Assessment in Student Affairs

A Guide for Practitioners

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Chapter Six

Assessing Student Needs

Needs assessment may be a little bit like the weather—people talk about it all the time but don't do much about it. In the case of the weather that may be because not much can be done. But there are some techniques that, when properly employed, can produce a very effective assessment of student needs. This chapter is dedicated to discussing how to conduct an effective student needs assessment. How are student needs separated from student wants? Should a needs assessment be theory-based? What techniques seem to work well in conducting a needs assessment? What problems will one encounter in conducting a needs assessment? These questions and others are the focus of this chapter.

A number of issues related to needs assessment will be introduced as well. To provide a framework for needs assessment, definitions will be offered and thoughts about who is the target of the assessment will be discussed. Various methods for conducting needs assessment, some described in greater detail in other parts of this book, will be identified. And finally, various steps and perspectives in the needs assessment process will be compared and contrasted. When student affairs officers have read this chapter, they should have a reasonable idea about how to conduct a needs assessment on their campus.

Definitions of Needs Assessment

Several authors have provided good definitions of needs assessment. In viewing needs assessment through a human resource development lens, Rossett (1990) defines needs assessment as "the careful study of the context, job, skills, knowledge and job incum-

bents prior to implementing an intervention" (p. 191). Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, and Nelson (1985) define needs assessment as "the process of determining the things that are necessary or useful for the fulfillment of a defensible purpose" (p. 16). They add that needs assessment can fulfill two primary functions: determining what needs exist and how best they can be addressed, and providing criteria against which a program's merits can be evaluated.

One of the difficulties with needs assessment is that it can be difficult to separate student needs from student wants. For example, many college students, even those who attend residential colleges, seem to need automobiles (often, the more exotic the better!). Do students really need cars, or do they simply want them? Even if the need is legitimate, determining what it will take to meet the need without being extravagant or wasteful is not easy. Lenning and MacAleenan (1979) provide conceptual guidance to help in understanding this issue, reporting that "a need is considered to be a combination of discrepancy and level of necessity" (p. 188). They add that "the amount of need varies directly with both the level of necessity and the amount of discrepancy" (pp. 188–189). Let us return to the example of college students and automobiles. Does a college student really need to drive an expensive sports car? Probably not, but some form of reliable transportation will expedite a student's ability to get to an off-campus job in times of poor weather. A sports car is not the only form of automobile transportation that will help a person stay out of the rain on the way to work. A reliable used car very well may get the job done and it certainly beats riding a bicycle or walking in the rain. Both the used car and the sports car meet the need; the used car does so more economically and is a satisfactory solution, although perhaps not the most desirable from a student's perspective.

Kuh (1982) offers another approach to student needs by defining them as what the majority of a group decide. Of course, a variety of problems can be associated with this definition, especially on a campus with sizable groups of students which are underrepresented in the total student population, or marginalized in the decision-making processes of the institution. Commuter students, for example, often are overlooked in the program planning process for campus activities (see Jacoby, 1991). Student affairs staff can easily be seduced into thinking that programs are available which meet the needs of the student body as a whole if they listen to the majority. Techniques which will be described later in this chapter will help student affairs officers broaden their perspective in determining how to meet the needs of students who are not part of the majority culture.

Stufflebeam and his colleagues (1985) offer two other conceptual approaches to the concept of need. One approach they identify as *analytic*, meaning that if something is not provided, a problem may result. For example, if the graduate, academic preparation of potential student affairs staff did not include rudimentary familiarization with certain legal issues, problems might ensue. Practically speaking, this might result in an entry-level staff member's making available a student athlete's academic transcript to the local newspaper, which would be an egregious error and a clear violation of law. The other approach that Stufflebeam and his colleagues identify is referred to as *diagnostic*, meaning that the absence of something will result in harm. An example of a diagnostic need would be the failure to have fire extinguishers on every residence hall floor consistent with appropriate fire and safety codes. The absence of the appropriate fire-fighting equipment could result in tremendous problems in an emergency, as is clear to anyone who has been involved in residence hall administration.

