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A Campus Model for Student Development: Program Review and Prioritization

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Abstract

The current financial climate for higher education is one of constrained and declining resources, causing many institutions to turn towards a retrenchment strategy that often includes reducing expenses and, in more extreme cases, eliminating programs. A review of existing literature reveals few models colleges can utilize in conducting comprehensive analyses of programs to determine how to proceed with these cost cutting measures. Additionally, the authors could not find any existing approaches focused on student development or other non-academic programs. In this article, the authors provide a review of relevant literature, a review of the Dickeson Model (2010), and build the case for an assessment-based program review and prioritization model designed to specifically address the nuanced needs of student development programs. This model is presented in a three-step process that should enable student development professionals to assess their programs and make prioritization decisions within a framework pertaining to student development professional standards as well as aligning with individual institutional contexts.

Introduction

The financial forecast for higher education is at best murky and, at worst, a potentially cataclysmic storm that will result in an increasingly difficult time for many colleges and universities. Reductions in state assistance, increased demands for compliance with federal regulations, changing student demographics, the economic downturn in 2008 and resulting lag in recovery, and the growing sense of mistrust that higher education is not successfully producing expected results are all factors contributing to this current state. The demands for accountability and the need to provide proof that the college experience is worth the cost have caused many institutions to critically examine their programs with the idea of creating more sustainable models streamlined to meet the economic demands. This climate is forcing colleges and universities to react in an unprecedented fashion, and many educational forecasts call for a reshaping of higher education, which may result in the closure of many existing institutions.

One approach in responding to this environment has been the program prioritization review model as introduced by Dickeson (2010). The Dickeson model calls for a systematic and comprehensive review of an institution's programs with the goal of identifying areas that need to be strengthened and areas that are under-performing, thereby ascertaining areas in need of reduction so resources can be funneled to higher performing programs. The Dickeson model, as well as other assessment approaches (e.g., Banta's (1997) Best Practices approach, Barham and Scott's (2006) Five-Step Comprehensive Model), provides useful theoretical frameworks for the development of a systematic approach to student development program review, such as the University of Texas at Arlington approach (Moxley, 1999). However, to date no one has offered a model that accounts for the unique context for this endeavor from the perspective of student development work in the Christian higher education setting. This article will propose a model developed at one Christian university designed to provide a systematic review and prioritization of student development programs. Before discussing this program, the authors provide a brief literature review that outlines the theoretical framework used to develop the model.

Literature Review

Student affairs has continually been a focal point in higher education. While many student development theories have been established through research, colleges and universities have struggled to assess and evaluate applications of the implications. Roberts and Banta (2011) highlight this dichotomy stating, ". . . the interplay of theory and practice is a necessity in delivering on a commitment to student development" (p. 54). A need exists for a comprehensive assessment model that can encompass and apply to all areas of student affairs (Barham & Scott, 2006).

Through assessment and evaluation, student affairs can "…shape the educational and interpersonal experiences and setting of their campus in ways that will promote learning and achievement of the institution's educational goals and to induce students to become involved in those activities…" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 648). The already-developed assessment models are cyclical, but perpetually changing as new policies and practices are implemented all over the country (Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, & Dean, 2012). In order to better inform an assessment model to be applied to Christian higher education, one must examine the need for a best-practice model, themes in assessment, and the promotions of and barriers to student affairs' assessment.

Need for Best-Practice Assessment Model

While assessment in student affairs has received attention in the last decade, a consistent best-practice student affairs or student development assessment standard for all universities to model has yet to be developed. Moreover, the question still remains if a best-practices model is warranted due to institutional differences (i.e., size, student demographics, values) and the nature of student affairs being a continuously evolving department (Shutt et al., 2012). Shutt and colleagues (2012) state,

> It is critical to establish a process to ensure the efficacy of programs and services. This focus on accountability gives other professionals the means to evaluate whether such practices might be a fit for their campus…[and] provides professionals with the justification for resources to support programming. (p. 68)

Thus, accountability and improvement go hand-in-hand. However, institutions and departments must develop a means of being able to provide evidence that they have achieved their objectives (Shutt et al., 2012).

