

September 2020—The Importance of Disaggregating Data

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 coming by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Let's get on with the podcast.

How much thought have you given to the need to dig a little deeper into the data that you have to better understand the experiences of groups you serve? It may not be something that comes to mind quickly, but it is still important. The process of disaggregating data usually takes on quantitative data...think responses to a survey question that has a set scale, maybe a strongly agree to strongly disagree scale. Let's take a quick example. When you look at overall results from an assessment that you did for a program you oversee, you find that most respondents agree with most questions, although there are a number who respond more on the negative side. If you stop there, you might think that you are doing pretty well, and you can't please all the people all the time. You move on to the next project and don't spend time interpreting your results and making changes. Now, let's say you decide to look a little more closely at your results. When you do additional data analysis, which doesn't have to be tremendously difficult, you find that men and women had a very different experience in your program. Women indicated more negative responses about their experiences. Hmm. The story changes a little bit. You might not be doing as well as you thought. After reviewing the program, you realize that the speaker made several sexist remarks that could have influenced how women answered the survey. With that information, you can now make decisions about changing your program or addressing any issues in the organization. Although that example used the demographic of sex, it could be any demographic or characteristic of a group, such as race/ethnicity, academic classification, first generation, sexual orientation, etc. When you dig a little deeper, you get new insights about how your audience feels about what you do.

One of the challenges of this process is being able to collect the demographic information. If you are using Student Life Studies and have student ID numbers, we can get those demographics for you and do the analysis. If you are doing an anonymous survey, you would need to ask students to provide the demographics you are interested in. To be sure you are using inclusive language, consult with the staff in Student Life Studies. At the end of a project, another challenge may be actually using the data to make change and being committed to providing a positive experience for all of your customers. It may take some discussion, changes in policies or processes, and long-term efforts to make change.

For staff who work in student affairs and higher education, we have a role in advocating for our students and addressing inequity in higher education. To do that, we need to know about the students we serve and don't serve, what their experiences are, and how we can create more equitable experiences.

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 coming 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.