Based on our analysis of these definitions, and our understanding of needs assessment, we have arrived at a definition which will guide our thinking throughout this chapter. Our definition is as follows: *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.*

Purposes of Needs Assessment

Various reasons exist for conducting needs assessments. Quite obviously, needs assessments are conducted because student affairs staff members have limited resources and they want to plan programs or create learning opportunities for students that will be useful and popular. Nothing is more deflating to the entry level program planner than to schedule a program in the campus center and have only a few people attend, or to plan a workshop on leadership development that, according to the evaluations completed by the participants, misses the mark! So, one purpose of conducting needs assessment involves making sure that programs meet the needs of the participants.

There is much more behind the conducting of needs assessments than we have suggested so far. Kuh (1982) identifies five reasons in his scheme for conducting needs assessments, as indicated in Table 6.1. As is the case with many aspects of student affairs, these purposes do not operate independently of one another (see Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt, 1991). Note that advantages and disadvantages exist for each of these purposes. Nevertheless, Kuh's scheme provides an excellent point of departure for staff who are thinking of conducting a needs assessment but are not quite sure how to develop a conceptual framework for the project.

It is probably useful to point out that needs assessments may very well be used in one way for purposes internal to a student affairs unit, and in another for external constituencies. Internally, a needs assessment will help student affairs staff make decisions about policies, programs, and services. The assessment can play a crucial role in helping staff determine what the unit's activities will be as they relate directly to students. Externally, needs assessments can be used to provide justification for initiating programs, for eliminating them, and for defending policies and activities to more senior level administrators, members of the governing board, the legislature, and the public. It should also be remembered that needs assessments can be very helpful in explaining to students why certain experiences are required of them, such as living in a residence hall, having to participate in a community service activity, or taking freshman English.

As one might imagine, there can be a dark side to conducting needs assessments. People do not always have the purest motives for these activities. Stufflebeam and others (1985) have identified several questionable, perhaps unstated, motives for conducting a needs assessment. One of these is to use the assessment on a post hoc basis to justify an administrative decision to cancel a program. At times, certain programs will have to be canceled, but the needs

Table 6.1. Purposes of Needs Assessments.

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 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 policy-making	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	Document effectiveness of unit; assesses client functioning	May not attend to present problems or needs; focus on concerns previously functioning

Source: Kuh, G. D. "Purposes and Principles of Needs Assessments in Student Affairs." *Journal of College Student Personnel,* 1982, 23(3), p. 205. Reprinted by permission.

assessment should be done in advance of the decision, not afterwards. Similarly, the discharge of an employee should not be justified by a needs assessment after the fact.

While it is nearly impossible to conduct value-free needs assessments (Kuh, 1982), conducting an assessment for the purpose of attacking an adversary's credibility is an anathema to the process. It can be difficult to separate organizational politics from a needs assessment, but in general the focus of the assessment should not be on strengthening a political position. However, as pointed out in Chapter Two, sometimes we must justify services and programs to important political constituents and needs assessments may be important to that justification. Similarly, trying to enhance one's visibility or credibility undeservedly should not be a purpose of needs assessment. The assessment may point to good work being conducted by certain persons in the organization, but that should be a by-product of the activity, not its central purpose. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrator's *Standards of Professional Practice* (1992–1993) speaks directly to the ethical considerations of conducting an assessment and is well worth reviewing in advance of conducting an assessment.

Theory-Based Needs Assessments

One of the first decisions one needs to make in adopting a methodology to conduct a needs assessment is to determine whether or not the assessment will be based on theory. Theories about human needs have been available for many years, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (cited by De Coster and Mable, 1980) has been integrated into student affairs literature for decades (Riker and De Coster, 1971; De Coster and Mable, 1974). Examples abound of theory-based programming, including those reported by Andreas (1993) and Rodgers (1990).

