

MIDDLE MANAGERS AND ASSESSMENT IN STUDENT AFFAIRS:
EXPLORING THEIR KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITY

by

DIANNE M. TIMM

(Under the Direction of Merrily Dunn)

ABSTRACT

This study examined the assessment knowledge, skills, and ability of middle managers working in divisions of student affairs at institutions of higher education. In this time of increased accountability for institutions, showing proof of the contribution made to the learning process is critical. Middle managers are key individuals in any organization because of their connections to the organizational levels both above and below them. They are instrumental in directing the flow of crucial information. Fourteen professionals working on three different campuses were selected and interviewed for this study. The findings emphasize a need for developing a stronger assessment environment in student affairs, specifically creating a common vocabulary and having a more formalized assessment process.

Index words: Assessment, Middle Manager, Student Affairs, Evaluation

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Mary Jo and Fred Timm, who have always believed in me and gave me all the tools I needed to be successful in life. I also dedicate this to the memory of my grandmother Eleanor Keefner who showed me how to be a strong, confident, independent woman.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities have been challenged by continuously changing student populations, technology, resources, and external expectations (Caple & Newton, 1991; Mable & Miller, 1991; Levy & Kozoll, 1998; and Grace, 2002). Higher education as a whole has come under scrutiny as the public has viewed a declining quality in the graduates entering a more competitive job market (Grace, 2002). The quality of undergraduate education students are receiving has been on the decline and they are lacking in the knowledge, values, and preparation necessary to contribute to society (Wingspread Group, 1993). This public criticism has led to declining state appropriations, criticism over retention and graduation rates, and changing perceptions of what students should be getting out of their time in college (The Wingspread Group, 1993; Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999).

Divisions of student affairs, like all of higher education, are impacted by these shifting political, social, financial, and technological forces. These constantly changing environments that require student affairs professionals to be able to adapt to meet the needs of students and society as a whole (Grace, 2002). College and university administrators, especially student affairs professionals, need to be able to understand the student body in order to gain a better perspective of the campus climate (Carney, 1991). Balancing society's needs with those of the student population on the campus is critical in student affairs in order to develop essential programs and services. Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1996) emphasize that academic and intellectual

development should be at the core of what student affairs professionals do as they provide services and programs.

Accreditation agencies were developed to hold higher education institutions accountable to society as a whole and to provide standards which would assist them in demonstrating institutional effectiveness (Upcraft, 2003). There are many accrediting agencies within the United States to which colleges and universities are accountable. One purpose of these accrediting bodies is to require colleges and universities to comply with a set of agreed upon standards that are designed to hold higher education accountable to the public good. This study references the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) because it is the accrediting agency for the universities selected in this study. There is a part of the report that is designated for divisions of student affairs, where they provide evidence of the impact they have on students' development in the academic environment (SACS, 2004). SACS designed the accreditation process to be a self-regulating one that allows the institution to identify what is important and to receive feedback from peers as the university continues to change and evolve.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS, 2003) was created in 1979 to provide a set of standards of professional practice to guide student affairs practitioners and related areas that created a legitimate and authoritative set of criteria to be used to evaluate program quality and effectiveness. Erwin, Scott, and Menard (1991) suggest using the CAS standards to create the division's mission and purpose. The emergence of the CAS standards in higher education has helped guide the assessment activity of student affairs professionals which is indisputably necessary in practice (CAS).

Two major themes have influenced the role of assessment in student affairs, society's push for quality education and the desire to understand the student population (Kuh, Gonyea, &

Rodriguez, 2002; Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999). Assessment in student affairs began to gain a more critical role during the 1960s with the emergence of developmental theories, and the need to understand the student population (Kuh, Gonyea, & Rodriguez, 2002). Assessment continued to gain importance through the 1970s and 1980s as institutions began seeing a shift in accreditation standards, and the implementation of standards for divisions of student affairs (Palomba & Banta, 1999). In the 1970's there was greater public questioning of the costs of higher education, dissatisfaction with the quality of education and services provided, and issues of access and student affairs divisions felt pressure to show how they supported and contributed to the overall learning environment (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999).

During the 1980s institutions were again faced with questioning by government agencies, accrediting agencies, governing boards, administrators, parents, students, and other internal and external groups about what difference college made to student success and society. A report by the Wingspread Group on Higher Education in 1993 called for better preparation of undergraduates and encouraged universities and colleges to train staff to engage in assessment activities that would lead to better prepared graduates. During this time student affairs and the related professional organizations began to discuss and promote the development of standards and tools related to assessment (Miller, 2003). In order to respond to these questions of accountability accrediting agencies began to drive the assessment movement within student affairs on the college campus (Erwin, Scott, & Menard, 1991).

Assessment in student affairs, formal or informal, summative or formative, is essential in providing information about what services and programs are needed, how current programs are being received, the effectiveness of programs, and how to keep up with the various changing demands (Banta & Associates, 1993; Kuh, 1997; Palomba & Banta, 1999, Schuh & Upcraft,

2001; Upcraft, 2003). Student affairs divisions and professionals working in these areas should contribute to student learning and must be able to demonstrate how this occurs (Brown, 1972; Miller & Prince, 1979; Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1996; Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999). Professionals in student affairs need to understand how critical the assessment process is in identifying student needs in designing and measuring out-of-class learning outcomes, and determining resource allocation, and they should be able to provide specific examples of how services, programs, and outcomes contribute to student learning. If they fail to do so, they risk becoming a low priority at the university (Pascarella & Upcraft). Student affairs professionals play a critical role in the area of assessment in that they provide a unique perspective in understanding institutional culture (Kuh & Whitt, 1991).

Assessment should be a routine and structured process at the core of all program areas within student affairs (Astin, 1993; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Love & Estanek, 2004). All professionals in student affairs should assume that at some time they will serve in an assessment role within their department (Love & Estanek, 2004). Due to lack of time, resources, and expertise, this may not be happening as consistently as it should (Astin, 1993; Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001; Upcraft, 2003). Bresciani (2002) stated that student affairs professionals, especially those in senior level positions, need to provide evidence that their programs are meeting their stated goals. New professionals, by the very nature of the amount of contact they have with students, need to be engaging in assessment activities that will provide them with useful information (Timm 2005).

According to Floyd and Wooldridge (1996), middle managers are key players in the assessment process because of their position on the organizational chart, serving the chief student affairs officers who want to know what is happening while supervising new professionals and

other middle managers who work more closely with students. Student affairs professionals, especially those in middle management positions, need to utilize assessment procedures that show how their efforts support intellectual development by providing quality programs and services that meet student needs (Jacoby, 1991). Middle managers need to be knowledgeable enough to design a quality assessment program, support and guide other staff members who design and conduct assessments, and utilize assessment results appropriately. Middle managers who can carry out well-designed assessment plans will adapt more successfully to evolving campus needs and be better equipped to serve current and future populations and to meet accreditation standards.

With society demanding that colleges and universities show proof of the difference higher education makes, professionals must be prepared to provide evidence of how they are preparing students. Middle managers working in student affairs can be instrumental in furnishing such information if they have the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities. Understanding the role that middle managers play in this process is critical to their professional success, and the vitality of the university.

Statement of the Problem

Assessment in student affairs has been greatly impacted by the creation of several seminal documents that discussed the assessment activity in which student affairs units and professionals should be engaged. Among the documents created and disseminated by student affairs professional organizations are two of the most influential: *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs* (American College Personnel Association, 1994) and *Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning* (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & National Association of Student

Personnel Administrators, 1998. *The Student Learning Imperative* called for student affairs divisions to focus on the services they provide, how they contribute to the students' out-of-class learning experiences, and emphasized the need for student affairs to collaborate with other parts of the university (American College Personnel Association). *Powerful Partnerships* was created as a joint statement by the American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators that challenged the academic and student affairs divisions to work together to provide an integrated learning experience for students in and out of the classroom. Both documents articulated a belief held by many in student affairs that learning does not stop once the student leaves the classroom, and emphasized that professionals should concentrate not only on assessing programs and services but also, and more importantly, on how student learning occurs outside of the classroom.

Within this context the middle manager is expected to fill multiple roles, often simultaneously, and must be able to balance their responsibilities and prioritize what is most crucial. Middle managers, in order to be effective administrators, need to be good human resource managers and financial managers, be technologically savvy, and be knowledgeable in the areas of assessment and institutional planning (Creamer, Winston, & Miller, 2001). Student affairs professionals, however, may not have the necessary skills to properly conduct assessment activities (Kuh, 1979; Schuh & Upcraft, 1998; Glasner, 1999; Palomba & Banta, 1999; and Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001). A common assumption is that assessment activities should be conducted by someone who has extensive knowledge in the area of assessment (Astin, 1993). A recent study of new professionals' knowledge, skills, and abilities showed that assessment was being undertaken by new professionals who had various degrees of formal or informal training

(Timm, 2005). Having support along with an understanding of assessment can help professionals design effective assessment plans.

There is increasing pressure from various constituencies to prove which student affairs services are necessary and why (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999; Bresciani, 2002; Grace, 2002). “More and more student affairs administrators are being asked to account for how efficiently and effectively they use the resources allocated to them from inside and outside the institution” (Desler, 2000, p. 285). Schuh and Upcraft (2001) stated that among the necessary skills for practitioners in student affairs is the ability to conduct assessment, and specifically the ability to create and implement assessment plans and to articulate their findings.

Creating an assessment culture within the student affairs unit is becoming increasingly important, and Schuh and Upcraft (2000) have stated that “a necessary first step is to overcome resistance and build support among staff, from the bottom up” (p. 17). Pike (2000) discussed assessment as a significant tool in improving programs and services. Equally important is the need to have staff at all levels involved. To create a culture of assessment requires all in the division to be knowledgeable in the area of assessment (Green, Jones, & Pascarella, 2003). The purpose of this study is to examine the middle level manager’s knowledge, skills, and ability to use assessment in practice. To gain further understanding into the area of assessment, this research will look at how middle level managers working in student affairs gather, analyze, and interpret information to make decisions to modify, or improve those programs or services they direct. Additionally, this study will explore how they use assessment with those they report to and those they supervise.

While previous research has examined the skills necessary to be a middle manager in student affairs (Winston & Miller, 1991), little information is available regarding the specific

knowledge, skills, and abilities that middle managers possess with regard to assessment. This is a critical piece as middle managers are the supervisors of new professionals and must set a clear example of how to conduct assessment. They are often called upon by supervisors to provide data for their area in discussions of resource allocation, facility maintenance, and program design. This study employed a qualitative approach to look at a small sample of middle managers with various years of experience, levels of skill, educational preparation, and knowledge with regard to assessment.

Operational Definitions

In researching middle managers and their ability to conduct assessment it was necessary to look at several key definitions. First, a definition of assessment, evaluation, and research was identified in order to provide the necessary foundation for determining the participants' use of assessment in their positions. The use of assessment by the participants was categorized into three specific areas: knowledge, skills, and ability. Each of these areas was defined in relation to how the middle managers functioned in their positions.

While it may appear that assessment is easy to define, one must consider the variety of different perspectives and cultures related to the topic in addition to having a basic understanding of evaluation, measurement, and research as they relate to assessment (Astin, 1990; Mentkowski, Astin, Ewell & Moran, 1991; Astin, 1993; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004). Defining middle managers can also be quite difficult with the description of particular positions varying between different campuses. In order to define the middle manager it is necessary to define both new professionals and senior level administrators in relation to the middle manager position.

Middle Manager

“A precise definition of what constitutes a middle manager proves to be as elusive as developing an exact definition of middle age” (Mills, 2000, p.135). Dalton (2003) discussed how middle managers developed as organizations became larger and needed to become more decentralized and collaborative. Middle managers are preeminent in the role they play in communicating key information between the upper- and lower-level positions within an organization (Floyd & Woolridge, 1996).

Middle managers are professionals who provide support services and perform other administrative responsibilities, linking vertical levels in an organization’s hierarchy (Young, 1990). Drucker (1974) identified the traditional middle level professional’s role as one of carrying out production routines and management responsibilities, and more recently taking on the role of knowledge professional. A middle manager in student affairs serves as a “director or associate director of functional departments, facilities, or programs such as admissions, residence life, counseling center, student center, alcohol education, and recreation” (Mills, 2000, p. 136).

For the purposes of this study, middle managers were defined as professionals working as associate or assistant directors, directors, or others in similar positions in a student affairs division. Participants selected had at least five years’ experience after completing the master’s degree, as those with fewer years of experience are classified as new professionals (Coleman & Johnson, 1990). Individuals selected also had spent at least three years in their current position, in order to allow them to become acclimated to that position and could potentially enhance their ability to conduct meaningful assessments. To identify participants who were key middle managers, the researcher sought professionals who reported to a senior level administrator and had either new professionals or students reporting to them.

New Professional

The definition of new professionals is much clearer than that of middle level managers. New professionals are those individuals who provide direct educational service to the students on the campus (Creamer, Winston, & Miller, 2001). Coleman and Johnson (1990) define new or entry-level professionals as those who have recently completed a master's degree in a variety of educational fields and are of varying ages. For the purposes of this study, a new professional is defined as someone with fewer than five years of experience working in student affairs, reporting to a middle manager or senior level administrator.

Senior Level Administrator

The senior level administrator is typically defined as an assistant, associate, or chief student affairs officer, often referred to as the vice president for student affairs (Sandeen, 1991). Senior level administrators typically report to university presidents, provosts, or other upper-level administrators, have had at least ten years of experience in the profession, and have typically moved up through the ranks within student affairs to their current position (Sandeen). In this study, senior level administrators were defined as the chief student affairs officer, vice president for student affairs, or middle managers with fifteen or more years of experience who supervise new professionals and/or other middle managers.

Assessment

Assessment is defined as “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 18). Erwin (1991) defines assessment as a process that guides good practice and has implications for the individual institution. Together these two definitions identify the need to focus on the collection, interpretation, and reporting of assessment data as it relates to student learning and

development, making it specific to the institution. Assessment can be goal-based or responsive; summative or formative; proactive or reactive; it can be used to determine needed programs and services, measure productivity and quality, gauge reputation, guide resource allocation, or any combination of these (Conrad & Wilson, 2003). Assessment in this study is defined as the broad process of gathering, analyzing, and disseminating information that looks at services and programs as well as student learning outcomes.

Evaluation

“While assessment describes effectiveness, evaluation uses these descriptions in order to improve effectiveness and determine progress toward objectives, goals, and benchmarks, however that might be defined by an institution” (Upcraft, 2003, p. 556). Evaluation, which is a companion to assessment, takes the information produced by assessment and looks at it in order to make decisions to improve the operation of programs and services (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). In this study evaluation is defined as the process of utilizing assessment results to determine whether goals have been accomplished and to make improvements to programs and services.

Measurement and Research

Assessment involves the process of gathering, analyzing, and interpreting information, and evaluation refers to how the data is utilized. “Measurement refers to the methods used to gather information for the purposes of assessment” (Upcraft, 2003, p. 556), and can be interpreted as a form of research. To determine which method of measurement will be most beneficial the professional needs to research the topic under study by reading journal reviews, conducting Internet searches, and benchmarking (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). Measurement can be qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of the two. The professional responsible for conducting the assessment must also decide which type of measurement tool will be most

effective in gathering the desired information. Options include using existing instruments, designing new instruments, or collecting information using established qualitative and quantitative methods. Measurement, in this study, is the method for collecting data; and research is the process of gathering information through a variety of means.

Knowledge

It can be difficult to define knowledge related to assessment especially because this is an area where little research has been conducted. While knowledge of assessment is often listed as one area of understanding that the professional should possess (Creamer, Winston, & Miller, 2001). The lack of a clear definition could be related to the various groups within the universities and the sub-cultures present, each having a different perspective of the same or similar words (Mentkowski, Astin, Ewell, & Moran, 1991). Another problem in defining knowledge is related to the two different types of knowing that exist, explicit and tacit (Nonaka, 1991; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004). Nonaka explains that tacit knowledge is based on our personal experiences; the observations we make, the way we imitate others, and what we actually do. O'Donovan, et al. goes on to say that, tacit knowledge is difficult to articulate to others because it is so closely related to an individual's personal experiences. Explicit knowledge is more easily identifiable because it is explained primarily through words with very little ambiguity (O'Donovan, et al.).

O'Donovan, Price, and Rust (2004) make the claim that to be knowledgeable in the area of assessment one must possess both explicit and tacit knowledge foundations. For the purposes of this study knowledge is defined as the combination of explicit and tacit knowledge. The explicit knowledge is identified in how the participants define key words and processes related to assessment and their knowledge of the tools available. Implicit knowledge in this study is

defined as how the middle managers experience assessment, what are they involved in, and how do they know or gain knowledge that relates to assessment activities.

Skills and Abilities

In defining skills and abilities for this study it is necessary to use the definitions of explicit and tacit knowledge (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004). How do middle managers experience assessment, what kinds of assessment activities are they engaging in, and what training or education have they had about assessment methods and tools? The literature available lists assessment as a skill that student affairs professionals should possess; however it fails to identify the standard by which these skills will be defined (Mable, & Miller, 1991; Fried, 1995; Creamer, Winston, & Miller, 2001; Bresciani, 2002; Love & Estanek, 2004). O'Donovan et al., stressed that assessment should be done 'right,' but they go on to say that finding the exact right way is very difficult.

Ability is closely related to the area of tacit knowledge (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust). It is the development of a professional's ability to use different assessment tools and methods to some level of proficiency. Ability can be understood by looking at the level to which a professional is able to engage in assessment activities including design, implementation, analysis, and reporting of results regardless of the professional's explicit knowledge of the mechanics of assessment. For this study, ability will refer to how middle managers are engaging in assessment activities without regard for whether or not they can articulate their actions as assessment or if they are even aware that they are engaging in assessment activities.

To be able to conduct effective assessments one must have some sort of basic knowledge, either implicit or tacit, that they can apply (Astin, 1993). Knowing the key words and definitions related to assessment and being able to apply them in work is where ability and skill begin to

separate. Explicit knowledge of the appropriate tools for assessment and how to properly use those tools should be considered in determining the level of skill of a professional. For the purpose of this study, skills are defined as the ways in which middle managers are able to act on their explicit knowledge both in the performance of their job responsibilities and how they transmit the results to others.

Research Assumptions

Assessment is being conducted by professionals in student affairs (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000; Timm, 2005). This led the researcher to the conclusion that there exists some basic level of knowledge related to assessment; that middle managers know what assessment is, what steps are needed to conduct assessment, and that they are engaging in assessment activities in a way that allows them to analyze the results and share their findings. Another assumption is that whether stated or unstated, assessment is an expectation for student affairs practitioners (Love & Estanek, 2005; Upcraft & Schuh). This study examined what types of knowledge, skills, and abilities middle level managers possess related to assessment and what types of assessments they are conducting.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine middle management professionals' knowledge, skills, and abilities to use assessment in practice. Specifically, the study addressed the following questions:

RQ 1: What knowledge do middle managers have regarding assessment?

RQ 2: How do middle managers define their role in assessment efforts in their current position?

RQ 3: How do middle managers describe their assessment activities?

RQ 4: How do middle managers utilize assessment results to guide programs and services?

RQ 5: What role does the middle manager's supervisor play in the middle manager conducting assessment?

RQ 6: What expectations do middle managers have of their staff regarding assessment and how are these expectations communicated?

RQ 7: What external influences impact assessments being conducted by middle managers?

RQ 8: How does assessment manifest itself in the daily lives of middle managers working in divisions of student affairs?

Limitations and Biases

Several limitations existed in this study including the data collection method, the population being researched, and the researcher. The data collection process utilized a qualitative approach that included interviews of middle managers that focused on how they utilize assessment to inform their practice. As the researcher, it was important to examine my own knowledge, skills, and abilities with regard to assessment in order to identify my biases as an observer and interviewer.

A critical element of the study involved asking participants to define specific words and pieces of information that are unclear within the student affairs literature. Part of the confusion related to the terminology and assessment activity stems from the variety of campus cultures, positions, definitions, and expectations within which professionals in middle level management positions operate (Astin, 1990; Mentkowski, Astin, Ewell, & Moran, 1991). Deciding how to

organize and analyze what qualified as knowledge, skills, and ability was a limitation to consider. These qualitative methods will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

The definition of *middle manager* in student affairs is somewhat unclear and can vary from one campus to another (Mills, 2000). Participants were selected by the researcher based on specific criteria that is further discussed in Chapter Three. However, identifying what constituted a middle manager from one campus to another was difficult given the ambiguity of the term. Identifying appropriate participants who qualified as middle managers was for this study another limitation.

