Before Starting an Assessment Project

Thank you for joining the Student Life Studies assessment podcast. Our goal is to educate people about assessment resources and topics, so they can more easily incorporate assessment into their daily lives. Feel free to contact Student Life Studies by calling 979-862-5624, emailing sls@tamu.edu, or come by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Let's get on with today's podcast.

Lots of folks want to jump right in developing an assessment instrument, but they may not have thought through some of the big picture before getting to the details. To have a more successful assessment project, you need to do some reflection and planning. I'm going to talk about a number of different questions you need to answer before beginning a project.

The first question to ask yourself is: What do I really *need* to know? This is very different than what you *want* to know and what might be *interesting* to know. This question really helps you focus your assessment to something meaningful and manageable. You might also find that what you need to know has already been collected by someone else, so another assessment is not necessary. When you get to the actual question development stage, this will also help you determine each individual question to be included, because a shorter, focused assessment is better than a long, rambling one.

Next, you can ask yourself: Who has the information I need? This determines your audience and potential sample size. If you are looking at satisfaction with your services, then it is helpful to know who has used your services, rather than sending out a blanket survey to a lot of random people who may not have used your services. Alternatively, if you want to know why people have not used your services, then you have to also know who they are. If you know your population and your users, you probably can determine your non-users. If you are sending out a survey for feedback about a campus event that happens in the spring, you may want to eliminate first year students who have not been on campus long enough to experience it. Focus on your audience that can give you the information you need.

Once you have a strong purpose and know your audience, you can to ask yourself: When do I need to collect data and use the information? For some projects, time is not a constraint, but it can also impact the complexity of your project, the methods you use, and the use of results. You may want to collect information from participants immediately after a program, so you can use that feedback in planning the next program. If you want to get feedback from students, you want to pay attention to the academic calendar, so you are not trying to collect data when students are focused on other things or are not on campus. You need to also think about when decisions are being made where your data may be influential. If you need funding for a program, you will want to have supporting information in the hands of the people who make budget decisions before the deadlines. I find it helpful to look at a calendar and plan backwards to ensure each step is accomplished to get you to your end goal on time.

When you know your timeframe, ask: In what ways can I and should I gather data? There are many data collection methods from surveys, to focus groups, interviews, rubrics, one-minute papers, and more. Data can be quantitative, represented with numbers and statistical analysis; qualitative, which uses words and images as data; or mixed-methods where both quantitative data and qualitative data are collected and used to address a particular assessment purpose. You might think it will be really quick and easy to create a survey, but you still have to consider devising good questions, determining your sample, and thinking about analysis. Alternatively, you might think it will be easy and interesting to get a group of people together to do a focus group. Once again, you still have to create good questions, invite people, reserve appropriate space, and think about recording and analysis. Your data gathering decisions are based on what you really need to know, how long you have to gather and analyze data, and what type of information the decision makers like when they make those decisions.

That leads to the next question to ask: Who wants the information I am collecting? Just you? That’s probably not the case, although you might not have thought beyond that. There are a myriad of stakeholders who might be interested in what you are doing: your supervisor, the department head, the

Vice President for Student Affairs, parents, students, potential students, faculty, legislators, etc. Each group may have a different motivation and knowledge level about your project. For example, students may want to know what action you are taking based on the results, while faculty may be more concerned about your methodology and data analysis. Parents may want to know the benefits of their student participating, especially if it costs money. The Vice President might want to know how the program contributes to student retention. Paying attention to your stakeholders helps you determine what data you collect, how you collect it, and how you share it.

That leads to the next reflective question: How am I going to share the results? You can think of that in a couple of ways. There are lots of options ranging from a summary report, to an infographic, webpage, power point presentation, email, etc. using tables, charts, graphics, and words to express your results. You may do more than one of these based on the needs of your stakeholders. You want to be sure that you are providing accurate and clear interpretation of your results. Keeping the results a secret doesn’t encourage transparency and commitment for people to participate in the assessment process.

A related question is: What if the results are not positive? Obviously, before you collect data, you do not know what the actual results are, but you need to be prepared for some negative feedback and know your tentative plan to address it. While you may not be shouting the negative results from the rooftops, you can use that to show that you are responsive to your constituents and spend your time focusing on how to address the issues, rather than the issues themselves. I tell people all the time that there are no negative results, there is only more information that you can use to improve.

Although you don’t have the results yet, you need to ask yourself: How am I going to use the results? Honestly, if you have no intention of using the results in some way, I would discourage you from doing assessment. That would be a waste of time for a lot of people. To not fall into that trap, before you start the project, think about what your action will be based on the potential results. What are you committed to doing? Will you be changing in the programs or services you offer, the hours you operate, the facilities you have, etc.? If you are not committed to making changes, at least considering options, or you do not have control over making changes, you might rethink your assessment.

In order to make changes and undertake a quality assessment project, ask yourself: What resources do I have or need? This could be in the assessment process in terms of data collection and data analysis resources, or it could be in the use of results. If you want to make an improvement, do you need funding, human resources, or other resources? You might include those decision makers in the assessment process, so they are not surprised when you ask for additional resources.

The last couple of questions are about your environment. You need to ask: What is in my control? If you do not have control to change something, then I would not set up your respondents' expectations that you can change it. For example, if you work in Residence Life, and ask students about the equipment and the hours of the Rec Center, can you influence Rec Center's decisions? And, is Rec Sports supportive of you asking those questions?

Finally, you have to think about the campus, division, and departmental politics. What are the political considerations involved in the project and results? Who wants this project done? Who needs to know this assessment is happening? Who is going to be impacted by the results? What are the reputational implications, especially if the results may appear negative or there is controversy? What discussions are already occurring on your topic of interest? Who are the decision makers and their willingness to act?

That's a lot to think about before getting started with an assessment project. But, the more you think ahead, the smoother the project will go. Student Life Studies is always here to help you through it.

Thanks for listening to today's podcast. Please let us know if this was helpful or if you have additional questions. You can contact us by calling 979-862-5624, emailing sls@tamu.edu, or come by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Check out our website at studentlifestudies.tamu.edu for more resources and information. We hope to hear from you.