

Turning Research into Assessment

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In higher education, we are fortunate enough to have a plethora of research. We have attempted to answer several questions that we have raised over time. In regards to how students learn, we have raised questions about whether we are teaching most effectively or whether our curriculum designs are logical, linear, or conceptual. What does the educational experience add up to? What are students learning and how do we know?

As a result of our questions, we organize research studies in an attempt to find answers to those questions. Often, what we find is that we have raised many more questions. We then either continue with the research in an attempt to answer the additional questions or we put the research study aside in an effort to wait for additional resources to fund the research or more practically, we wait for additional time to be allocated to the research project. Thus, the research, information about the question we have raised, remain on the desk in a pile or filed neatly in a bookshelf never to be read again, never to be used.

When I took my first appointment in an institutional research office, there were many questions that faculty and administrators had raised. Some of the questions had changed over time and many of them were the same. In looking through files and literature to see where to start in answering these questions, I found several published studies. These were studies that had been conducted at this particular institution in an attempt to answer those questions. In looking over the various studies, I found that they

were well done. They answered a portion of the questions; in some cases, and in other cases, they raised more questions at a more detailed level, which required a different type of methodology to approach finding the answer.

I thought I had discovered a gold mine. I took the studies to my supervisor illustrating for her what the findings were. I was so excited. My work was practically done. Here were well thought-out, well-conducted analyses of the problem, pointing to some possible solutions, pointing to some further questions. I showed them to her. “Yes,” she answered, “we have seen those. We have shared these studies with the particular interested parties.” I then said, “Well, what was done with them?” She frowned in a sad way and responded, “nothing”. Absolutely nothing was done with them.

I was crushed. Here was my opportunity, or so I thought, to inform institutional decisions by gathering information and what I had found was that my predecessor, having done great work, left the university with his fine work unused, read but unused. I returned to my office somewhat perplexed, somewhat angered, and somewhat saddened.

Here, were incredible resources, information and data gathered, done with extraordinary care and precision, yet, they had been sitting in my file cabinet unused. What was I to do? It dawned on me, almost two years after that incident, that the problem didn't lie in the research. The problem didn't lie in the office. The problem didn't lie with the faculty and administrators who chose not to use the information. The problem, perhaps, was in the process itself--raising questions without anticipating what information may come, without taking accountability to do something or placing accountability with someone to do something with that information. It was at this point that I realized assessment...assessment could help.

When one examines the purpose of assessment, one immediately understands that its purpose is to articulate that which you want your program to accomplish, whether it be facilities, education, student development, planning; whatever portion is your responsibility at your institution, assessment can be of assistance.

The first step is articulating what it is that you are trying to accomplish and possibly even, why. In so doing, you have raised a research question. The difference is the planning; the intended outcomes and the articulation of them inform the research questions. This does often stem from innate curiosity, the same curiosity that causes us to ask questions when we first conduct research. However, it's done in a bit more systematic way because when you engage in assessment, the intent is to make decisions based on the evidence you have collected - to make decisions for program improvement, for budgeting, for future planning, to provide information to constituents who need it or desire it, to influence policy. All of these are reasons to engage in assessment. They are also reasons to engage in research, but again, often we don't close that loop by making decisions based on the evidence that we have gathered even if the decision is to dive in at a more detailed level to get a better answer to the question. This concept maybe best understood through an example.

A year ago, the institution in which I am employed asked the question, "How much do our students cheat?" They asked other questions such as what does academic integrity mean to students? What is the students' perception of cheating? How do students perceive that their peers cheat? Do we cheat more than other institutions? These questions led to a desire for a research study...a study to understand how much our students do in fact cheat, to understand what constitutes cheating, and to understand if

students have any sense of academic integrity. Thus, the institution embarked on some painful discussions and debate over appropriate assessment research methodologies.

After a year of discussion, faculty and administrators agreed upon a survey approach and a particular institutionally drafted survey. The intent again, was to do a one time study just to get an understanding of where this institution lied in comparison to others. After successful completion of the survey design and its administration, the research team began to analyze the results. The findings were somewhat unexpected.

It was not necessarily the amount of self reported cheating incidents that caused great concern among the research team. There were other findings - - findings in which the institution should be able to respond. Findings that led to the research team wondering if the institution was doing all that it could do to educate students about academic integrity, what it meant, and what it looked like in and out of the classroom. The research team wanted to make recommendations for improvement based on the evidence, and they wanted the institution to conduct follow-up analysis to assess the proposed interventions.

Thus, the research team examined an assessment model and began to articulate outcomes. What they were really trying to do here, they said, is influence student behavior. They truly wanted to not just understand what the students' perceptions were, but they wanted to influence students' values and their thinking, their ethics about academic integrity, and what academic integrity means to students and then, they wanted to influence students would behave in and out of the classroom. What the team really wanted here was for the students to be ethical.

Fortunately, the survey instrument design gave the research team several pieces of information in which to form an action plan; an action plan based on the evidence gathered in the research study and one that would call for decisions and recommendations to be made based on the evidence. It would call for an action plan to be put into place and then to be reassessed two years down the road, understanding that it takes some time to influence the institutional culture. In addition, the students also needed to assess the impact of some of the programs that they were about to put into place. This movement from a research study to an assessment plan empowered the institution to take control of its issues. It empowered the students and the faculty to use the information to the betterment of the institution, the betterment of the students, the betterment of the instructors, and the instruction. It turned potentially “embarrassing” evidence into a plan of action. It painted the institution as accountable. It painted the institution as responsible and one that wants to take control of institutional outcomes especially those that pertain to undergraduates demonstrating ethics and integrity.

This institution is in its first year of continuing assessment and implementation of the action plan. Assessment has occurred in small pieces through the implementation of some of the interventions. Those who are implementing the interventions are engaged in formative assessment, taking the temperature if you will, of their program so they can understand how well it is doing and if it will have an impact on students’ academic integrity in two years.

As we write this, I have on my right the results of the first Academic Integrity Intervention assessment. We are encouraged, as are those who conducted the program in an effort to influence student behavior. This initial research study, which was once

considered a one-time, throw it on the shelf, potentially do nothing with it, has had a significant positive impact on this institution, its students, faculty and administration. We no longer feel that the resources of those who spent monuments of time in discussing survey design and appropriate assessment methodologies are wasted. Something came out of this study, something good. This was a research project that became assessment. This was a research project that started with questions, moved into articulation of intended outcomes, which informed the research methodology. It was assessment that demanded that decisions be made, that actions be implemented, and that the continuing monitoring of this particular research project go on.

So how do you make research become assessment? We have illustrated in this example what you can do in the middle of almost any research project. Or you can start by articulating the outcomes of your program. What is it that you want your program to achieve that informs the research questions? Or what research questions could inform the intended outcomes? It doesn't matter how you do it. It only matters that you do.

Note: Insert specific examples from the academic integrity study that would be examples of findings and the examples of the interpretation of those findings and the action plan and the results of that action plan.