Student Affairs Assessment Priorities and Focus During (and After) COVID-19: Suggestions and Tips

Higher Education has shifted dramatically in the last month with most campuses delivering learning and student services to students at a distance and staff and faculty working remotely. For student affairs practitioners, the immediate focus has rightfully been on the safety and well-being of students. In a recent webinar (hyperlink to recording), Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) leadership and associate vice president for strategy at Campus Labs, Dr. Anne E. Lundquist, discussed the focus and priorities for student affairs assessment professionals as well. Below are key take-aways, as well as tips and advice.

The Current Role of Student Affairs Assessment

“Assessment is professional reflection.” —Judd Harbin, University of Nevada–Las Vegas

“Assessment professionals are as important as ever in higher education. Assessment is when one takes a deeper look into an outcome to discern areas of weakness in order to implement continual improvements to the activities/programs/services offered to students. The need for assessment and data tracking still exists. The way one tracks data will shift as well as the focus of assessment plans.” —Melissa Brown, University of Tennessee

“I am serving as a consultant with an assessment mindset in a virtual learning and engagement environment.” —Dayna Weintraub, Rutgers University

“Assessment and Data collection is now more focused on identifying the current needs of our students and identifying best ways to support them to continue to thrive and be engaged. We are more than ever committed to our community well-being.” —Rihab Saadahine, Rowan University

“Remember what’s not changed: our mission, values, and goals to best serve students. So, while our approach may look different and we may not have all the same questions needing answered as when we started the year, we still have core questions to answer with respect to how student experience matches with our expectations—which is what assessment is all about.” —Joe Levy, National Louis University
Focus/Activity Shifts

→ Supporting colleagues in the shift to a virtual environment—beyond the assessment role
→ Collaboration with academic affairs, enrollment management, institutional effectiveness, other campus partners to consolidate efforts, share data, send fewer emails (and fewer surveys)
→ Guiding departments in their relevant assessment projects (realignment)
→ Shifting to more of a hands-on supportive role in project managing assessment activity, perhaps more than before given added responsibilities/changes areas are experiencing
→ Revising end of year/annual planning—extending deadlines, asking about COVID-19 impact
→ Using the “assessment lens” to support financial, revenue loss, and end-of-semester, summer, fall institutional and divisional planning
→ Gathering/analyzing data for accreditation

Priorities

→ Student well-being—any related data
→ Student involvement and engagement in a virtual environment
→ Data on/for marginalized populations
→ Assessment basics:
  o What do we hope students will learn? (learning outcomes)
  o How will we know they’re learning? (assessment plan)
  o Where do we fall short and what can we do about it? (interpreting and acting on results)
→ Self-care

“Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions people care about.” —Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning, 1992
Relevant Methods and Data Collection

→ Methods that explore, but don’t exploit the current student experience (Drew Thiemann, Bellarmine University)
→ Methods answering questions/meeting data needs (i.e., “simple” methods like reflections ok)
→ Leverage existing data
→ Formative assessment during online events and activities; data collection on the topic at hand and also embedding questions to gauge satisfaction and well-being
→ Student participation in online events
→ Qualitative data that provides a lens into the student’s lived experience
→ Textual analysis (analyzing article comments, chats in platforms)
→ Web platform meeting interviews
→ Add student experience questions to end of year course evaluations
→ Needs assessments
→ Evaluate business continuity plans and how we are supporting students, staff, and stakeholders to see what we can learn to improve for ongoing remote services if necessary

Tips and Advice

→ Frame assessment around “critical questions”: what the institution needs to know to understand the student experience and plan for the current time period and the future
→ Be clear on how you will use the data—if it isn’t actionable, don’t collect it right now
→ Assessment approaches don’t need to be complex—what do we need to know and what is the simplest approach?
→ Involve more people in assessment – may be people in departments that want to develop their skills and/or can assist and learn from assessment projects
→ Reach out to peers in similar roles: people are being really creative and willing to share
→ Be flexible but keep the expectation of reporting
→ Devote some “found time” to revising assessment and planning priorities for next year.
→ Partner with departments, academic affairs, enrollment: how can you collaborate?
→ Simplify and streamline data collection efforts.
→ Close the loop: share assessment results with participants, other colleagues, and those who can take action
→ Be patient, understanding, and extend grace to everyone (including yourself!)
Thanks to our assessment experts who contributed these ideas:

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Daniel Doerr, University of Connecticut
Kellie M. Dixon, Ph.D., North Carolina A&T University
Judd Harbin, Ph.D, University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Ciji Heiser, Western Michigan University
Nick Kehrwald, J.D., University of Kentucky
Joe Levy, Ed.D., National Louis University
Anne E. Lundquist, Ph.D., Campus Labs
Dayna Weintrab, Ph.D, Rutgers University