All campuses selected for this study were geographically convenient to the researcher and the participants were identified either by a supervisor or suggested by a colleague of the researcher. Regional differences of institutions and culture limits the applicability of these findings to other institutions. In addition, some of the participants were aware of the general topic of the study prior to the researcher's arrival and may have had time to prepare their thoughts about assessment even though they did not know the specific interview questions asked in advance.

Researcher Biases

I have been working in the student affairs profession for over ten years and my last professional position would fit the definition of a middle manager. I completed my bachelor's degree at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh in elementary education. As a doctoral student, I hold an assistantship within a unit of student affairs and my primary responsibility is to conduct assessment for the department. I have worked predominantly with university housing during my time in student affairs but have also had experience within the areas of student activities, volunteer programs, Greek life, judicial programs, and orientation. I have had experience

working in various types of institutions large and small, public and private, co-educational and single sex, and in various regions of the United States.

In each of my positions I have utilized information gathered through various assessment techniques in order to guide the programs and services for which I was responsible. I did not have an assessment course in my master's degree program but I felt that I was conducting necessary assessments in the course of my employment. Until entering the doctoral program I did not fully comprehend the importance of assessment or the knowledge required to implement an effective assessment plan. Understanding how to use the results was a critical skill that would have benefited me in my previous positions and it was this realization that led me to this research study.

I recently completed a research study on new professionals and their knowledge, skills, and abilities related to assessment. The findings from this study led me to identify an area needing further investigation, understanding how the supervisor influenced the new professionals with regard to assessment. In the previous study those who were doing assessment on a regular basis typically had a supervisor who was knowledgeable about assessment and had a good understanding of its purpose (Timm, 2005). My belief before beginning this research study was that middle managers could impact the programs and services of their areas in a positive manner by serving as role models and guiding new professionals in assessment activities. With the greater emphasis on assessment being made in the profession (Astin, 1993; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004), new professionals are more likely to receive specific training on how to engage in assessment activities through their graduate preparation programs which prepare them to enter their new positions with the skills necessary to conduct effective assessments. If middle

managers are not prepared to continue this training, those skills can become dormant or disappear altogether.

Significance

Literature is significantly lacking in the area of assessment conducted by student affairs professionals and on the role of middle managers, especially in the area of assessment. In the ever-changing college environment student affairs professionals, particularly those in middle management positions must become adept at communicating the ways in which they contribute to the learning environment or risk extinction. Middle managers' job descriptions are often very complex and assessment can become a very small, unimportant, or neglected part of their job. The research collected from this study will bring more attention to this component of the middle managers position. Most importantly, this research will provide specific recommendations to help middle managers utilize assessment techniques that will improve the programs and services provided through their areas of responsibility.

Like the new professionals, middle managers answer to a supervisor who needs to be able to understand the qualifications of their staff. Senior student affairs officers need to understand how their middle managers are not only incorporating assessment in their work but also how they are articulating and demonstrating it to the staff they supervise. With increased call for accountability, all levels of student affairs need to be contributing not only to the institution, but they also need to be able to demonstrate that contribution (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999). Understanding the knowledge, skills, and abilities of middle managers will allow their supervisors to take the necessary steps to continue supporting assessment in student affairs divisions.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professionals working in student affairs need to be able to demonstrate how their areas are functioning and how their work contributes to the intellectual climate of the institution (Erwin, Scott, & Menard, 1991; Pascarella & Upcraft, 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1999). Assessment should be a routine and structured part of all program areas within student affairs tied to the university mission and strategic plan and used in the development of policies (Love & Estanek, 2004). There are many obstacles to successfully implementing assessment plans, including lack of knowledge by the assessor, lack of resources such as money or time, lack of support from supervisors, insufficient reporting of findings, and the failure to identify objectives in creating an assessment program (Bresciani, 2002; Upcraft, 2003; Love & Estanek). Mable and Miller (1991) discuss the need to establish standards of professional practice and to identify how the accreditation of programs and services has impacted the types of professionals who are working in student affairs. Student affairs professionals, including middle managers, need not only a solid knowledge of assessment practices and techniques in order to engage in ongoing assessment activities, but they also need the skills and ability to use assessment results both to improve the programs they work with and to share the results appropriately.

Assessment

The impetus for increasing the use of assessment to critically examine the practices of higher education has come in response to the call for accountability by sources external to higher education, often driven by political demands (Heywood, 2000). The Wingspread Group on

Higher Education (1993) noted a mismatch between what the American society wants and what higher education provides regarding the preparation provided to undergraduate students.

“Although student affairs organizations are not at the center of controversy over accountability in higher education, criticism of the profession is growing” (Blimling & Whitt, 1999, p. 8).

Divisions of student affairs are coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate their worth to the core mission of the institution (Erwin, Scott, & Menard, 1991; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993; Grace 2002), and at a time when budgets are being cut and competition for resources is increasing, student affairs’ spending has been scrutinized more than ever before (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999). “Assessment results can help answer questions of accountability and quality; help gauge affordability and cost effectiveness; provide valuable data in a strategic process; and aid in the policy and decision-making process” (Desler, 2000, p. 291). Middle managers can use assessment and evaluation results to navigate the political terrain as well as to improve programs and services.

History of Assessment in Student Affairs

Assessment in some form has been conducted in student affairs since the inception of the profession but the need for formal assessment began to gain importance in the 1960s with the emergence of student developmental theories (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Gonyea, & Rodriguez, 2002). In the 1970s two significant documents were written regarding the state of “tomorrow’s higher education” which questioned the role of higher education and specifically the role of student affairs; and called for greater collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs (Brown, 1972; Miller & Prince, 1975). Brown recommended establishing expectations for students and measuring the outcomes of students’ growth. Three years later, Miller and Prince stressed that student affairs professionals need to become engaged in assessment activities and recommended

assessing the programs and services provided by student affairs in addition to assessing student learning. Assessment began being talked about throughout the profession and it was stressed as an activity that professionals needed to be doing. At first many people believed, or perhaps hoped, that this call for assessment was simply a passing fad and would soon pass like other fads (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999).

However the 1980s showed student affairs professionals that assessment was here to stay when more explicit standards for accreditation included student affairs, which impacted the evolution of assessment at the university (Wright, 2002). During the mid-1980s the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) began providing guidelines for institutions that increased the need for assessment activities on campus and while this was just one accrediting agency, it was an example of some of the new demands that student affairs was facing across the country. These new standards were designed to improve institutional effectiveness, which was linked to outcomes assessment (Wright). In the late 1980s the Total Quality Management (TQM) initiatives began to spread in response to the need for organizations to have greater accountability (Grace, 2002). About the same time, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was formed to provide specific units in student affairs with a set of standards that would assist both practice and the educational preparation for the profession. The CAS standards provided professionals with a comprehensive and solid set of criteria to support program quality and effectiveness and included the need for assessment of programs and services (Miller, 2003).

In 1993, the Wingspread Group on Higher Education published *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*, a document that called for universities and colleges to become more engaged in improving the undergraduate experience and to provide evidence of

how they were achieving their goals (Wingspread Group on Higher Education). This document called for professionals working at institutions of higher education to consider their contributions to the institution and what skills and abilities they possessed in order to provide information that supported those contributions. The report identified that this new way of assessing our outcomes may require professionals to develop or enhance a skill set not previously utilized and called for institutions to invest in the cultivation of the skills needed to conduct necessary assessments (Wingspread Group on Higher Education).

Over the years several national surveys have been developed to assist universities in the area of assessment. The National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE) and the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) are two of the most well known surveys utilized by institutions to better understand the undergraduate experience. The CSEQ was developed in the late 1970s to measure the degree to which undergraduates were engaging in the university to enhance their learning and development (www.indiana.edu/~cseq/cseq, retrieved, March 29, 2006). More recently the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ) (www.indiana.edu/~cseq/csxq, retrieved, March 29, 2006) has been developed to assess new students' expectations and motivations that they have of their undergraduate experience (www.indiana.edu/~cseq/csxq, retrieved, March 29, 2006). The CSXQ was designed to be used with freshmen to identify the types of interactions they want to have with faculty and peers and its impact on both their satisfaction and achievement in college.

The NSSE, developed in the late 1990s was created to assess student participation and the desired outcomes of the college experience (www.nsse.iub.edu/html/origins.cfm, retrieved March 29, 2006). The NSSE survey is typically given to both first year students and seniors to measure what the students are getting out of their college experience based upon a common set

of standards (www.nsse.iub.edu/html/origins.cfm, retrieved March 29, 2006). These instruments, and others like them, are often used by student affairs professionals to meet their goals regarding assessment, including policy and program development, and to examine and understand current programming efforts.

While these instruments have given student affairs administrators tools to gather assessment information, they do not provide the assessment mindset that student affairs professionals need (Love & Estanek, 2004). These instruments, while opening the discussion about assessment of student affairs' contributions to the institution, do not provide the level of information necessary for the analysis of individual programs and services by different units within student affairs divisions. While getting big picture information is a critical element of the overall assessment plan, it does not provide the majority of student affairs professionals with the experience and comfort level with assessment methods that is necessary for creating the culture of assessment that will allow student affairs to fully contribute to the mission of the institution (Love & Estanek).

In the past decade assessment activities have become more focused on collaborations with academic affairs, specifically student learning outcomes, and on preparing individuals to complete the necessary assessments (American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998). There has also been a clearer call for student affairs divisions to establish their contributions to the academic community by demonstrating their support and development of the whole student (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1996). During this time there has also been push to include assessment courses in graduate preparation programs, leading to a stronger emphasis on assessment within student affairs (Fried, 1995).

Types of Assessment

There are many different ways to assess, each with a unique way of gathering data (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). The methods of collection include qualitative, quantitative, or a combination of the two (Upcraft, 2003). The professional coordinating the assessment must consider several factors in choosing one of the various methods for gathering the desired information; who to assess, when to conduct the assessment, and how any information will be analyzed and reported (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates). Some of the methods for assessing include satisfaction surveys, needs assessments, focus groups, individual interviews, observation, program evaluation, benchmarking, peer review, and environmental (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson).

Qualitative methods are inductive methods where the professional conducting the assessment also serves as the instrument for data collection (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Using a qualitative method for gathering data requires the professional to personally engage with those whom they are assessing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Qualitative methods include but are not limited to interviews, focus groups, and observation (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001).

Quantitative methods are deductive and view the world as fixed and therefore measurable (Huck, 2004). Professionals using quantitative methods for collecting data are looking for results that are more generalizable, that is information that can be applied to the greater population. Quantitative methods typically require some form of statistical analysis as results are processed (Tuckman, 1994). Satisfaction surveys, needs assessments, and program evaluations are just a few examples of quantitative methods middle managers may use to gather data (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001).

Some of the most common types of assessments that are used in student affairs include benchmarking, satisfaction, needs assessment, focus groups and student learning outcomes (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Schuh, Upcraft & Associates, 2001; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). Benchmarking is a form of assessment that involves comparing one's results with those of another's, either inside the institution or with other institutions (Bresciani, et al.) Bresciani, et al., go on to state that while this can be a very valuable tool in the assessment process, one major flaw of benchmarking can be that the individual or individuals benchmarking are placing value judgments in the comparison which can lead to deciding whether the program is good or bad. Satisfaction assessment involves gathering information about the services, programs, and facilities that are used by the population being served (Schuh, et al.).

Needs assessment provides information about what the clientele is in need of or what should be done for them based on the information received from the population that is using the services (Schuh, et al.). Both satisfaction and needs assessments are used to better understand the population that is using the programs and services provided, while needs assessment provides insight into the development of programs and services satisfaction surveys provide information about the level of satisfaction with current programs and services (Schuh, et al.).

Focus groups and interviews are other ways of getting information through direct interaction with individuals impacted by the services; questions are asked and the participants can provide thick, rich detail to the interviewers (Bresciani, et al.). The greatest strength of focus groups and interviews is that you can get instant clarification if any information does not make sense, and is better when creating survey questions is difficult (Bresciani, et al.).

Measuring student learning outcomes involves setting specific goals for what students will gain from the programs and services provided and the most difficult part of that is creating

goals that are measurable and reporting results in a meaningful manner (Bresciani, et al.). It is important to have a basic understanding of the different means of acquiring assessment results and these are some of the most commonly used methods.

Assessment for Quality Programs and Services

Providing high quality programs and services is a main goal in student affairs and one way of achieving this goal is through assessment (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000). When used as a foundation for decision making, assessment and evaluation provide valuable insight into program strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, by contributing to the development of a well thought-out plan that is tied to the mission of the university, assessment assists in creating effective programs and services (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999). Upcraft and Schuh assert that if assessment is done correctly it can show the impact student affairs has on the student's out-of-class experience, identify how services are being used, and even clarify how learning, academic achievements, and retention are impacted. Working with other units on the campus can strengthen assessment results and impact a wider community (Erwin, Scott, & Menard, 1991; Bresciani, 2002). Equipped with information provided by assessment and evaluation, the middle manager can communicate more effectively with other student affairs units, the division as a whole, outside stakeholders, and the larger campus community.

Assessment can provide individuals and programs with greater understanding of the impact they make on students (Bresciani, 2002). If student affairs professionals want to determine the quality of their programs and services they need to conduct periodic assessment (Schuh & Upcraft, 2000). Professionals often want to gather specific information, such as what students think, what they learn, or how they learn and to obtain these answers they must ask students in some way. Although this may seem obvious, Blimling and Whitt (1999) have stated

that very few institutions actually conduct assessments appropriately. Assessment is most successful and useful when it is an ongoing endeavor (Erwin & Sivo, 2001).

Assessment for Policy Development

Assessment provides systematic information necessary to those responsible for policy development, strategic planning, issue resolution, and resource allocation (Conrad & Wilson, 2003). In institutions of higher education, assessment data can be used to make a number of important decisions. As a result, student affairs divisions that are not conducting assessments and evaluating the results can be at a great disadvantage in being able to demonstrate how and what they are contributing to student learning outside the classroom (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). Student affairs professionals must also have clear goals in order for assessment results to be meaningful and useful (Kuh, Gonyea, & Rodriguez, 2002).

Good practice requires student affairs professionals to engage in systematic inquiry that focuses on gathering and analyzing data in various ways and then using that information in planning, decision making, and policy development (Pascarella & Whitt, 1999). Upcraft (2003) goes on to emphasize that assessment can be a useful resource in linking goals to outcomes, defining quality, and determining the quality that exists in specific student affairs initiatives. Institutions and programs require both faculty and administrators to be able to identify, measure, and disseminate the results of their assessments (Erwin & Sivo, 2001). Pascarella and Whitt stress that actively engaging in a process of systematic inquiry is an important and valued part of the role of student affairs professionals.

Assessment as a Tool for Gaining Resources

According to Blimling and Whitt (1999), student affairs plays a critical role in student learning as well as in university retention and graduation efforts; however, student affairs

divisions must be able to provide evidence to support these claims. Only by showing how they contribute to these areas can student affairs professionals validate their need for institutional resources (Moore, 1991). “Assessment can help answer such important questions such as, Are students learning what we think they do? Does college help students develop? Are we meeting students’ needs? and How much are students learning through out-of-class experiences?” (Upcraft, 2003, p. 558). Middle managers may not always think to ask these questions or be able to identify how they can answer them. Student affairs professionals need to recognize the growing importance of assessment and be able to use the results to improve the quality of student services and programs, guide strategic planning, analyze cost effectiveness, justify student programs and services, assist in accreditation processes, and perhaps most importantly, guide decision making, policy development, resource allocation, and practice (Upcraft, 2003).

Assessment Tied to the University Mission

Student affairs professionals need to be aware of the institution’s mission and the impact it has on activities, programs, operations, and most importantly, assessment (Bresciani, 2002; Walvoord, 2004). Tying assessment activities to the university mission provides an important link to the division’s mission, and gives meaning to the results produced (Walvoord). Astin (1993) discussed the contribution assessment makes to defining goals and objectives in strategic planning in addition to identifying critical issues and problems that must be resolved before an organization can meet its goals. Assessment results can be used in conversations with institutional staff to help guide the development of programs and services in their areas (Walvoord).

Assessment is about learning more about your area in addition to improving programs and services provided in divisions of student affairs (Love & Estanek, 2004, p. 83). Assessment

may offer evidence of the worth of a program and thus provide support for its survival (Carney, 1991; Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999; Upcraft 2003). Assessment activities should be designed to support the university's mission and goals (Kuh, 1979; Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Pascarella & Upcraft). Knowing how to develop a comprehensive assessment plan that is implemented on a regular basis and contains clear objectives and intended outcomes will provide the middle manager and the student affairs division with a more useful appraisal of their services.

Developing Assessment Plans

Designing an assessment plan or tool requires clearly defining the purpose and objectives of the plan and identifying the desired outcomes (Erwin, 1991; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Walvoord, 2004). Walvoord stated that a major flaw in assessing occurs when the assessment is seen as a task that must be accomplished, rather than a developed plan for gathering useful information to guide practice. Assessment can be goal based or responsive, formative or summative, depending on how the results will be used, which in turn impacts decision making, program quality or need, and resource allocation (Conrad & Wilson, 2003). Being able to answer the important questions related to the outcomes of assessment such as; why are we assessing these programs or services? What is being assessed? How is assessment conducted? Who should manage the assessment? and When is the best time to conduct the assessment? Helps in identifying the type of assessment that will provide the most useful set of results (Brown, 1999). The creation of a detailed assessment plan, with the help of a committee or an assessment specialist, will lead to an assessment process that is manageable and well-timed, and that serves a greater purpose (Maki, 2004).

One of the most commonly used and well known formalized assessment plans is provided by Schuh, Upcraft and Associates (2001). They have developed an eleven step plan which will begins with defining the problem or goal, looking for the ‘why’ something is or is not occurring (Schuh, et al.). The next two steps involve determining the purpose of the study and where you will get the information needed, which requires one to identify what information will help solve the problem and pin-point the best source for getting the information needed. The fourth step involves determining the assessment method that will serve you best; will the information be best gathered through qualitative, quantitative methods, or a combination of the two. The fifth step is closely related to the third step and involves identifying who to study, which population(s) are going to provide the most useful information based on criteria developed for the population being studied. Next in the assessment plan is determining how to collect the data; this includes identifying if there are other assessments being done that one can use, the types of incentives to use, and which method will yield the return rate desired. The seventh step is determining the instruments that will be used. There are many different types of instruments available in addition to creating one’s own instruments. The eighth and ninth steps involve determining who should collect the data and then determining how the data will be analyzed. Next, determine the implications of the study for policy and practice. This requires the assessor to identify how the problem stated in step one is solved, in addition to providing insight into policies and practices that may need to be revised, eliminated, or created. Finally, step eleven, calls for the effective report of results; which requires one to identify what will make this information useful and purposeful, and who should see this information. Being familiar with this plan can help in creating an assessment process that has meaning and purpose and provides information that will be useful to professionals in student affairs.

Upcraft (2003) offers the following advice for student affairs professionals in positions where assessment is critical: understand the barriers to conducting assessment and work to overcome them, select professionals qualified to conduct the studies, find ways to gain maximum participation, and make extra efforts to ensure that all students have access to participate in the assessment studies. These steps will help insure a high quality, well-developed assessment and will provide information that is much more accurate and useful (Upcraft).

Assessment is not fully understood by many in the student affairs profession who often equate it with simply distributing surveys or running focus groups (Upcraft, 2003). Assessment is often done in a piecemeal manner rather than accomplished through an intentional planning effort (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). It is commonly undertaken either in response to a particular problem or is neglected altogether, both approaches which prove ineffective for the middle manager (Blimling & Whitt). Professionals can even be afraid of assessment, despite the real need to be able to demonstrate how their efforts influence student learning, simply because they do not know how to create or carry out a formal assessment plan (Blimling & Whitt). Other barriers that may prevent professionals from engaging in assessment include lack of time, fear of the results, an assumption that things are acceptable as they are, lack of support from their supervisor, lack of knowledge, or simply a feeling of being overwhelmed by the prospect of having to conduct an assessment (Bresciani, 2002).

