

Ethics in Assessment

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We probably don't talk enough about ethics in assessment. It's easy to assume that we all have the same ethical standards and would always do the right thing when faced with a dilemma. Fortunately, we do have some standards to guide our actions and decisions. I'll touch on those, then talk about some practical applications.

In 1985, Kitchener proposed five ethical principles that should guide our work. They are: respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefitting others, being just, and being faithful. Without going through each one of those principles, the gist is that we should be respecting individuals throughout the process and creating a process that is fair, equitable, and for the benefit of others. Within the student affairs profession specifically, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, NASPA, and ACPA have espoused ethical standards. In the research field, federally mandated institutional review boards on college campuses are in place to monitor research endeavors to be sure projects impose as little risk as possible and treat participants fairly. If you have not read the Belmont Report, I suggest that you do that for a broader perspective on research ethics.

Ethical standards come into play before you even collect data. I hope that you enter into an assessment project with an open mind, rather than a set agenda of what results you will find. As you develop questions, they should be unbiased and clear. As you think about your participants, be sure that you are including people who can give you all kinds of feedback, not just what you want to hear. When you are collecting data, you want to be clear with your participants about the level of confidentiality they can expect. When you get to the data analysis step, you want to be sure that you are using correct

methodology and are not over or understating the meaning of the results. You do not want to overstretch the interpretation of your results, for example, by implying causation when there might only be correlation. When you report your findings, you also want to be fair and accurate to not mislead your stakeholders. As you get to the step of using data in decision-making and change, be sure that you think broadly about the impact decisions may have on particular groups of people that you may not have initially thought about.

That leads me to a couple of thoughts about the relationship between you and your participants. There is probably a power differential between you and the people you are asking to participate. For example, it may be a fairly close relationship if you advise or supervise the students who you want to participate in a focus group. But, it could be fairly distant if you are asking a random sample of students to take an electronic survey—you may not know any of them, and they may or may not know who you are. It is your responsibility to minimize any real or perceived coercion for participation. In addition, you need to be culturally competent, especially if you are doing assessment around diversity, climate, or social justice. Understanding how different groups perceive assessment, as well as their comfort level providing feedback is important. There is not always a sense of trust about assessment being done, and some people prefer and value different methods of communication. Understanding and articulating your own identity in relation to the topic, as well as your participants, will make the process smoother from the beginning.

How do you make sure that you stay on the ethical path throughout the process? One of the best ways is to have multiple people working on a project. You come to a project with your own identity, perspective, and knowledge. Because you cannot think of everything all the time, having several minds contributing to the process will help to bring ethical questions to the forefront. There might be people who are experts on the topic, on your audience, or in the methodology you choose. You might realize there was implicit bias in your questions or your participant list, but you might also see broader

ramifications of asking particular questions or making a particular decision. Being transparent about the process builds trust and confidence with your participants and stakeholders. When you do come across a sticky situation, be sure to consult your supervisor, knowledgeable peers, or even legal counsel.

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