How theory might or might not be used can be illustrated by considering how to assess prospective students' needs for orientation to a given college. An atheoretical way to approach this problem would be for the investigators to survey students after their first year, asking them what they recall they needed to know about the college as they entered the institution. It would also be useful as part of this process to ask them what was not but should have been included in the orientation process. These data could be aggregated, and a needs assessment instrument could be prepared for incoming students. Based on all of this information, drawn from both students after the first year and students ready to enroll, needs could be identified and orientation planned. This assessment was atheoretical, that is, not based on student development theory.

Another way to examine this problem would be to use theory to guide the development of questions for incoming students. Chickering's psychosocial theory of student development (1993), for example, would indicate that students, especially in the early postsecondary years, most likely would be addressing vectors one through three (developing competence, managing emotions, and moving through autonomy toward interdependence). Using this approach, needs assessment questionnaires and interview protocols would be based on the theory, with individual items speaking directly to the various aspects of Chickering's first three vectors. On the basis of what is learned from surveys and interviews, orientation programs and experiences could be planned.

Evans (1985) conducted a study of needs assessment methodology to determine if using a questionnaire based on theory was more relevant to students than one empirically based. Her results favored the theory-based instrument. Evans concludes, "These results suggest that items on the theory-based survey were generally more relevant to students than those on the empirically based survey" (p. 112). She also observes that a "well designed questionnaire with a solid theoretical base can provide a comprehensive and accurate overview of student concerns" (p. 114). The theory selected by the person conducting the assessment will depend on a variety of issues, including the target of the assessment and the skills of the researcher. Nonetheless, grounding the assessment in theory seems to enhance the quality of the project.

Needs Assessment Techniques

As has been discussed earlier in this book, a variety of techniques are available to the person planning to conduct a needs assessment. Evans (1985) indicates that "the purposes for the assessment, the size of the project, and the time and money available to carry out the assessment must be considered" (p. 114). Probably the

most difficult decision to make is to identify the techniques to employ, since such a wide variety of them is available. As a result of their study of this matter, Barrow, Cox, Sepich, and Spivak (1989) recommend that multiple techniques be used. They conclude that the "results of this study support the contention that multiple sources of information should be used in assessing students' need" (p. 80). Several of these techniques will be identified in this chapter, along with some of their advantages and disadvantages.

Questionnaires

Rossett (1990) presents an excellent discussion of tips for improving needs assessment questionnaires and avoiding problems associated with them. What follows is based largely on her discussion of this issue.

The use of questionnaires in conducting a needs assessment has several advantages. Among them are relatively low cost, ease in scoring the results, guarantee of respondent anonymity, and strong public relations value.

The cost of conducting a survey can be quite modest. The primary expenses of developing this approach include printing and postage (although campus mail can eliminate postage costs for students with on-campus mailboxes), and staff time. The students completing the instrument can be guaranteed anonymity simply by not writing their names on their answer sheets. A separate postal card should be sought from respondents to facilitate follow-up with nonrespondents. By using score sheets that can be analyzed mechanically, the time needed for securing results is minimal, and a final report can be produced quickly. The production of a final report on a timely basis inspires confidence on the part of the participants, reinforcing the impression that the needs assessment is a serious attempt at determining how to plan interventions which meet participants' needs.

The needs assessment process can be improved by implementing the following guidelines, although this list is by no means complete; Chapter Two provides more ideas about how to improve the quality of survey instruments.

The number of items should be kept relatively short. Remember that students have many activities competing for their time, and completing a survey will probably not be high on their list of priorities for the day. By keeping the number of items short, one improves the chances for a high rate of participation.

Follow up at least once. By using the postal card arrangement described above, a follow-up can be completed without great effort. Undoubtedly, a few respondents will forget to send in the postal card, which may mean that they will have to be contacted more than once, but conducting a second mailing to nonrespondents will improve the participation rate markedly.

Pilot test the instrument on a group of students. The size of the pilot group need not be large. After the students have completed the instrument, ask them questions such as: Were the items easy to understand? How long did it take you to complete it? Do you think this kind of activity will be attractive to your colleagues? Is there anything we can do to improve the chances that students will complete the survey?