Many professionals make the mistake of attempting first to determine how quality will be assessed instead of identifying what is to be assessed (Heywood, 2000). Schuh and Upcraft (2000) offer two key strategies to prevent this problem. They recommend first creating an assessment plan that includes determining the specific needs of students and clients and then determining whether those needs have been met. This approach insures that the process

proceeds in a logical fashion that ultimately leads to the identification of quality programs. Other important elements in developing an assessment plan include collaborating with others outside specific units and engaging in ongoing training and development opportunities in research, assessment, and evaluation (Erwin, Scott, & Menard, 1991).

Schuh and Upcraft (1998) offer three tips for conducting an effective assessment. First, they urge professionals to conduct studies that matter and not waste time on assessing something that has an outcome that is either not desired or has little importance to the program. Second, they recommend involving those who will be affected by the assessment as well as those who will be interested in the results (Schuh & Upcraft). Banta and Associates (1996) support this suggestion, stating, “there is, perhaps, no more important principle in the assessment literature than this: successful assessment requires collaborative efforts” (p. 35). Finally, Schuh and Upcraft implore those engaging in assessment to “conduct a good study” (p. 6). In other words, if the assessment has been well planned out, the objectives concur with the actual outcomes, and the results are reported in an effective manner, the study will have been a successful one. The question then becomes whether middle managers have the knowledge, skill, and ability to put together a good assessment plan.

The Need to Learn Assessment Skills

Many practitioners misinterpret the purpose of assessment (Kuh, 1979; Schuh & Upcraft, 1998; Banta & Palomba, 1999; Glesne, 1999; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Their basic assumption is that assessment needs to be conducted by someone who is an expert in the area of assessment; however, few individuals in student affairs have enough formal knowledge of assessment procedures to develop an effective assessment program (Schuh & Upcraft). Assessment appears to be a skill for which little formalized training occurs so practitioners often lack the necessary

skills to conduct an effective assessment (Kuh, 1979). Identifying this area of weakness in the student affairs profession supports the idea that further training and increased emphasis on instruction in assessment preparation programs is needed. Practitioners should be aware of their own weaknesses in this area and work to gain a better understanding of the assessment process.

The credibility of the results of any study is often determined by the qualifications of those conducting the study (Upcraft, 2003). Winston and Miller (1991) emphasize the need for student affairs professionals to develop the necessary skills to properly conduct assessment and evaluation. Institutions must recognize their responsibility in training professionals through staff development activities to develop the skills necessary to perform assessments (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). Avoidance of assessment may simply be the perception of the practitioners' lack of knowledge about, or experience in, performing assessments. Many middle level professionals conduct assessments simply by working their way through what is required, often frustrated by their inability to understand exactly what the information means and their feelings of inadequacy as they struggle through the process (Upcraft, 2003). In reality, they typically have the resources they need to assist them available on their own campuses, usually from offices of institutional effectiveness, research offices, or specific people within student affairs whose sole responsibility is assessment, but they need to know how to access them (Upcraft, 2003).

Often this confusion comes from how expectations for assessment are communicated, requiring the professionals to "do" an assessment rather than expecting that they engage in assessment activities that will provide them with useful results (Wolvoord, 2004). With a greater call for accountability in student affairs, staff members need to be knowledgeable about how to conduct meaningful assessment and evaluation as part of their work routine (Love & Estanek,

2005; Maki, 2004). Student affairs professionals cannot rely solely on others to assess their programs and services or the purpose of the assessment may be lost and the results less useful (Sandeen, 1991). Schuh and Upcraft (2001) suggest that divisions of student affairs will thrive when as many members as possible understand and can implement an effective assessment or evaluation plan.

Graduate preparation programs are the most obvious place to prepare student affairs professionals to conduct assessments, and implementing such instruction would represent a paradigm shift within the profession (Fried, 1995). Timm (2005) found that professionals who had an assessment course in graduate school had a better foundation of knowledge to work from and were better prepared to conduct formal assessments. Professionals equipped with explicit knowledge regarding assessment can take the lead to ensure the provision of quality programs and educational opportunities (Sandeen, 1991). Assessment can play an important role in any student affairs department and middle managers in particular must understand its significance and increase their knowledge base in this area to lead their division in the appropriate direction.

The Role of the Middle Manager

Middle managers are the key to effective student affairs operations and the institutions that they serve (Mills, 2000). Middle managers are often seen as the linchpins of the organization, responsible for keeping things together (Procaccini, 1986). The position of the middle managers has developed over time as organizations expanded and they are often situated between two positions: those in powerful decision-making roles and those responsible for implementing the decisions that are made (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996). The middle manager's primary relationships are with lower- and upper-level staff, while their contact with students is

minimal (Mills). Because of their critical position within the organization, middle managers need to work effectively with those above and those below in order to be successful.

Professionals at different levels of an organization are subject to distinctly different expectations. Those at the top create plans and implement structures to support those plans, while middle managers are largely responsible for the direct management of those plans (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1996). Middle managers are often stretched in many different directions and must decide the best way to allocate time, energy, space, staff, and money in order to get the greatest return on their investment (Procaccini, 1986). Those closest to the action, typically new professionals, are often best at identifying what is needed, and effective middle managers tap into this resource (Kuh & Whitt, 1991). A major role of middle managers is to provide information that is critical to the organization and to the organization's goals for the future (Mills, 2000).

Middle managers in a university setting are typically caught between two important constituencies on campus; those whom they serve and those whom they supervise. The situation of middle managers requires them to move forward while they simultaneously manage their day-to-day responsibilities, balancing the two roles (Procaccini, 1986). Middle managers who are unable to influence those above, as well as those below, may find themselves caught between the two groups and may feel extreme pressure from both sides about how to do their job (Procaccini).

While management of staff is an important part of the middle manager's role, managers must avoid spending too much time supervising their staff at the expense of developing the skills necessary to influence their supervisors (Procaccini, 1986). Nevertheless, it is the middle manager's responsibility to ensure that their staff is able to accomplish expected tasks (Mills,

2000). Middle managers should encourage their staff to avoid always doing things the same way and to experiment, dream, and challenge each other as new goals are created by focusing on the positive aspects of their work and engaging others in their vision (Kouzes & Posner, 1991; Kuh & Whitt, 1991). Assessment is often approached erratically or unsystematically by middle managers, causing confusion and preventing their staff from seeing the connections between goals, priorities, and procedures (Procaccini). Middle managers should be knowledgeable and aware of what is happening around them in order to work effectively with their supervisors and staff to conduct appropriate assessments.

Dalton (2003) outlines four key roles for supervisors: ensuring that staff fulfill all responsibilities related to their job; helping staff master specific competencies necessary for success in their position; helping employees understand and cope, both personally and professionally, with the culture and requirements of the work environment; and finally, helping employees engage in continual learning, including professional development in these areas. As assessment becomes increasingly important in divisions of student affairs, there will be a greater need for professionals at all levels to conduct assessment. Middle managers need to be equipped not only to perform assessment themselves, but also to assist their staff members in conducting assessments if they are to be successful (Dalton, 2003, Upcraft & Schuh, 2000).

Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) found that individuals in middle management positions tended to be the center of organizational communication and knowledge and were often the best equipped to identify the needs of the organization. Being at the center of an organizational structure requires that middle managers be aware of what is happening in all directions. Middle managers are in positions where they can gather important data that can influence policy decisions; however, they do not necessarily create or implement the policies (Mills, 2000).

Knowing what areas need to be addressed or assessed will assist the middle manager in effectively communicating with key individuals.

Managers are expected to be able to lead, use sound judgment, and act effectively (Birnbaum, 2000). Birnbaum asserts that managers want to make a difference in their position and improve their institution, and have gained their positions because of past success in these areas. Middle managers who recognize the importance of assessment in decision-making and are able to use it properly can benefit the entire organization. Middle managers will find success in their positions and ensure the delivery of effective programs and services when they are able to gather information and make decisions based upon the appropriate analysis of assessment information (Mills, 2000). The role of middle manager is critical both to the organization and to the implementation of an assessment plan. Middle managers should be knowledgeable about what is happening in their area; familiar with the expectations of supervisors, administrators, and the community; and be aware of what information they need to share with their diverse stakeholders.

Summary

Understanding the need for conducting assessment is critical in order to provide accurate information about programs and services. Showing how student affairs is contributing to the learning environment and satisfying external constituencies will help middle managers serve more effectively in their positions. Student affairs professionals need to make appropriate use of what they know and find the right time, place, and manner in which to utilize those skills (Desler, 2000). When assessment is thoughtfully and carefully coordinated, it can provide valuable information instrumental in the planning, development, and improvement of programs

and services. Middle managers are often best positioned to utilize assessment techniques as they lead their unit; however, they may lack the knowledge, skills, and ability to make this happen.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Ample research has documented the need for assessment in student affairs (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993; American Association for Higher Education, American College Personnel Association, & the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1998; Kuh, Gonyea, Rodriguez, 2002; Wolvoord, 2004). However, there is a paucity of research available regarding middle managers' knowledge, skills, and ability to properly use assessment tools and methods in practice. Missing from the literature is data about how middle managers gather, analyze, and interpret the information they use in making decisions to modify, or improve the programs and services they direct. This chapter provides an overview of the methods and procedures used in this research study. First, the methods used for data collection are outlined. Second, a description of the participants and the interview protocol is provided. Finally, the chapter concludes with an overview of the methods that were used in analyzing the data.

Process

The purpose of this study was to investigate what middle managers know about assessment and how they demonstrate that knowledge through their behavior and use of their assessment skills and ability. This study also considered how middle managers gather, analyze, and interpret information to make decisions to modify, or improve, the programs and services that they direct. The study employed a basic interpretive qualitative method to gather the appropriate data; that method provided a structure for identifying the knowledge, skills, and

abilities of middle managers, and specifically, for exploring how they utilized assessment in their professional lives (Patton, 2002).

According to Patton, qualitative methods allow researchers to look at specific issues, such as the assessment activities of middle managers, more closely (2002). The basic interpretive method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to see how individuals construct reality in their own world (Merriam, 2002). This method of collecting data relies on identifying patterns that emerge during the observation and interviewing of middle managers. The basic interpretive method was selected by the researcher as the most appropriate way to elicit the desired information from the middle managers. This method allowed the middle managers to share, in their own words, what they know about assessment and how assessment occurs in their work environment. This information would not have been obtained as easily using a different method such as a survey.

The constant comparative method was used in the analysis of the data as it was gathered in order to provide a formal structure for identifying the themes and patterns that emerged. The purpose of the constant comparative method is to identify patterns that emerge as data is analyzed and to arrange those patterns to show how they relate to one another (Merriam, 1998). As interview transcripts were read and compared and themes were identified to assist in the interpretation of results.

Location of Interviews

Interviews were conducted at three universities in the Southeast. Interviews were conducted in the participants' own office or work environment in order to identify how assessment was visible and present in that environment. This choice was also important as a research method because it could provide an additional example of how assessment was utilized

in the middle manager's work life. The presence of assessment materials could be referenced by the participants either during or after the interview and would allow the participants to provide examples to support their responses.

Institutions were chosen based on three criteria: size of the student population, size of the student affairs division, and the absence of an office or specific individual responsible for assessment within the student affairs division. To compare the issues of assessment between different types of institutions, I wanted to include both public and private institutions in the study. In this study, two of the institutions were state universities with over 15,000 students; one a regional institution and one a research-intensive institution. The third institution was a private, research-intensive university with over 11,000 students.

The first institution, henceforth referred to as Western University, is a private, research-intensive university. The president of Western University recently released a new strategic plan for the institution which affects faculty and staff working in all areas of the institution. The strategic plan is over 75 pages in length and broadly asks everyone to enrich the lives of the students and to promote a diverse community as they become a destination university. Over the past three years Western University has experienced a great deal of transition in their division of student affairs, including a new Vice President for Student Affairs who has been in his position for less than three years. Several other senior level administrators who had worked in the student affairs division for a significant period of time either left on their own or were asked to leave during the last year. Student affairs professionals are spread, geographically, throughout the campus and there were few materials, such as brochures, newsletters, and other materials that referred to the other units available in the specific offices visited while conducting this research.

The second institution, which will be referred to as Eastern University, is a regional state institution with over 15,000 students that is one year away from a SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) reaffirmation visit. The university's president has been at the university for over two decades and has had a great deal of success and influence; however, the president recently announced that she will be retiring this summer. The student affairs division is a close-knit community with the majority of staff working in one of three buildings. Materials, especially informational brochures related to assessment from various offices were available in the offices visited in this study and referred to by individuals in other areas. With the SACS reaffirmation visit only a year away, the institution is preparing to show what they do and how they do it in order to maintain accreditation. The student affairs division is preparing for this visit by preparing evidence of their role in supporting student learning. The student affairs division at Eastern views their assessment activities in preparation for the SACS review as a critical component in demonstrating the value and contributions of student affairs' programs and services at Eastern University.

The third university, Northern University, is a public, research-intensive university with over 15,000 students. The president of Northern University is extremely influential on the campus and has established a clear and often repeated expectation that the institution will become a more competitively ranked university nationally. This expectation has compelled professionals in all areas of campus to conduct assessments and share results, though usually just with their supervisors. The offices of individuals working in student affairs are spread out across the campus; however, assessment-related materials from other offices and areas were present in more than one of the offices visited by the researcher.

Interviews were conducted in each research participant's personal office. It was important for me to enter the professional's location of work in order to understand the environment within which the professional conducts daily business. Seeing professionals in their personal work settings helped identify the office culture as it related to the general work environment, and specifically to assessment. Over half of the participants referred to a specific item related to assessment in their office during the interview; some pointed to printed results or summaries of data while others had surveys that were awaiting analysis on their desks. At least two participants provided materials containing results of an assessment that had recently been conducted.

One area of concern for researchers is the impact they can have on the participants' environments (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). I had no idea that I would affect these professionals as much as I did. Over half of the participants wanted to know how they compared with other participants or what the research says about assessment. Participants also wanted validation for what they were doing and sought advice regarding what else they should be doing. As a researcher entering their worlds, I did not want to provide too much information during the interview that would influence their responses. My intention was to help the professionals become better at what they were already doing and I wanted to be conscious of the mark my interviews would have on the culture both while I was there and after I had left.

Selection of Participants

In order to gather the necessary data, a purposeful sample was used to identify participants from each institution. A purposeful sample is created when a set of specific qualifications for participants is developed by the researcher in order to gain the information desired (Glesne, 1999). Originally, I had intended to interview four or five middle managers at

each institution; because of timing, audio recording difficulties, and scheduling conflicts, only four individuals were interviewed at one university, Western University, while five individuals were interviewed at each of the other two universities, Northern and Eastern, for a total of fourteen (N=14) participants.

Participants were chosen based on criterion sampling, a method that uses specific demographic information to aid in collecting the most useful information from potential participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Demographic information was collected just before the interview. The information collected included the number of years the participant had worked in higher education, the number of years worked at their current institution, and the number of years in their current position. Participants were also asked what their highest degree attained was and the specific area of study. Finally, participants were asked to describe the area(s) of student affairs in which they worked. Table 3.1 provides a summary of the participant demographic information. In order to understand middle managers' knowledge, skills, and abilities it was necessary to find those professionals who best fit the description of middle managers and whose work responsibilities involve the use of assessment. Participants were chosen based on the criteria that they would facilitate the expansion of this information; that is they were in positions that would require them to conduct some form of assessment and had been in their positions long enough to identify what areas they needed to assess. (Bogdan & Biklen). The fourteen participants included seven males and seven females. Nine of the participants self-identified as white and five identified as non-white. All participants considered themselves to be middle managers as defined by this study.

This study primarily looked at middle managers with at least a Master's degree and a minimum of five years of professional experience in student affairs. Thirteen of the participants

had Master's degrees, and the individual without a masters' degree was chosen to participate despite the lack of a degree because she had eight years of professional experience and four additional individuals were interviewed at her institution. Four of the participants' degrees were in higher education administration; four in college student personnel; two in counseling; and three in areas not specifically related to student affairs; recreation/ tourism, human resources, and journalism (see Table 3.1). Additionally, three of the participants hold doctoral degrees in student affairs-related areas and one is a doctoral candidate in a student affairs-related program. The majority of degrees were completed at universities in the southeastern United States.

The participants selected for this study have all been in their current positions for at least three years. This requirement allowed them enough time in their position to be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the programs and services for which they are responsible. Additionally, professionals with five or more years of experience in student affairs or higher education were expected to have developed the ability to ascertain their program's level of functioning and effectiveness, as well as to be able to implement positive change.

Four participants in the study had at least five years, but not more than 10 years of experience in student affairs; two had between 10 and 14 years of experience; five had 15 to 19 years; and three had 20 or more years of experience (see Table 3.2). Six participants had held their current position between three and five years, three participants had six to nine years in their current position, and five had over 10 years of experience in their current position (see Table 3.2). Participants were also asked how many years they had worked at the institution, though not necessarily in their current position (see Table 3.2). Four participants had fewer than five years at the institution, four participants had between six and 14 years at the institution, and six participants had over 15 years of experience at the institution.

Table 3.1

Participant Demographic Information

	Years in		Highest Degree Attained	Area of Graduate Study	Title Held	Area of Responsibility
	Student Affairs	Current Position				
Eastern University						
Joseph	17	17	Master's	Journalism	Assistant Director	Student Activities
Lucy	24	11	Master's	College Student Personnel	Director	Student Activities
Monica	8	8	Bachelors	Unknown	Assistant Director	Recreation Sports & Facilities
Rachel	12	12	Master's	College Student Personnel	Assistant Director	Multicultural Affairs
Ross	25	16	Ph.D.	Counseling	Director	Counseling
Western University						
Genevieve	5	4	Master's	College Student Personnel	Area Director	Housing
Joann	5	3	Master's	Higher Education Administration	Associate Director	Student Activities
Mariah	6	4	Master's	Higher Education Administration	Director	Housing
Mark	15	3	Master's	College Student Personnel	Director	Recreation Sports & Facilities
Northern University						
Brandon	18	13	Ph.D.	Recreation & Tourism	Director	Generalist (Student Activities)
David	11	6	Ph.D. Candidate	Human Resources	Associate Director	Housing
Donna	18	11	Ph.D.	Higher Education Administration	Director	Generalist

Dylan	15	3	Master's	Unknown	Director	International Student Life
Steve	27	27	Master's	Higher Education Administration	Director	Recreation Sports & Facilities

Table 3.2

Years of Experience

Type of Experience	0-5 years	6-9 years	10-14 years	15-19 years	20+ years
In Higher Education/Student Affairs	0	4	2	5	3
At Current Institution	4	2	2	6	0
In Current Position	6	3	2	3	0

The definition of middle level manager is not clear in the student affairs literature as professionals with various job titles can fit the definition used in this study (Astin, 1990; Mentkowski, Astin, Ewell, & Moran, 1991; Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001). Participants selected ranged from an area coordinator in a housing program to the director of an area or program. Table 3.3 shows the positions titles of the participants in this study. Of the eight directors, five reported directly to the Vice President for Student Affairs, two reported to assistant or associate vice presidents, and one reported to a Dean of Students. Participants worked in various areas of student affairs, including recreational facilities and programs, residential life, student activities and leadership, international/multicultural student services, and generalist positions that oversee more than one functional area in student affairs (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.3

Position Title Distribution

University	Area Coordinator	Associate or Assistant Director	Director
Eastern University	0	3	2
Northern University	0	1	4
Western University	1	1	2
Total	1	5	8

Table 3.4

Areas of Responsibility

University	Residence Life	Recreational Programs	International and Multicultural	Student Activities & Leadership	Generalist
Eastern University		1	1	2	1
Northern University	1	1	1	1	1
Western University	2	1		1	
Total	3	3	2	4	2

All participants completed an informed consent form (see Appendix B) explaining their rights as participants in this study. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary and it was not anticipated that participation in the study would cause them any undue harm. Participants were allowed to end their participation at any time before, during, or after the interview to insure their comfort with being a participant in this study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Participants were also

made aware of the potential benefits to society that the research hoped to provide in order to make an informed decision regarding their participation (Glesne & Peshkin).

