

John H. Schuh
M. Lee Upcraft
and Associates

Assessment PRACTICE in Student Affairs

*An Applications
Manual*

Copyright © 2001 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, e-mail: permcoordinator@wiley.com.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at (800) 956-7739, outside the U.S. at (317) 572-3986 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Jossey-Bass also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

The exhibits included in this book (except those for which reprint permission must be obtained from the primary sources) may be freely reproduced for educational/training activities. There is no requirement to obtain special permission for such uses. We do, however, ask that the following statement appear on all reproductions.

Assessment Practice in Student Affairs: An Applications Manual by John H. Schuh, M. Lee Upcraft, and Associates. Copyright © 2001 by Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schuh, John H.

Assessment practice in student affairs: an application manual/John H. Schuh, M. Lee

Upcraft, and associates.—1st ed.

p. cm.—(The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7879-5053-8 (alk. paper)

1. Student affairs services—United States—Evaluation—Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Education, Higher—United States—Evaluation—Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Upcraft, M. Lee. II. Title. III. Series.

LB2342.92 .S35 2001

378.1'98—dc21

00-048759

Chapter 9

Needs Assessment

NEEDS ASSESSMENT is a central element in a student affairs assessment program. It is very difficult to develop student affairs programs, activities, and services without an awareness of client needs. In spite of the centrality of needs assessment, the number of routine needs assessments that are conducted is inadequate. Buttram (1990, p. 207) concludes, "Although most program planners would probably argue that they know what their clients need, too many programs have failed because of mismatched services." We would also assert that before any new program, service, or activity begins, a systematic needs assessment ought to be conducted. We fear such is the case too infrequently.

Kaufman and English (1979) assert that needs assessment helps provide precision in addressing various problems, issues, and concerns: "Needs assessment is a tool by which one may be increasingly assured that the intervention, once selected, is related to basic gaps and problems, not just to the obvious symptoms or to problems poorly defined" (p. 55). Soriano (1995, p. 2) adds, "Needs assessments are used to collect data on the need for or current use of services, products or information. The information gained from needs assessment is typically used to make decisions about the allocation of program resources and services." Needs assessment, in our view, is closely linked with satisfaction assessment. In effect, needs assessment helps define problems so that they can be acted on, while satisfaction assessment helps determine if the interventions have been successful.

This chapter discusses the needs assessment process by using a case study that demonstrates how such an assessment was central to an overall decision-making process.

Definition of Needs Assessment

In *Assessment in Student Affairs*, we identified a number of definitions of needs assessment. (One caution we offered was to distinguish between student wants and student needs.) At times students think their needs can be met only through an expensive, elaborate intervention on the part of their institution, which could involve the addition of staff, new equipment, and so on. This may not always be the case. Consider the following example.

✦ Student leaders report, after considerable input from their constituents, that a number of students with young children are unable to attend classes when their children are ill. The work of the leaders has been thorough; nobody on campus disputes their claims. Day care centers will not provide service to sick children for fear of contagion, and parents seem to have no alternative. Students need to attend class, they cannot leave their children in traditional day care, and they cannot leave them at home. What can be done?

This is a situation where the needs are clear: find a way to provide care for sick children so that their parents can attend class. One way of dealing with the problem would be to develop a day care program strictly for sick children. But this kind of care could prove to be costly for the parents since there would be no way to predict when the care would be needed or how many children would have to be served daily.

A far less costly alternative would be to develop a cooperative program among parents so that they could take care of each other's children on an emergency basis. That may or may not solve the problem. Another approach would be to form a partnership with businesses in the university area so that a program could be developed to serve the needs of working parents who face the same problem when their children are ill. Another possibility might be to work with a local hospital with empty beds to provide drop-in care for sick children.

Whether any or all of these approaches might be successful depends on local exigencies, although the approach with the local hospital was successful in one setting. Nevertheless, the examples demonstrate that there is a difference between student needs and student wants. Moreover, it is important to the institutional responses to the institution's mission. At a residential college that enrolls traditional-age students almost exclusively, it might not make sense to provide a response to this problem since very few students have children. Developing a complex system to meet the needs of a handful of students may fall outside the mission of the college. Harsh though it may seem, colleges and universities cannot provide services to meet the needs of everybody all the time. At times, it makes much more sense for institutions to narrow their focus and use their assets to advance

their stated mission rather than to broaden their focus and dilute what they do best.

