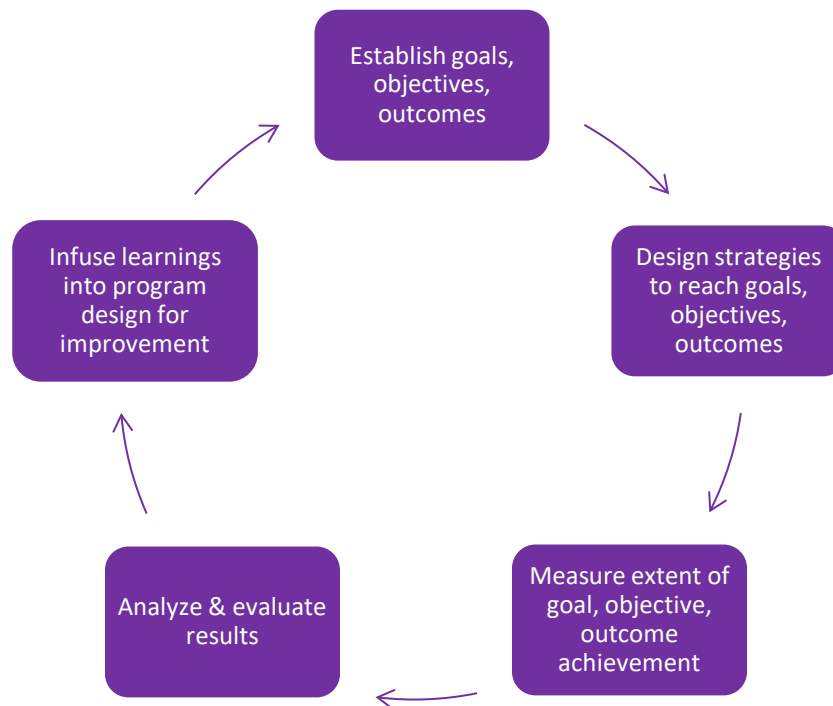# Texas Christian University
Student Affairs Assessment Guide

Chapter 1: Assessment, Evaluation, & Research

The purpose of this guide is to familiarize Student Affairs staff members as to the "who," "what," "when," "where," and "how" of our approach to measuring effectiveness at TCU. Assessment is our way of checking whether what we are doing is contributing to what we hope and say our students are getting out of their TCU experience.

Assessment Cycle

Assessment, Evaluation, and Research: Relationships and Definitions in Student Affairs
While assessment, evaluation, and research share many commonalities, they are three very distinct ways of looking at data and processes. Some practices may be similar; however, the real differentiation comes in the intent, or purpose of the effort.

Research
The term research is not tied to a specific field or discipline and, when used generally, can be defined as "a truth-seeking activity which contributes to knowledge, aimed at describing or explaining the world" (Coryn, 2006, p.1). Gall, Gall, & Borg (2007) provide this definition of research for the field of teaching, learning, and educational administration:

A form of inquiry in which (1) key concepts and procedures are carefully defined in such a way that the inquiry can be replicated and possibly refuted, (2) controls are in place to minimize error and bias, (3) the generalizability limits of the study are made explicit, and (4) the results of the study are interpreted in terms of what they contribute to the cumulative body of knowledge about the object of inquiry (p. 34).

Educational research eventually leads to the improvement of educational practice when practitioners make decisions informed by research and implement evidence-based practices and programs.

Evaluation

"Even though evaluation and research provide information about questions of interest, they are typically undertaken for different reasons" (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009, p. 8). "Evaluation, as a discipline, draws on other disciplines for its foundations and especially the social sciences for its methods" (Mathison, 2006, p. 183).

Evaluation is a form of inquiry that seeks to address critical questions concerning how well a program, process, product, system, or organization is working. It is typically under-taken for decision-making purposes, and should lead to a use of findings by a variety of stakeholders (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009, p. 6).

Evaluation refers to the process of determining the merit, worth, or value of something, or the product of that process…. The evaluation process normally involves some identification of relevant standards of merit, worth, or value; some investigation of the performance of evaluands on these standards; and some integration or synthesis of the results to achieve an overall evaluation or set of evaluations (Scriven, 1991, p. 139).

