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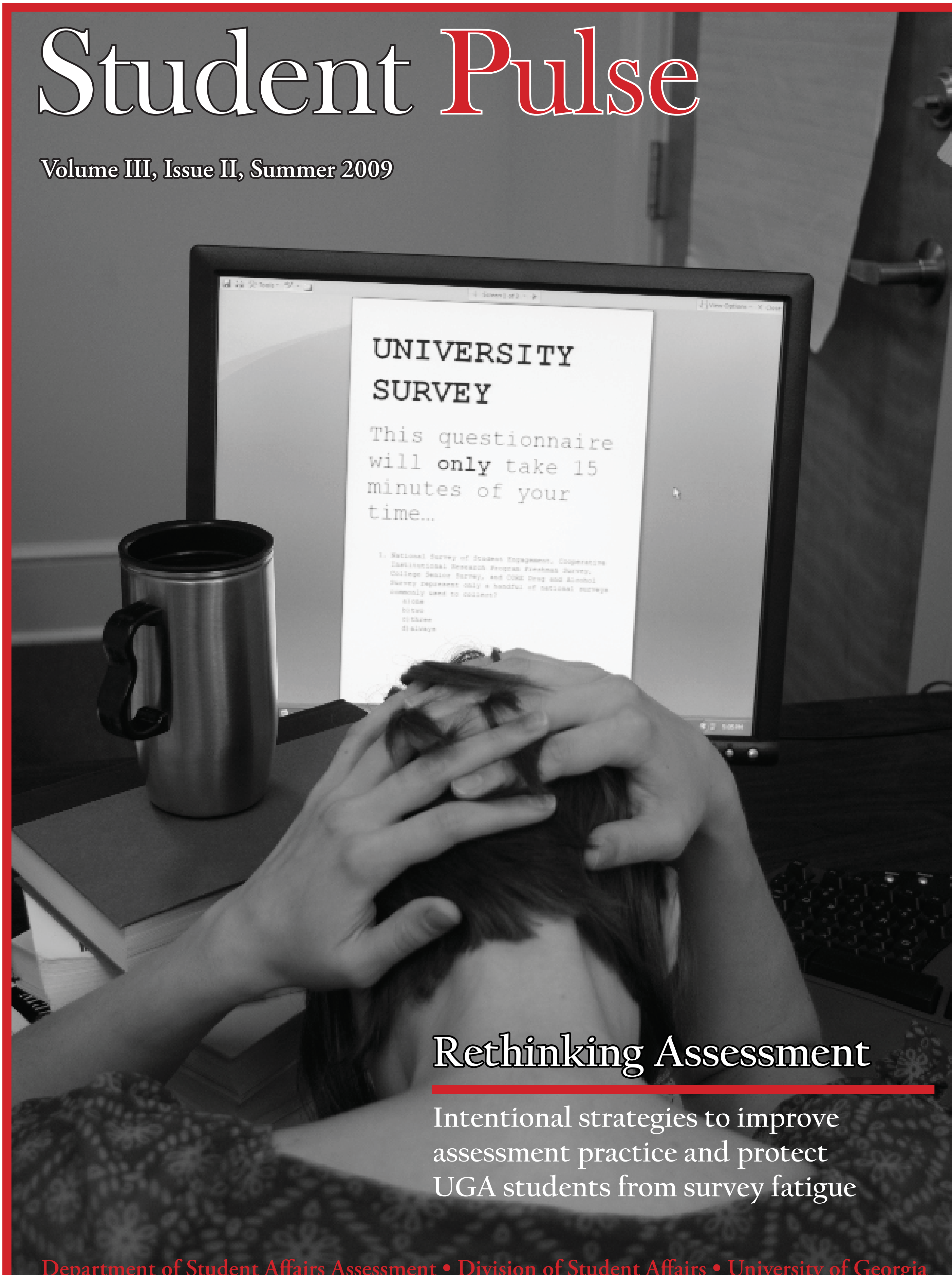

Rethinking Assessment

Intentional strategies to improve assessment practice and protect UGA students from survey fatigue

Department of Student Affairs Assessment • Division of Student Affairs • University of Georgia

This edition of the *Student Pulse* explores emerging issues related to assessment and offers practical strategies for enhancing assessment practices within student affairs. In the first article, I introduce the concept of survey fatigue, provide a literature review on the topic, and consider potential implications of survey fatigue for data collection efforts. Following, Lindsey Anne McKinney describes the results of four interviews she conducted with UGA students regarding their perceptions of assessment initiatives on campus. She delineates several themes that cut across all of the interviews and posits areas for consideration as institutions of higher education consider improving their assessment activities. Asserting that more assessment does not equal better assessment, Leslie Atchley's article asks practitioners to rethink data collection to improve assessment efforts. She illustrates several strategies for reducing students' exposure to the assessment processes, such as utilizing preexisting data, sharing data across departments, and engaging in creative, nontraditional methods of assessment. Closing this edition, Dr. Jan Davis Barham describes a new model for creating an intentional, comprehensive, and long-term departmental assessment cycle. This model is geared specifically towards departments in the Division of Student Affairs at UGA.