Finally, the needs investigator might want to publicize the survey before it is conducted, with the hope that this will stir up a bit of interest in the project among the people whose needs will be assessed. This can be done through the student newspaper, residence hall newspaper, campus radio station, bulletin boards and so on.

Of course, problems are associated with using questionnaires. Rossett has identified several of these, including the fact that surveys are not interactive; that is, the person conducting the survey cannot ask follow-up questions beyond what is on the questionnaire. In addition, poorly worded questions will result in responses that are nonsensical. Unless the items are constructed with great precision, it can be quite difficult to determine what the responses mean. And, of course, typographical errors, lots of white space, and sloppy layout can distract the respondent from focusing on the items. While written questionnaires can be of great utility, they tend to yield results that are less rich than a second commonly used technique, interviews.

Also, as discussed in Chapter Two; telephone surveys can be used to assess student needs, overcoming many of the problems inherent in mailed questionnaires, such as cost, response rate, and student convenience.

Interviews

Interviews tend to produce richer data than questionnaires (Evans, 1985), but are usually a more time-consuming and expensive method of collecting information. Students can be interviewed individually, or in small groups often referred to as focus groups (Carnaghi, 1992). Whitt (1991, 1993) provides a strong overview of the use of interviews as a data-gathering technique. The reader is referred to Chapter Three for more information about conducting focus groups and interviewing individuals.

Other Needs Assessment Techniques

Two other techniques, document review and observations, can be used in certain circumstances. These techniques are not used as commonly as questionnaires and interviews, but they certainly have a place in the process, depending on the nature of the needs assessment. For example, observing student behavior was instrumental in determining the need for child care at Wichita State University. The Associate Dean of Students, after hearing that students were leaving their children in their parked cars while they went to class, systematically walked through parking lots at various times to determine how widespread this practice was. She found that it was all too common and this information provided the impetus for conducting a more systematic needs assessment, which resulted in the university's developing a comprehensive child care program.

Documents also can provide useful information about student needs. Just reading the letters to the editor in the student newspaper will provide a hint about what is in the minds of students. Obviously, further investigation beyond reading letters to the editor would be necessary before committing substantial funds to new programs or services, but if students write many letters to the editor expressing concern about some aspect of campus life, this area may need to be reconceptualized and perhaps changed.

Brown and Podolske (1993b) recommend several other forms of needs assessment that are less formal but still quite useful to the student affairs staff member charged with trying to determine the needs of students. They recommend polling students by asking them to rank program possibilities at residence hall floor meetings, interviewing particularly insightful students informally over lunch or dinner in the cafeteria, and asking for a show of hands of students in a meeting. While none of these techniques will provide a complete picture of the needs of students by itself, like the letters to the editor they can provide points of departure for further investigation. Sometimes, simply asking students how they feel about life on campus and the quality of their education will yield very interesting information. However, one should never make major decisions on the basis of an informal chat with one student; still, as is indicated above, valuable information gathered in a casual manner can help the investigator to frame additional, more systematic inquiry.

Needs Assessment Process

After thinking through some of the issues presented above, including theory-based needs assessment and various methods that might be employed, once these matters have been decided, the next step for the investigator is to follow a process. A variety of processes appear in the literature about how to conduct needs assessments. What follows is based upon ideas from Rossett (1990) and Stufflebeam and others (1985); the questions frequently asked about how to conduct assessment studies discussed in Chapter Two; and thoughts based upon our hands-on experience in conducting needs assessment studies. To illustrate the needs assessment process, we have a scenario based on a real-life situation.

The Scenario: Old Ivy College

What's the Problem?

As stated in Chapter Two, problems drive assessments; thus, problems drive needs assessments. The overall problem is that many times, our services and programs lack a coherent basis for students needs, often severely limiting their effectiveness. So all needs assessments are driven by a lack of information about students. Generally speaking, needs assessments are conducted in response to three problems: (1) there is absolutely no institutionally based information on student needs in general; (2) general information is available, but specific information on one or more student subpopulations, such as women or African Americans, is lacking; or (3) specific information on particular issues important to student learning, such as alcohol and drugs or career development, is lacking.

