

The Importance of Assessment



By Regina Young Hyatt

When I went to graduate school 15 years ago, assessment was something we talked little about. We took one class on research and learned how to create a survey, but there was little discussion about how the findings from our research could inform our work. Fast forward to 2009 and I would be hard pressed to find a graduate program that isn't teaching our new student affairs professionals about the importance of assessment.

I recently attended the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges conference in San Antonio, TX. The focus of the conference was to share best practices in accreditation, assessment and measuring student learning. One of the keynote presenters was Judith Eaton, President of CHEA (Council of Higher Education Accreditation). In her remarks, she shared that the call for better assessment in higher education would continue to increase. Gone are the days when we can say we do what we do because it works. We now have to prove it works. We must show that students are gaining skills and learning what we think they are learning. And as resources from our states continue to shrink, we will all be asked to prove what we are doing actually is accomplishing what we think it's accomplishing and that our states are getting their money's worth.

I am pleased with the work we have done as an association to respond to this greater call for accountability and measurement of student learning. This year, we celebrated our 30-year partnership with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, CAS. Dr. Susan Komives of the University of Maryland-College Park spent several years as our CAS liaison and engaged us in the revision of the Campus Activities Program standards two years ago. Dr. Jan Arminio of Shippensburg University served as our representative to CAS until 2008 and Dr. Bill Smedick of The Johns Hopkins University (MD) currently fills that role with CAS. The CAS standards are truly the foundation of our professional competencies and outline what students should learn through their participation in our campus activities, programs and services. The CAS standards are available for all of our member institutions on our website in the digital library.

Our Education Advisory Group (EAG) used the CAS standards to develop the "Steps to Individual Excellence as a Campus Activities Professional" document and evaluation. These instruments can help supervisors manage their staff and can help staff assess their level of competency in a variety of areas. These resources are also available on our website. The EAG is continuing its outstanding work and will debut its student leader competencies documents this spring. Again, these competencies have their foundation in the CAS standards and its student learning outcomes. Each of the functional area standards outlined in CAS have a list of student learning outcomes. An additional resource titled *Framework for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes (FALDO's)* is available from CAS at <http://www.cas.edu/>.

Through NACA's efforts, there will be a robust research agenda that advances campus activities in higher education. This is goal number two in our strategic plan. Our selection of this as a strategic

goal really speaks to our association's commitment to understanding how campus activities impacts student learning. In 2008-2009, NACA selected its first recipients of our new research awards.

The winner of the Comprehensive Award was the University of South Florida for their study: Predicting the Risk of Individual Student Attrition and Enhancing Student Persistence and Degree Attainment for First Time in College (FTIC) Students.

The secondary award winners were:

- Dartmouth College (NH)—Mapping Leadership Skills to Activities: Transforming Student Stories Into a Useful Tool
- The George Washington University (DC)—Student Affairs Fundraising at Private Research Universities: How Organizational Culture Affects Collaborations Between Student Affairs and Development Units
- Louisiana State University—An Exploratory Investigation of the Relationship Between Involvement and Persistence Beyond the First Year Among Black Students Attending a Predominantly White Institution
- University of Connecticut—A Longitudinal Study of Leadership Value Development of First-Year College Students
- Suffolk University (MA)—A Qualitative and Quantitative Study on Student Engagement: An Exploration into the Impact Co-curricular Involvement Has on Retention Rates of Residential Status

Each of these research projects will advance our knowledge of how campus activities impacts the student experience at our colleges and universities. I congratulate all of the recipients and look forward to learning about the outcome of their work!

An additional way our members can see our commitment to assessment and research is through our partnership with NASPA in the Campus Activities Assessment Consortium. Colleges and universities can take part in this assessment project, which is being administered by Student Voice. A campus activities assessment is being developed by a team of NACA volunteers with the leadership of Dr. Jon Dooley, Marquette University (WI). The team also includes Dr. Gayle Spencer, Kansas State University; Dr. Adam Peck, Stephen F. Austin State University (TX); Dr. Heather Larabee, University of Southern California; and Dr. Jan Arminio, Shippensburg University (PA). In addition to the campus activities assessment, participating institutions will have benchmarking data from other participating institutions. More information about this partnership can be found on our website under the strategic plan link.

Campus activities professionals certainly have a role to play in assessing student learning. We have many resources available to our member institutions to assist in this area, many of which are available to you through the NACA website. As you experience how assessment of student learning works on your campus, please submit information to our digital library so we can continue to grow our resources in this area. My own learning on this topic continues to grow and I appreciate the opportunity to learn from your campus' best practices, as well.