Enjoy reading!

Kyle Tschepikow, Chief Editor

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Survey Fatigue: Implications for Higher Education

By KYLE TSCHEPIKOW

Introduction

National Survey of Student Engagement, Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey, College Senior Survey, and CORE Drug and Alcohol Survey represent only a handful of national surveys commonly used to collect data from college students—and the list could go on…and on…and on. Commercially developed surveys now exist to measure nearly every facet of the undergraduate experience, and many institutions utilize several of them, often on a yearly basis. Additionally, most institutions regularly administer various internally designed surveys as well (Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer 2004).

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It is safe to say that surveys are now ubiquitous on campuses across the country, and further proliferation appears inevitable. As external agencies intensify their calls for assessment and institutions themselves demand administrative and academic units to document their contributions to student learning, the use of surveys will likely increase. After all, surveys have proven to be one of the most valuable tools in the institutional research toolbox (Porter, 2004). That surveys are a popular choice to collect data is understandable, given how conveniently and inexpensively one can administer a survey via the web nowadays—especially an electronic questionnaire. As Umbach points out, "web surveys in particular are attractive because in a matter of weeks a researcher can have data" (2005, p. 99).

Unfortunately, at the same time that demand for survey usage is increasing in higher education, participant response rates to surveys are falling across the board (Porter, 2004). One possible cause for this phenomenon is *survey fatigue*, a term loosely defined as overexposure to the survey process (Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004). The purpose of this article is to review research around this concept and consider the potential implications of survey fatigue for institutions of higher education.

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Literature Review

Porter et al. (2004) provided a helpful literature review of several studies related to survey fatigue. From their review, the authors concluded the following:

• The prospect of multiple surveys can reduce response rates.
• Potential respondents often cite time concerns as reasons for not participating.
• The effects of survey fatigue may be mitigated by the importance of the survey content to the participant.
• Although the evidence is mixed, the number of previous surveys administered may have an impact on current survey response.

Most studies included in this review focused on non-student populations, but these conclusions seem germane to higher education nevertheless. Looking at these conclusions as a whole paints a discouraging picture for assessment administrators, especially if time concerns and the prospect of multiple surveys are contributors to low response rates. The likelihood of a student encountering multiple surveys is great, and a student's time is something for which many in the university vie.

Curious to understand more fully the impact of survey fatigue on college students, Porter et al. conducted two studies with undergraduate students at a selective liberal arts institution (2004). The first study measured the impact of a paper survey administered immediately prior to a second paper survey, and the second study measured the impact of three web surveys administered during the fall semester on a web survey administered the ensuing spring semester. Their findings, generally speaking, coincided with those from previous studies on non-student populations. They concluded that administering multiple surveys to students resulted in lower response rates.

Implications for Higher Education

As the studies discussed indicate, a fatigued student population is less likely to participate in the survey process, resulting in low response rates. A low response rate can render any data collected from a survey unusable. An example will help illustrate this point. Suppose an institution comprised of 10,000 undergraduate students (evenly split in terms of academic class and gender) were interested in learning more about how undergraduates in general spend their time on the weekends. The institution decides to administer an electronic questionnaire to a simple random sample of 2,500 undergraduate students.

"In an era of growing accountability and fiscal constraint, collecting accurate data in an economical manner is imperative for institutional agents, particularly policymakers and assessment administrators working to better understand conditions that best promote student learning."

The questionnaire yields a low response rate of 10%. Upon further examination of the data, administrators discover that 80% of the respondents are freshmen and 75% are female. More important than the low response rate is the fact that those who did respond are not representative of the larger undergraduate population, which is nearly balanced across academic class and gender. In order for data generated through a simple random sample to be usable, the respondents within the sample must be closely representative of the larger population being studied—in this case all undergraduate students. Typically, a higher response rate increases the likelihood that the population of respondents will be representative of the larger population. As a result of the low response rate, the institution in this example would not be able to use the data collected from the questionnaire to answer its question regarding how undergraduate students spend their time on the weekend. Moreover, the institution would have lost time, money, and other precious resources in futility.

In an era of growing accountability and fiscal constraint, collecting accurate data in an economical manner is imperative for institutional agents, particularly policymakers and assessment administrators working to better understand conditions that best promote student learning. This example illustrates how survey fatigue can affect this effort. It also illustrates how important it is for institutions to think comprehensively about assessment and research efforts and to implement policies that protect students from overexposure to the survey process. Several institutions—such as Duke and Northwestern—have developed policies to address survey fatigue and other issues related to survey research and assessment (Porter, 2005).

Conclusion

Surveys are an efficient and cost-effective way to collect data from students for assessment purposes, and, as web-based technology continues to improve, this method will become even more appealing to administrators working within shrinking budgets and tight timelines. Administrators, however, must exercise caution in the employment of this data collection method. Overusing this method may result in students feeling fatigued and becoming less willing to participate thoughtfully in the survey process. Porter et al. emphasize this point, warning that, "institutional researchers must be careful not to evoke such a feeling among students; otherwise, survey fatigue may become more of a problem and negatively affect future research efforts" (2004, p. 72).