For student affairs, Upcraft and Schuh's (1994) evaluation definition is commonly utilized: "Any effort to use assessment evidence to improve institutional, departmental, divisional or institutional effectiveness" (p. 19).

Evaluation, specifically program evaluation [or program review] is the systematic gathering of data/information about the activities, characteristics, and outcomes of a specified program in an effort to come to sensible conclusions about the program, improve program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and increase understanding of the program in general (Patton, 2008). Many student affairs divisions utilize the standards and processes set forth by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) to conduct their program review process – including TCU.

Assessment

The term assessment may pose the most confusion, even though it is used most often by student affairs practitioners. In education, the term assessment is often used to describe the measurement of what an individual knows and can do (Banta & Palomba, 2015, p. 1) and, particularly outside of student affairs in the academic arena, the term has come to mean the assessment of student learning very specifically (Suskie, 2009). With that focus on student learning in higher education, the term outcomes assessment has come to "imply aggregating individual measures for the purpose of discovering group strengths and weaknesses" (Banta & Palomba, p. 1); however, in practice, many people eliminate the term outcomes and use assessment to describe the specific concept of the assessment of student learning.

In student affairs, the term assessment is often used more broadly to include the entire assessment process or cycle. It includes assessment of student learning as well assessment of programs, operations or services. In the foundational publication Assessment Reconsidered, Keeling (2004) defines this integrated concept in student affairs:

> The assessment of learning explores how effectively engagement with the institution increased students' ability, skill or competency in various domains as a result of various learning experiences – a curriculum, academic major, certificate program, course, specific classroom activity, student development experience, or experiential learning activity.

One of the most commonly used definitions of assessment in student affairs is Upcraft & Schuh's (1996): "Assessment is any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness" (p. 18). They distinguish between assessment and evaluation by noting that assessment is focused on effectiveness while evaluation is focused on using that assessment evidence for improvement. Banta (2002) provides this succinct definition that includes the concept of assessment as a process or cycle: "Assessment is a multi-stage, multi-dimensional process – a vehicle – for bringing clarity and balance to an individual activity or set of activities."

Assessment, Evaluation, and Research – Similarities with Distinctions
Upcraft and Schuh (2001) distinguish between assessment and research, noting that research guides theory development while assessment guides practice; research most often has implications for the field of student affairs and higher education, while assessment most commonly has implications for a single unit or institution. Russ-Eft and Preskill (2009) distinguish between evaluation and research, noting that they employ similar data collection and analysis methods, but they are often initiated for different purposes, involve and respond to different questions and audiences, and report their findings in different ways. Mathison (2008) notes that "evaluation and research are different – different in degree along the dimensions of particularization-generalization and decision-oriented-conclusion-oriented" (p. 195).

Generally, assessment is the gathering of information and using that information to measure effectiveness. Evaluation comes into play when collected data are used to measure effectiveness against a set standard, benchmark, or previously set metric. Research is testing a hypothesis using the scientific method. Research is typically more rigorous than assessment or evaluation.

While identifying and articulating the distinctions is important, "what matters most is that when we engage in [evaluation or assessment] work, we strive for conducting our work in ethical and professional ways that produce high-quality processes and findings that are used by the organization and its members" (Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2009, p. 8).

Purpose of Assessment in Student Affairs
- Demonstrate Student Affairs' contribution to student learning, growth, and development;
- Ensure quality in our efforts;
- Increase knowledge about students, their activities and interests;
- Seek and prioritize resources;
- Inform strategic planning;
- Provide mechanisms for accountability;
- Demonstrate program effectiveness;

🦆 Inform policy development; and,

🦆 Documentation for accreditation and other external stakeholders.

Use of assessment:
Formative evaluation improves program performance by influencing immediate decisions about the program, especially how its component parts and processes could be improved. Data collected for formative purposes are seldom reported to anyone but those who have responsibility for implementing and improving the program. New programs go through periods of development in which formative evaluation is necessary before the expected effects can be observed.