After reviewing a number of elements that potentially could be part of a definition of needs assessment, we agreed on the following: assessing student needs is the process of determining the presence or absence of the factors and conditions, resources, services, and learning opportunities that students need in order to meet their educational goals and objectives within the context of an institution's mission (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996).

• Purposes of Needs Assessment

More than fifteen years ago, George Kuh developed a scheme for needs assessment that is still contemporary in its approach. He identified five different kinds of needs assessments and outlined the advantages and disadvantages of each (see Table 9.1). *p. 132*

We think that needs assessment, as depicted in this scheme, is especially useful in the justification of program policy. The purpose of the activity is to examine an expressed need and develop alternatives to address it. With the example of sick children of students, a need had been expressed, and no one disputes it. In an attempt to respond to it, a variety of alternatives are developed, and one or more may be tried on an experimental basis to determine which is most effective, given its various dimensions of cost effectiveness, service to parents, and enabling students to attend class. Consider the following case related to developing an institutional response to potential student needs.

Evening Student Concerns at Metro Community College: A Case Example

You chair one of the most prestigious councils on your campus, a community college that serves a large metropolitan area. This council is concerned with academic operations, such as registration, academic advising, and collecting fees. You have wide latitude to discuss academic matters on the campus, although the group does not address such faculty issues as curriculum, and tenure and promotion in academic rank. Representatives from every academic college sit on the committee, as well as staff from the registrar's office, faculty council, and so on.

At a recent meeting, questions were raised about how long offices ought to remain open during the day. The college has a night program with several thousand students, and so there may be a need for evening services.

TABLE 9.1

Purposes of Needs Assessments*Kuh*

Kind	Purpose	Advantages	Disadvantages
Monitor stakeholder perceptions	Generate ideas and document perceptions about various issues	Exploratory in nature; relatively threat free	Needs and wants may not be differentiated; not linked directly to action
Program policy justification	Collect information to support likely alternatives	Allows input into decision making	Needs and wants may not be differentiated
Satisfaction index	Estimate relative acceptability of various alternatives	Allows input; helps identify potentially controversial issues	Tends to emphasize wants over needs; may generate support for questionable or controversial activities
Participating policymaking	Select the most acceptable policy or program from alternatives	Allows stakeholders to influence institutional response to needs	Potential to generate support for questionable or controversial practices
Measurable improvement	Determine whether needs have been met	Documents effectiveness of unit; assesses client functioning	May not attend to existing problems or needs; focus on concerns previously functioning

Source: Kuh, 1982, p. 205. Reprinted with permission of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA).

What you do know is that over two thousand students out of a total enrollment of eighty-five hundred students are enrolled in classes only at night. The assumption is that these students work all day and probably could not conduct business on campus except during the evenings.

The discussion ranges from some offices being open for long evening hours and doing little business, to others that do a brisk business at night, to still others that close at 5:00 P.M. The discussion reflects anecdotal information about the question before the group. No one knows with any degree of certainty what services evening students need or for how long. As chair, you see that the discussion could go on indefinitely. Is there a way of getting a handle on this matter? What action steps might be taken?

The needs assessment in this case is a thorny issue. What are the needs of students who attend classes only at night at Metro CC? How could one determine these needs? These questions and others require a response from the college before programs and services are developed, modified, or eliminated.

A Quantitative Approach

The students involved in this case attended class only at night, took just a class or two, tended to work full time, and were rarely on campus. One strategy was to use a telephone poll. Two thousand students fit the definition of the students in the case, so a random sample of 959 was drawn (Rea and Parker, 1997), and these students were then queried over the telephone. The registrar's office or institutional research supplied a list of students who were enrolled only at night, along with their addresses and telephone numbers. The investigators then developed a questionnaire, trained people to collect data, and analyzed the information.