Survey fatigue, however, is only one component of a larger problem in assessment, which could be characterized, perhaps, as assessment fatigue. One might say that on many campuses across the country, students are being assessed to death. In their efforts to retrieve good data from students, institutions must become more strategic, collaborative, and creative in their assessment efforts and foster a sense of responsibility in students around assessment participation. Failing to do so may result in the emergence of a student population resistant to assessment initiatives. This issue can be best handled at the broader institutional level through the establishment of sound policy; however, individual divisions and units can take steps to address it now. Subsequent articles in this edition of the *Student Pulse* present such steps for avoiding survey and assessment fatigue.

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An Insider's Perspective on Assessment at the University of Georgia

By LINDSEY ANNE MCKINNEY

Assessment initiatives have long been regarded as an integral part of higher education (CAS, 2006), and they are becoming increasingly popular. Student affairs professionals across the country acknowledge that assessment initiatives "can help institutions set priorities, allocate resources, and work to enhance student learning" (Keeling, 2004, p. 26). But, what perceptions do our students have about assessment initiatives? Four students were interviewed regarding their perceptions of assessment initiatives at the University of Georgia to address this question and ultimately improve assessment practices within the Department of Student Affairs Assessment. During these interviews, students were asked to discuss their awareness of assessment initiatives, the impact they believe assessment has had on their educational experience, and changes the University can make to improve assessment efforts in general.[1] The interviewees were purposefully selected and given pseudonyms for this article.

Student Perceptions

David, Junior, Executive Leader, Campus Life Organization

David, a junior student serving in an executive leadership position within a Campus Life organization, stated that he received approximately ten surveys per month. David expressed that he feels most compelled to complete surveys that allow him to provide suggestions for improvement or solutions to problems posed in the survey. He explained that he completes surveys if the

[1]For the purpose of these interviews and this article, questionnaires were referred to as surveys in an effort to communicate with the students using language that is most common to them.

survey asks, "How can I improve this?", "How can I change this?", or "Do you agree with this?" He also appreciates surveys that have "substantive changes that are clearly listed." David completes open-ended surveys because he is confident that service providers who utilized them "are trying to provide [...] optimal service and that they are actually going to change in response." On the other hand, he does not complete surveys that exclusively request a quantitative measure of satisfaction, because he does not feel that such a measure provides "an accurate picture of what is really going on." He also expressed that when completing a survey, he devotes his full attention to the effort because he believes that the "purpose of having a survey is to collect accurate feedback," even if the feedback is not what practitioners would hope to hear.

"David expressed that he felt most compelled to complete surveys that allowed him to provide suggestions for improvement or solutions to problems posed in the survey."

Sally, Senior, Executive Leader, ICA Organization

Sally serves as an executive leader within one of UGA's Intercultural Affairs organizations. She expressed a sense of obligation to voice the opinions of the student population she represents. As the conversation developed, Sally articulated that she is very willing to participate in surveys and that her organization "usually tries to help out in any kind of way because we know that we are a small population here on campus." While Sally is devoted to participating in all surveys she receives, she expressed that she completes more thoughtfully those surveys that do not have open-ended questions—unlike David. When asked about how the University might improve assessment efforts, she suggested that assessment initiatives may be more effective if the data collected is communicated back to students. She believes that disseminating data, "would make the community more willing to take another survey in the future because [students would] feel like they learned something from the previous survey."

James, Freshman, Member, Campus Life Organization

James, a freshman member of a student organization and future resident assistant, estimated that he receives two surveys per month. In sharing his experiences with assessment, he explained that he only completes surveys that "actually pertain to what [he is] involved in or going to be involved with in the future." If a survey does not meet these criteria, James stated that he does not complete it—either because he does not have time to do so or simply does not want to participate. When reflecting on the outcomes of the surveys he had taken, he stated that a previous biology professor surveyed his class regarding their learning styles and used the information to structure subsequent class lectures. James truly appreciated that effort and stated that the faculty member is one of the best instructors he had ever had.

Chris, Junior, Transfer Student

Chris, a junior transfer student, estimated that he receives two or three surveys per month and believed he has been surveyed more by his fellow students than by University employees. Reflecting on his process for deciding to participate in an assessment initiative, Chris stated, "I will complete any survey when I feel the issue itself could affect me somewhere down the road or does affect me directly, but if it is an issue that doesn't affect me, then I don't see a reason why I should voice my opinion." Chris stated that when he does decide to complete a survey, he completes them honestly, without trying to "skew anything." As Chris continued to reflect on his experiences, he suggested that it may be helpful to collect data using OASIS or WebCT and that providing results of surveys to students would encourage them to participate in the future. He asserted, "I think students might feel more encouraged to do polls when they can actually see results of the polls and then see what the University is going to do about it down the road."

"I think students might feel more encouraged to do polls when they can actually see results of the polls and then see what the University is going to do about it down the road."

