Ethical Considerations for Assessment in Higher Education

Through the programs and services that we as Student Affairs educators offer to students, we can encourage “higher-level thinking on the basis of sensitive and respectful consideration of others” (Hamrick, Evans & Schuh, 2002). We can do this not only by engaging students in decision-making, but also in acting ethically in our assessment work. The two aspects of assessment most affected by ethical decisions are data gathering and reporting of results.

Five principles to consider when performing assessment in student affairs are as follows: respecting autonomy (no coercion); doing no harm (protecting anonymity); benefiting others (a culture of improvement, not retaliation); being just (fair treatment of individuals and resources); and being faithful (serpulous attention to finding the truth). Following are guidelines that address these principles:

- Maintaining confidentiality is the most salient principle to be used in assessment: “Confidentiality of the respondents must be guaranteed and protected” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 295). “Failure to do so is a serious ethical breach and may even make the researchers liable” (p. 296).

- It is vital that anyone who performs an assessment maintain acute attention to detail to the end that the final report is accurate and “fairly represents what was learned” from the assessment. “Results must be neither overstated nor underplayed” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 295).

- Honesty relates to the idea that the respondents should know the purpose of the assessment, any potential risks and who will have access to the data. The researcher is responsible for including in the final report any mistakes made in the process of the assessment (Patton, 2002).

- Protection of the rights of human subjects. “Subjects should be protected from harm, loss of agency or autonomy, and the loss of self esteem that occurs upon discovering that one has been duped” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 298). Although the internal, program level assessment that we perform does not have to be reviewed by the grad. school’s Institutional Review Board as student and faculty research does, we still practice ethically.

- When making decisions related to the ethics of research and assessment, it is always best to err on the side of protecting and informing your subjects.

- Don’t make promises lightly (Patton, 2002). Being faithful includes “the concepts of loyalty, trustfulness, and basic respect” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 294).

- “Those conducting assessment projects need to reassure the units or programs being assessed that organizational improvement is the goal (Schuh, et al. 2009, p. 195). “If the institution does not have a culture of assessment or one in which routine organizational improvement is the norm, it is possible for people…to worry. What will happen to us? Will our program be eliminated?” The units should be reassured about the purposes of assessment (Schuh et al, 2009, p. 197).

- “The assessment process should be governed by impartiality; that is, data are collected using a rigorous process where accuracy is held to be sacred” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 294).

References