Using the telephone has two disadvantages. First, students do not always provide their up-to-date information for the institution's database, and the telephone numbers for some of them may be incorrect. Students seem to change residences frequently, and often they do not keep their telephone number after they move. The other problem is that it may be difficult to contact some of these students. We know by definition that they work all day and attend classes at least one night per week. Contacting them may be a challenge. The weekend might be the best possibility, although they may not want to engage in a telephone conversation on a Saturday or Sunday (see Chapter Seven for a detailed discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of telephone surveys).

The alternative to a telephone poll was to mail questionnaires to the students. We knew that the response rate would probably not be as high if we used a telephone survey, and we also knew that it would take a number of weeks to complete the data collection process since it was almost certain that a follow-up mailing or two would be needed (see Chapter Six for a detailed discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of mailed surveys).

Given the alternatives, a telephone poll seemed to be the better strategy. Before any data were collected, the design of the study was submitted to Metro Community College's Institutional Review Board, which reviewed the study to determine if the rights of participants were protected. Permission was granted, so the study was implemented (for a more detailed discussion of protection of human subjects, see Chapter Thirty-Two).

The first alternative in this case study was to consider using a commercially developed instrument, such as the College Student Needs Assessment Survey, developed by the American College Testing Program (1989) (www.act.org), or the satisfaction assessment instrument developed by Noel-Levitz (www.noellevitz.com). Still other instruments can be found on the American College Personnel Association World Wide Web site (www.acpa.nche.edu). In this instance, however, a locally developed instrument

better fit the purpose of the study. (For a more complete discussion of locally developed instruments and commercially developed instruments, see Chapter Five.) Exhibit 9.1 contains a telephone survey, which determined if students knew about the student service and if they used it, the number of times they did.

Data analysis of this survey was quite simple. Reporting frequencies and percentages was sufficient. It would be possible to conduct additional analyses by using the demographic data as independent variables. Since this is a project designed to determine what student needs have gone unmet by the institution, more sophisticated quantitative data analyses were not necessary. For the open-ended question, data were analyzed by reporting the services identified by the participants.

"Conducting a needs assessment and undertaking appropriate analyses are meaningless if information is not presented in an appropriate manner" (Soriano, 1995, p. 84). The report developed based on the data collected was prepared for the committee charged with oversight responsibility for services for these students. Each of the committee members would receive a full report. Executive summaries would go to the senior academic and student affairs officers of the college to make them aware of the activities of the committee and the committee's efforts to meet the needs of students on campus better. Based on the results of the report, changes may or may not be made.

A Qualitative Approach

An alternative to the quantitative approach would be to employ a qualitative approach. Berkowitz (1996, p. 54) asserts that "the most salient reason to use qualitative methods in needs assessment is that they offer the opportunity to probe an issue or question in depth, and to explore respondents' views and perspectives in their own terms and framework of understanding." Should the committee have decided that the questions required more in-depth responses from the students that a telephone poll would yield, a qualitative approach would have provided a good alternative.

In this case, instead of contacting a random sample of 959 students, the committee could have decided to conduct five focus groups of approximately seven students each. Students would be invited to participate in the focus groups using criterion sampling (Patton, 1990). That is, the focus groups would consist of people who represented the kinds of students who took classes at night, based on their demographic characteristics. The groups would also represent proportions of students who took these classes by gender, race, class standing, and major. So, for example, if 60 percent of

EXHIBIT 9.1**Telephone Interview Protocol**

Good evening. My name is _____. May I speak to _____? I work with a committee at Metro Community College that is attempting to determine the needs of adult students such as you. You were one of the randomly selected Metro students to be called for this voluntary, eight-minute survey. Please be assured that your responses are confidential and will be reported as summarized data used in future planning efforts of Metro. No individual data will be identified. You may choose not to answer specific questions. If you have any questions, contact Dr. I. M. Doingastudy, at 403 Administration Building, Metro Community College, Metro, Pennsylvania, or by telephone (999) 555-1938, or by e-mail (imd5@metro.edu).