Themes

Overall, students were motivated to engage in assessment initiatives for various reasons. The students involved with campus organizations perceived assessment as an organizational and institutional process conducted for the greater good of their constituencies. For example, David and Sally expressed an obligation to complete surveys because of their leadership positions within their organizations. Sally, in particular, noted the way in which her role of representing a cultural group on campus engendered a sense of civic responsibility. In contrast, James and Chris were motivated to participate in assessment initiatives they perceived would enrich their personal experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. All interviewees expressed a desire to see positive change occur as an end result of their efforts. Additionally, they all had suggestions for improving assessment initiatives at UGA. For example, the students encouraged administrators to be more intentional in terms of selecting specific student populations to survey and to create surveys that are more salient to students' experiences at UGA. As another example, the students proposed that assessment results be reported back to the students so they can better understand how their contributions are making a difference.

"Sally, in particular, noted the way in which her role of representing a cultural group on campus engendered a sense of civic responsibility."

Conclusion

The opening article in this edition of the *Student Pulse* presents current challenges that assessment administrators are facing in their practice. The interviews conducted demonstrate the value of adding students to the dialogue about overcoming those challenges. The interviews also demonstrate the value of including students in the entire assessment process, from instrument development to data dissemination. Administrators may find that student involvement leads to a better understanding of the motives that drive student participation, the discovery of new methods for collecting data, or even the development of a sound survey research policy, aimed at preventing assessment fatigue. Regardless, administrators must find better ways to involve students in assessment planning and practice going forward.

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About the Author

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Rethinking Data Collection to Improve Assessment Practice

By LESLIE ATCHLEY

As the demand for more assessment has dramatically increased in recent years, student affairs educators have often subscribed to the mantra that more assessment equals better assessment. As previously mentioned in this edition of the *Student Pulse*, technological advances on campus have allowed electronic questionnaires to explode in popularity, adding to the problems of survey fatigue and low response rates among student populations.

A question often asked is: How can student affairs administrators meet demands for more assessment, while protecting students from overexposure to the assessment process? One answer to that question is to change the underlying approach to assessment: instead of equating more assessment with better assessment, we must recognize that better assessment means smarter assessment, and smarter assessment includes efficient, unobtrusive assessment efforts. This article discusses three strategies practitioners can utilize to conduct smarter assessment: a) utilize preexisting data, b) share data across departments, and c) engage in creative, nontraditional methods of assessment.

"Instead of equating more assessment with better assessment, we must recognize that better assessment means smarter assessment, and smarter assessment includes efficient, unobtrusive assessment efforts."

Utilize Preexisting Data

Utilizing preexisting data for assessment purposes is an excellent strategy to avoid distributing yet another questionnaire. It also saves staff time and resources. Departments in the Division of Student Affairs (Division) have a multitude of data sources that can be tapped to get information about students. These sources often contain data that are systematically collected as part of a routine internal process. The data from the sources, however, are not always viewed through the lens of assessment. Here are several examples of such sources and ways data collected from them can be used for assessment purposes:

- *Program attendance records*: Many departments keep track of student attendance at various programs or events, and this data can be useful in tracking participation trends over time. Moreover, this information can help identify populations not being served. The more information a department has about the demographics of these students, the better administrators can understand and serve their audiences and direct marketing efforts. If there are no formal ways to keep program attendance (such as ID card scanners, hand scanners, or ticket sales), simply counting may be sufficiently effective!
- *Student applications*: Applications for leadership positions, scholarships, program participation, or other activities can provide insight into how students view themselves. They can also help advisors and supervisors identify areas for focused attention during training. Applications that require students to write about their personal strengths and motives for Student Affairs involvement at UGA can reveal students' self-reported levels of cognition and personal development. Comparing initial applications to written reflections upon completion of a leadership term, a program, or a training experience is an excellent way to assess growth.
- *Student trainings*: Many departments hold regular or *ad hoc* trainings with students, such as organization members, leaders, and student employees. If students are required to give mock presentations or complete group planning tasks as a part of training, administrators can create specific learning outcomes for the training and use a rubric to measure them. Administrators can consider other exercises students complete routinely and approach them in a similar way. The point here is to create assessments around activities that students are already doing.
- *Web site traffic*: For administrators who have the ability to track hits to their departmental Web site, paying attention to the links that are most frequently visited and at what times in the semester they are visited provides much useful data. This activity can be a

convenient way to gauge the success of communication and outreach efforts. Additionally, administrators can be sure to keep those pages most frequented up-to-date, informative, and visually appealing.