Summative evaluations judge program worth by assessing program effects in light of relevant problems. The worth of a new program can be judged by comparing its effects with those of the program it is intended to replace. Data are used for purposes of accountability, advancement, and decisions about the continuation of the program or service.

Comprehensive Assessment
A comprehensive approach to assessing effectiveness in student affairs involves a variety of assessment methods. The first method involves *tracking* program, service, and facility usage. Knowing who uses or participates in what services and programs and when is the most fundamental measurement of success. This is the most basic form of assessment as it provides the foundation for all other methods of inquiry, as this knowledge provides direction for further assessment efforts. The second component of a comprehensive assessment plan involves conducting a *needs assessment*. According to Upcraft & Schuh ((1996), "it is a good idea to abide by the basic principle that whatever services, programs, and facilities we offer must meet the needs of our clientele." *Satisfaction surveys* comprise the third component of a comprehensive assessment model. Client satisfaction is important because if students aren't satisfied, they won't continue to use the service/facility or participate in the program. To assess the broader collective of students' attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors, *climate surveys* are typically used. The fifth aspect of a comprehensive assessment plan, and the one that seems to appeal to external stakeholders the most, is *outcomes assessment*. It is important that we have evidence that what we are doing is making a difference in our students' lives. As Upcraft and Schuh (1996, p. 217) state, "assessing the purported outcomes of our efforts with students is probably the most important assessment we do." The final component of this model is *benchmarking*, or comparing the metrics from our assessments with nationally accepted standards or metrics from peer institutions.

Types of Assessment: What Is It That We Want to Know?
In addition to levels of assessment, there are also types of assessments, again depending upon the intended purpose of the assessment initiative.
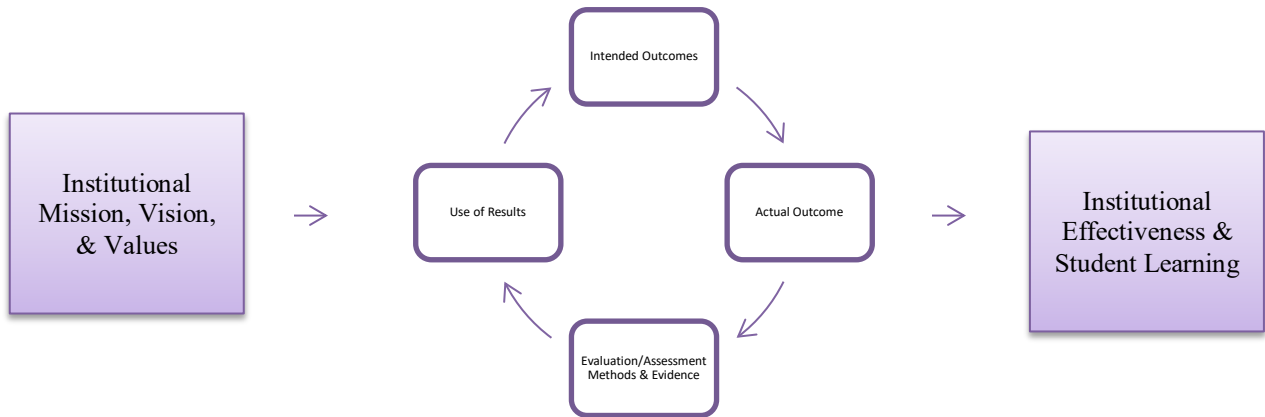
Descriptive: used to describe the basic features of the data gathered. Descriptive statistics provide simple summaries about the sample and the measures. Together with simple graphics analysis, descriptive statistics form the basis of virtually every quantitative analysis of data. Think "describing the sample/data."