I hope you will take this opportunity for your voice to be heard. Are you willing to participate? Good. Here is my first series of questions.

Have you used the following student services, after 5:00 P.M., during the previous semester? And if so, how many times have you used this service? Have you:

Used the services of the admissions office?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Used the services of the financial aid office?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Sought career counseling from the career services center?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Used the placement services at the career services center?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Looked at the part-time job listings at the career services center?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Sought treatment from the student health service?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Purchased medication from the student health service?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Dropped or added a course at the registrar's office?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Gotten an identification card from the registrar's office?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Ordered a transcript from the registrar's office?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Paid fees at the controller's office?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Sought help from an academic adviser?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

Sought help from the staff at the learning resource center?

Yes ____ No ____ If yes, how many times? ____

EXHIBIT 9.1**Telephone Interview Protocol, continued**

Used the math lab at the learning resource center?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Used the writing lab at the learning resource center?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Sought help from the counseling center?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Gotten a parking decal from the parking office?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Sought help from the disability services center?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Used the computer lab?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Ate a meal at the student union?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Used the commuter lounge at the student union?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Used the facilities at the recreation center?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Used services at the child care center?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Made purchases at the bookstore?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Used the library?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

Studied on campus?

Yes ☐ No ☐ If yes, how many times?

My second question is, given your daily schedule, are you able to access these student services during the day, from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.?

Yes ☐ No ☐

Thinking about these many services or others you believe you need that are not currently available, what services would you use if they were available after 5:00 P.M.?

[Record responses.]

Thank you very much for your help with this project. The results will be available in about six weeks on Metro's Web site: www.metro.edu.

the students who took classes at night were women, about 60 percent of focus group participants should be women.

The purpose of using this qualitative sampling technique is to ensure that the study will have credibility among prospective audiences and should not be confused with stratified random sampling in quantitative studies. There is no assertion of statistical representativeness in using this sampling procedure, but we recognize that there should be a logical similarity between the characteristics of students participating in focus groups and those of the general population of adult students.

One issue related to sampling would be left unresolved until the focus groups were completed: five groups may not be enough, but we will not know that until the information we have learned from our groups becomes redundant. Redundancy is reached when the information gleaned from a group is so similar to what has been gleaned from previous groups that nothing new is learned.

Focus Group Protocol

Exhibit 9.2 contains the focus group interview protocol that was used in conducting focus groups with Metro Community College students.

Data analysis began as the groups were conducted. For example, based on information gathered from early focus groups, the protocol could be modified for the later groups. Patterns, themes, and trends were sought from the groups and formed the basis of the report. In conducting the groups, the assistant moderator kept notes. All groups were tape-recorded and analyzed based on repeated listening to the tapes. If resources are available and time permits, the tapes could be transcribed for the purposes of data analysis.

Other qualitative approaches also were used to collect data. Evening students were observed on campus. Did they park their cars, go straight to class, and then go home, or did they detour to the library, the computer center, or the student union? Observations helps the investigators understand these students' behavior patterns while they are on campus.

Document and record analysis also was useful in this project. Did evening students drop or add classes at a rate different from day students? Did annual reports of the recreation center compare usage between day and evening students? Did these students use other services in campus and, if so, to what extent? Assuming campus services and programs track their student users, this information could be useful in this assessment.

The report from the qualitative study was developed for similar audiences as the quantitative approach. The oversight group had a copy of the

EXHIBIT 9.2**Student Needs Focus Group Protocol**

Thanks very much for joining me today for this discussion. My name is _____ and I am _____ at Metro. We are here to visit for a few minutes about services for evening students at Metro. I would like to ask you folks a few questions about the services you use at Metro as evening students. Your participation in this group is voluntary. You may leave at any time. I will not attribute anything said to any specific person. If these conditions are agreeable to you, let us begin.