Share Data Across Departments

Another way to engage in smarter assessment is to communicate with other Student Affairs departments, either directly or through the Department of Student Affairs Assessment (DSAA), to identify opportunities to share data. University Housing, for example, has various types of information on residential students at UGA. The University Health Center has data from national questionnaires on students' alcohol and drug use, sexual behaviors, and other health-related topics. DSAA has data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey that offers a portrait of the incoming freshman class. DSAA also has data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. The following is a list of tips for sharing data across departments:

• If possible, make the sharing process a reciprocal activity. If a department allows an administrator access to their data, he or she should try to identify data that may be of use to share in return. While this may not apply in all cases, reciprocity encourages a spirit of sharing that is essential to a healthy culture of assessment.
• Adhere strictly to confidentiality standards. The department sharing the data should communicate the expected level of confidentiality required for using their data. Adherence to these standards is a must. In addition, the department that is requesting data should make known in advance how all data acquired will be used and disseminated.
• Identify opportunities for collaboration. Administrators can discuss with colleagues in their own departments and other departments assessment projects planned for the future to determine if there are ways to collaborate. One department may develop the assessment instrument and conduct data analysis, while the other may offer a subset of its student population as participants and assist in the data collection and reporting processes. DSAA can help make connections between departments by sharing current assessment project lists.

Engage in Creative, Nontraditional Methods of Assessment

Finding new ways to collect data is critical to keeping students engaged in assessment efforts. Instead of creating yet another online questionnaire, consider creative ways to collect data that may be more interesting and gratifying to students. Creative assessments that measure beyond simple facts, frequencies, and descriptives illustrate how students apply their learning to "solve real-world problems and to develop habits of mind for dealing with life" (Mezeske & Mezeske, 2007, p. 5). These data collection methods should be used "alongside a range of assessments […] to build a multi-faceted, agile thinking citizenry" (p. 6). The following is a list of examples of nontraditional data collection methods.
• Photo elicitation: This technique is emerging in student affairs assessment. Photo elicitation involves giving students a prompt or question to address by taking photos of objects within their environment. One might ask students registered with the Disability Resource Center, for example, to take pictures that represent their experiences with wheelchair accessibility on campus. More broadly, one might ask a group of first year students to take pictures of objects that represent what the University means to them. The student photographer is then interviewed about his or her photos. One might ask students to keep a journal throughout the picture-taking process and discuss its contents during the interview process as well. Photo elicitation is a more time consuming technique, but it yields rich assessment data from students who tend to truly enjoy the process.
• One minute messages: Asking students to take one minute after a meeting, event, or training exercise to jot down thoughts, reactions, questions, or things they have learned is a quick and simple way to collect data. It requires little planning and takes up very little of students' time. Administrators can ask students to write whatever comes to their minds or give them a specific question to which to respond. This technique gives one a snapshot or longitudinal picture of how students view a particular experience or what students have learned from an exercise or training opportunity.

• Case studies: This method is particularly useful in student trainings and retreats for student leaders. Presenting students with specific scenarios they may face in their role and having them develop an appropriate course of action facilitates teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving. The solutions they present, as well as the manner in which they present them, provide the assessment data. Developing a rubric of desired skills is very helpful to measure the competency level of students' case study work and their presentation abilities.

Conclusion

Rethinking data collection can go a long way in improving assessment practice and building a healthy culture of assessment. As demands for assessment continue to increase, student affairs educators will need to collect data in a way that is cost-efficient, resource-efficient, and sensitive to the problem of survey fatigue. In short, the current state of affairs calls practitioners to conduct smarter assessment and let go of the idea that more is better. This article presented three strategies for doing so: a) utilize preexisting data, b) share data across departments, and c) engage in creative, nontraditional methods of assessment. The use of these strategies will ensure that departments obtain the necessary information needed to measure and demonstrate effectiveness while reducing students' exposure to survey methods.

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Leslie Atchley currently works as Assessment Coordinator for the School of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She formerly served as Assistant Director of Assessment and Staff Development and Student Government Association Graduate Advisor within the Division of Student Affairs at UGA. She serves as a member of the Directorate for ACPA's Commission for Assessment and Evaluation.

Cyclical Assessment: A Strategy for Long-Term Success

By DR. JAN DAVIS BARHAM

Introduction

Since the earliest part of this decade, there has been an influx of literature on the topic of assessment (American College Personnel Association, 2006; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Yet, little has been written about how to establish an intentional, comprehensive, and long-term cycle for conducting assessment at the departmental level. The purpose of this article is to redress this scholarly shortcoming by articulating a rationale for instituting a cyclical system that gives structure to assessment efforts and providing a structure for establishing such a system. The model presented here is built around and designed specifically for departments within the Division of Student Affairs (Division) at the University of Georgia (UGA).

In recent years, the Division at UGA has done an exceptional job of meeting rising demands for assessment. In 2005, the Division only reported conducting 15 assessment initiatives, most of which highlighted the work of one or two departments. However, by 2008 every department participated in data collection efforts to complete over 70 assessment projects. It is clear that staff within the Division understand the importance of examining programs and services in order to make informed decisions, demonstrate efficacy, and contribute to the campus learning environment.

While the number of assessment initiatives being reported has increased substantially since 2005, current practice within the Division does not include an intentional cycle for assessment at the departmental level. Some assessment projects are conducted on a regular schedule, but, overall, assessment efforts are spontaneous and not cyclical in nature. This approach is problematic for two main reasons: 1) staff members report feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with the number of assessments they think they need to conduct, and 2) students are being unsystematically bombarded with requests to participate in assessment activities.