Relational: used to describe, or examine, the relationship between two or more factors. A correlational relationship simply says that two things perform in a synchronized manner – no cause/effect is established.
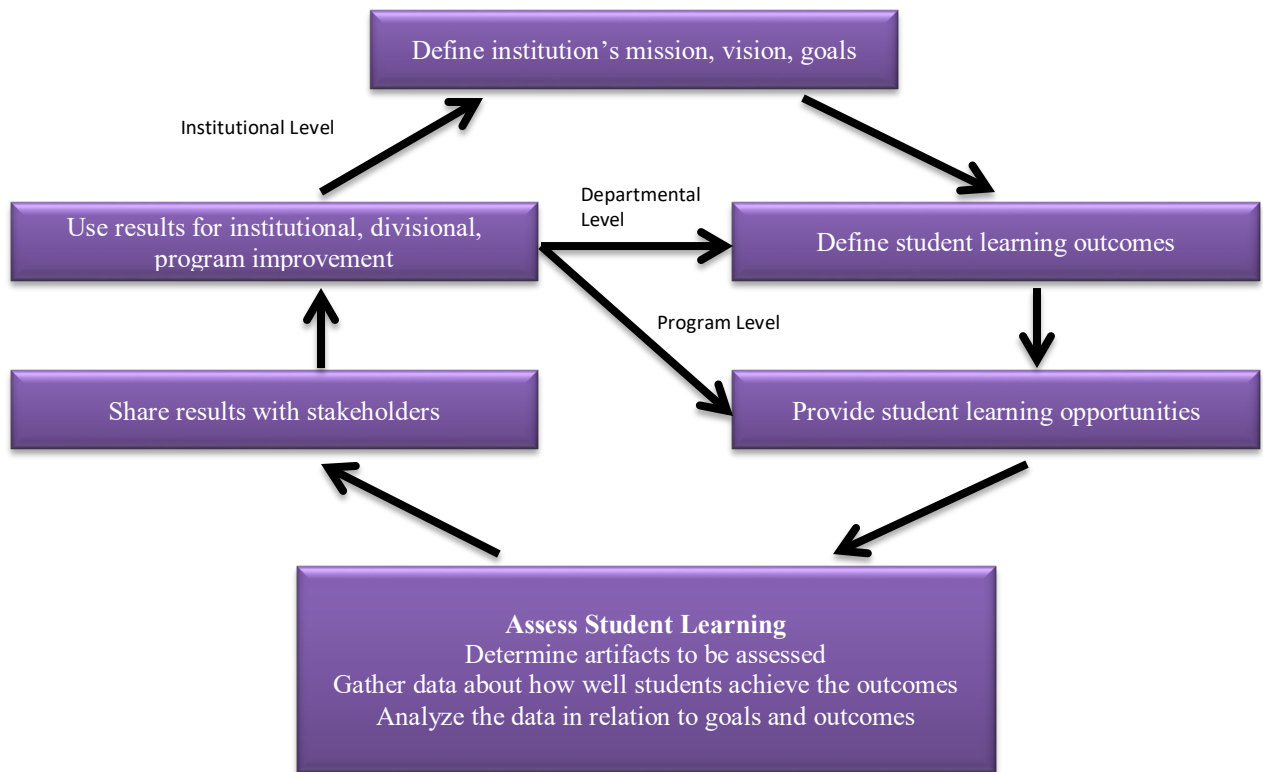Causal: used to examine, or demonstrate, that variables are not only in correspondence with each other, but that one actually *causes* the other.

Student Affairs Assessment in Context

In the context of the growing demands to demonstrate the value of a college degree, the more student affairs professionals can align their outcomes with institutional learning outcomes and strategic initiatives, the more student affairs staff can participate in the conversation. Furthermore, such alignment demonstrates the wide sphere of influence of student affairs staff in enhancing student learning and development. Finally, aligning with institutional goals and initiatives connects student affairs professionals to conversations about how resources may be allocated or reallocated (Bresciani, 2011).

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Institutional              Intended Outcomes                    Institutional
Mission, Vision,                                                Effectiveness &
& Values         →    Use of Results    Actual Outcome    →    Student Learning

                      Evaluation/Assessment
                      Methods & Evidence
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Same concept, different layout.

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                        Define institution's mission, vision, goals

Institutional Level                                         Departmental
                                                            Level
Use results for institutional, divisional,                         Define student learning outcomes
program improvement
                                        Program Level

Share results with stakeholders                           Provide student learning opportunities

                        Assess Student Learning
                        Determine artifacts to be assessed
                Gather data about how well students achieve the outcomes
                     Analyze the data in relation to goals and outcomes
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