Themes in Assessment

Institutions, specifically student affairs departments, must be able to provide evidence that programming is reflective of and contributing to aiding students and their needs. In order to do so, planning clear, measurable goals and objectives must be set and used in evaluation (Banta, 1997; Bresciani, 2010; Hugenberg, 1997; Roberts & Banta, 2011; Shutt et al., 2012). All stakeholders must be involved in this process, as assessment is a responsibility of all who are involved (Roberts & Banta, 2011). Assessments can take various forms, but "two of the more common forms include program evaluation and outcomes assessment" (Shutt et al., 2012, p. 70). A program evaluation examines the design of the program and if it has achieved its intended purpose or goal. Outcome assessments analyze the results as seen in the students, specifically what they have learned (Shutt et al., 2012). It is important that the process and results of these assessments be communicated to stakeholders in order to achieve maximum success (Roberts & Banta, 2011).

Various institutional assessment types exist and can be implemented for evaluative purposes. Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2010) list the following outcome-based assessment types: benchmarking, quantitative, qualitative, interviews, observations, and documents. By utilizing more than one type of tool—triangulation—the assessment process gains validity (Bresciani et al., 2010).

In her work, Banta (1997) discusses ten principles for best practice in assessment. These principles, along with other researcher's principles, include concepts about encompassing university values and goals, having clear objectives and standards, understanding assessment as a continuous process, emphasizing cross-departmental collaboration, using assessment to enact change, and facilitating a supportive campus community (Banta, 1997; Hugenberg, 1997; Kuh, Gonyea, & Rodriguez, 2002; Roberts & Banta, 2011). In addition to these principles, Bresciani (2010) includes examining existing trend data to seek successful patterns, prioritizing assessment concerns, and implementing an outcomes-based assessment plan.

Additionally, Kuh and colleagues (2002) studied and compared several different colleges' and universities' assessment protocols. In examining these assessments, the researchers charted each institution's student development theory assessed, the assessment instrument used, the results and use of the assessment, and the changes made to policy and practice within student development (Kuh et al., 2002).

Thus, when reviewing themes across research regarding assessment practices, no clear-cut methodology has been achieved. However, some models have been developed to address assessment practices.

Barham & Scott's Modell

Barham and Scott (2006) argue that an assessment model must be the following: comprehensive (i.e., inclusive of the three philosophies of student development—service, development, and learning), intentional and systematic, and replicable (p. 212). This five-step model is built on a foundation of the university's mission and goals and includes: (1) selecting a philosophical area to address, (2) creating accountable objectives, (3) setting accountable outcomes, (4) assessment, and (5) evaluation (Barham & Scott, 2006, p. 214-216). Building on the mission and goals of the university and department, one student development philosophy integrates itself as the focal point for the development of objectives in this assessment model. Once objectives have been established for the specific philosophy, the department can move toward creating a list of desired outcomes and work to purposefully develop programs that would tackle those objectives and outcomes. By creating specific objectives and outcomes, assessment becomes easier. Therefore, through different forums and tools, the assessment data can be gathered and evaluated (Barham & Scott, 2006).

University of Texas at Arlington's Modell

Due to "demands for accountability, the need to make decisions on the basis of facts, the desire maximally to respond to students' needs and preferences, and a keen interest in wisely using the divisions' financial resources and personnel talents . . . ", the University of Texas at Arlington's (UTA) Vice President for Student Affairs formed a research and evaluation office in the early 1980s (Moxley, 1999, p. 11). UTA's Student Affairs Planning Model, developed by their research and evaluation office, consists of four guiding principles: (1) information is required in order to be effective (e.g., goals, mission), (2) data collectors must collaborate (i.e., different departments share collected data for efficiency), (3) collect diverse data (e.g., surveys, interviews, evaluations), and (4) gather increasingly sophisticated data (i.e., changing the nature of the data collected based on previous data in order to make more effective and efficient changes) (Moxley, 1999, p. 12-20). Through these principles–the ongoing process of incorporating the university's and/or department's mission statement, setting goals, researching and evaluating, and applying findings–UTA is progressively improving the student affairs department. Additionally this model moves interchangeably at the institutional, departmental, and individual sector levels (Moxley, 1999).

Dickeson's Model

Dickeson's (2010) research has focused on academic program prioritization. Like many other researchers, Dickeson believes strong leadership that keeps the institution's mission and goals at the forefront of the assessment process is vital in implementing effective changes. Furthermore, determining clear, stated objectives assists the assessors in establishing appropriate assessment materials for evaluation (Dickeson, 2010).