One might say that we are at a crossroads. The Division can continue business as usual, collecting assessment information with little attention to the coordination of assessment projects, or we can further improve our assessment practice by adopting an assessment model that is comprehensive, cyclical, and highly intentional. Such a model has the potential to address the problems of survey fatigue and personnel dissatisfaction mentioned previously, while steering the Division toward desired growth and long term success.

"It is clear that staff within the Division understand the importance of examining programs and services in order to make informed decisions, demonstrate efficacy, and contribute to the campus learning environment."

A Five-Year Departmental Assessment Cycle

What is it?

In general terms, a five-year departmental assessment cycle (DAC) is a plan that identifies the key aspects of practice that need to be examined systematically within a department over a five-year period of time. The purpose of the DAC presented here is to bring intentionality and structure to current departmental assessment practice, streamline assessment efforts across the Division, and decrease the assessment fatigue being experienced by both students and staff at UGA.

Several documents serve as the foundation of this DAC: UGA's mission, the Division's mission and strategic plan, and each department's mission and strategic plan. These documents are interconnected. A department's mission and strategic plan are connected reciprocally to the Division's mission and strategic plan, while the Division's mission and strategic plan support the overarching mission of UGA.

What should be included?

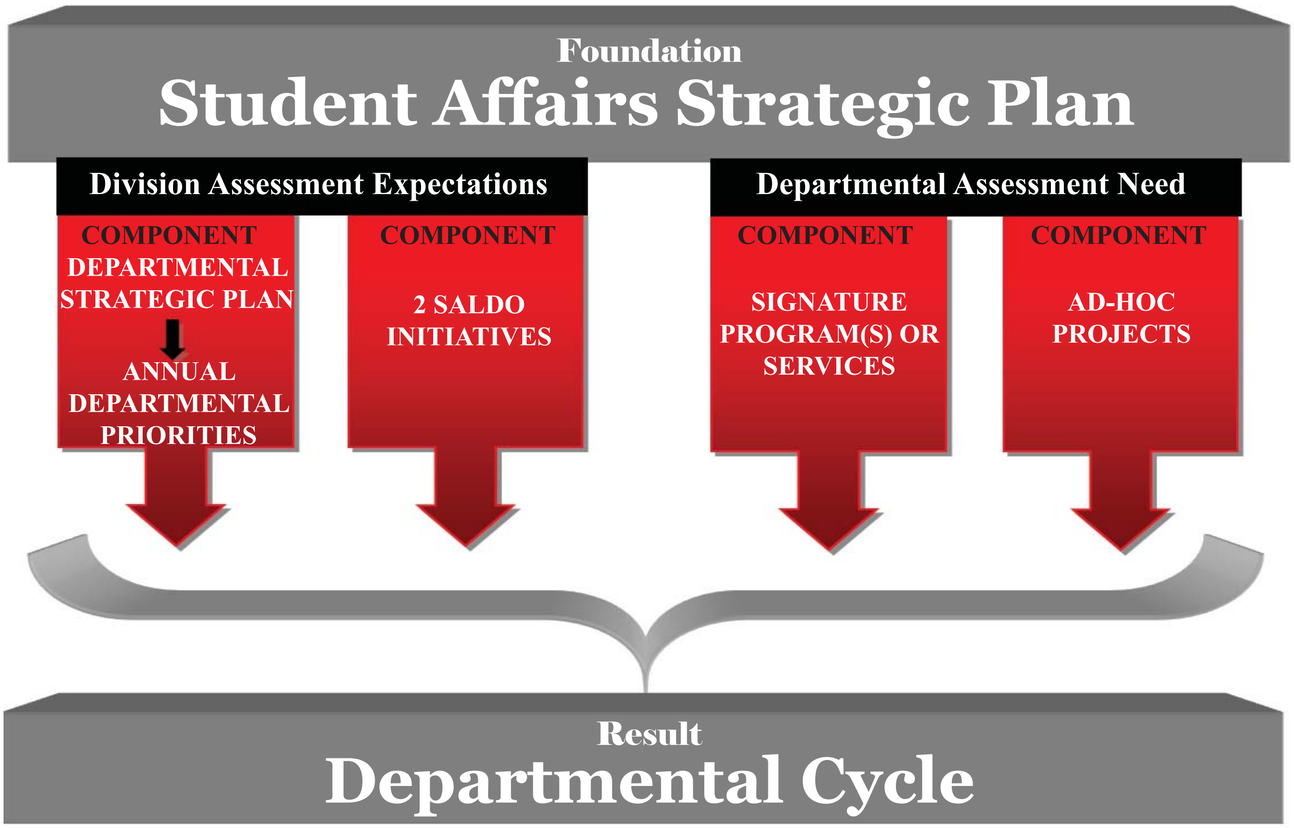
Four key components should be included in this DAC: (1) assessment of annual priorities, (2) assessment of learning in two areas related to the Student Affairs Learning and Development Objectives (SALDOs), (3) assessment of signature program(s) and/or service(s), and (4) assessment of ad-hoc projects.