Maintaining participants' anonymity is important in the gathering of information (Glesne, 1999). The identities of participants in this study have remained confidential through the assignment of pseudonyms in the researcher's notes and reporting. In addition, participants reviewed the transcripts of their interviews and were given the opportunity to restrict or remove any information that they felt could provide personally identifiable information. The middle managers who participated were asked during the review of their transcripts and the researcher's notes and interpretations, to validate the information that was collected. This process, referred to as member checks, involves the participants in order to increase the validity and reliability of the study's results (Glesne, 1999).

Data Collection

Qualitative research allows the researcher to study specific topics in depth (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Data for this study was collected through a semi-structured interview with each subject; "we interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe" (Patton, 2002, p. 340). The interview process provided a structure for having a purposeful conversation with the participant in order to gain information in the person's own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Based on the literature review conducted in preparation for this study, questions were developed to help the researcher gain a better understanding of the middle level professionals' knowledge, skills, and ability to conduct meaningful assessment activities. The questions were organized into a standardized open-ended interview; "this approach requires carefully and fully wording each question before the interview" (Patton, 2002, p. 344). Each interview lasted between 25 and 50 minutes and interviews were conducted in person, with the

exception of one telephone interview. The interviews were audio-taped and 13 of the 14 interviews were transcribed verbatim with participants conducting member checks on the transcription. The fourteenth interview was not available for transcription due to a technical problem with the recording equipment, but the information was still included using my researcher notes from the interview.

Each interview was conducted on the campus of the participant in their primary work space, with the exception of the one telephone interview. During the interview participants provided artifacts such as surveys, assessment results, newsletters, or other documents that demonstrated how assessment is present in their work. Field notes were taken as a part of the interview process, which allowed for the recording of the researchers impressions of the surroundings and initial reactions to the participants' responses (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Information Needed

The purpose of this study was to examine the level and quality of assessment knowledge, skills, and ability of middle managers working in student affairs. This was accomplished by interviewing middle managers to understand how assessment information is gathered, analyzed, and interpreted in order to make decisions about how to modify or improve the programs or services they direct. The information needed for this study included 1) middle managers' knowledge of assessment, 2) how middle managers define their role in assessment efforts, 3) how middle managers describe the assessment process, 4) how middle managers interpret and utilize information, 5) which assessment tools middle managers use, 6) what role the middle manager's supervisor plays in conducting assessment, 7) what expectations middle managers have of their staff and how these expectations are communicated, 8) what external influences

impact the assessment activities, and 9) how assessment manifests itself in the daily lives of the participants.

Construction and Format of Interviews

The open-ended questions were designed to allow participants to define key terms and describe how they conduct assessment in their own words. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) stated that when developing the order of the questions to be asked, it is important to build rapport with the participant and help them feel comfortable in responding to the specific questions. The interviews conducted for this study began by asking participants to talk about how they identify their programs' strengths and weaknesses and how they use the information they gather. Next the researcher asked participants to define key terms related to assessment. The final part of the interview was designed to elicit a more specific view of how assessment was discussed, used in supervision, and conducted by the participants. In addition, many of the participants continued after the final question to ask the researcher about assessment and to offer further information that provided insight into their impressions about, and use of, assessment information.

Questions were designed to identify the participant's knowledge, skill, and ability related to assessment. Glesne (1999) states that questions should be designed to help the person being interviewed to better understand the topic you are studying, which leads to clearer responses from the participants. Regarding their assessment knowledge, I looked to see how they defined key terms, what kinds of tools they knew about, and the purpose of these tools as it related to their explicit knowledge of assessment. Related to tacit knowledge, I looked at how they described their assessment experiences and what types of activities were they engaging in and describing during the interview. Regarding assessment skill, I looked to see how their explicit knowledge was applied in their work and whether participants were talking about their

assessment activities with the appropriate language and if they could speak about how tools were used to gain desired outcomes. Finally to understand participant's ability, I looked at their level of assessment activity. How detailed was their assessment plan? Participants who provided a more detailed plan, emphasizing outcomes or goals, methods for collection and analysis, and how results were to be shared were considered to be more "able" to assess, even if they were lacking the knowledge and skill pieces.

Pilot Test of Instrument

The failure to develop a well thought-out interview protocol or to test the accuracy of the interview design can compromise the integrity of a study (Merriam, 2003). To address this concern, in September of 2005 a pilot test was conducted in which a sample of middle managers were asked the interview questions. Of the five participants in the pilot group, all had been in their positions for at least five years and had earned at least a Master's degree, and two had completed or were in the process of completing doctorates in student affairs administration. Participants were interviewed individually and were asked to answer the questions and then provide feedback about the wording, order, and understandability of the questions. After completing three of the interviews, the researcher made several revisions and then developed the final set of questions. Upon the recommendation of the doctoral advisory committee, the researcher expanded the literature review and developed two additional questions to gain further insight into this topic.

Interview Protocol

The questions asked in the interview included:

- 1) Tell me a little about your position and the responsibilities you have in your position.

- 2) Describe how you make decisions about improving your programs and services (student learning outcomes, strategic planning, benchmarking, satisfaction surveys, etc.).
- 3) How have these decisions helped in the modification or improvement of your programs and services?
- 4) Define the following words: assessment, evaluation, and research.
- 5) How do you currently use assessment in your position?
- 6) Describe how assessment information is used once the assessment is completed.
- 7) Who or what influences how you choose to identify your program's strengths and weaknesses (including barriers, dissemination of information, and support from division/supervisor)?
- 8) What expectations do you have for the staff you supervise in identifying program strengths and weaknesses (training programs, professional development opportunities)?
- 9) How do your supervisor's expectations related to assessment influence your assessment activities?
- 10) What assessment activities are you aware of that are currently occurring within student affairs and the campus as a whole (student learning outcomes, strategic planning, benchmarking, satisfaction surveys, etc.)?
- 11) What resources are available on your campus to assist in the assessment process?
- 12) Which assessment tools do you utilize in conducting assessment (Educational Benchmarking Incorporated, National Student Survey on Engagement, Cooperative Institutional Research Program, etc.)?
- 13) Is there anything else that you would like me to know before we end?

Questions were presented to participants in this order; however, when the responses of the participants addressed a future question, the interview was altered appropriately.

Data Analysis

The responses of the participants were analyzed using the constant comparative method. The constant comparative method allows the researcher to examine the information being collected during the research process instead of waiting until the end to determine whether changes are needed in the format or protocol of the study (Merriam, 1998). The constant comparative method looks for emerging themes which guide the data collection process; however, formal analysis does not occur until data collection is near completion (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Patterns and themes were evaluated by comparing information from one interview to the next, allowing themes to emerge.

Responses of participants within institutions and between institutions were also compared and various themes were identified and studied (Merriam, 1998). A rudimentary coding scheme was developed by the researcher to identify thematic elements, and the coding became more formalized as the study progressed (Glesne, 1999). The process of coding involved reading over the transcripts for a first time and looking for key themes that emerged. The transcripts were then read a second and third time to further develop themes and identify supporting evidence. Finally, the transcripts were read a fourth, and in some cases a fifth, time to draw final conclusions related to the themes that had been identified and developed by the researcher.

As transcripts were read, I was looking for themes that emerged that specifically related to the middle manager's assessment knowledge, skills, and ability. Specifically, I looked at how they defined the knowledge they possessed related to assessment. I also looked at the middle managers used their knowledge of assessment to describe their activities and to what degree they

were using appropriate language and tools, in addition to methods for gathering and analyzing data. I also looked for evidence or examples of the type of assessment plan that they utilized. I intentionally did not develop themes prior to analyzing the transcripts in order to allow the themes related to each of the areas to emerge and to process the results under the categories described above. Finally, I was cognizant in the analysis of the transcripts of where the gaps appeared in the areas of knowledge, skill, and ability to understand where deficits may be present.

Several strategies were used to assure the accuracy of the findings. Accuracy is crucial in the research process and contributes to the reliability and validity of the information gathered. Merriam (1998) explains that the researcher must approach the study with the goal of obtaining both validity and reliability in order to ensure that the study is both credible and reliable, especially with respect to how the data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted by the researcher. To insure accuracy in this study, all transcripts were independently coded and analyzed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As the researcher completed each interview and created a transcript, it was reviewed multiple times to identify key terms, themes, and ideas that emerged. As the researcher moved from one set of transcripts to another, the terms, themes, and ideas in common among the different interviews were able to be identified. Participants were asked to conduct member checks which included reading their own transcripts and the researcher's notes to verify the validity of both (Merriam, 2002).

Additionally, two individuals were utilized as independent reviewers to identify the terms, themes, and ideas that they saw emerging from the transcripts. These individuals would both be considered middle level professionals and have had experience in the area of assessment. Both are completing doctoral degrees, have experience reading transcripts, and are familiar with

the constant comparative method. Finally, a peer reviewer analyzed the data collected, looking at the sub-categories in order to insure the accuracy of the themes that the researcher identified. This individual has experience with qualitative research, has completed a doctoral degree, and is familiar with the area of assessment and middle level professionals.

Research Questions

The key research questions for this study are:

RQ 1: What knowledge do middle managers have regarding assessment?

RQ 2: How do middle managers define their role in assessment efforts in their current position?

RQ 3: How do middle managers describe their assessment activities?

RQ 4: How do middle managers utilize assessment results to guide programs and services?

RQ 5: What role does the middle manager's supervisor play in the middle manager conducting assessment?

RQ 6: What expectations do middle managers have of their staff regarding assessment and how are these expectations communicated?

RQ 7: What external influences impact assessments being conducted by middle managers?

RQ 8: How does assessment manifest itself in the daily lives of middle managers working in divisions of student affairs?

Summary

Assessment is a critical part of the job responsibilities of middle level managers. Entering the world of the middle managers and speaking directly with these professionals about the role

assessment plays in their daily work lives was the key to understanding their knowledge, skills, and abilities in this area. The perspective gained from interacting with middle managers and allowing them to define, in their own words and through their own understanding, the concepts related to assessment was critical in identifying the knowledge and skill base of these professionals. Most importantly, it was necessary to hear in their own words about the successes, challenges, and frustrations they have experienced with regard to assessment. This information would not have been possible to gather in a survey format. Hearing their personal stories has provided the researcher with significant insight into the role that assessment plays in the daily work lives of middle managers.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter discusses the findings and analysis from this study of middle managers in student affairs and their knowledge, skills, and ability related to assessment activities. To begin, the results related to the research questions developed for the study will be presented in detail, specifically examining how the managers define and conduct assessments. This chapter will also identify the themes that emerged during the study as they relate to the middle managers' knowledge, skills, and ability to conduct assessment. Insight into the knowledge skills and abilities of the middle managers as they relate to the research questions established for this study will also be explained in this chapter. Finally, an analysis of the overall themes that emerged is provided to gain insight into the middle managers assessment activities is provided.

The results of this basic interpretive study indicate that the middle managers interviewed are conducting assessments within their areas of responsibility. Information critical to understanding the knowledge, skills, and ability of the middle managers was collected based upon the focus of the research questions that guided the development of the specific questions asked during the interviews. The interview questions used in this study are listed below:

- 1) Tell me a little about your position and the responsibilities you have in your position.
- 2) Describe how you make decisions about improving your programs and services (student learning outcomes, strategic planning, benchmarking, satisfaction surveys, etc.).

- 3) How have these decisions helped in the modification or improvement of your programs and services?
- 4) Define the following words: assessment, evaluation, and research.
- 5) How do you currently use assessment in your position?
- 6) Describe how assessment information is used once the assessment is completed.
- 7) Who or what influences how you choose to identify your program's strengths and weaknesses (including barriers, dissemination of information, and support from division/supervisor)?
- 8) What expectations do you have for the staff you supervise in identifying program strengths and weaknesses (training programs, professional development opportunities)?
- 9) How do your supervisor's expectations related to assessment influence your assessment activities?
- 10) What assessment activities are you aware of that are currently occurring within student affairs and the campus as a whole (student learning outcomes, strategic planning, benchmarking, satisfaction surveys, etc.)?
- 11) What resources are available on your campus to assist in the assessment process?
- 12) Which assessment tools do you utilize in conducting assessment (Educational Benchmarking Incorporated, National Student Survey on Engagement, Cooperative Institutional Research Program, etc.)?
- 13) Is there anything else that you would like me to know before we end?

This chapter provides insight into the research questions established for this study as they provide information regarding the middle managers knowledge, and skills to engage in assessment activities. The chapter will also address the middle managers' ability to conduct

assessments. Additionally, the analysis of the overall themes that emerged is explained to understand the middle managers involvement in assessment activities.

Results from Research Questions

Assessment Knowledge

The middle managers who participated in this study all possessed a basic knowledge of assessment. All 14 participants could identify ways in which they were making improvements to their programs and services. Some of the plans were rather rudimentary while others' were more sophisticated, but all of the participants were able to articulate how they determined what types of improvements were needed for their particular area of responsibility. Their knowledge and understanding of assessment ranged from simple to complex, with some able to use the appropriate terminology while others could not. Some of the participants acknowledged their own sense of inadequacy in regard to what they know about assessment.

In order to evaluate their explicit knowledge of assessment, participants were asked to define assessment, evaluation, and research. The responses were wide-ranging but none of the participants were able to provide an accurate definition, as defined in the literature, for all three of the words. Most often, the participants used the definition of one of the three words to define another or were unable to explain how they were different: "so, I know that evaluation and assessment are two different things, but I am not sure exactly how to explain them" (Joann, Western University). Only three participants were able to provide the accurate definition of assessment as defined for this study. Assessment is "the methods by which we obtain information to determine whether the outcomes that we desire to achieve, in the context of student services, are being met and how we're going about doing that" (Rachel, Eastern University).

The participants described their assessment activities mostly using qualitative methods for collecting data; primarily through conducting interviews, focus groups, or personally observing events. Of those interviewed, seven of the 14 correctly used the language of qualitative data. “A lot of that is qualitative feedback; you know we get people’s observations of things we observe, how people respond to different things...” (Rachel, Eastern University). Only four of the participants referred to quantitative data collection methods, like David (Northern University) who conducts a satisfaction benchmarking survey each year to the student population in the residence halls of Northern University which provides him with a broad range of information regarding the satisfaction students have with the residence halls.

Quantitative methods of collection were also discussed by a couple of the participants who used surveys and evaluations to gather assessment data. Joann at Western University said she has students who participate in a leadership retreat fill out a survey and she uses the results to make changes each year and to reflect longitudinally on the data that is collected. When other participants mentioned quantitative assessment methods it was usually in regard to counting the number of people at a program or activity: “we don’t want to cancel a program just because of low numbers” (Steve, Northern University).

Middle managers also described connecting their assessment activities and plans to the university, division, and unit’s missions as another way in which they focused their resources and direction of their activities. Some participants discussed how assessment is related to state or governing boards’ expectations and even to accreditation. “I consider the university goals and the objectives of the university . . . and ours are very compatible with it” (David, Northern University). The expectations of the institution, and its attention to its own priorities, impact these professionals’ decisions about what, how, and when they conduct their assessments.

Many participants defined evaluation as either program performance or personnel performance. Performance evaluation was mentioned by six of the participants when defining evaluation. “Looking at evaluations of job performance, we have to go through that every year. Part of my position is to evaluate employees” (Ross, Eastern University). Over half of the participants talked about evaluation related to a specific program or service. Mark, at Western University, spoke about how he evaluates the services provided in the recreation facility he oversees, “what are areas that we can identify as needing improvement and then we take those . . . and make a list of those and try to figure out what we can do.”

Participants were asked to define research, which is important in the assessment process (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). Most of the participants interviewed said research is something they avoid or do not have time to do, and when it is done, it is usually related to benchmarking. This was very evident at Northern University, where the president has made improving its national ranking an institutional priority. “You’re asking questions, you’re asking questions to peer institutions, to experts, that could help you improve a process, a program, or a task” (David, Northern University). Over half of the participants talked about research related to fact finding or data gathering around a specific topic to help them better understand what they were doing. “Research is sort of investigating an area, whatever it is, if it is a fact or a problem or whatever by going to the library, Googling it...” (Mariah, Western University).

All but two of the participants had some knowledge of the different instruments available for assessment, but most of the participants were only familiar with a single instrument. The Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) assessment program was mentioned by five participants, mainly those working with university housing and student unions. Four participants mentioned the CAS standards and the CAS self-study as a guide to help with assessment. “We use CAS

standards a lot to do our, a lot of our self study pieces” (Donna, Northern University). Eastern University, as it prepares for its SACS visit, has developed their own Quality Enhancement Plan to help guide their assessment efforts and reporting process as it relates to the SACS accreditation. All participants interviewed at Eastern University spoke of the Quality Enhancement Plan.

And then on our campus there is the QEP, Quality Enhancement Plan, that’s kind of part of SACS I think... CAS that sort of covers student affairs as a whole and there’s a recreation piece within that... [and we’re about] to begin that one for CAS because that’s going to help us when we have to do SACS. (Monica, Eastern University)

Half of the total participants in this study discussed how they had created their own instruments to use in gathering information about an area they wanted to know more about. The NSSE was mentioned by the researcher and a few of the participants stated that they were aware of the survey and knew that their university used the survey at some point, but did not know what the results were. The CSEQ and the CSXQ were not mentioned by any participants at any of the institutions.

Defining the Middle Manager’s Role in Assessment

Middle managers participating in this study comprehend the need to understand their programs’ strengths and weaknesses, but they are lacking knowledge of the various tools and methods that are available to them. They use the assessment process to obtain information or feedback from their students, but only in the most simplistic or basic ways. The middle managers interviewed rely mainly on student input, satisfaction surveys, and program evaluations in gathering information. The majority of the participants stated that they try to elicit feedback

directly from students in addition to acquiring information through program evaluations and satisfaction surveys.

Participants shared how important it is to get feedback from their students and customers and how important that information can be “I think that our students by far have the most feedback and get to shape what we do most” (Joann, Western University). This information then lends itself to affecting what changes are necessary; “based on the results of those evaluations we’ll see if any changes are needed” (Ross, Eastern University). While the participants were able to talk about students having input through their feedback, they did not speak about what impact the programs were having on those same students.

Seven of the participants identified assessment activities that were directly related to facilities management which enabled them to gather information about the building where they work or which they manage. Mariah, (Western University) who works with summer conference programs and who houses these groups in the residence halls, spoke about how assessment results from the previous year indicated extreme dissatisfaction with the cleanliness of the residence halls so she implemented a new way of cleaning the facility to address those concerns. These activities were most evident in talking with the three individuals who are responsible for recreation centers. At Eastern University, Monica is dealing with a newly renovated facility and a new addition to the building, “I have heard lots of good things from the students that they enjoy it, of course there are some things within that facility that they would like to see happen and we are working on those things.” The individuals working in university housing and student unions were also cognizant of facility management as an area of assessment. However, the participants only discussed this information as it was gathered either incidentally or through simple methods like satisfaction surveys.

Describing Assessment Activities

The middle managers interviewed were conducting assessment in a routine manner, but often times they were unaware that what they were doing is in fact assessment. Joann (Western University) talked about the survey she conducts at their leadership retreat each year in addition to getting personal feedback from the students at the conclusion of the retreat. She was able to discuss how she uses these results in planning for the next year; however, she did not consider this to be assessment. “I mean I don’t know if what we do qualifies as assessment” (Joann, Western University). One participant talked about assessment in terms of something they do on a regular basis to get information:

I think we use assessment on a rolling basis as the year goes on to improve what needs to be improved and we also use it at our summer retreat to look at what we want to work on for the year. (Genevieve, Western University)

The cycle of assessment however did not appear intentional, but rather something that was performed annually with only two of the participants describing the process and the purpose involved. “We start during the summer. We’ll get together the entire staff and create goals and lists, strengths and weaknesses, and figure ways to address those weaknesses for the upcoming year” (David, Northern University).

Eight of the middle managers who participated in the study were able to identify assessment activities in which they were participating, but still felt that they were not doing real assessment or rather they were muddling through what was expected or required of them with no real understanding or direction. “I feel sometimes we’re working without a map, which isn’t the best thing I guess, because ignorance is bliss, but I kind of like to analyze things and figure out how we can improve” (Mark, Western University). As stated earlier, most participants could not

appropriately define assessment and evaluation, which led to confusion about what they were doing or should be doing. “I don’t think that what we currently do is assessment; I think what we do is evaluation” (Joann, Western University).

