. The remaining two hours per week of face time are spent in a workshop format, including sessions on conducting and running focus groups as well as analyzing data. This method has helped to alleviate some of the training-related challenges, but potentially at the cost of deeper philosophical discussion on the need for and nature of assessment.

A project-related challenge has been the logistical difficulty of some projects, partially arising from the assessment project. For example, the previously noted opportunity of aligning all projects with a need to understand the underutilization of services led to a considerable challenge. The project focus involved soliciting options from students about services they did not use and most departments defined the underutilizing population strictly (for example, Black sophomore males). Students expressed difficulty recruiting from some populations because, as one student put it, “I feel like in asking people to participate, I am profiling.” Members of another group feared that they would not be able to interview effectively because, as one student put it, “I don’t look like them.” These were unanticipated but welcome challenges that led to larger class learning opportunities about research conduct, responsibility, and reflexivity.

Concluding Thoughts

Based on student, staff, and instructor reflection, the chief benefit of the assessment course is reciprocity. Students gain a foundational assessment skill set they can build upon, experiential knowledge about other departments and campus programs, and experience working with campus partners outside of their primary areas of responsibility. As a result, students frequently have been offered internships with practitioner partners following the course or have been sought for other assessment-based internships across campus. Practitioner partners most frequently cite three valuable gains: evidence-based recommendations, valued student interns, and time. The latter is an extremely valuable commodity for practitioner partners, who note that the assessment projects save them time by yielding needed answers to questions without the need to dedicate staff or resources to the task. This win-win approach has been a hallmark of the course.

Successful implementation of the course is critically dependent on establishing and maintaining partnerships characteristic of mutual trust among the instructor, students, and the division of student affairs. This commitment can result in a seamless learning environment blending classroom instruction with practical application in an area of student affairs practice in need of effectively trained graduates.
References


J. PATRICK BIDDIX is associate professor of higher education, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.