

QUESTION #10: HOW DO I ASSESS WHAT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES ARE NEEDED FOR OUR STUDENTS?

A conversation with Gene Kerstiens

First of all, needs assessment is not so much a matter of selecting what programs and services are needed but rather where they will be offered, who will administer them, and how much effort should be afforded to budget, space, personnel, and equipment. Let me explain with an example. Tutoring will certainly be incorporated as one component of your program because its availability is a normal ex-

pectation on virtually all campuses. But the kind and amount of tutoring that is offered is the question that needs to be answered. And to assess this need and others, you should consult those most directly involved in student learning; for instance, students, faculty, counselors, and, of course, administrative officers and their selected staffs.

Are you suggesting that assessment will have political and organizational implications?

You bet! Although some players will want more voice than others, all must have their fingerprints appearing somewhere on the de-

cision-making. Not every constituent may want to attend the party, but everyone will expect an invitation.

Then let's start with students. How might we get their input?

For starters, you might post a solicitation in the school newspaper to get random opinions. A more expedient and comprehensive

method would be to administer paper-and-pencil surveys to a broad sample of students functioning at all levels of performance. Include

those who had dropped classes and/or have departed from the institution. Commercially prepared instruments like the *College Student Needs Assessment Survey* could be employed. But this method is not preferred. Much more revealing, authentic, and detailed results yield from personally interviewing this same popu-

lation. This is accomplished on a one-to-one basis or, more efficiently, in focus groups where the group dynamic elicits more spontaneous, spirited responses and prompts open discussion of learning problems students encounter in certain disciplines or classes.

That seems straightforward enough. But I'm more concerned about faculty input. Should I start by surveying the faculty senate?

You might want to advise and consult the faculty senate about your plans, especially if this body will endorse your efforts. But the interviews themselves might be more profitably conducted through academic departments or divisions. Consult first of all with deans or department heads to test the disciplinary climate. They may choose to name interested survey candidates among their faculty who could be interviewed personally. Also, you might ask to have some time during a division or department faculty meeting to discuss spe-

cific student learning problems of people who attend their classes. Incidentally, during these encounters you have an opportunity to identify faculty members whose enthusiasm would suggest their willingness to serve later on an advisory committee for the LAC when the center becomes operational. But don't be surprised if some disciplines show little interest in this process. You will, however, most likely encounter active interest among English, math, and science faculty.

Now, what about counselors? Should I use the same strategies on them?

Again, the dean of counseling services might be your best first contact to discuss strategy. But you will probably find that counselors prefer to interact one-on-one since they typically function in a more intimate, confidential setting. And the prompts used to elicit their responses could be adjusted to their style of operation. Doubtless, this group will have a

different perspective on student needs involving emotional rather than intellectual obstacles to learning. Since they are not grade-givers and therefore not directly associated with instructional outcomes, what they hear from students will be different from and complementary to the picture that needs assessment is painting.

OK, speaking of the big picture, how will administrative personnel be put to use to fill out the assessment picture, which, apparently, is assuming the dimensions of a mural?

That's an incisive question—and observation! First of all, these information-driven players will be eager to learn the results of your assessment. Therefore, they will be most helpful as you gather data. Especially if a president, vice president, or academic dean refers you to a certain agency, the doors of that office will open more willingly to help you. For instance, your director of institutional research will have valuable enrollment, dropout, grade,

testing, and other data and analyses, sometimes not otherwise shared or noticed. To investigate prudent hardware, software, and networking applications, the advice from the person in charge of campus technical systems can be priceless. The director of buildings and grounds can point out limitations and opportunities concerning space and location for the center. Identifying these and other needs can contribute to the assessment process.

Does that complete final touches to the needs assessment picture?

Hardly! Assessing needs is comparatively simple. Prioritizing programs and services included in your offerings will be more arduous. And as you develop and maintain the learning assistance center, hard choices are inevitable. Here is where you will encounter the realities of academic turf, disciplinary rivalries, bud-

get, space allocations, and the shifting faculty and student sentiments toward instructional delivery. You may be the “new kid” on the academic block, so you'll be seeking accommodation from those well ensconced and sometimes recognized as sacred. Your negotiating talents will be tested. Good luck!

ADDITIONAL READINGS

Castelli, C., & De Johnson. (1984). Learning center assessment: Managing for change in the 80's. In D. R. Fleming (Ed.), *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 17, 30-42.

Clowes, D. (1981). Evaluation methodologies for learning assistance programs. In C. Walkever (Ed.), *Assessment of learning assistance services. New directions for college learning assistance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 17-32.

Miller, C., Dean, J. F., & McKinley, D. L. (1990). Learning approaches and motives: Male and female differences and implications for learning assistance programs. *The Journal of College Student Development*, 31, 147-154.

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