The vice president for student affairs and the president of the institution also had an important impact on how the middle managers described their assessment activities. The majority of the participants spoke of the expectations held by their president or vice presidents for student affairs and how those expectations impacted the middle manager and how they were to gather the information desired. Donna, at Northern University explained that her supervisor, the Dean of Students, expects her to submit an assessment plan each year, and that plan and the results of the plan should follow the university’s mission. Those results were then shared with the Vice President for Student Affairs and the university’s assessment office.

In relation to the strategic plan or mission of the university, about half of the participants were able to describe how their assessment activities were impacted by the guidelines established by the university president or institution mission. Genevieve (Western University) spoke of developing goals related to the strategic plan, with committees designed to develop the goals under each tenet of the plan and then working to identify ways to measure the goals. It is interesting to note that all four participants from Western University described their assessment activities in relation to the university’s new strategic plan.

The main focus of the participants was on using the information gathered through their assessment efforts to better understand their own programs and services. Participants discussed using satisfaction surveys and program evaluations to gain a better picture of what they were doing. “we have different [training] surveys... what we could improve on and so I sort of use that as my basis for planning” (Mariah, Western University). Being more proactive, eight

participants discussed conducting needs assessment activities either in their own units or elsewhere in student affairs. “We’re doing a needs assessment survey about expanding our facility and there’s a needs assessment to expand housing” (Steven, Northern University). Almost all of the middle managers interviewed provided at least one anecdotal example of a specific student they had impacted or shared a story of how they impacted an area as a form of assessment. Two of the fourteen recognized that such anecdotal information is difficult to use in sharing data with others at the university in a manner that impacts the middle manager’s area or the university as a whole and could not articulate how they could use that information appropriately.

...like the student who said I am here because of (student group)... well that says a lot and I don’t know how you can argue with that, but you know trying to put that on a piece of paper can be pretty difficult. (Joseph, Eastern University)

Most of the feedback the middle managers act upon comes from informal discussions with students and record keeping of this type of information is difficult and complicated especially the professionals who do not know how to properly do it.

Utilizing Assessment Results to Guide Programs and Services

Middle managers, for the most part, understand the roles they play in guiding their programs and services in accreditation processes, resource allocation, and change implementation. All of the participants talked about using the satisfaction surveys and program evaluations to determine what had been accomplished in their areas. Some of them mentioned that they are required to complete annual reports which include details of assessments conducted by their areas and the results that are gathered.

The participants also talked about how results are used to define goals and guide the future of the program:

Well the EBI assessment information is compiled and then during our training during the summer... we break down into areas and go through areas that address a staff's particular area and see how we can create goals or ways to address areas that are scored low.

(David, Northern University)

Such results are used to evaluate whether the division is moving in the desired direction and what changes, if any, may be necessary. The participants were also utilizing the information gathered to identify new goals and to make any changes that were necessary.

Assessment data can impact resources and the financial allocation the middle managers receive. All but three of the participants discussed how assessment results affected resource allocation and revenue collection in their departments. Rachel, at Eastern University, talked about how many of her programs are funded by grants or state money and that she must provide evidence of the success and need of the programs in order for them to continue to receive funding. She also stressed how she tries to provide information before it is requested in order to eliminate doubts about what is happening in her area of responsibility. Some middle managers characterized their areas of responsibility as partially or totally revenue-driven and described using assessment results to identify necessary changes that would increase their revenues. The use of assessment results to secure additional funding or resources was also addressed:

When you're looking for resources, it helps to have that assessment and evaluation too, because you can say, "Look, all these students are saying these things," or "This seems to be a problem area we just don't have enough staff." (Donna, Northern University)

The middle managers working in recreation centers focused particularly on how their results impacted their funding, resources, and revenue. At Western University, Mark spoke about how his area is partially revenue driven, which requires him to constantly look at the amount of money being generated. Mark also stated that many of the requests made for things in the facilities were evaluated as being either necessary or unnecessary as they related to revenue production. Steve, at Northern University, spoke about a committee designed to make decisions about needed resources and programs for the recreation center. This committee is made up of representatives of the various populations using the facility including community members, faculty, and students. This committee also approves things like the allocation of resources that are also used will improve the facility. While Monica, at Western University, was dealing with a newly renovated facility, and was concerned about use and the programming occurring in the facility. She needed to be able to demonstrate how the facility was being used as proof that the renovations made were worth the money that had been spent

Assessment results are also used by middle managers in relation to accreditation and governing boards. Joann (Western University) receives funding support from the university's governing board, in addition to financial support provided by other units in the division and she understands the need to provide evidence to these various constituents; "We're going to need to prove that we are doing things. We should be giving people data before they're asking for it, if at all possible." All the participants who talked about using assessment results in relation to accreditation or governing boards worked at state institutions, and the topic was particularly emphasized among those at Eastern University, which is about to go through the SACS reaffirmation visit.

The Role of the Supervisor in Assessment

All of the participants stated that their supervisor had a significant impact on their assessment activities. However none of them talked about assessment as a specific part of their job description; it was more of an implied expectation. “I’ve never felt any pressure from my boss to [assess]; I feel that’s something we just need to do” (Steve, Northern University). Four of the five staff members interviewed at Northern University stated that they had received a directive from their supervisor to provide results of the assessments they were conducting and three of the five spoke directly of the university president’s goal that the institution to become a higher-ranked university. “We’re tied to the president’s mission on becoming a top institution, so there’s certain things that we need to make sure we’re doing well to help the university reach that goal” (David, Northern).

Those interviewed at Western University, the institution experiencing a great deal of transition in the division of student affairs, were conducting assessments but did not feel it was a priority to their supervisor:

I think that she doesn’t have any expectations, except that it just happen magically, but she doesn’t really give any focus, she doesn’t really tell you this is where it’s really important, this is where we’re lacking. (Joann, Western University)

Those at Western University were working to support the new strategic plan and directive from the university president and they hoped to provide evidence that their area was advancing that overall plan.

At Eastern University, all five participants discussed how they share results with their supervisor to keep them abreast of their assessment activities. The middle managers referred to conversations with their supervisors about how to gather information, analyze results, and make changes based upon that information. The participants also talked about how their supervisor

encouraged them to use the CAS standards in their assessment activities. Two participants stated that assessment was an area of weakness for their supervisors, and thus was less of a priority to the middle manager.

I came here and we didn't have any of that [assessment] stuff and there's not a demand placed on me for that either, and I'll be honest with you, I think to a certain degree that's affected my motivation to get it done. (Rachel, Eastern University)

All 14 participants stated that they were doing what they were supposed to be doing and sharing sufficient information with their supervisor, but that no real questions about their efforts were being asked by their supervisor. Most participants felt that as long as they could say that they were assessing something, then they were meeting expectations. The supervisor's direction and involvement in the assessment process greatly impacts the middle managers conducting assessments, in addition to their knowledge, skill and ability. When supervisors are not providing direction and involvement with assessment to their middle managers, the middle managers do not feel motivated to make assessment a significant part of their job.

Assessment Expectations for the Middle Manager's Staff

All of the middle managers interviewed stated that they expected the staff they supervised to participate in assessment activities. However, only one provided any type of training on assessment for their staff. The middle managers tended to talk about the expectations as directives, something they asked staff to do. "Tell people what assessment is, tell them how they can do it and then support them as they do it" (Genevieve, Western University). Middle managers with 15 or more years of experience could identify specific ways in which they supported their staff in conducting assessment. Brandon (Northern University) spoke of requiring

the staff to set goals they can measure, giving them the autonomy to develop these goals as they saw fit; however, he wanted to be kept informed about what they were doing.

The types of assessment middle managers most commonly expect of their staff to engage in include satisfaction surveys, student feedback, program evaluation, and attendance. The most common types of informal assessment were observing and talking with students:

I give my expectations that we evaluate each program, we look at it, we observe it, if they're over a certain program and that periodically throughout the semester they try and make it to something... and observe what's going on and see if things are being taken care of the way they would like to see them taken care of. (Monica, Eastern University)

All of the middle managers stressed their understanding that their staff members had other important areas of involvement and that they had other tasks to accomplish in addition to performing assessment activities. Typically they expected their staff to make working with the students a top priority. David, at Northern University, spoke about training his staff to better understand and serve the student population. It appeared that less importance was placed on assessment and more on being visible on campus, including walking around, and interacting with staff and students. "You know you just get up out of your chair, and out of your office and you go and be visible" (Ross, Eastern University).

External Influences Impacting Assessment Activities

The middle managers interviewed for this study identified several external influences on their assessment activities, including resources, customers, politics, and outside agencies (i.e., governing boards and accrediting bodies). Because many student affairs practitioners serve the student body and the public, otherwise known as "customers," the participants most often listed students or customers as having a great deal of influence over what they do.

Resources, including time and money were also perceived as having influence on assessment activity. Over half of the participants listed money as an important influence on how much and what type of assessment was being done.

Well when you don't have a lot of staff to do a lot of things, you don't have a lot of time to spend on it [assessment], but at the same time it's [assessment] really helped us in situations where we wanted to make significant changes in orientation. (Donna, Northern University)

Almost all of the middle managers stated that one of the biggest reasons they were not conducting assessments was lack of time. Genevieve (Western University) spoke about how overworked she and her co-workers were, which was further impacted by the fact that they were understaffed. The middle managers observed that they were pulled in so many different directions that assessment was often an afterthought, noting the limitations on "time and resources, when you're trying to do, well when you don't have a lot of staff to do a lot of things you don't have a lot of time to spend on it [assessment]" (Donna, Northern University).

Institutional politics was another area of influence discussed by over half of the participants. Being in the middle and wanting to serve the students while also responding to the upper administration was mentioned in several of the interviews:

I mean I definitely want to say that I'm helping students but I also feel like I'm sharing the information that is going to help the students, but I think that many of us are politically driven when it comes to assessment. (Rachel, Eastern University)

University presidents and the goals and initiatives they set for the university also influence how the middle managers conduct assessment and report results. Brandon (Northern University) described how many of his assessment efforts are driven by the president's mission to be a more

competitive university, requiring him to do much more benchmarking than he feels is truly necessary. In addition to the university president, participants spoke of governing boards and accreditation processes influencing the assessment activities in their offices.

The Manifestation of Assessment in the Daily Lives of Middle Managers

While all 14 middle managers participating in this study acknowledged taking part in some form of assessment, not all of those interviewed referred to assessment as a planned and intentional part of what they do. Participants spoke of assessment with a certain amount of dread, which could be tied to their lack of confidence and their own confidence in their ability to do it. Most of what they do is informal or unplanned in nature, gathering data from satisfaction surveys, observation, and direct feedback from students. In gathering information from students, Rachel at Eastern University, spoke of how she uses satisfaction surveys, conducts focus groups, and relies on her staff members' observations to make improvements to her programs and services. Satisfaction surveys are the main method that these managers use to collect information.

Over half of the participants discussed how assessment helps them make changes to the programs and services they oversee. "I feel like assessment is an instigator for change and if you don't do assessment or evaluation you will just keep doing something the way we did" (Genevieve, Western University). Eight participants identified needs assessment as another activity that helped bring about change. "I believe there's three things in the needs assessment: where you are now, where you want to be, and how do you get there" (Steve, Northern University). Middle managers are using the information that they gather on a daily basis to identify ways to strengthen their programs, making changes that they identify as necessary to the overall improvement of their efforts.

Analysis of the Data

To fully understand the middle managers' knowledge, skills, and abilities the transcripts were read to analyze the data as well as to discover what themes occurred across interviews. The themes developed include: assessment ability, years of experience, assessment skill, lack of knowledge and language related to assessment, lack of a formalized assessment process, campus culture and assessment, someone else should be conducting the assessment, anxiety related to assessment, and the role of the middle manager. The following is the analysis of themes which emerged during this study.

Assessment Ability

Middle managers participating in this study are engaging in some form of assessment, however at very different levels of ability. Tacit knowledge is the knowledge we gain from what we experience, observe in supervisors and other professionals, and it relies on conversations about the topic. This is how most of the participants in this study developed their assessment ability. The middle managers in this study could refer to others' assessment activities, they talked about what their supervisor expected or did not expect, and they could even use some of the language related to assessment. Through engaging in assessment activities, they have grown to understand the importance of assessment and have developed some ability to gather information about their programs and services.

Part of a middle manager's ability to assess develops through observing and speaking about assessment with others, especially with their supervisors. Monica (Eastern University) spoke about working with co-workers, led by her supervisor to identify and assess appropriate areas, making it a collaborative effort. In addition to observing and talking about assessment, the expectations placed on these middle manager appeared to drive the type of assessment activity

they engage in. “I came into this job expecting I was supposed to be in charge of all assessment everywhere. It was really not something I could do...She [supervisor] did not give me clear directions on what the expectations were” (Joann, Western University). Based on this study, opportunities to witness assessment in action and to have meaningful discussions with supervisors and other professionals are not occurring on a regular basis.

With a basic tacit knowledge of assessment, middle managers are usually able to use assessment instruments that provide them with useful information that can be used to make changes to their programs and services (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001). “We reach out and try to get the opinion of the campus regarding how we’re doing” (Brandon, Northern University). Brandon went on to say that once information is gathered he works with his staff to identify how to use the information that they have collected. The assessment activities they are able to conduct include satisfaction surveys, focus groups, program evaluation, and needs assessment. In most cases the managers developed their own instruments or created their own questions, often with no research or careful thought given to exactly what they hoped to gain from the information. Donna (Northern University) spoke of creating a rudimentary assessment tool: “...even if it’s just a simple half-sheet, what was good, what was bad kind of thing,” and went on to speak of how she used the information gathered from the half-sheets to make changes she identified as necessary.

One problem that plagued those involved in assessment is the lack of knowledge of the resources available on the campus which can influence the middle managers ability to assess. Mariah (Western University) shared how she had to call consultants in to help with an assessment project; “I don’t know about Western’s resources.” The middle managers in this

study while aware of assessment offices on their campus, rarely utilized them in ways that would benefit their area of responsibility:

I don't know of any assistance. I know we have the department... they do our university fact book and I know that their department does a lot of research... and you know I would imagine that would be a resource that I could tap into. (Monica, Eastern University)

The participating middle managers' inability to utilize these offices may be attributed to a number of factors including anxiety related to seeming ignorant about assessment, poor outreach by the assessment office, or lack of encouragement from the supervisor or other professionals to use this office. Some of the middle managers were able to identify individuals whom they would ask for assistance in conducting assessments. "The only other folks I would think of to ask would be doctoral students, and perhaps some specific departments" (Joann, Western University).

Often the information gathered through their assessments provided these middle managers with a guide for modifying existing programs and services or implementing new ones and those with a higher ability appeared to be more adept.

When you're looking for resources it helps to have that assessment and evaluation because you can say, 'look all these students are saying these thing' or 'this seems to be a problem area,' and we just don't have enough staff [to do that]. (Donna, Northern University)

These middle managers also spoke of using information to develop and measure goals for their units. This is perhaps the most effective use of assessment, and those participants who were utilizing results in this manner were able to articulate their assessment activities in a more

positive light. The assessments they create, the results they receive and analyze, and the way they share information are reflective of their ability related to assessment (Upcraft, 2003).

The participants in this study were also able to recognize that assessment can be an instigator of change, positive or negative. “Based on the results of those evaluations we’ll see if any changes are needed” (Ross, Eastern University). Some of the participants discussed how they were able to use the information to prove that change is necessary, sharing information with supervisors and staff to guide the unit in the desired direction. Other participants talked about how assessment results might show that an unwelcome change is necessary, one which was more difficult to accept and implement. “I feel like assessment is an instigator for change... Since I have been in my position I have become better at not promising changes will happen” (Genevieve, Western University). Evidence that an existing program or service is insufficient or ineffective could negatively affect the middle manager’s budget, resources, credibility, and program vitality, consequences that may lead managers to avoid gathering or sharing such negative results:

It’s like you have people who run the programs and they’re invested in that program and they find out that the word out there isn’t as good as I want it to be, and then you know there has to be some change and you know with change...some people are readily adaptable and some are more resistant. (Ross, Eastern University)

The potential for unfavorable results is a reason these professionals prefer to do only what is minimally required in the area of assessment to reduce the risk of adverse findings.

It is important to note that some areas lend themselves more readily to the development of assessment ability for middle managers than other areas. The middle managers’ ability may also be developed through the support of their supervisor, but those interviewed did not support

this conclusion. This study found that some areas require that the professional engage in other types of assessment activities because it appeared to make the most sense for their particular area. The participants working in recreational facilities or with recreational programs could talk more easily about facility and program assessments, which they referred to as evaluations. Monica, at Eastern University, described how she has implemented a variety of program evaluations in addition to regular facility inspections or evaluations to better understand the area for which she is responsible. Those working with students in advisory or supervisory roles could articulate the process for training individuals and assessing their skill levels and comprehension of material, most often called program evaluation. Mariah (Western University) described how she evaluates her student staff training each year through paper surveys and focus groups, and makes changes based on the feedback that she receives. The participants who were involved in student activities, especially orientation, could identify through assessment whether or not they were achieving the desired outcomes from the experience. “For instance our orientation program changes all the time, just based on you know evaluations we get each time. The evaluations tell us what works and what doesn’t necessarily work, and we change what doesn’t necessarily work” (Ross, Eastern University). The knowledge level that one has of their own functional area impacts the manager’s ability and motivation to assess their efforts.

Years of Experience

Participants with more years of experience in student affairs appeared to be better able to define what they were looking for and how they could use different instruments to elicit that information when discussing assessment. The experienced middle managers in this study appeared to have a greater level of tacit knowledge, which they had gained through their experiences, and led to a higher level of ability to conduct assessment. However, the newer

professionals had a better understanding of the explicit knowledge of assessment and could provide more accurate definitions of assessment and evaluation. All of the middle managers interviewed were lacking in the area of skills, which relies on the explicit knowledge that professionals have related to assessment. Ability relies on their involvement in the assessment process, and it appeared that the tacit knowledge was really how they were learning to assess, but the explicit knowledge must also be cultivated.

This suggests that the more middle managers are engaged in assessment activities the more developed their tacit knowledge will become and that can influence both their ability and willingness to engage in assessment. Brandon, a middle manager at Northern University with over 12 years of experience in his position, talked about using the university's strategic plan and goals in the design of the assessment plan that guides his unit. Brandon also spoke about using various tools like the EBI to provide longitudinal and benchmarking information and the APPA standards to understand the facility standards for the student union. Naming the tools used to assess and having a more detailed way in which he used the information shows a more developed level of ability.

In looking at the less experienced middle managers in this study, one can see that they may have some of the explicit knowledge necessary to understand assessment from their graduate preparation program. Rachel, who has been in the profession a little over ten years, and in her middle manager role at Eastern University for three years, defined assessment as “the methods by which we obtain information to determine whether the outcomes that we desire to achieve... are being met and how we're going about doing that.” Rachel listed a great deal of assessment projects her office was engaged in; however, she admitted that there was more things they could be doing and states; “one area we struggle with is assessment.” Her confidence in her

ability was not developed because she does not have enough experienced with it, and her tacit knowledge is still being developed and enhanced.

Middle managers with more years in their position appeared more comfortable talking about the results of assessments. Brandon (Northern University), with 13 years of experience in his current position, described how he sets standards for the results they are hoping to collect, “we’ll set a goal regarding you know 80% will be satisfied.” He went on to talk about how important it is to share the results to inform himself, his staff, and his supervisor explaining that there are many people who want to know the results of your assessment activities. These managers could also identify partners on campus, or activities that were being done by other units.

Well, in student affairs I know the Jane Smith group is in charge of orientation and is very much involved with assessment, and I know that it’s something that the students in the student affairs program [receive] in terms of education. (Dylan, Northern University).

Middle managers with fewer years both in their position and on the campus did not have the appropriate partnerships forged and lacked the understanding necessary to identify with whom they should be sharing their information. Monica, with eight years of experience at Eastern University and in her position, when asked about assessment activities occurring on campus, referred to the SACS and Quality Enhancement Plan that were influencing everyone’s activities, but did not know what others were doing specifically. When middle managers are left out of conversations about assessment on campus they will not be able to contribute.

Assessment Skill

While it was easy in this study to understand the middle managers ability to assess, understanding their skills proved much more difficult. Part of the difficulty in identifying a

professional's skill level, specifically related to their explicit knowledge, stemmed from their inability to define the key terms related to assessment. Skills are developed through the explicit knowledge one has and the application of this knowledge in practice. "Assessment is something very far removed from what the average person can do" (Joann, Southern University). The participants were also unable to describe formalized assessment plans knew of few formal tools they could utilize to gain information about their programs. Dylan (Northern University) commented that he was sure that there was a variety of tools available but he was unaware of any that he could specifically use.