Once assessment materials have been established and administered, the evaluation process takes place through means of analysis and prioritization. Dickeson (2010) discusses the use of various ratings and scales (e.g., Likert; "high, medium, low") to categorize assessment questions or concepts. In doing so, Dickeson also developed a point system in which ratings and scales were combined for an overall point value to determine program prioritization within a specific department. Once implemented, changes made programmatically could be evaluated according to their effects (Dickeson, 2010).

Promoting Assessment and Barriers to Effective Assessment

Seagraves and Dean (2010) discuss four research findings that contribute to promoting assessment in student affairs: (1) having support from senior level administrators, (2) informal assessment procedures so as not to skew the responses, (3) belief that the assessment procedure will lead to improvement(s), and (4) a supportive working environment (p. 314-316). If all four items exist, assessment procedures are more fluid, effective, and timely.

While providing effective principles of assessment, Banta (1997) also discusses barriers that can exist and hinder successful assessment procedures. A lack of support from staff and faculty as well as leadership transitions can negatively impact assessment (Banta, 1997). Furthermore, staff members may lack time or familiarity to implement assessment methods effectively (Bresciani et al., 2010). Changes to the institution itself can also disrupt assessment, altering the results. Often, smaller colleges and universities lack resources and access to complete comprehensive evaluations. Students can impact results depending on the seriousness with which they participate in assessment processes. Lastly, assessment tools cannot be used effectively if data is not used to enact change (Banta, 1997).

Summary

Reviewing the current literature on student development assessment makes clear that a comprehensive model does not exist that can be applied to all areas of student affairs (Barham & Scott, 2006). Furthermore, a model for Christian higher education is needed. Through examining assessment themes, various assessment models, and the promotion of and barriers to effective assessment, a better informed program review and prioritization for student affairs was developed through a collaborative process.

The Formulated Model

The model developed for a Christian college context was implemented as a part of a university-wide program review instituted at one campus. Every area of the university, including Academic Affairs, Student Development, and Intercollegiate Athletics as well support areas such as Enrollment Management, University Advancement, Finance, and Business Affairs underwent this comprehensive review process as a campus-wide initiative to insure long-term sustainability. It is important to note that this institution engaged in this process as a proactive means of attempting to stay ahead of economic and other negative influences facing all institutions, rather than out of an immediate need to cut budgets in the short-term. Doing so allowed the institution to proceed at a slower pace and develop this model in a more reflective time frame. Hopefully, this model will help other institutions gain head starts, thus providing for quicker processes. This model is presented in three steps: (1) The Institutional Process, (2) The Departmental Process/Model, and (3) Implications and Discussion.

Step 1: The Institutional Process

As previously stated, this institution instituted a campus-wide program review in an effort to proactively respond to the current economic environment from a position of relative strength as opposed to budget crisis. This allowed the institution to adopt a reflective approach, taking two years to develop and implement. It is surmised that this approach allowed for ample time to consider a host of factors that a more truncated approach would not allow. From the perspective of the Student Development review, this allowed for the reflective development of the resulting model. The principles of this model are implementable in a shorter time frame, if necessary. The university established the following overarching goals for this process: to evaluate all programs and support areas campus-wide in order to identify best practices and create resource reallocation strategies. Achieving these goals would foster excellence on a larger scale in:

1. Purposefully striving for educational excellence through innovative programming and effective faculty/staff development;
2. Strategically addressing on-going resources issues—most importantly, faculty and staff salary/compensation; and
3. Proactively meeting budget challenges to make [institution redacted] as affordable as possible without derailing mission or diminishing quality.

The Academic Affairs program review at this institution relied heavily on the Dickeson Model (2010) in developing the review of all schools, departments, and programs in their area. In an effort to promote uniformity in the reviews, the Student Development program review also reviewed the Dickeson Model. As stated earlier, Dickeson (2010) is primarily focused on academic program reviews. As such, it was helpful in developing the student development model, but was inadequate to implement in full. Therefore, the student development review was developed utilizing elements of the Dickeson Model as well as elements from other assessment approaches. In addition, unique characteristics associated with the specific university mission and Christian Student Development best practices were utilized in the development of the Student Development Program Review.

All institution program reviews followed a similar timeline with milestones and goals that led to the completion of all review reports being submitted to the institution's President's Council concurrently. Throughout this process, there were many checkpoints in which the various areas reported progress and maintained accountability with the process. The Student Development faculty and staff spent approximately 500 hours in the development of the review that will be outlined in the next section.