Currently, two Division-level assessment requirements exist, assessment of annual priorities and assessment of learning through the use of SALDOs. These assessment expectations comprise the first two components of this DAC. Through the annual priority planning process, departments identify priorities and indicate how the achievement of those priorities will be measured. Departments also assess two programmatic areas each year using the SALDOs curriculum. Departments can select and assess any of the eight SALDOs believed to be relevant to their respective programs and services.

It is also important that individual departments have the flexibility to assess areas other than those mentioned above. The final two components of this cyclical assessment model address this need for flexibility by including space to assess signature programs and services and ad-hoc initiatives. *Signature programs and services* are typically core aspects of a departmental mission and should be examined on a regular basis. Examples of signature programs may include those that are high cost programs and/or high profile activities, such as Dawgs After Dark, Intramurals, DAWG Days, Regents Testing, REAL Talks, etc. *Ad-hoc projects* might include a needs assessment, a cost-benefit analysis, a market study for growth, or an environmental study of physical space needs. As a rule of thumb, ad-hoc projects should focus on areas critical to a department operating effectively and carrying out its mission. Signature programs and ad-hoc projects should be examined over the life of the five-year assessment cycle; however, in some instances, departments may find it necessary to prolong the assessment of these core operations over the life of two assessment cycles.

In summary, this DAC should include a minimum of two initiatives that measure student learning and development utilizing the SALDOs curriculum, measurement of annual departmental priorities, and assessment of designated signature programs or services and ad-hoc projects. The following diagram illustrates the four components.

Five-Year Departmental Assessment Cycle
Division of Student Affairs



NOTE: Departments should select different programs and/or services to assess each year. See "How do we create our plan" for additional guidance on establishing assessment initiatives for each year.

	Departmental Priorities	2 SALDOs Initiatives	Signature program/service	Ad-hoc projects
Year One Initiatives				
Year Two Initiatives				
Year Three Initiatives				
Year Four Initiatives				
Year Five Initiatives				

Why a five year cycle?

In scholarly research there is debate over the life cycle of documents such as strategic plans, master facility plans, etc. Some suggest that a ten-year cycle works best, while others offer the thought that ten-year cycles are too long and lack the detail for true completion of the plan. Thus, many organizations have moved to a five-year life cycle for major plans and processes because it provides a more practical roadmap towards completion. A five-year cycle is more finite in time, appears more achievable by staff members who are asked to implement the plan, and inherently impacts change at a faster rate than a ten-year cycle.

How do we create a plan?

Creating a five-year departmental assessment cycle using this model begins by engaging staff. Understanding the assessment needs from the staff members who do the work on a daily basis is critical to the development of a formative yet practical document. Further, it is important to understand from those staff members the urgency of those assessment needs. These two elements coupled with a familiarity and understanding of the departmental strategic plan serve as the foundation for creating a plan that is grounded in the day to day work as well as the long term goals of the unit.

Other points of consideration that will aid in the creation of this DAC include:

• What are the departmental annual priorities for the next five years? As indicated previously, these should be grounded in the departmental strategic plan.

• What are the signature programs and services that should be examined in the next five years?

  o Which of the programs or services need to be assessed first (for budgetary reasons, to have evidence of the impact, to justify its existence)?

  o Determine the number of projects that is reasonable for the department to examine given workload and other priorities. Assign initiatives in order of importance to different years in the cycle.

• What information do you really need to know about your department, your students, your programs, your competition, or your staff? List these out and determine those that are the most critical. Spread these inquiry points out over the five-year cycle, integrating those that the staff identified as most critical earlier in the cycle.

• How will the department utilize SALDOs. (Note: It is best to not assess the same two programs each year. By rotating initiatives, departments can better determine the impact each has on student learning and development.)

"One of the most important principles to remember in the development of this DAC is every program does not need to be assessed every year!"

One of the most important principles to remember in the development of this DAC is every program does not need to be assessed every year! Practitioners should intentionally select areas of assessment that are the most important, cost the most, or have the greatest potential to demonstrate evidence of effective practice in terms of learning, development, or service. If in the development phase, departments find themselves with more assessment initiative ideas than are reasonable to accomplish in a given year, consideration should be given to combining efforts. It is possible that two assessment objectives can be accomplished through one initiative.

A five-year departmental assessment cycle is not intended to create more assessment work, but is intended to bring structure and intentionality to current assessment efforts. Additionally, this DAC should always be grounded in the departmental strategic plan and mission statement. It should focus on the key components that are needed to gauge departmental success, and should be used as a tool to instill sustainable assessment practice. Finally, to ensure cohesiveness between the various units within the Division, it should tie back to the Division's strategic plan and learning and development curriculum, SALDOs.

What are the benefits of using this DAC?

There are multiple benefits to such an approach for staff, departments, students, and ultimately the Division. Staff members can better understand the expectations of assessment being placed upon them. As a result, the pressure to assess every program every year is alleviated and staff will find themselves in a better place to seek training and assistance needed to conduct high quality assessment projects. Departments can also benefit from the use of this DAC. Knowing assessment priorities for the year allows departments to be more intentional in planning assessment projects, more intentional in delegating such assessment projects, more intentional in allocating staff resources to complete assessment projects, and more intentional in communicating assessment results to stakeholders.

