



NOVEMBER SCOPE PRACTICING PREVENTION TIP

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During the SCOPE 2013 Conference held in Orlando a few weeks ago, I had many opportunities to hear colleagues share their new initiatives for addressing emerging or longstanding issues. When I connected more informally with them, I was interested to learn about the politics on their campuses and the level of support for their efforts. They often mentioned the importance of assessment in this regard, especially in terms of securing political cover or funding.

It has always been important—but now it is crucial—for our efforts to include means for determining whether and to what extent our programs, projects and services achieve their intended goals. While the impetus for this can certainly come from innate curiosity, more often it is stimulated by expectations from students, supervisors, institutional leaders or even external stakeholders such as accrediting bodies and professional organizations. In practice, the inquisitiveness we have about the impact of our work, and the enjoyment of finding out, can be overshadowed by politics.

It is not uncommon for the intensity of external scrutiny, budget fears and competitive dynamics to interfere with the more interesting and rewarding aspects of assessment. Even when there is not a hurried atmosphere created by looming deadlines or impulsive requests from people in authority, we may find the process tedious and get lost in data that seems vague, irrelevant or misleading. Many of us have “war stories” about being on the receiving end of sharp and unfair criticisms of people and programs, or abrupt cancellations despite the absence of sufficient information to do so.

For my November tip, I would like to offer some food for thought about cultivating an assessment practice that can provide compelling stories about meaningful work done well for people’s benefit or insights about how to overcome whatever is preventing that from happening. These ideas can be applied toward a single effort or a broader collection of programs, services or departments.

I believe very strongly that the solution to this problem starts by remembering that good assessment is rooted in relationships rather than spreadsheets. When I became a Chief Student Affairs Officer at a university, I was determined to act on this belief as we developed an assessment program for the Division. This was a big challenge because there were 250 colleagues across over 20 departments. This required consideration about how to apply this viewpoint to the assessment of our work products. But, it also required attention to enacting this belief for the people doing the work. I’ll explain both aspects.

In terms of the work itself, this approach suggests we connect with our constituents—in most instances, students—during the formative phase of a new program or reform in order to transparently share what we are thinking of doing and our rationale. Then, we ask them about their thoughts and suggestions before implementation or changes. Periodically, we check in on whether and to what extent they believe their feedback is being applied, make adjustments to achieve this, check in again about whether we got it right and so forth in a continuous loop. This kind of approach allows us to have a broader data “dashboard” from which to draw with precision and to generate support for our organization and the work we are doing. With this approach, even when there is critique about a particular program or service, community buy-in for our organization remains strong. Creating this big, living conversation has a synergistic effect on the collective efforts of our organization, its reputation with stakeholders and the working conditions for staff.

I also believe it is imperative to create conditions for our staff to approach assessment authentically so it can be done well. By this, I mean that our assessment activities should make intuitive sense, both for the program or department concerned, as well as for the personal creativity and style of the people doing the work. So, rather than imposing a template on the entire collection of people and programs, I engaged the Division in a similar living conversation to the one I described for students. This was started with a simple question: *what does doing a good job mean from your perspective?*

The answer to this question is informed by the professional community and literature one has roots in, personal temperament and style, as well as the particular activity being undertaken. This is true for a single practitioner, as well as for an entire Division. So, in the latter instance, we spent several months holding town halls and more intimate

meetings to deliberate these questions. The themes that emerged became a framework for a Divisional assessment program that honored the diversity of approaches and beliefs of our entire staff. The only things I insisted upon were that each department and person needed to be able to explain how they know something is going well, have a means of collecting and reporting data (quantitative and/or qualitative) determining that and to show how they used that data to start, cancel or reform what they were doing. I hired an Assessment Coordinator to help me collect that information from across the Division so that we could organize thematic reports for institutional use and for reporting to the campus community about what we were doing, why and the benefits.

The information I share here is scalable, useful to a single practitioner overseeing one program or to a senior administrator overseeing many. I'd like to offer some generative questions for your use as you build assessment into your professional practice:

- What is the fundamental reason for doing this?
- Who are the stakeholders for this and how will I invite their suggestions and feedback?
- How would I know this (project, program, service) went well (e.g. what does success look like)?
- What are some indicators of success that can be shared with numbers and what can be shared with stories? How can I collect, organize and report each of these?
- Who needs, wants or is waiting to hear about the findings of my assessment efforts? How can I provide them with accessible and meaningful information?
- If my program or project is given critical feedback or even cancelled, how can I come to believe that the work that replaces it was made possible by the learning that my initial effort created?

How have you seen assessment initiatives be successfully incorporated into prevention work?

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For more information about Dr. Laker and his role as Visiting Scholar with SCOPE, visit <http://wearescope.org/resources/visiting-scholar/>

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