Step 2: The Departmental Process

The departmental process consisted of five of phases that concluded with a template and rubrics for evaluating all programs associated with Student Development. The first phase was to create a list of all program areas to be included in the review. At this institution, that list included a fairly standard listing of program areas associated with student development departments at Christian colleges: Chapel, Calling and Career Office (Career Development), Campus Ministries, Counseling, Housing, Leadership Programs, Office of Intercultural Programs (Diversity Programs including American Ethnic and International Students), Residence Life, and Student Programs (Activities and Student Government). Additionally, two other program areas not typically associated with student development—Campus Police and Honors Programming— were included in this review.

The next step was to develop the criteria for evaluation and the matrixes for evaluating these criteria. A leadership group within this department, The Student Development Deans Cabinet (SDDC), began this process in the spring. The SDDC utilized a recently published strategic vision plan for the department as the starting point for developing the evaluation criteria. The strategic plan outlined the guiding principles and core values for the Student Development area. This process solidified the core values of the department and the alignment of these values with the overarching institutional mission, providing the framework for developing the specific criteria to be evaluated for the program review. The core values identified are outlined in Appendix A.

Next, the SDDC went through a process of aligning this foundational departmental information with institutional documents to develop seven criterion for reviewing Student Development as a part of the university program review. The criteria are as follows:

- Connection to university mission: Does the program align with the institutional mission and strategic directions/initiatives? Does the program foster inter-departmental collaboration and engagement with other program areas on campus?
- Connection to departmental focus on discipleship: Does the program align with the Student Development focus on discipleship and incorporate significant discipleship-enriched opportunities for students?
- Promotes student learning: Does the program have clearly articulated educational outcomes that promote student learning,

enhance curricular programs, and provide unique learning opportunities for students?

- Program uniqueness: Is the program providing a unique service program to students? Is the program broad in its impact in terms of the number of students engaged? Are the program offerings in part or in total uniquely offered by the specific program area?
- Program efficiency: Does the program utilize both budget and human resources in designing and implementing programs? Do program personnel seek opportunities to work collaboratively with other areas?
- Student satisfaction: How do students rank programs offered by the area both in terms of how often they engage in these programs and their satisfaction with the programs that they do engage?
- Benchmark comparison with other institutions: How does the program compare to similar programs at benchmark and aspirational institutions?
- General campus perceptions of program: How is this program generally perceived by students? Academic Affairs faculty? Student Development faculty? Other Administrative/program areas?

Each program area developed a report based on these criteria and utilized existing institutional assessment data, or gathered additional data when necessary, to prepare a report that was submitted to the Dean's Council.

The Dean's Council developed a scoring rubric for the criteria and a weighted scoring system that resulted in a ranking of all programs for each criterion. This data was utilized by members of the Dean's Council to compare the programs and place each in one of four main categories: Enhance, Maintain, Restructure, or Retire. Programs in the Enhance category were those that represented a strategic need or opportunity for the department but needed additional resourcing to achieve the strategic goals. Those in the Maintain category were programs judged as meeting departmental goals at a high level and as having an adequate level of resourcing. Programs in the Restructure category were those that emerged as critical to departmental and university program success, but were either under-performing, under-resourced, or a combination of both. Those falling into the Retire category were programs that were not able to demonstrate that they were meeting current Student Development program goals.

The results of this process were compiled into a comprehensive report and submitted to the institution's President's Council for further review and analysis. The President's Cabinet evaluated reports from all university areas and developed a university-wide review report to be implemented across the campus. Thus, the resulting model included a combination of a focus on institutional and departmental priorities based on an integrated use of best practices and theory, which was then infused with data enriched decision-making.

Step 3: Implications and Discussion

Applicability. This model was developed at one institution for the purpose of reviewing the programs within the Student Development division. However, there are at least three aspects of this process and model that may prove helpful to others. First, it provides a starting block for those contemplating a similar process. As stated earlier, there are lacking existing models to guide student affairs professionals in this process, and an even scarcer supply of those focusing on the Christian college setting. Second, it provides a framework to build upon. Every campus will have unique program characteristics that will need to be incorporated in a review; it is hoped that the process outlined here will provide a guide for others as they develop the model suitable for their own institutional contexts. Finally, it provides a useful list of important elements to consider. The focus in this process on departmental strengths, values and priorities, alignment with institutional mission and priorities, integration of best practices and theory, and the use of data enriched decision making are all worthy of consideration.