1. Why did you enroll at Metro?
2. How long have you been an evening student at Metro?
3. If you could do it all over again knowing what you know now, would you enroll at Metro? Why?
4. What is it like being an evening student at Metro?
5. Have you had any particular problems or challenges being an evening student at Metro?
6. What services and resources do you use at Metro at night?
7. Are there other services or resources you wish Metro would provide to evening students?
8. If you were in charge of all the services available for evening students at Metro, what would be the one service you would not change? What would you change immediately?
9. What should I ask you about services for evening students at Metro that I have not?
10. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

If you have any questions, contact Dr. I. M. Doingastudy, at 403 Administration Building, Metro Community College, Metro, Pennsylvania, or by telephone (999) 555-1938, or by e-mail (imd5@metro.edu). Thank you very much for your help with this project. The results will be available in about six weeks on Metro's Web site: www.metro.edu.

complete report, and the senior officers of Metro received an executive summary. What was learned from the study became the basis for reconsidering the needs of evening students and the hours of operations of student services. Changes were thus dependent on what was learned from the study. While report preparation is discussed in much greater detail in Upcraft and Schuh (1996), it is important to remember just how crucial the presentation of the data is. Dillman (1987, p. 206) reminds us that "more needs assessments probably fail because of inadequate data presentation than for any of the other reasons so far discussed."

Combining Methods

Rather than choosing to do either a quantitative study or a qualitative study, what might make the most sense is to do both. One analysis of needs assessment is that using a combination of methods is quite rare. Witkin (1994)

reports that in her study of 125 needs assessment reports, 86 percent used only one method. Of these studies, "the most widely used method was the written survey questionnaire followed by the structured interview" (p. 24). She urges the use of multiple methods since, in her view, "the data gathering instrument or method often constrains the kinds of data that emerge particularly in the case of surveys, in which case the [needs assessment] cannot reveal anything beyond what the questions ask; and . . . there is some evidence that different methods yield noncomparable results" (p. 24), an observation with which Wayman and Savaya (1997, p. 236) agree: "Mixed methods may provide divergent and even contradictory findings regarding a single phenomenon." They also point out that mixed methods require more personnel and time, and as a consequence they are more costly than using a single method.

Conclusion

Elsewhere (Upcraft and Schuh, 1996) we have noted that student affairs practitioners are tempted to implement programs and services based on what they learn at conferences, read in the literature, or talk about with their colleagues, but without carefully determining if there is need for a new intervention. Needs assessment becomes an essential tool in making sure that the programs that are offered are needed and that new interventions will meet an unaddressed need of students and other clients. Our view is that unless systematic needs assessments are conducted, precious resources are wasted addressing problems that do not exist.

References

- American College Testing Program. *College Student Needs Assessment Survey*. Iowa City, Iowa: American College Testing Program, 1989.
- Berkowitz, S. "Using Qualitative and Mixed-Method Approaches." In R. Reviere, S. Berkowitz, C. C. Carter, and C. G. Ferguson (eds.), *Needs Assessment: A Creative and Practical Guide for Social Scientists*. Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis, 1996.
- Buttram, J. L. "Focus Groups: A Starting Point for Needs Assessment." *Evaluation Practice*, 1990, 11(3), 207-212.
- Dillman, D. A. "Elements of Success." In D. E. Johnson, L. R. Meiller, L. C. Miller, and G. F. Summers (eds.), *Needs Assessment: Theory and Methods*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1987.
- Kaufman, R., and English, F. W. *Needs Assessment: Concept and Application*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications, 1979.

- Kuh, G. D., "Purposes and Principles of Needs Assessment in Student Affairs." *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 1982, 23(3), 205.
- Patton, M. Q. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. (2nd ed.) Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1990.
- Rea, L., M., and Parker, R. A. *Designing and Conducting Survey Research: A Comprehensive Guide*. (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Soriano, F. I. *Conducting Needs Assessments: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1995.
- Upcraft, M. L., and Schuh, J. H. *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.
- Wayman, M., and Savaya, R. "Mixed Method Evaluation: A Case Study." *Evaluation Practice*, 1997, 18(3), 227-237.
- Witkin, B. R. "Needs Assessment Since 1981: The State of the Practice." *Evaluation Practice*, 1994, 15(1), 17-27.