So the first question to be asked is which of these problems must be addressed in designing a needs assessment. A general needs assessment may be constructed in a way that addresses all three problems, and there are commercially available instruments which can do this (see the Appendix). In some instances, these instruments can offer not only information on general student needs, but specific information on specific issues. Further, data can be analyzed by student subpopulations. But it has been our experience that while general needs assessments are helpful in understanding students in general, it is often difficult to use this information to change or improve services and programs.

Thus, needs assessments which are focused more narrowly and developed institutionally may have more direct applications to student services and programs. It makes sense to design studies which are more specific, and the Old Ivy College example illustrates such a study.

Old Ivy College (OIC) is a private institution which is in its second century of service. The college is dedicated to providing a high-quality liberal arts education, and until the late 1960s it admitted only men. Today, the college enrolls nearly as many women as men.

Historically, OIC has had very strong intramural programs. Men formed teams through their living units and Greek letter organizations, vigorously competing for championship trophies in fifteen sports. After women were admitted to OIC, similar team sport opportunities were made available to them, but the women's intramural teams and leagues were not as successful as the men's.

In response to this imbalance, recent women presidents of the student body have campaigned on the promise to rethink OIC's approach to student recreation, which was built historically on a male intramural sports model. Each woman president held that women were as interested in recreation as men, but that the nature of their interest was different, that is, they were more interested in aerobics classes, fitness machines, wellness instruction, and weight training than in competitive intramural sports. Not only did OIC offer nothing in these areas of recreation, it resisted changing the strong tradition of campus intramurals.

After the three years of debate, the college decided it was time to find out more about recreational programs for women, as well as how widespread apparent dissatisfaction was among the student body, faculty, and others. The president appointed a blue ribbon committee consisting of faculty, students, recreation administrators, and two local graduates with the specific charge to "determine the extent to which a need exists on campus for expanding the nature and variety of recreation programs to better meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student body."

What's the Purpose?

As discussed in Chapter Three, the purpose for an assessment study should flow directly from the problem. In this instance, the purpose of the investigation (translated from the president's charge to the committee) was to assess the recreational needs of students, and offer recommendations.

Who Should Be Studied?

Because OIC was relatively small (1,570 students), and virtually every student lived on campus or in facilities adjacent to it, the committee decided to include the entire student body in the study—in other words the entire population was used, rather than some smaller sample.

What Is the Best Assessment Method?

The committee decided upon a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. First, the committee would survey the entire study body to form a basic understanding of their perceptions. Information was collected about students' backgrounds and characteristics so that analyses by gender, class standing, and other variables could be conducted.

The committee used three qualitative assessment methods to generate a greater depth of information about the situation. These methods were developed after the quantitative analysis was completed, so the committee had some guidance as to what issues they

should explore in greater depth. First, the committee decided to conduct focus groups consisting of those who participated in recreational programs and those who did not. The needs of nonusers are a very crucial element in any needs assessment and should not be overlooked. Second, they held open forums on campus to discuss this issue with anyone who was interested. Finally, several committee members spent some time in OIC's recreational facility and talked with student users informally.

Who Should Collect the Data?

For the quantitative part of the study, the committee decided to use the good services of the Institutional Research Office to mail the questionnaire to students, retrieve information, and analyze results.

For the qualitative part of the study, the committee decided to conduct the focus groups, open forums, and observations with committee members, for two reasons. First, they felt very strongly that they needed direct contact with students to better assess their needs. Second, the composition of the committee was sufficiently representative (students, faculty, recreational administrators, and local graduates) to provide a variety of perspectives and perceptions.

What Instrument Should Be Used?

For the quantitative assessment, a locally constructed questionnaire was developed by the committee, in close consultation with experts on survey construction from the Institutional Research Office. This questionnaire explored the reasons why students participated or did not participate in current recreational programs, and what programs they wished would be offered but were not currently available.

For the qualitative assessment, interview protocols were developed for the focus groups, consisting of two basic questions: (1) What do you think of our current recreational program? and (2) How might the current recreational program be improved?