Timing. This review took place over a two-year period. This deliberate pace allowed ample time for the development of a reflective program review that incorporated a multitude of variables. Often, institutions faced with more immediate financial issues do not have the luxury of a two-year process and must make budgetary decisions in a much shorter time frame. The authors offer two suggestions for consideration regarding the timing aspect of a program review. First, this discussion allows others to use the suggested framework and processes as a head start in the development of a process of their own. In this process, there were many times when the pace was deliberately slow to provide time for analysis, and to provide the ability to add and delete items from consideration. While this process yielded beneficial results, it was also—at times—slower than necessary. However, having this model as a starting point will aid others in accelerating their pace. The second suggestion is to consider engaging in this process prior to being in the position of doing so out of financial necessity. The process of clarifying departmental values, strengths and weaknesses, and aligning the department with institutional priorities was a very valuable endeavor in its own right. Much of the work done for this review was valuable whether a part of a program prioritization review or not. The authors encourage student development programs to adopt many of these tasks as a part of a comprehensive and ongoing assessment protocol. This could also provide a quicker route to a program prioritization review.

Resourcing. The main resource necessary for this process was student development staff time. As mentioned earlier, this process included hundreds of hours work and as such was a drain on the staff and the program. Additional resources were utilized from various campus areas including the Assessment Office, Institutional Research, Academic Affairs faculty, Academic Affairs administration, President's Cabinet, and other administrative and staff areas. All of these areas provided valuable insight and contributions to the process. Utilizing on-campus resources allowed this review to not require a significant budget expenditure.

Collaboration. Collaboration was the most significant aspect to the success of this review. Without the concerted efforts of those both within the department and across campus, the review would not have achieved the desired outcomes. The most important collaboration came in the form of working with Academic Affairs administration and faculty. As previously mentioned, this student development review was a part of a campus-wide program review. Academics and Student Development constitute the major program offerings at this institution. A good deal of effort is expended in making these two areas as seamless as possible. Therefore, great care was taken to ensure collaboration between the two throughout this review. There are several notable examples of this collaboration. First, the time frames for Academic Affairs and Student Development were as identical as possible in terms of milestones, preliminary reports, and final reports. Second, the format of the reviews—including report formats, program categorizations, use of assessment data, and terminology—were also nearly identical. Finally, the student development review team included multiple opportunities for academic faculty to participate in almost every phase of the process. The academic faculty input and expertise were valued and utilized in significant ways throughout the review.

Summary. This model for a student development program prioritization and review process is not presented as a completely replicable model for other institutions. Rather, it is suggested as a starting point for other colleges and universities, providing a framework that others can build upon to develop a unique process for their own institutions. Timing is a critical element in this process and student development departments would be well-advised to engage in some of the preliminary work prior to being forced into the work by financial exigencies. However, this model can be helpful even in a shortened time frame by providing a head-start and framework upon which to build. The most necessary resource for this endeavor is staff time, which cannot be ignored; this process should not require a good deal of additional budgetary resources. The most critical element for success is working collaboratively with other areas on campus, most notably Academic Affairs administration and faculty. This collaboration will help ensure campus-wide support for the review while also providing valuable additional insight and expertise to the process.

Conclusion

The financial future of higher education—at least in the foreseeable future—is murky at best and may more likely be described as stormy. This is true for all sectors and areas, including Christian higher education and Student Development departments. Many institutions are utilizing, either out of choice or budget necessity, a program review and prioritization process. Many of these processes are based on the Dickeson Model (2010), but this approach— focusing primarily on academic programs—is only partially helpful to student development programs. The model presented in this article integrates portions of this model, as well as other best practice approaches in student affairs assessment and theory, into a comprehensive program review and prioritization at one Christian college. This review focused on this student development department's core values and strengths, alignment with university priorities, and a collaborative methodology that incorporated best practice and theory application utilizing data infused decisions. While it was designed uniquely for the context of this particular college, there are principles and processes that maybe transferable to other institutions. The seven criteria developed for this project serve as a potential template for initiating a program review and prioritization process that can be a valuable tool in seeking student development program vitality and sustainability in these uncertain economic times.

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