The most influential factor impacting these middle manager's assessment skills is their own knowledge and confidence in their ability. The participants overwhelmingly believed they should not be conducting the assessment because they lacked the skills to properly perform such assessments. The middle managers at Western, who are receiving little direction and support in this area, stated that they were not equipped to include assessment in their work and hoped that with the staff changes occurring in the division that a new person would be added who would be responsible for conducting the needed assessments. The middle managers lacked confidence in knowing what to do because they did not have the explicit knowledge of the tools, resources, or steps necessary to gather the necessary data.

I think that it's [assessment] one of those things where, this is one of those years that I wish I knew more people who did this kind of thing in a way because I'm sure there are other things that we could be assessing that I'm not aware of. (Mark, Western University)

Some examples of popular national assessment tools that are available to student affairs professionals include the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI), the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ), and the CAS

Standards not to mention hundreds of other lesser known instruments. The problem is that middle managers in this study often do not have the skills or knowledge that is required to use such instruments or interpret the data that they provide. Even more critical, very few of the participants in this study mentioned using, or even knowing about, such instruments. The middle managers interviewed do not have a comprehensive knowledge of the tools available or possess the skills necessary to use them effectively on their campuses. This can lead to many problems when it comes to accountability for assessment results. In talking about tools available for conducting assessment, Joseph (Eastern University) stated, “I don’t have the slightest, I don’t know if there are any, if there are any that would be awesome, but I don’t know of any.” If the assessment is to be effective those working most closely with it must have the skills to implement the assessment and in the analysis of results, otherwise it can prove quite useless (Astin, 2003).

Another difficulty many of the participants face in using these tools is that they are so broad in scope that it is often difficult to apply them to the area in which the individual works. The instruments can measure student engagement at the institution, but the middle managers do not understand how to use those results can be used to affect their work. Even when participants knew about an instrument, they did not have the understanding necessary to either trust or comprehend the information that is provided to them. Brandon (Northern University) described how he uses the Educational Benchmarking, Inc. survey; “this thing was extremely difficult to complete, and I wonder as I look through this, and even as we were completing it. . . I mean it’s good but how really reliable the results are because of the variance.”

When asked about how they improved their areas of responsibility, the middle managers in this study were able to articulate some of the methods they employed to obtain and use

information; however, it appears they may be lacking the skills to conduct the assessment properly and use the results appropriately. Their responses provided insight into the means they use to gather information to guide their efforts. “We use CAS standards a lot to do our...self-study pieces” (Donna, Northern University). However, when asked what assessment activities they were engaged in, many stated that they did not do much, with many even admitting that they avoided assessment whenever possible. Steve (Northern University) talked about how he tries to avoid assessment, yet he went on to provide a few examples of what his area was doing, stating that he assessed both because it was expected and did provide him with useful information. Steve also felt that there was more that they could be doing but were not because of the limits of time and lack of knowledge. The middle managers in this study are clearly involved in assessment activities even when the formal language is not present. They have the ability and the desire for what assessment activities can provide to them, but without the proper language, their skills are very undeveloped.

Lack of Common Knowledge and Language Related to Assessment

As is evident from this study, the participants do not have a common language or highly developed levels of explicit knowledge related to assessment. When participants were asked to define assessment, evaluation, and research they willingly admitted their confusion about the terminology. As stated previously, the majority of the participants were unable to provide definitions that correlated with ones that were found in the assessment literature and described in chapter one of this study. In addition there was very little consistency in how the terms were defined even within each of the institutions. Part of this confusion comes from the lack of training, support, and guidance that the middle managers received to prepare them to engage in assessment activities.

The literature on assessment that was reviewed for this study offered consistent definitions of the terms *assessment*, *evaluation*, and *research* (Erwin, 1991; Schuh & Upcraft, 1996). However, in this study the participants did not use the language that is considered to be “common,” in the field of student affairs. This deficiency led to some of their misunderstandings when talking about assessment. “I guess assessment is, I guess reviewing what you’re doing to see how you’re doing it and how well you’re doing it and how you might make changes and additions to better the future I guess” (Dylan, Northern University). The interviews began by asking participants how they make decisions about improving programs and services, then for the participant to provide definitions for *assessment*, *evaluation*, and *research* before they were asked how they used assessment in their job. All of the middle managers could provide examples of the actions that they take to improve their area. However, after defining assessment, they would then describe assessment as something that they avoided, was not occurring, or was not done like it should be. Mark, at Eastern University, began by explaining some of the ways he went about improving his area of responsibility and how he utilized his staff in this process; and then when asked what type of assessment activities he was engaging in he spoke about having little direction and knowledge about what he should be doing or how he should be assessing. This disconnect between what the evidence of their behavior demonstrated and how they were unable to describe it was common among all of the middle managers regardless of experience in the profession, which campus they were working on, or what was occurring on their campus.

The differences in the language used by the middle managers in this study is also affected by the differences in campus cultures, research and topic knowledge, professional preparation, and the job expectations placed upon the middle managers. The campus’ assessment activities at Eastern University are also being impacted by the reaffirmation visit only a year away. Those

participants' language focused on the quality enhancement plan, SACS, and the CAS standards; the emphasis was gathering data and reporting results to use in the reaffirmation. "They're doing some type of QEP thing that has to do with that SACS accreditation and all that stuff" (Joseph, Eastern University).

At Northern University, the middle managers' language is more heavily influenced by the president's desire to be a more competitively ranked university. "Our president is pretty set on becoming a top 20 institution, so a lot of our assessment and goals and so forth are looking at those top 20 benchmarked schools" (Donna, Northern University). Assessment at Northern is strongly tied to benchmarking. While at Western University, the new strategic plan had middle managers focusing on creating their own unit plans and creating measurable outcomes. Mark (Western University) shared that the new strategic plan was affecting the whole campus and he knew he should be involved with it to some degree, but was not quite sure what he should be doing. The various campus cultures were influencing the middle manager's research and development of topical knowledge by directing them toward specific assessment techniques and language. University wide expectations were having a greater impact on the middle managers than those of their own units.

Part of the confusion may lie within the student affairs profession as various professional organizations may provide middle managers with different areas of emphasis or mindsets regarding assessment for their various areas of responsibility. Monica at Eastern University spoke of how she relies on the National Intramural and Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) to provide her with guidelines for running both the facilities and the programs for which she is responsible. The NIRSA assessment terminology is focused on facility use and upkeep, programming and resources provided. Brandon (Northern University) talked about using the

standards of the *APPA: The Association of Higher Education Facilities Officers* in assessing the student union. The specific purpose of this assessment tool is to evaluate facilities, “we want to maintain our facility so we can track what we spend per square foot on certain with APPA standards” (Brandon, Northern University). The tools available from APPA use assessment terminology related to square foot use, facility maintenance, and management.

At Northern University, David spoke about the Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) tool that he uses in assessing his Resident Assistant (RA) staff and the students living in the residence halls. This survey provides a structure for understanding resident satisfaction and allows him to compare his results with other institutions as a way of benchmarking. Each of these professional organizations provided tools for assessing a different set of information which required middle managers to manipulate the assessment language in order to adapt it to the areas being assessed. If the basic language was more consistent across student affairs units, then the middle managers would not have to struggle as much to understand the various types of information that is provided by the different instruments.

The middle managers interviewed were aware that there were campus resources available to help them in conducting assessments but the majority of those interviewed admitted to not utilizing those offices as they should. Ross (Eastern University) knew of a several different offices that could assist him in gathering information for an assessment; however he stated that he and his staff had developed their own systems for assessing and did not need assistance from those offices. There appeared to be a certain level of anxiety or intimidation among the participants about calling upon these offices to assist them. This intimidation is may be a result of their lack of explicit knowledge about assessment and their fear of being exposed as not having the necessary skills for someone in the middle manager role:

I'm not aware of them so . . . I think of myself as being reasonably educated in that [assessment activity], and it's probably not the case . . . there isn't really one or more sources that I know of within the university that I could go to find some assistance and get some help. (Mark, Western University)

Part of the participants' lack of explicit knowledge may come from the assessment offices on the campus failing to communicate and/or publicize what exactly they do for the institution; what services they provide and who they are designed to benefit and support.

Middle managers are only as good as the knowledge and skills with which they are equipped. The middle managers interviewed in this study were quite articulate and competent when talking about making improvements to their area of responsibility, yet they still stated how inadequate they felt in the area of assessment. Dylan (Northern University), when discussing how he improved his programs and services, spoke in detail of the different things that he did. But when he was asked to talk about the assessment activities he was involved with, he again went into rich detail, but he also commented repeatedly that what he was doing was really not assessment. Dylan wanted the anecdotal information to have more meaning and believed that the students' feedback was the most important to his decision making, but he did not know how he could include it in his efforts. Assessment is an area in student affairs that is often overlooked by professionals at all levels and supervisors are assuming that employees are knowledgeable about, and capable of, engaging in the activities necessary to do their jobs. Joann at Western University shared that she felt quite incompetent about assessment and expected her supervisor to support and guide her and since that was not happening, she was left to figure out what to do on her own. Assessment is often not set as a formal priority for the middle managers and this may be why the lack of common knowledge and language is tolerated.

Lack of a Formalized Assessment Process

In talking with the middle managers for this study it is clear that there is no consistent formalized assessment process as defined in chapter 2. The participants did not talk about the steps involved in assessing their areas, nor did they provide examples of the steps related to an assessment plan similar to that developed by Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001). Those who have little knowledge and receive little guidance or support are left to their own devices to identify or create the strategies they believe will be most effective. The middle managers in this study who had a formalized assessment plan for their area were more confident in carrying out assessments and in using and sharing the results they obtain.

Many of the participants talked about their assessment activities as a routine part of what they do, completing what is required of them at a certain time each year. David (Northern University) explained that he works with his staff to conduct the same assessments each year, taking time during the summer to evaluate the information as a group. He talked about how his staff knowing what to expect throughout the year helps streamline the processes related to assessing. This does not necessarily mean they have a formalized assessment process; they are simply doing what has always been done before. Erwin and Sivo (2001) state that assessment activities are the most beneficial when conducted in a cyclical or routine manner, especially when this routine is used proactively:

We have some kind of routine expectation of gathering information about how we do our jobs, to serve our students, how can we do better, what ought we to spend our time on and what ought we to leave. (Genevieve, Western University)

The middle managers interviewed often equated assessment with formal benchmarking or simply comparing themselves to others. This preference for benchmarking may be a result of

increased pressure on institutions to receive better rankings, pass easily through the re-accreditation processes, or simply to prove that they are competitive with peer institutions (Banta & Associates, 1993; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Schuh & Upcraft, 2001). Dylan, a middle manager from Northern University, noted that he often compares what other universities are doing with the services and programs available at his university; “I kind of try to stay aware of which institutions have really good programming. . . I look and see what they are about.” While benchmarking may be an important method of assessment, alone it does not provide an overall understanding of the program and does little to inform the middle manager of the needs and satisfaction with services on the campus.

Having a formalized assessment plan is also important in identifying and creating effective assessment tools. Many of the participants shared how they struggle to how to gather information and to conduct assessment plans. “I think if we could come up with a way to properly evaluate our programs beyond what we are doing... developing something that’s comprehensive enough to get all the information you want to get” (Rachel, Eastern University). If middle managers are aware of the instruments that are available or can create reliable tools that are useful the process, then their results will have greater meaning. However, if the instruments are changed each year, as some of the participants indicated, the results can be quite inconsistent and therefore provide no longitudinal data or insight. Joann, a middle manager at Western University responsible for leadership development, discussed how she has created a survey to evaluate the annual retreat. She also described how she has changed the questions each year based on student feedback and that the goals are developed specifically for that year, admitting she has no information that is consistent from one year to another.

Creating a formalized assessment process that is tied to the university, division, or unit mission and strategic plan is essential to the success and usefulness of results to the middle manager (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000), and less than half of the participants explicitly tied assessment activities to these missions and strategic plans. “I consider the university goals and objectives and the vision, and ours are very compatible with it, they fit right in and we try to complement everything the university does” (Brandon, Northern University). However, the majority of the middle managers did not speak at all about how their results related to the mission and strategic plan.

The lack of formalized assessment processes prevented the middle managers in this study from gathering necessary data to maintain and improve programs and services. Mark (Western University) could not identify any type of structure he had in place to conduct assessment and struggled to talk about the assessment activities in which he was engaged. A formalized process could provide these middle managers with ways in which to identify how they could connect with the university mission and how to create a strategic plan for their unit. The middle managers interviewed in this study recognized the lack of a formalized assessment process was an area of weakness but they could not identify what they should, or could, do differently.

Campus Culture and Assessment

Culture played a big role in the assessment activities of these middle managers. Both public and private institutions were chosen for this study because there was a perceived difference prior to the study, with state institutions having a greater variety of constituents to deal with and thus having to provide more information produced from assessments. However, this is not the case and in fact the biggest difference between the institutions in this study regarding

assessment is related to the culture on the different campuses and differences that was most influenced by the institution's upper management, specifically the president.

At Eastern University, the SACS reaffirmation visit and the development of their Quality Enhancement Plan dominated their assessment mindset. Committees had been created to identify areas where they need to report regarding what was happening on the campus and consequently there was a great deal of collaboration occurring related to these assessment activities. Rachel (Eastern University) described how, as a member of the QEP steering committee, she was working with a group to audit several different areas to get the information needed for the required reports. The middle managers are also using the CAS standards self-studies in order to prepare their reports, which is the purpose of the self-studies. At Eastern University, Monica is getting ready to conduct a CAS self-study because she recognizes that the information it will provide to her as she prepares her report for the reaffirmation visit will be critical to how she is able to demonstrate the contributions of her area. The SACS reaffirmation visit and the Quality Enhancement Plan are having a significant influence on the assessment culture at Eastern University.

Northern University, with the president's mission to become a more competitively ranked university, had participants discussing the institutions to which they should be comparing their programs. "So a lot of our assessment and goals and so forth are looking at those benchmarked schools" (Donna, Northern University). All of the participants spoke of benchmarking and the importance of providing evidence of how they supported the institution's mission. They knew what institutions they should be looking at and what comparable programs at those institutions were doing. The participants were also able to talk about what others on their own campuses were doing because the information was being shared among units. During the interview with

Dylan (Northern University) he spoke of the efforts that Donna (Northern University) and her staff were making. Steve (Northern University) was able to talk about things occurring in residence life, greek life, the student union, as well as other areas of the division; he was very aware because the information was being shared in the student affairs divisional staff meetings.

At Western University the new strategic plan implemented by the president, along with the shifting of staff members, has greatly influenced the assessment activities of the middle managers. There appeared to be a great deal of emphasis for middle managers to develop strategic plans for their individual units; plans that were guided by and supported the university's overall plan. Genevieve (Western University) spoke about developing a strategic plan for the housing department that supported the university's plan and the importance of creating measurable goals as a part of the plan. With the leadership shifting the middle managers were mostly left to their own devices in determining what and how to assess. Mariah (Western University) explained that with all of the transition occurring on campus, her assessment activities were not a priority to her supervisor although she continued to attempt to do what she felt was necessary and her supervisor was not providing her any feedback that would either support or challenge her decisions.

The culture on campus appeared to have a great deal of influence on the type of assessment activities in which middle managers engage. These middle managers must be able to identify where they fit into their institution's culture and how they can work to create assessment plans that will provide them with the necessary information.

Someone Else Should Conduct the Assessment

The middle managers in this study appeared to be pulled in many different directions; and since assessment was often a low priority there was a preference for someone else to take

responsibility for conducting it. Lacking skill, knowledge and confidence in conducting assessments along with a low ability to properly conduct an assessment, these middle managers demonstrate a strong belief that someone else could do a better job than they could and hope that such a person would come along to take over that responsibility. The middle managers interviewed expressed the need for someone within their unit or division, other than themselves, to conduct the necessary assessment activities for their areas.

As stated previously, the middle managers in this study engaged in assessment activities despite the fact that their explicit knowledge of assessment was very basic. A lack of time to conduct appropriately designed assessments led the middle managers to want to avoid this type of activity all together. “We’re hoping to hire someone that can do that [assessment] for us” (Joann, Western University). To get results that can be interpreted and used by these middle managers it would be best for them to be involved in all parts of the assessment process from the development of the assessment plan to the analysis and reporting of the results because the results are best understood by those responsible for the program being assessed (Upcraft & Schuh, 2001).

The middle managers cited limitations on their time as a key reason for wanting someone else to do their assessments. They expressed frustration over their lack of time to conduct a good assessment and analyze the results effectively. Donna’s (Northern University) frustration was tied to the fact that she does not have the staff necessary to conduct all of the necessary assessments that she would like to do. The middle managers stated that having someone else responsible for conducting assessments would help them attend to other areas of their job that they were more confident in their ability to handle. Mariah (Western University) stated several times that having someone else come in to assess would make her job much easier and would

still provide her with the necessary information. In reality, handing over the assessment process to someone else in order to have more time to tend to the other parts of their job can lead to results that often do not truly meet the needs of the middle managers.

Each of the three campuses had an office or offices related to assessment and/or institutional research outside of the division of student affairs. While some participants at the institutions were aware of the existence of these offices, only a few of them knew how those offices could assist them. “I don’t have the slightest [about assessment offices on campus], I don’t know if there are any, if there are any that would be awesome, but I don’t know of any” (Joseph, Eastern University). Some participants stated that when they had used these types of offices they were often confused by the results that were provided. Rachel, a middle manager from Eastern University, identified two offices from which she has requested information, “but sometimes the data I get back from that office does not jive with that which the other office provides.” When the middle manager’s explicit knowledge of assessment is minimal the results obtained from these types of offices can be rather confusing to them without additional explanation, for which they are reluctant to ask.

Designating a professional within the division of student affairs to assist the middle managers in this study, along with other professionals on the campus with assessment would be beneficial. The position would need to be able to provide the additional support and training in assessment needed by the professionals. In addition, this resource person could also provide guidance through the assessment process to help all staff develop their assessment knowledge and skills. If these middle managers knew that there was someone on whom they could rely on to help them create assessment plans and analyze assessment results, then they might be more willing to conduct assessments and to do so with greater confidence.

Anxiety Related to Assessment

When middle managers are not given specific guidelines related to assessment activities they can feel lost (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). The middle managers interviewed expressed frustration over not knowing exactly what to do. They also expressed anxiety about how to analyze their results and how, and with whom, they should share those results. Their anxiety level about doing the wrong thing or getting unfavorable results prevented some of those interviewed from being interested in or willing to conduct assessments in the way that would make them the most useful.

Over half of the participants expressed some degree of anxiety associated with having to gather information and that the anxiety is tied to their lack of knowledge about assessment and the resources available to them. Mark (Eastern University) talked about how little he knew about his new area of responsibility and this feeling of being overwhelmed was further complicated by his lack of knowing how to properly assess it; “I am not really exactly certain what the next step is like where we should take this facility to or the programming within it and that’s probably the biggest challenge I face.” The participants were conducting assessments; mainly in the form of needs assessment, program evaluations, and satisfaction surveys, but they were using only the most basic instruments which provided them with only some of the answers about their programs and services, not all of the information that they needed. Steven (Northern University) described how his staff relies on the needs assessments they conduct in order to identify what types of programs and services are needed, especially within their new facility. Despite their experience with actually doing assessments, the participants continued to articulate how inadequate they felt they were to conduct assessment activities: “I think the barrier may be in our ability, our knowledge of how to do it correctly” (Brandon, Northern University).

The prospect of unanticipated change also contributes to the anxiety the middle managers interviewed have related to assessment. Genevieve (Western University) spoke about how sometimes the changes that assessment results indicate are called for are difficult to implement or manage because making those changes is not always easy and is not always embraced by everyone involved. Those interviewed often spoke of how assessment leads to change, or the expectation that change will occur, and it is often not the change that was expected. “Based on the results of those evaluations we’ll see if any changes are needed” (Ross, Eastern University). Ross went on to say that not everyone involved would be accepting of the changes and that often made implementing them difficult. Some of the changes that can result from assessments are expected and even anticipated, but when unexpected, and sometimes unwelcome, changes are called for the middle manager is left with the prospect of having to make decisions that while supported by the data collected, still remain unpopular with the people affected by the change.