No particular protocol was established for the open forums, except that any and all students were invited to share their perceptions of the recreational program, and the committee would be there to listen. For students using the current recreation facility, committee members had two tasks. First, they simply observed how students used the facility, roaming the building from time to time and noting which facilities were used and by whom. Second, in informal conversations with users they asked two basic questions: (1) Why do you use this facility? and (2) How might our current recreational program be improved?

At Old Ivy, the assessment began. As stated above, questionnaires were mailed to every student and the response rate was gratifying. Since over 50 percent of students completed the instrument, the committee decided not to conduct a follow-up. From the responses to the questionnaires, participants and nonparticipants in the recreation program were identified, and focus groups were formed, each conducted by a two-person team from the committee. Students were eager to participate, and freely shared their opinions about what they liked and did not like about the recreation program. However, the campus forums were a bit of a disappointment. Not too many students participated and the information generated tended to repeat what was learned from the survey and the focus groups. The conversations in the recreation facility provided more depth to what was learned from the users.

How Should the Data Be Recorded?

Data from the questionnaire was recorded from machine readable instruments to a computer-based data file. Data from the focus groups and open forums were audiotape recorded, and observations were recorded through observers' notes. Themes were identified. (For a more extensive discussion of recording data, see Chapters Two, Three, and Four).

How Should Data Be Analyzed?

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using multivariate analyses, which provided not only descriptive results, but helped explain responses according to various subgroups. Data from the focus groups, open forums, and observations were summarized and analyzed, yielding selected themes from participants.

At Old Ivy, the analysis of the data indicated that the student body presidents had been mostly right. Many women, indeed, were looking for different recreational activities than those currently available. Surprising to many committee members, however, was

the large number of male students who were interested in different recreational opportunities as well, including camping, hiking, rock climbing, boating, and other outdoor recreational activities. In addition, more women would have participated in intramural competition if different sports were available.

How Should the Data Be Reported?

After extensive discussion and deliberation, the committee reported its finding and recommendations to the president, along the lines suggested in Chapter Thirteen. They submitted three reports. The first was the full report, which included what was done, why it was done that way, and all the findings and conclusions. The second was a short report (five pages) based on the full report; it provided more detail than the executive summary without burdening readers with a full report. The third report was an executive summary intended for general student, faculty, and public perusal.

The final report contained recommendations for changes in recreational programs, including a change in philosophy starting with the development of a new mission statement. The committee also recommended that the recreation programs' advisory board be more representative of all students, and that a person be hired to coordinate a wellness program that could be offered not only in the recreational facility but also in residence halls and Greek letter houses. And of course, the committee recommended additional funds be allocated to improve and expand already existing recreational facilities.

How Should the Study Be Used?

Unfortunately, the actual change may not be that easy to implement. If an assessment study indicates that a variety of student needs are not being met, then work will have to be done to change what is in place, or create new structures, services, programs, and learning opportunities. This is not easy in the environment in which colleges and universities currently operate. Money is short; staff members are overloaded with assignments; other priorities may be more important; and, as we stated earlier in this book, just because an assessment project concludes that certain students' needs have not been met, we cannot expect people to step forward immediately to fund new initiatives. Student affairs staff have been known to plan programs because of their own interests or skills rather than to meet student needs (Hurst and Jacobson, 1985).

At OIC, the president received the report, gave it wide circulation in the campus community, discussed it with his cabinet, and instructed the student affairs staff to develop an implementation plan, including funding. Ultimately he approved the diversification of the recreation program, the reconfiguration of the advisory board, and the hiring of a wellness coordinator. He did not approve the expansion of physical facilities, however, because of a lack of funds, but he did include this project in the institution's development program.