Equally as important, students benefit from the establishment of this DAC. In this model, they are solicited for information less frequently, their experiences with assessment are more salient and intentional, and a framework is provided to demonstrate how assessment initiatives positively influence their educational experiences. As Tschepikow and McKinney demonstrate in this publication, these improvements may go a long way in enhancing assessment within the Division. Finally, the Division as a whole can benefit from departments establishing this DAC. As data collection efforts are streamlined and made more efficient at the departmental level, the Division will be better able to articulate the many ways in which it is accomplishing its mission, strategic plan, and learning and development curriculum.

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Conclusion

The demands for data at the local, state, and federal levels are here to stay (Bryan, Winston, & Miller, 1991). Therefore, the need for assessment is paramount in today's institutions of higher education (Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). However, the assessment work that is done can be practical, intentional, and completed in a way that meets both institutional and departmental needs for long-term success. Through the use of an intentionally created five-year assessment cycle, the Division of Student Affairs at the University of Georgia can accomplish several objectives. We can meet the demand for data that is posed by various constituent groups, we can collect information we need to make evidence based decisions, and we can do this in a way that attends to the assessment fatigue experienced by both students and staff.

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About the Author

Dr. Jan Davis Barham is the Director for Student Affairs Assessment and Staff Development in the Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs. Her responsibilities within the Division of Student Affairs are two-fold. First, Dr. Davis Barham provides leadership for the division in the areas of assessment, strategic planning, and annual reporting processes. Second, she coordinates the staff development activities and learning opportunities for staff within the Division. Dr. Davis Barham received her undergraduate degree in Communication Science from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and master's in Human Development and Psychological Counseling from Appalachian State University. She received a Ph.D in Education from UGA. Prior to serving in her current position, Dr. Davis Barham worked in residence life at several institutions, including the University of Tennessee-Knoxville and Wake Forest University.

Raising Response Rates

Strategies for Practice

• **Contacting potential participants multiple times** significantly increases response rates. Consider including a short pre-notification email/letter foretelling the survey and one or two follow-up emails/letters after the survey has been disseminated.

• **Longer surveys** yield lower response rates. The shorter the survey the better.

• **Incentives** more effectively increase response rates when they are included with the surevey (prepaid incentive). Incentives do not need to be extremely valuable; however, the more salient the incentive is to the sample group, the more effective it will be.

• Surveys that are **highly salient** to the potential participants yield higher response rates. Helping potential participants understand how the data will be used to impact their educational experience may go a long way also.

• Including a **request for help** from the potential participants in the cover letter may increase response rates. For example, one could write, "completing this survey would really help us out."

• Emphasizing to participants that they are part of a **selected group** from a larger population may increase response rates.

• Giving potential participants a **timeline** by which to complete the survey may also increase response rates.

Adapted from Porter, S. (2004, January 1). Raising response rates: What works?. New directions for institutional research, no 121 (pp. 5-21). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

DSAA on the Web

http://www.uga.edu/studentaffairs/assess

The DSAA Website serves as a resource for educators who would like to learn more about assessment.

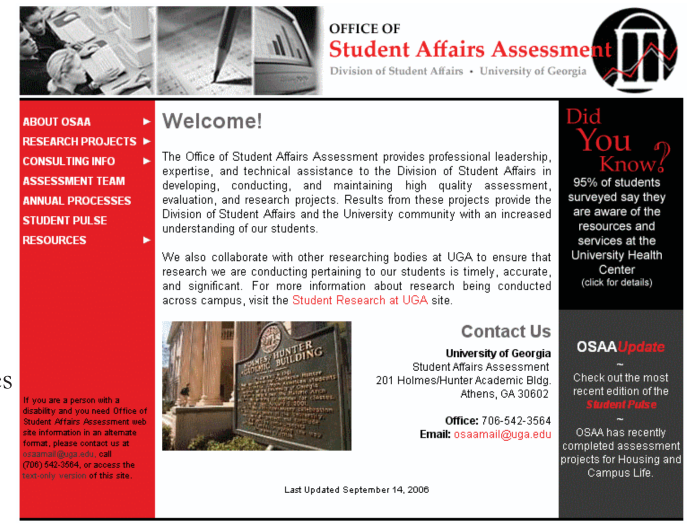
The site offers a variety of information about DSAA, including:

- a list of selected projects
- reports from selected projects
- consulting services and processes
- Assessment Team 2007 curriculum
- previous editions of the *Student Pulse*

You can also access general assessment and research information, including:

- a glossary of assessment terminology
- a list of available research grant and funding sources
- links to other assessment-related organizations

If you have any questions about DSAA or the website, contact us at (706) 542-3564 or osaamail@uga.edu



STUDENT PULSE MISSION

The *Student Pulse* serves to introduce the University community to the assessment being conducted on college students at UGA and to emerging research in the field of Student Affairs. In addition, this publication serves to increase the Division's exposure to, knowledge of, and experience with assessment principles.

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