Uncertainty about how to analyze and share assessment results appropriately also contributed to middle managers’ anxiety about assessment in this study. In talking about receiving assessment results from other offices, Joseph (Eastern University) said; “I just wish these people that do these things could explain them in a way that makes sense, and I would be more than happy to do it any way I could.” This anxiety is tied to the managers’ level of explicit knowledge and their ability to interpret those results once the assessment has been completed. Knowing what the information means and presenting it in a meaningful way can be difficult, especially if the middle manager lacks experience in this area. The middle managers with more experience appeared to be more comfortable and knowledgeable in analyzing and sharing results. Both Brandon (Northern University) and Ross (Eastern University) each have over 15 years of experience and were able to describe very detailed plans for assessing, including how they gather

the data, involve the staff in the process, and report information to constituents. Their assessment plans were purposeful and provided them with information that helped them better manage their areas of responsibility. Perhaps with time and experience the level of confidence increases, in addition to being able to identify what type of assessment activities they need to be performed. The difficulty is that waiting for the middle managers to gain the experience they need by themselves is not a proactive approach to dealing with this issue.

Middle managers participating in this study expressed uncertainty about who would benefit from the assessment information they have and they spoke of their inability to share the results properly because they did not know with whom to share them. “I think I could do a better job of sharing the assessment information gathered and how I used it to change things” (Genevieve, Western University). Genevieve was not sharing the information that she had primarily because she did not have a supervisor who was invested in her results, or guiding her to share them with others. She was also apprehensive about what people’s reactions would be to what she was doing and the meaning of the information that she was producing.

Some of the participants described how they shared their results with their supervisors, but they never knew what happened to the information. While others were unsure of how they could establish the necessary relationship with their supervisors in order to share their results. Mark, at Western University, talked about not sharing his results simply because no one was asking him for them. He also admitted that transferring over to a different area of student affairs, one with which he was unfamiliar, caused him to be unsure about whether what he was doing was enough, or had provided him with the results that would prove the most useful to him in this position. He also did not want to look incompetent to his supervisor, which he felt was a risk if he shared his information and it was not the methods or tools that his supervisor would feel were

the correct ones. The middle managers, for the most part, are not sharing the results of the assessments that they do conduct because no one is asking for them but when those results are requested, their anxiety levels will undoubtedly increase unless they are trained and supported in this aspect of their job.

These middle managers, like most professionals, tend to be apprehensive about what they don't know, and there is much that these middle managers feel they do not know about assessment. Monica (Eastern University) explained that to her assessment is "just seeing how your programs are" defining what she considers to be forms of assessment rather than defining what it is explicitly. The avoidance of assessment activities could easily impact the success of the middle manager. Although having someone else come in to conduct assessments may not be the most beneficial approach or produce the most useful information, this is precisely what many middle managers hope for, and this could have a significant impact on their areas of responsibility.

The Middle Manager's Role

The middle manager is truly at the nexus of the organization (Young, 1990). Being in this middle role, the participants in this study shared their frustration over being pulled in so many different directions. The majority of the middle managers provided long lists of programs and services for which they are responsible in addition to the supervision of staff. Those newer to the role of middle manager communicated a greater amount of frustration and difficulty in balancing their many roles and responsibilities. Under this kind of burden it is understandable when assessment is placed as a lower priority.

Being a middle manager requires communicating with both supervisors and staff. The middle managers in this study spoke of the necessity of keeping their supervisors informed:

“Whatever we do, whatever direction we want to go, I believe as a manager you need to let the people above you know what you’re trying to do” (Steve, Northern University). Sharing the assessment process and the resulting information with colleagues and staff members appeared to make the burden of assessment a little bit lighter.

This study showed that middle managers are not receiving the training or support to engage effectively and confidently in assessment activities, and perhaps as a result they are not taking the time to train the new professionals they supervise. “As far as assessment there’s really not any training on assessment, but you’ve given me something to think about” (David, Northern University). It was evident in this study that supervisors need to take an active role in what are the middle managers’ assessment activities, and provide the necessary training when there is a deficit present.

The middle managers with more experience were more confident in their abilities and skills related to performing and supervising assessment, something that may come with time and experience. Donna (Northern University) could describe in detail her assessment plans and expectations for staff related to assessment, she could speak to the changes implemented based on results and talked about the various reports her office was creating:

It’s that whole selling factor. . . and all those other things that you know are kind of out there in the field, but it just helps to justify it on your campus, which is in the end what matters. (Donna)

They have a higher level of skill and their tacit knowledge has also developed through experience and time.

It is difficult for these middle managers to balance so many varied job responsibilities. The middle managers participating in this study must prioritize what needs attention on a daily

basis, and unfortunately, this often means assessment receives low priority. Dylan (Northern University) spoke extensively of the various areas he is responsible for and how he chooses each day to put the students first despite competing demands, and that this choice often means he must put something else as a lower priority. Assessment was just one of the many things that Dylan stated he chose to give lower priority to and that these choices did not seem to affect his job performance. With experience the middle managers appear to become better at balancing these multiple tasks, especially those related to assessment.

Summary

This study provided evidence that the participating middle managers have the ability and tacit knowledge related to assessment, but are lacking the requisite skills and the explicit knowledge to feel comfortable about their level of competency. The middle managers in this study emphasized the importance of serving their students and making them a priority in addition to working with their supervisors to provide evidence of the impact their programs and services have on student learning; however, their assessment activities appear to lack purpose. Rachel discussed that assessment in her area at Eastern University was more reactive and the majority of the information they gathered from students was more about improving and less on developing and setting goals; “the way we go about making improvements is primarily through the feedback we get from students.” While improvement guided assessment is necessary it should not be the only type of assessment used to gather data. The expectation to engage in assessment activities was met with apprehension; the middle managers were cautious of the results and the impact they would have in their area of responsibility. The managers appeared to lack a full understanding of the many uses of assessment results, including their value in helping to refine and develop their programs and services.

The middle managers participating in this study have the tacit knowledge and basic ability to conduct assessment, developed through graduate preparation programs, time, and/or experience. They are using what they know to do and what they see as necessary, but they are critically lacking in the areas of explicit knowledge and the development of their skills to conduct assessments. “With you asking me these questions it definitely, I think defines what my role should be and I should be spending time on assessment, and also using that to shape future planning” (David, Northern University). The problem lies in the lack of support or training that would allow them to develop their skills and abilities further. Developing their explicit knowledge and skills will allow them to develop more useful assessment results.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Middle managers face many obstacles as they engage in assessment activities with their own lack of knowledge, skills, or ability as their greatest challenge. Without a thorough understanding of the explicit knowledge of assessment middle managers are challenged when they attempt to create formalized assessment plans and developing the skills necessary to contribute to the development of the intellectual climate of their institution. This chapter will begin by discussing the assessment knowledge and skills of the middle managers interviewed in this study, and continue with other significant areas that are impacting middle managers' ability to conduct assessments. The lack of evidence that middle managers are measuring learning outcomes will also be discussed.

In order to address the lack of a foundational understanding, or the level of explicit knowledge, middle managers have of assessment, a common language must be established to alleviate the confusion surrounding the terminology related to assessment. Additional training, guidance, and support about assessment must also be provided to those who serve in middle manager positions, especially from supervisors and professionals who are specifically responsible for assessment on the campus. Four additional areas also need to be discussed as they impact the middle manager's ability to conduct assessment: resource allocation which includes both financial and time allocation, the university's mission or strategic plan, the role that the accreditation process plays on the middle manager's assessment activities, and the development of student learning outcomes and how to measure those outcomes.

The chapter will also provide suggestions for additional avenues of research related to assessment for student affairs professionals. This study was designed to look at specific aspects of middle managers' work, particularly to capture insight into the area of assessment. Upon completion of this study it was obvious that there is much more that needs to be researched related to the topic of assessment in student affairs. The final section of the chapter will discuss the implications of this study's findings for student affairs as a whole.

Assessment Knowledge

Pascarella and Upcraft (1999) stated that professionals in student affairs at first had hoped the need for assessment would be a passing fad. The middle managers interviewed for this study felt the same way. The middle managers in this study were conducting assessments, while they lacked explicit assessment knowledge, they were able to work from the tacit knowledge they possessed. Research indicates that middle managers must have the appropriate qualifications and knowledge to be able to conduct assessments and they often avoided this task because they lack adequate preparation (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000; Upcraft, 2003). In this study a certain level of anxiety was evident as the middle managers spoke of their desire to avoid assessment, their inability to understand it properly, and their uncertainty about how to use results. Schuh and Upcraft (2001) note that few student affairs professionals possess the assessment knowledge needed for their jobs and while the middle managers interviewed had a tacit knowledge of assessment, gained to varying degrees from past experience, they did in fact lack the explicit knowledge base and specifically, the common language related to assessment activities in student affairs.

With a growing emphasis on reporting what happens in student affairs units to various constituents, assessment must become a priority for student affairs professionals (Erwin, Scott, &

Menard, 1991; Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Heywood, 2000; Grace, 2001). The middle managers in this study understood the need to participate in assessment activities:

I'm a big believer that you have to quantify what you are doing, not just qualify it. I think that you have to do your homework to see what is being done, how it's being done, what are the standards out there that are being done . . . before you make the decision. (Steve, Northern University).

However assessment is also “what I avoid” (Mariah, Western University). Despite understanding the importance of assessment and placing a certain amount of value on it, the middle managers were still not comfortable with their ability to conduct a proper assessment.

The middle managers in this study did not appear to have either tacit or explicit knowledge of the formalized assessment process. In chapter 2, Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates' (2001) eleven step assessment plan was clearly outlined and explained; however the middle managers had no knowledge of that process. The middle managers could speak to individual steps, mainly conducting the survey and gathering data, but those steps were not understood to be components of a larger process. If the middle managers had an assessment plan like that provided by Schuh, et al. they would be better equipped to assess.

Blimling and Whitt (1999) suggest that student affairs professionals may be unsure of which assessments to use to get the desired information. The findings of this study supported Blimling and Whitt's findings; the majority of the participants were either doing things that they had always done, throwing together surveys just to have something, or they simply avoided doing anything at all.

But I think if we could come up with a way to properly evaluate our programs beyond what we are doing I think we're going to be able to draw some conclusions and that's the

hardest thing I think about assessment and research, is developing something that's comprehensive enough to get all the information you want to get. (Rachel, Eastern University)

Middle managers can get caught up in how to assess instead of identifying the information that they want (Heywood, 2000). Moreover, the middle managers in this study had a difficult time distinguishing between gathering data for the sake of completing a task and conducting purposeful assessments to guide their units.

The middle managers in this study expressed their anxieties associated with conducting assessments by identifying the fear of discovering unfavorable results, not understanding what the findings mean, or not knowing with whom to share the results. Mills (2000) discussed how critical assessment can be in guiding a unit or division, and if they are anxious about this activity the results will be useless. The Wingspread Group on Higher Education (1993) stated that when the professionals were not prepared to share necessary information related to assessment, then the institution had a responsibility to train staff to assess. Not knowing how to use the results leads to not knowing how to make the necessary changes that the results indicate:

I think I could do a better job of sharing the assessment information gathered and how I used that to change things . . . Sometimes I don't necessarily think we are willing to make the changes the assessment indicates would be necessary. (Genevieve, Western University)

The anxiety middle managers participating in this study experienced appeared to come mostly from not having a clear knowledge of how to effectively use the information they have, especially when it calls for making changes to programs and services. "With you asking me these questions it definitely, I think defines what my role should be and I should be spending time on

assessment, and also using that to shape future planning” (David, Northern University). Middle managers lacking the necessary explicit knowledge to engage in assessment activities can appear less able to guide their unit.

Assessment Skills

In 1979, Kuh stated that few professionals have developed the skills necessary to appropriately assess, and based upon the results of this study, that is still true today. Blimling and Whitt (1999) claim that institutions are not doing necessary assessments and this can be attributed to the lack of skills of middle managers with this competency. Assessment is a skill that needs to be developed if it is to serve the middle manager in a useful manner (Upcraft & Schuh, 2000). No formal skill development was occurring in any of the middle managers who participated in this study.

Middle managers have gained experience and been successful in their past employment endeavors, but that success may not have included any assessment activities (Birnbaum, 2000). The middle managers, as they explained their various job responsibilities, appeared quite capable of balancing their various responsibilities; however it was clear that many of their supervisors and division leaders had failed to clearly communicate their expectations regarding assessment. The middle managers who had a clearer understanding of what was expected of them in the area of assessment were better able to articulate their own expectations regarding assessment to the staff that they supervised. This allowed those middle managers to be better positioned to support their staff in assessing all of the middle managers’ different areas.

Creamer, Winston, and Miller (2001) identified the set of skills that student affairs professionals should be able to demonstrate. They emphasized supervision, management, and education while only somewhat emphasizing the importance of assessment. The middle

managers participating in this study appeared to prioritize their job responsibilities in a manner similar to that suggested by Creamer, Winston, and Miller, while also emphasizing the need to work closely with students. With such a low expectation level placed on assessment it is not surprising that the middle managers are not working to develop this skill.

The middle managers interviewed shared one major expectation, whether stated or implied: to serve the students first and foremost causing them to place assessment as a lower priority. This contradicts Mills' (2000) assertion that middle managers have less contact with students because they must focus on supervising staff and reporting to their supervisor. When professionals have developed their skill set to conduct assessment they can then use the results in addition to their interactions with students more productively. The middle managers with more experience, however, talked less about interactions with students and more about the importance of interacting with staff and administrators, suggesting that a shift to a more administrative role often occurs with time and experience. Brandon (Northern University), a more experienced middle manager, used assessment to inform himself and his supervisor; "Regarding my bosses' expectations, you know, the idea is that you are here to serve the students of this campus and this community, this campus community, how do you know what they want?"

Student affairs professionals who work closely with students may have an emotional, instinctive, and anecdotal knowledge of student experience and the types of programs and services needed (Astin, 1993). However, they need a language through which to communicate this information to those above them who don't interact with students on a regular basis and who do not have such direct involvement in the lives of students the way those working closely with students do. Assessment can provide middle managers with examples of what they see going on in the student population and they must be able to convey it effectively and understandably to

those in the upper administration. To more experienced middle managers assessment becomes increasingly important in understanding the student population in which they may not have daily contact.

The supervisors of middle managers can play an important role in guiding the development of the middle managers' skill in conducting assessments. In describing the barriers to conducting assessment, Bresciani (2002) identified lack of support from supervisors as a key influence on the level of assessment being performed. Supervisors can influence both the type and quality of assessment activities in addition to providing training and support; however, few of the participants in this study discussed supervisors who helped or guided them through the process. When a deficit in skills related to assessment is occurs the upper administration has a responsibility to provide the necessary training (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). The middle managers in this study mainly talked about their supervisors' expectations that they do some type of assessment and provide results to them:

I have to send them to her, and then they kind of go up into assessment heaven, I don't know where they go on campus . . . nobody comes back and asks us or checks on what we're doing but it's just our responsibility to make sure that if we put it down that we're actually doing it. (Donna, Northern University)

Participants were often told to "do" an assessment, which they interpreted as a required task to check off, receiving little guidance or formal expectation (Walvoord, 2004). Being told to do something without knowing what specific steps are necessary to create an assessment plan can leave middle managers feeling confused, especially if they are lacking skill and direction. "We need to try to figure out what we are exactly trying to measure, or what we are trying to determine is success, what we decide, what we have identified what our outcomes are" (Rachel,

Eastern University). When given more specific guidelines, middle managers can use the results more efficiently and share the information in a more meaningful manner (Blimling & Whitt, 1999).

The majority of the middle managers spoke of conducting assessment for use in their area only--working in an isolated assessment “silo”--while a few others talked about working with committees or groups to gather data. If they lack the skills to assess and have little confidence in reporting results it makes sense that they would avoid working or sharing with others. In fact, collaboration in assessment is more important than ever for middle managers (Banta & Associates, 1996; Schuh & Upcraft, 1998). Sharing assessment results with others can increase the value and usefulness of the results and help middle managers guide their programs to greater success (Schuh & Upcraft). The middle managers participating in this study who were in their positions longer had more contacts on campus, which appeared to make the collaborations easier.

Assessment Ability

All of the participants had the ability to assess they were surveying students conducting focus groups, and benchmarking, and so on; with some showing higher levels of ability than others. The majority appeared to have developed their ability through prior experiences, engaging in assessment activities required of them by others. While they may not have the skills or explicit knowledge to conduct a proper assessments they appeared to rely on their tacit knowledge to complete what they saw as being necessary in order to meet the expectations of their supervisor or other constituents. Their ability to assess can have an impact on the resource allocation, goals, and level in which their unit serves the institution (Conrad & Wilson, 2003).

The middle managers may be impacted by their inability to design an assessment plan. Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) provide an eleven step plan, outlined in chapter 2, which

begins with identifying the problem and concludes with sharing the results. The majority of middle managers in this study were completing some of the steps outlined by Schuh, et al., but they were not following this or any other type of formalized plan. Having an intentional plan helps the middle managers gain resources, set goals, and provide important information to constituents.

Assessment and Resources

As was evident among the participants in this study, middle managers often have a broad scope of responsibility and ability. Under the pressure of a variety of expectations, various people reporting to the middle manager, different programs needing attention, and other demands, it is easy to understand how stretched and strained middle managers already feel (Procaccini, 1986). This study shows that assessment often becomes less of a priority for middle managers who must divide their time between supervising their staff, coordinating programs and services, interacting with students, and attending to the other responsibilities that end up on their desks. The middle managers interviewed struggled to identify where assessment activities fit into the priorities set for their division in order to determine the appropriate allocation of resources and how the information can be used to help justify additional funding and support.

While the middle managers in this study understood the impact assessment can have on their areas, they often identified a lack of time as a impacting their ability to assess. Donna, at Northern University, uses the results to guide her area of responsibility and expressed the difficulty she faced in making it a priority:

When you're trying to do, well when you don't have a lot of staff to do a lot of things, you don't have a lot of time to spend on it [assessment], but at the same time it's really

helped us in situations where we wanted to make significant changes. (Donna, Northern University)

The majority of the participants noted that it would be much easier if they had someone to assist with or conduct assessments for their areas, an observation that supports the findings of Bresciani's (2002) study of senior level administrators' assessment activities.

The middle managers ability to assess can have a strong influence on the allocation of financial resources that their area is allocated. Student affairs professionals need to show evidence that they are contributing to the university community and the development of the whole student and assessment is one of the main ways to achieve this (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1996). Through the development of measurable goals the middle manager can create a purposeful assessment which will provide useful information (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999). In this study very few middle managers could speak about their measurable goals, or how they used the assessment to gain information that would help them gain additional resources or provide proof of the contribution they make to the campus. In fact, lack of ability and direction can lead to ineffective assessment:

We don't assess it in the right ways I guess, we kind of look at the dollar signs and say, "Well, are we losing money in that program?" So I think sometimes we need to be careful with assessing programs and how far we go with them. (Steve, Northern University)

Lack of assessment ability can lead to the loss of a program or service, but if middle managers are well informed throughout the process, then the elimination can be understood and accepted more easily to everyone involved (Upcraft, 2003).

The management of facilities is also influenced by the results of assessments. When renovating or adding new programs these middle managers are being asked to provide proof of the difference these changes will make, or have made. Steve (Northern University) spoke of how he opened a new facility and while some things worked well, others did not and he utilized both verbal and written feedback from the facility's users to identify necessary changes. Having proof that something needed to change, or that a change was successful, helped improve the satisfaction the users have with the facility as well as demonstrating to others that he was in fact working to improve the facility was providing the community. Having assessment results that show proof of the need for resources and facility upgrades will validate the changes made or needed (Moore, 1991).

Proccacini (1986) discussed the use of assessment in justifying the need to allocate additional funds. The middle managers in this study could gain financial support in a specific area by sharing assessment results with the right people; however, when their ability is less developed, they often struggle in this area. One participant summed up the main reason middle managers should assess:

Assessment is one of those pieces that we keep talking about, like I'm not going to go any further until we talk about how we are going to measure it and what we are going to need, in order to prove that we are doing good in order to get more money. (Joann, Western University)

The tacit knowledge that these middle managers have developed through their experience aids them in getting what they need, and through that experience their ability will develop and become stronger.