Commentary on the Process and the Example

The process described in this section has excellent potential for assessing student needs on virtually any campus. One should not assume, as has been suggested earlier in this chapter, that change will come easily. Nor should one assume that answers to the complex problems that face college campuses will come easily. As a case study, this example was fairly simple with clear-cut logical solutions. Real life dilemmas, however, are not always resolved so elegantly. Further, in this case, multiple methods of needs assessment were used, but please note that approaches that work well in one circumstance may not be transferable to others. Local exigencies nearly always influence the needs assessment process. Finally, one should not conclude that because some of the techniques used in this example worked better than others, that therefore they are inherently superior. The purpose of indicating that some techniques worked better than others was to illustrate that everything will not be as successful as one might plan, and that a variety of techniques promotes confidence among members of the assessing team that they will be able to generate enough useful information upon which to write a meaningful report.

Potential Needs Assessment Problems

A variety of issues and problems related to needs assessment merit at least cursory discussion as one contemplates conducting a student needs assessment. Some of these issues have been touched upon briefly in the previous discussion. In this section these issues are aggregated so that they can be addressed before a needs assessment project is undertaken.

Organizational Politics

The reader will recall that in Chapter One, one of the reasons for doing assessment in student affairs is "political." Brown and Podolske (1993b) and Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, and Nelson (1985) discuss the role of politics in conducting a needs assessment. From the perspective of Brown and Podolske, the role of politics in the decision-making process should not be underestimated. They observe, "It is important to recognize the political nature of decision making about needs, whether it involves different opinions among student groups, among staff, or between students and staff" (1993, p. 408). If the president decides that the university is going to provide student housing living arrangements so that women and men do not live on the same floor, conducting a needs assessment to determine if students have needs that run counter to the president's wishes will not be productive. The president has decided this issue already; no matter what a study shows, men and women are not going to live on the same floor.

In addition, if the president or other senior administrators interpret needs assessment results by taking certain actions that run counter to the interpretations of those conducting the assessment, that is their prerogative. The investigators do not have to like the senior administrators' interpretation, but they do need to realize that senior administrators may have to deal with a different set of problems and issues, and within their framework for determining how to solve problems they may choose to act differently than those who have conducted the assessment.

Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, and Nelson (1985) view the political problems related to needs assessment in a different way, but still provide useful advice: "One must keep in mind the capability a needs assessment has to affect people and resources, especially money, in order to be aware of the potential to arouse political forces" (p. 11). The fact is, when a needs assessment is undertaken, the potential exists that the results of the assessment may point to certain student needs that are not being met as well as they should be. Needs that are addressed poorly can be interpreted as caused by specific people who are not performing their jobs up to the standard that has been set for them. Will that discovery result in tasks being reassigned? Will resources be diverted? Will people be replaced? All of these questions have dramatic implications for the needs assessment process. It is one thing to think about conducting a needs assessment in a hypothetical situation, but it is something altogether different when one considers that certain people's careers may hang in the balance of the results of the assessment.

Perhaps one of the ways to avoid the potentially emotionally charged nature of an assessment would be to agree before conducting the assessment that the results will be used to make certain judgments about the direction of a program and the way it has been implemented. All concerned should agree in advance that if certain problems surface, staff will be retrained and supported so that they can do their jobs more effectively rather than being demoted, reassigned, or removed.

Crisis Orientation

Closely related to the political problems associated with needs assessment is what happens when this kind of study is conducted as a result of a crisis, such as when an institution's retention of students is so poor that enrollment is affected. In this scenario, a needs assessment might be conducted to determine if the needs of those students who do not persist are being met. Another crisis situation would occur when residence hall occupancy declines precipitously. Or after a student is assaulted, in which case assessment of campus safety would be required. Needs assessment under the cloud of a crisis creates a very difficult situation for all concerned.

Routine Needs Assessment

A needs assessment may be triggered by a campus problem, but from a conceptual perspective, needs assessment ought to be a continuous process rather than a single method utilized to resolve a crisis. Student needs ought to be assessed on a routine basis within the calendar of events for a student affairs division. If they are, a

variety of useful byproducts are likely to occur. Kuh (1982) speaks to this point: "Experience has shown that needs assessments that follow a predetermined but flexible plan often have a variety of side effects that prove to be beneficial both from an educational and personal development perspective" (p. 208). These byproducts are less likely to occur if the needs assessment is conducted in an atmosphere of crisis.

