Research (and/or?) Assessment: How they differ and how to use them together

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Introduction

- Defining the terms
- The differences
- The similarities
- Interactions and (more) productive moments
- Challenges
- What we’re missing
Defining the terms

• Research
  • Guides theory, is neutral, and rigorous

• Assessment
  • Steers policy, is political, and is practical

• Research – universal
• Assessment – here and now

Differences

• Research
• Assessment
• Evaluation
But...

- Are these categorizations true now?
- Rigor, policy, practicality, neutrality?
- What happens if it is not research VS assessment, but research AND assessment?
- And what about evaluation?
Chart that could be helpful

Role of Researcher:
- Constructs new knowledge
- Formulates and confirms theories

Role of Assessor:
- Measures outcomes
- Confirms approaches
- Addresses the aggregate

Role of Evaluator:
- Measures quality of educational programs (e.g., attendance, satisfaction, staff performance)

Oregon State University
June 17, 2014
Similarities

• Methods (sort of)
• Application (maybe in intent?)
• Use of existing data (potential?)
• Others?
Interaction points between research and assessment

• Deconstructing the assessment planning questions (using Schuh, 2009)
  • What is the issue at hand?
  • What is the purpose of the assessment?
  • Who should be studied?
  • What is the best assessment method?
  • How should we collect our data?
  • What instrument should we use?
  • How should we analyze the data?
  • How should we report the results?
What is the issue at hand?

• Research could drive this, and probably does
  • Example, focus on “hot issues” in higher education
  • Probably has a genealogy in research areas

• Connecting to this research makes us “smarter” as we proceed
  • Helps us decide “what” to assess and perhaps “how”
What is the purpose of the assessment?

• See previous slide – connection to “hot issues” in higher education

• Assessment can take on a “diagnostic nature” – it could help clarify the “hot issue” for local contexts
Who should be studied?

• Sampling frameworks could be a function of previous research
• Or *how* people are studied could be a function of previous research
What is the best assessment method?

• Much to learn here from the research traditions, obviously
• Not just methods, but also methodology
• How to understand the data (theoretical perspectives, worldview, etc)
• How to design the study
How should we collect our data?

• Even using research to shape data collection can help us
• Example: surveys, instruments, focus groups – this all ties to research that has been done
• Lessons learned, what *not* to do
What instrument should we use?

- Instrumentation (we hope) that is used should be based in research
- Validation, reliability
- Another good measure: research from the instrument (trace the citation trails)
- Possible productive moments with research and assessment
How should we analyze the data?

• Research can, and has helped here, too
• Qualitative and quantitative data analysis can be guided by previous research – research tells us “how to”
How should we report the results?

• Interpretation might be guided by previous research as well
• What to report about – link to research dialogue as well
• Policy recommendations based on other research
• Results could also point to future research *and/or* assessment
Challenges

• These are separate processes, but...
• Requires more time, but...
• Requires more discipline and training, but...
What happens if we don’t connect the dots?

• We tend to reinvent the wheel
• Our findings might not be able to dialogue
• We miss a great deal of what research can teach us
• It may reduce the inquiry process in non-productive ways
• Ethical implications of our work
From Student Affairs Assessment to Student Affairs Inquiry

• Inquiry as a process – shows learning, too
• Cycle of learning rather than fits and starts
• More honest to students
Conclusion

• This may already be happening and integrated
• Thinking about research differently
• Getting past the “versus”
• Separate processes, but also very connected
• Productive moments – pushing assessment farther
Questions?

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