Goal-Setting Related to Assessment

Several forces drive assessment on the university campus, including the university's mission, strategic plans and accreditation requirements (Bresciani, 2002; Astin, 1993). The middle managers interviewed understand these key guideposts and the need to support these directives. The results of assessments are valued by the participating middle managers, but they are often kept within the unit or student affairs division instead of shared with all of the potential stakeholders. As middle managers develop their goals they need to be mindful of how their results support the institution's mission and strategic plan as well as helping fulfill any accreditation requirements (Carney, 1991; Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999).

For results to be meaningful those assessing must have clear goals for the units they supervise; goals that are tied to the university's strategic plan or mission (Kuh, Gonyea, & Rodriguez, 2002). The need for such a link was quite evident in the findings from this study. "I consider the university goals, and the objectives of the university and the vision, and ours are very compatible with it, they fit right in and we try to complement everything the university does" (Brandon, Northern University). The majority of the participants in this study were able to tie their activities in some way to the mission or strategic plan; however, they were unable to identify specific things they did to accomplish this. Those interviewed noted that the mission or strategic plan is created with little input from student affairs professionals, which can make it difficult to support, much less measure:

The university in a larger sense is also involved in a new strategic plan that's very vague, very like overwhelming to become a destination university, and I'm still not certain in terms of the individual what that means, honestly. (Mark, Western University)

Culture appeared to have an influence on the goals designed by the participating middle managers. As discussed previously, each of the institutions studied had a different driving force influencing the assessment activities on campus. Providing evidence of how the assessment activities support the President's vision and goals is important to the survival of the programs and efforts of middle managers (Carney, 1991; Upcraft, 2003). Middle managers need to be able to identify in what ways they can support these missions, strategic plans, and accreditation reports.

Middle managers with additional years of experience were better able to identify areas they should assess and recognized how the information they gathered could assist in creating goals and setting direction for their unit. This supports Conrad and Wilson's (2003) assertion that having information that can help shape policies, support the division's strategic plan, and guide the division is critical. Unfortunately, for most of the participants in this study, assessment was a low priority given their level of ability and comfort with conducting assessments; they acknowledged that it was not given the attention or time it deserved, instead becoming just another undesirable task:

You should strategically plan time throughout the year to revisit this [assessment] and seeing where we are and how are we doing on the goals we set to address these changes and talk about it a little bit and then just kind of check it off. (David, Northern University)

When assessment has purpose it is no longer just a task to perform, it becomes something that is able to contribute to their work and middle managers who understand this can then prepare an assessment plan from which they will receive both more, and useful benefits (Wolvoord, 2004).

Student Learning Outcomes

Student affairs divisions are responsible for providing opportunities for students to pursue extracurricular, academic, social, leadership, and intellectual pursuits (Jacoby, 1991). In this study only one person spoke specifically about creating learning outcomes and that was in the context of training the student staff they supervised. The middle managers in this study do not have the ability to provide evidence that they are designing and measuring learning outcomes, let alone the related knowledge or skill and this is most disheartening. The middle managers in this study were primarily conducting satisfaction surveys, needs assessments, and benchmarking; which are necessary but they should be including student learning in their plans. If student affairs professionals cannot articulate the ways in which they contribute to the intellectual climate--or worse, if they do not know that they are contributing--they risk becoming dispensable on campus (Pascarella & Upcraft, 1999). "Was it worth anything to anyone? Did anyone learn anything?" (Mariah, Western University). In the future, divisions of student affairs will be required to show specific examples of how they contribute to the learning environment.

In recent years there has been a great deal of emphasis placed on developing learning outcomes in student affairs (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). This is due in part to the greater demand placed on higher education to provide evidence of the contribution higher education makes to society (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993; American College Personnel Association, 1994; Grace, 2002). While this study did not intentionally question the middle managers about the use of, or their familiarity with, learning outcomes, the participants did not talk about or even identify them as par of the expectations of their position or even as something that had been talked about to them by their supervisor.

Areas for Further Research

This study provides a great deal of insight into middle managers' knowledge, skills, and ability to conduct assessment. The information gathered from this study will help student affairs professionals understand the assessment process, the role middle managers play in this area, and the amount of support and training that is required. In addition, the study has shed light on areas of further research. A variety of topics related to assessment warrant further study, including the language surrounding assessment, the tools available for assessment, and the middle managers' knowledge of benchmarking. Additionally, the training and supervision of middle managers, which in turn leads to learning more about senior level administrators' knowledge, skill, and ability related to assessment, is a subject in need of further study.

As this study makes clear, while the language of assessment in textbooks and professional journals is consistent, in this study the professionals' explicit knowledge of that language is inconsistent. In particular, consensus must be reached on the definitions of such key terms as *assessment*, *evaluation*, *research*, *methodology*, *measurement*, and *learning outcomes*. Examining in greater detail the vocabulary used by textbooks, professional organizations, and graduate preparation programs, as well as the terminology used in practice, could help clear up much of the current confusion. Senior level administrators also need to have explicit knowledge of assessment; especially the language used and to emphasize it in conversations with their staff members.

The individuals interviewed in this study could identify only a few tools or resources available to them in conducting assessments; however, many more are available. A more comprehensive look at assessment resources including national surveys and tools for analyzing data such as SPSS™ software would help bring to light a broader variety of resources available

to student affairs professionals. In addition, studying the feasibility of using national surveys to assess various campus programs warrants greater attention. Researchers should also look at how middle managers are using the CAS standards to undertake self-study in relation to larger assessment activities. Finally, managers' level of knowledge and comfort with using various types of assessment software should also be studied.

Almost all of the participants in this study referred to benchmarking, in addition to satisfaction and needs assessment, as an element of their assessment efforts. At a time when universities are being scrutinized by many constituents, being knowledgeable and aware of what other universities are doing appears to be a critical role of the middle manager. Further study would also help to clarify how middle managers conduct benchmark studies. For example, studies that explore the process through which middle managers select schools and areas for comparison would help illuminate the process of benchmarking, as would investigations of how information from benchmarking is used and with whom it is shared.

The development of learning outcomes offers another area for further investigation. The participants in this study did not speak of this as a priority; however, the literature review conducted for this study shows that this area is gaining in importance, especially as it relates to accreditation requirements (Wright, 2002). Areas for future research include middle managers' knowledge of how to assess learning outcomes and how to use the results to inform and guide practice. Certain areas in student affairs may lend themselves to creating and measuring learning outcomes more readily than others. Professionals at all levels and in all areas of student affairs would benefit from evaluating their contribution to outcomes as a form of assessment.

Middle managers are not receiving the training necessary to conduct assessment properly. Studying both the type of training middle managers receive and the expectations of their

supervisors related to conducting assessment could identify areas in which additional training is needed. It is the responsibility of supervisors to invest in developing the middle managers knowledge, skills, and ability. Moreover, studying the assessment knowledge, skill, and ability of senior-level administrators would be the next step in understanding the assessment activities of student affairs professionals because if they are lacking in any of these areas then they will be unable to guide, support, and most importantly, to train their staff. Such a study might examine how assessment is used in senior-level administrators' supervision of staff and in their communication with other offices. Because senior-level administrators are called upon daily to share information about their divisions, it would be beneficial to see how assessment manifests itself in their daily professional lives.

Finally, overall assessment activities in divisions of student affairs need to be better studied and understood. This particular study identified three cultural influences that proved significant on the type of assessment activity being conducted by the middle managers; including strategic plans, accreditation, and competitive ranking. There are many reasons for student affairs professionals to engage in assessment activities beyond those typically instigated by a senior level administrator or institution president. Assessment can also be impacted for a variety of reasons beyond just the three presented in this study, including but not limited to state governing boards, new senior administrator of president, and crisis on the campus.

Implications for Student Affairs Practice

The findings of this study provide evidence that assessment activities of student affairs professionals have several implications for the future of student affairs. Middle managers in this study did not have the explicit knowledge or skill necessary to create effective assessment plans; however, they were able to gather information. Assessment is a valuable tool for the entire

institution; however, middle managers do not understand the value of the information that they have due to the lack of guidance by supervisors, clear expectations, and explicit knowledge. Middle managers need to be better prepared for, and guided in, conducting assessments as they transition from new professional to middle manager. They also need to understand their responsibility in supporting the division of student affairs and the institution as a whole by creating goals and missions that support the president, institution, and accreditation standards. Middle managers must collaborate with other internal and external units and intentionally share their results with appropriate individuals. Finally, student affairs professionals need to understand the importance of contributing to student learning outcomes, finding effective means of assessing these outcomes, and sharing the results as appropriate.

Intentional Preparation to Assess

As Timm (2005) found, not all graduate preparation programs in student affairs offer the subject of assessment as a formal academic course and this needs to change. It is critical that professionals coming through student affairs administration graduate preparation programs have the training necessary to help them as they enter the profession and later as they move from new professional to middle manager. Graduate preparation programs have the responsibility to provide individuals with the explicit knowledge and basic skills that can later be cultivated through experience.

Those who supervise middle managers also need to be involved, whether they themselves are middle managers or senior-level administrators. Supervisors should identify areas in which their staff need additional support and training and to find ways to help them develop in those areas. Such support will help middle managers as they supervise their staff, offering them opportunities to further develop their knowledge and skill, and improving their assessment

ability. Assessment needs to be a routine and structured part of training and professional development within the student affairs unit.

One clear finding in this study is that student affairs practitioners do not have a common language with regards to assessment. Developing such a language is a crucial responsibility for professional organizations and graduate preparation programs that support and prepare those working in student affairs. While there is a specific vocabulary provided in professional journals and textbooks, this study shows that the middle managers are not aware of it or are simply not using it. Regional and national organizations can provide support by emphasizing the established terminology, while graduate preparation programs can also aid in developing the specific language necessary for the assessment work of student affairs professionals. Emphasizing the need for formalized assessment plans and outlining the steps involved are also critical tasks that should be covered in graduate preparation programs and by professional organizations. Some professional organizations are beginning to offer specific assessment conferences, resources, and support; however, more needs to be done as this is an area that will continue to become more pertinent with time.

The Supervisors Role in Assessment

The supervisors in this study clearly influence to what degree and how middle managers assess. When expectations of the middle managers are clear and the assessment activities are being conducted, then the results will have a greater meaning. Additionally, supervisors, whether middle managers themselves or senior level administrators, must have the appropriate knowledge, skills, and ability to conduct assessments themselves in order to support the that staff they supervise.

Supervisors of middle managers must be able to effectively discuss assessment activities with the staff, which means they have to possess explicit knowledge in order to role model what they expect of others. Using the appropriate language related to assessment with the staff will help the middle managers develop both their tacit and explicit knowledge.

Having the knowledge of what an assessment plan should look like, in addition to the skills and ability to conduct the plan is a necessity for senior level administrators. If the senior level administrators are not able to conduct an assessment based on a plan like Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) they may not be able to guide the middle managers as they attempt to conduct their own plans. Using a plan like the one provided by Schuh, et al. is ideal because it provides steps that are easy to understand and follow.

The supervisor's of middle managers have an important responsibility to guide, train, and role model what assessment activities are expected. The senior level administrators should be identifying ways they can train the staff they supervise on campus, whether or not they are sending them to specialized conferences, because this will help their staff understand the assessment culture on their particular campus. Being involved in the assessment activities of their staff will help the senior level administrator role model what is expected and provide opportunities for conversations about the assessment plan the sharing of results. The senior level administrators have a responsibility to ensure that their staff are able to engage in these important assessment activities.

A Responsibility to Assess

Middle managers are responsible for assessing the programs and services occurring in their areas. They must define goals and create a strategic plan that supports the university's mission as well as the directions set by the university president and the vice president for student

affairs. Middle managers need to work with their staffs to design ways to measure the goals they have set and to continuously improve their areas of responsibility.

Middle managers need to identify and use assessment tools beyond the basics of satisfaction surveys and program evaluations. They need to be able to create an intentional and comprehensive plan that produces the specific information that will strengthen programs and services. More than ever before, institutions are being scrutinized for their spending, the contribution they make to society, and so on, and student affairs professionals must be able to show how they are contributing to the institution's intellectual climate. The assessment cannot be done piecemeal and the results cannot be limited only to internal use; instead, assessment must be utilized to promote the contributions student affairs is making on the students' experience.

An expectation of assessment knowledge and ability also needs to be clearly expressed in the job descriptions of student affairs professionals. Senior student affairs professionals must provide clear expectations for the staff they supervise and be prepared to support staff members when their skill is lacking. Professionals at all levels need to find ways to regularly participate in assessment activities and to utilize the resources available on campus, including those specific offices and individuals whose primary focus is assessment. To make assessment a priority and reinforce its importance, resources and time allocations need to be made to support assessment initiatives.

Middle managers also need to engage in the intentional sharing of assessment results (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004). Student affairs professionals cannot continue to work in assessment silos. Moving from a satisfaction-based assessment plan to a more comprehensive and intentional goal-driven plan may help to validate their work. Additionally, if middle

managers can create well thought-out assessment plans and develop the assessment mindset they will be in a better position to role model and guide their staff (Love & Estanek, 2005).

Assessment Collaborations

Many of the middle managers interviewed talked about the collaborations they had with other offices on campus, both academic and non-academic. Middle managers who had been in their positions longer had a better understanding of the value of these collaborations. Some of the participants sat on committees that conducted assessments and analyzed the results together. Working in a group strengthens the results and provides a more inclusive structure for meaning making. More of these types of groups need to be developed to connect student affairs professionals by taking them away from their individual units and helping them see the bigger picture.

Senior-level administrators should also seek ways to help their middle managers establish connections with others outside of their unit. Senior-level administrators are often in a position to see the bigger picture and know more people at the institution; they can identify with whom the middle manager should be working. However, such networking should not be solely the responsibility of the senior-level administrator; middle managers must also find ways to involve their new professionals in collaborations across campus. Only when all levels are engaged with other individuals and offices on the campus will they improve their position on the campus.

The Importance of Learning Outcomes

Only one participant in this study discussed learning outcomes for their area. Yet learning outcomes have been gaining importance in the field of student affairs, especially as they relate to accreditation. Middle managers need to identify ways to assess the educational

opportunities they provide through the programs and services they offer. This may be easier in some areas than others, but it is still necessary across the board.

The topic of student learning outcomes has been discussed at length in student affairs publications over the past couple of decades. Professionals working in student affairs have worked hard to make an impact on students' intellectual pursuits; now the time has come to show the results of these efforts. Professional organizations and graduate preparation programs should assist in this area, providing education, training, and professional development opportunities that will help professionals develop the knowledge and skills to create and measure learning outcomes.

Conclusion

The middle managers in this study had a tacit knowledge of assessment, but they were lacking the experience and skill required to make the best use of their assessment opportunities and results. They recognized the need to intentionally gather information but were very limited in their familiarity with the tools and resources available. They did not possess the necessary explicit knowledge about assessment. They knew key words, but not how they should be used and they were unable to use them to talk about how they were improving their areas of responsibilities. With professional development opportunities and support from their supervisors and other campus officials, their explicit knowledge about assessment will develop to the point that they will be able to articulate both their efforts and results to others at their institution.

The middle managers in this study were actually able to gather some assessment information; however, they had not created a formalized process. They lack the skill to identify what needs to be assessed and how to conduct the assessment. While they are able to create basic surveys and questionnaires, they have insufficient knowledge of other tools and resources

available to them in assessing. The absence of a formalized process and the managers' lack of confidence in their own skills and knowledge prevent them from fully participating in the assessment process. They deal with this lack of confidence by wanting someone else who is more qualified to perform the assessments in their unit. The middle managers' anxiety related to assessment also prevents them from even trying to fully develop their skill related to assessment.

The middle managers who participated in this study indicated during the interviews that they are able to handle the multiple responsibilities their jobs require (Creamer, Winston, & Miller, 2001; Bresciani, 2002). The ability to conduct assessment is a critical piece in their positions and many admitted that they were not measuring up to the expected ability level. The middle manager role requires that they do many things, often simultaneously, and cultivating assessment abilities has not been made the priority that needs to be if they aspire to succeed in their positions and to rise above the middle manager role in the future.

Middle managers are critically positioned to gather important information that will improve their area of responsibility and the division of student affairs as a whole. Because they are connected to students and can interact with them naturally it is necessary for them to continue to identify ways to impact intellectual climate on campus. This can also aid them in providing critical information related to accreditation. Middle managers have a responsibility to share what they are doing and what they know with their supervisors, their staffs, and other necessary constituents on campus.

At the same time, graduate preparation programs, professional organizations, and senior-level administrators must recognize their role in preparing student affairs professionals to be able to engage in assessment. This includes creating a common language which will help alleviate much of the confusion that currently exists. Additionally, middle managers need to recognize

assessment as an area of weakness in the profession--and in some cases themselves--and work to overcome this deficit.

Assessment also must be a part of job descriptions in student affairs. Professionals at all levels need to find ways to regularly participate in assessment activities and to utilize the resources available on their campus including specific offices and individuals. Senior administrations also need to make assessment a priority by allocating time and resources for staff members to actively pursue assessment information. When middle managers take their role in the assessment process seriously, everyone at the university can benefit from the impact that the results gathered will produce by continuously improving the educational experiences of students at our institutions of higher education.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

- 1) Tell me a little about your position and responsibilities you have in your position.
- 2) Describe how you make decisions about improving your programs and services (student learning outcomes, strategic planning, benchmarking, satisfaction surveys, etc.).
- 3) How have these decisions helped in the modification or improvement of your programs and services?
- 4) Define the following words: Assessment, evaluation, and research.
- 5) How do you currently use assessment in your position?
- 6) Describe how assessment information is used once the assessment is completed.
- 7) Who or what influences how you choose to identify your programs' strengths and weaknesses (including barriers, dissemination of information, and support from division/supervisor)?
- 8) What expectations do you have for the staff you supervise in identifying program strengths and weaknesses (i.e., training programs, professional development opportunities)?
- 9) How do your supervisor's expectations related to assessment play into your assessment activities?
- 10) What assessment activities are you aware of that are currently occurring within student affairs and the campus as a whole (i.e., student learning outcomes, strategic planning, benchmarking, satisfaction surveys, etc.)? Do you share results or interact with these individuals?
- 11) What resources are available on your campus to assist in the assessment process?
- 12) Which assessment tools do you utilize in conducting assessment (EBI, NSSE, CIRP, etc.)?
- 13) Is there anything else that you would like me to know before we end?

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Participation Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study titled “Knowledge about Assessment of Middle Level Professionals in Student Affairs” conducted by Dianne M. Timm, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling & Human Development Services at the University of Georgia, under the direction of Dr. Merrily Dunn, Department of Counseling & Human Development Services, University of Georgia (706-542-3927). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can stop taking part without giving any reason, and without penalty. I can ask to have all of the information about me returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this research is to examine how middle level professionals gather, analyze, and interpret information to make decisions to modify, change, and improve those programs or services they direct. This research project is formative in nature.

Procedures

If I volunteer to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

1. Read this consent form (10 minutes).
2. Fill out the demographic information (5 minutes).
3. Take part in an interview that asks about your knowledge, skills, attitude, and resources used for making decisions for continuous improvement for your programs and/or services you coordinate, direct, and/or supervise. (60-90 minutes).
4. Review transcription and researcher’s notes (30 minutes).

Confidentiality

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout this study. Participants, upon agreeing to be in the study, will be identified by a number. The interviews will be audio taped and the resulting tapes kept in possession of Dianne M. Timm in a locked cabinet until the study is complete. All information on the tapes will be transcribed and used for research purposes only. After the completion of this study all tapes will be destroyed on or before December 1, 2006.

Discomforts or Stresses

The discomforts or stresses that may be faced during this research are:

No discomforts or stresses are expected.

Risks

Participation entails the following risks:

No risks are expected.

I understand that if I have additional questions regarding the research project, I may contact the researcher, by using the contact information listed below.

Benefits

Participation in this study will benefit individuals and the student affairs profession as a whole in providing valuable information regarding important courses in graduate preparation programs and the emphasis placed on continuous improvement of programs and services.

Final Agreement & Consent Form Copy

My signature below indicates that the researcher has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____ Name of Researcher Telephone: 706-389-6509 E-mail: dtimm@uga.edu	_____ Signature	_____ Date
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_____ Name of Participant	_____ Signature	_____ Date
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Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu