
The Politics of Assessment

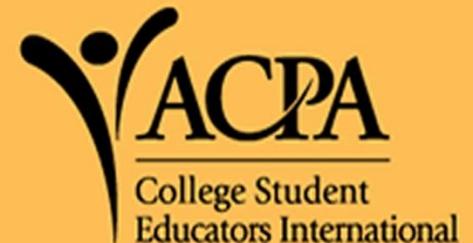
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Goals of this program

- Define politics in student affairs
- Explore the relationship between politics and assessment
- Learn strategies to consider when planning assessments and disseminating findings
- Discuss how to avoid common errors

Defining Politics

- A social interaction that makes decisions
- Determines who makes the decision, what is decided, how it will be made and when it is to be implemented
- An interaction between power, self-interest (or organizational interest), reason and the common good

Organizational Politics

- “Involves acquiring, developing and using power to obtain preferred outcomes in situations in which groups disagree”

(Birnbaum, 1988, p. 132)

Characteristics of Organizational Politics

- Groups that work autonomously but remain interdependent
- Power of any group depends on their value in the organization
- Some groups have more power than others but no one group has enough to dominate
- Trade-offs and compromises

(Birnbaum, 1988 p. 132-138)

Assessment and Politics

- “All assessment is political” (Upcraft, 2003, p. 560)
- Assessment will be used if it can be planned and conducted in a way that will build support from many different parties or interest groups

Other Definitions:

- Interest Groups: “any group of individuals that seeks to influence policy in favor of some shared goal or concern”
- Political Implications: the extent to which your findings lead to changes in policy, resource allocation or influence
- Politically Viable: extent to which a study is fair and equitable in pressures and actions by all interest groups involved

(Sanders, J.A., 1994, p. 71)

Ultimately:

“The [assessment] should be planned and conducted with anticipation of the different positions of various interest groups, so that their cooperation may be obtained, and so that possible attempts by any of these groups to curtail [assessment] operations or to bias or misapply the results can be averted or counteracted”

(Sander, J.A., 1994, , p. 71)

Goals of Assessment

- Obtain objective information that is useful to all parties

To reach that goal, you need to plan for the politics involved

Planning Your Assessment for Politics

- Before starting meet with as many interest groups as possible
 - Anticipate who will be interested in your findings
 - Find out concerns/areas of support
 - Find out what they would like to know or find useful
 - Assure them of integrity of the study

Planning Your Assessment

- Make explicit ahead of time:
 - Who helps to create assessment tools?
 - Does the tool need to be vetted and by who?
 - Who has access to raw data?
 - Who helps to edit final reports?
 - Who helps to determine dissemination of findings?
 - How and to what extent will confidentiality of participants be obtained?

Planning Your assessment

- Plan a strong study
 - Make sure instruments are valid, reliable and/or trustworthy
 - Take into consideration the credibility/expertise of the creators and those carrying out the study
 - Maintain high ethical standards
 - Acknowledge strengths and weaknesses up front
 - Try and reduce weaknesses when possible

Group Exercise

Think of an assessment project you are planning and then brainstorm:

- What interest groups would be effected or interested in your assessment results?
- How knowledgeable are they currently about your project?
- What has been determined as far as planning and access to data?
- What could you do when you return to your campus to improve these areas?

During the Assessment Process

- Eliminate surprises - provide updates of the process to key stakeholders and interest groups
- Discontinue if study appears to be favoring one group over another or becomes subjective in some way
- Analyze and report data differently for different perspectives if resources allow

Dissemination of Findings

Layer #1: Interest Groups

- How best to present findings to each group?
- What is the impact (positive and negative) of the findings on each group?
- Who will help in the editing process and deciding what “goes public”?
- Properly address limitations of the study in findings

Dissemination of Findings

Layer #2: Public Findings

- Determine how “public” of a report
- Determine with interest groups what targeted audiences will get report
- Determine how best to present findings (i.e. short or long report, all findings or selected findings)
- Determine if different audiences need different formats (i.e. 1-2 page summary, press release, full report)
- Anticipate criticisms and address in your report

Group Exercise:

- Think of past assessment projects
 - How well have they been received?
 - What works well on your campus?
 - What does not work well?
 - From a political lens is there something you need to consider that you have left out in the past?

Common Errors to Avoid

- Giving the appearance of bias towards one group
- Not taking into account formal and informal power structures
- Conducting a study that no one wants
- Not allowing interest groups to give feedback
- Not addressing concerns of interest groups
- Assuming objective methods = fair assessment
- When providing updates during study, failing to mention that future analysis may lead to altered findings

Share some of your experiences:

- How could you have anticipated the politics of the situation better?
- What roadblocks have you found that are linked with politics?
- What challenges have politics played in your assessment efforts?
- What rewards have politics played in your assessment efforts?

Contributors:

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