Lack of Coordination

Needs assessments, according to Thomas (1984), frequently are not coordinated with other organizational activities, or with other needs assessments that are conducted continuously within the life of the institution. An illustration of this potential problem is as follows. The student health service conducts cholesterol screenings of the entering class and determines that students need more exercise and a lower fat diet. Simultaneously, student government reviews the fee structure and recommends to the governing board that their contribution to the recreation and wellness programs be reduced. Independently, the food service director conducts focus groups and learns students want more fast food in the union building without regard to their diet. The director decides to develop a hamburger, French fries, and malt shop in place of a salad and yogurt bar. The result is that cholesterol counts do not improve. This example, quite obviously contrived, points out how units can work in opposite directions, all trying to be helpful to students. Closer coordination might have averted the undesirable outcome.

How much are the results of needs assessments shared? We suspect not very much (see Chapter Thirteen). Rather than a variety of uncoordinated, perhaps overlapping, needs assessments conducted by various departments each year, such studies ought to be coordinated so that time, money, and effort can be saved. Determining which office will handle the coordination of these activities is a major decision, as is how the information can be shared. On a complex campus perhaps no single office can coordinate all assessment activities. But, as a start, a perspective needs to be developed so that as various departments learn about student needs, their knowledge is shared with other departments. Reports, no matter how informal, ought be sent to each department head in student affairs and routed to appropriate staff. It might be possible to hold a yearly miniconference at which each department that has collected needs assessment information shares this information, giving a brief presentation followed by reactions from their colleagues. Another step would be to identify skilled assessment consultants who might be willing to work with various departments as they contemplate conducting needs assessments.

Utilizing Only One Data-Gathering Technique

Thomas (1984) observes that needs assessments frequently rely on only one data-gathering technique, a tendency which has been addressed earlier in this chapter. The use of multiple data-gathering techniques will result in much richer information for the people conducting the assessment. Admittedly, the more complicated the data-gathering plan, the more expensive the project will become, in terms of both time and money. The alternative, however, which is to utilize only one technique and run the risk of developing an incomplete project, is hardly desirable.

Multiple data-gathering techniques should be employed whenever possible. Brown and Podolske (1993a) argue persuasively that using questionnaires alone may be the wrong approach in conducting a needs assessment. They conclude that questionnaires "become massive undertakings taxing the staff's time and energy to construct, mail, process, and tabulate the results" (p. 407). They also question the validity of homemade instruments. They believe that alternative means of assessing student needs may be more useful to the student affairs staff members as they analyze assessment data. Their point is well taken. If alternative means of identifying student needs can be developed, they should be used. Clearly, more than one method of identifying student needs will add substantial richness to a needs assessment project.

Target Populations for Assessment

Barrow and his colleagues (1989) identify a very interesting issue in their analysis of a needs assessment project they conducted. They concluded that survey data may be "more valuable when used to identify subpopulations with special needs than when used to provide a needs profile for the general student population. A need idiosyncratically expressed by one subgroup may be a more reliable indicator of a genuine area of interest than a need endorsed highly by the overall sample" (p. 81).

This is a point well taken, and was illustrated in the Old Ivy College scenario. It may be more useful to target needs assessments at definable groups of students within the overall student body rather than all students on campus; it may be more effective to look at the needs of the freshman class, master's students in specific departments, and so on. For example, if one really wishes to determine the special needs of people who are physically challenged, ask people from that group, not everybody. Similarly, female students can best speak to their needs, as can students from other historically underrepresented populations. As needs assessment projects are contemplated, it may be more useful to work with identifiable subgroups of students rather than the larger group from which they are drawn.

Conclusion

Conducting a credible needs assessment is not an easy task. Too often needs assessments are conducted the wrong way for the wrong reasons. This chapter has identified some of the salient issues related to needs assessment, including (1) determining substantive purposes for doing a needs assessment, (2) identifying various assessment techniques, (3) following a process that will generate useful information, and (4) avoiding a variety of problems that can contaminate the process. Armed with the information contained in this chapter, a student affairs officer should always be ready to conduct a needs assessment.