

**The ACPA ASK Project:
Assessment Skills and Knowledge Content Standards
for Student Affairs Practitioners and Scholars**

*As developed by the ACPA Commission on Assessment for Student Development Directorate
in consultation with student affairs professionals from across the Association*

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The Context for Assessment Skills and Knowledge Content Standards

Over the course of the past two decades, the public, legislative bodies, parents and students have shown increased interest in fiscal and learning accountability in higher education. Initiatives such as *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Personnel Association, 1996), *The National Study on Student Engagement* (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2004), *Learning Reconsidered* (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2004), *Greater Expectations* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002), the *Measuring Up* series (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004), and the recent publication, *Declining by Degrees* (Hersh & Merrow, 2005) are examples of criticisms and higher education's response to better identify and measure college outcomes.

In student affairs, the articulation and assessment of student learning has been especially challenging given the complex psychosocial and cognitive constructs that are the hallmarks of our work with students. Messy constructs such as leadership, citizenship, appreciation for diversity, critical and ethical judgement, and a host of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences present unique measurement issues. These constructs are found not only in student affairs but also in academic affairs where the constructs may include effective writing and speaking, team work, critical thinking and problem solving ability.

While student affairs graduates are taught basic research and assessment skills in their programs, many more seasoned professionals look to current publications. Professional organizations such as ACPA assist them with the development of the skills and knowledge needed to successfully identify, measure, evaluate and articulate students' co-curricular learning outcomes. Seminal works such as *Assessment Practice in Student Affairs* (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001) and *Assessment for Excellence* (Astin, 1990) have helped to guide our work in this area.

While publications and other vehicles have been helpful, the ACPA Commission on Assessment for Student Development (CASD) notes that there is no agreement and no clear articulation of the content areas and proficiencies needed to successfully assess student learning outcomes in the co-curriculum. With this need in mind, the ACPA CASD invites you to engage in thought and dialog through The Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) project.

The ASK project seeks to articulate the areas of content knowledge, skill and dispositions that student affairs professionals need in order to perform as practitioner- scholars to assess the degree to which students are mastering the learning and development outcomes we intend as professionals. Consistent with language used in the context of educational accountability, these areas of knowledge and skill are termed "content standards." Phrased conversationally, *content* standards describe "what you need to know." That is, what do student affairs professionals need to know in order to do assessment?

Proficiency standards complement content standards. Proficiency standards articulate the degree of expertise of the practitioner in a given area of content. Again phrased conversationally, *proficiency* standards describe "how

well do you know it; *how well* can you do it.” Phrased another way, how well do student affairs professionals know various areas of assessment skill and knowledge?

The primary focus of this discussion paper is to identify the appropriate knowledge content areas all student affairs practitioners need in order to engage in meaningful and useful assessment. The identification of appropriate proficiency levels for each content area is outside the scope of this project. However, it follows that once content areas are established and generally agreed upon, a discussion of proficiency in each area will and should follow.

In consultation with student affairs professionals from across the Association, the Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) content areas are:

- Assessment Design
- Articulating Learning and Development Outcomes
- Selection of Data Collection and Management Methods
- Assessment Instruments
- Surveys Used for Assessment Purposes
- Interviews and Focus Groups used for Assessment Purposes
- Assessment Methods: Analysis
- Benchmarking
- Program Review and Evaluation
- Assessment Ethics
- Effective Reporting and Use of Results
- Politics of Assessment
- Assessment Education

Content Standard 1: Assessment Design

Ability to articulate and execute an assessment plan at the program/service, unit, or divisional level, depending on the practitioner’s needs.

Ability to “map” (Maki, 2004) or establish conceptual connections from institutional mission, to divisional mission, to program/unit mission such that program/unit goals for student learning are consistent with institutional mission. The assessment plan should provide information on the manner and degree to which students are mastering the intended learning and development outcomes, programmatic outcomes, needs of a given population, or other intended focus of the assessment effort. Such a map also recognizes that “outcomes are not necessarily linearly related to practice” (Love & Estanek, 2004, p. 87).

Ability to design a quantitative assessment plan including learning objectives, measurement of student achievement of those objectives, selection of appropriate quantitative data collection techniques, and analysis plan.

Ability to design a qualitative assessment plan including learning objectives, conceptual approach (e.g., phenomenological, case study, and so on), selection of appropriate qualitative data collection techniques, and analysis plan.

Ability to identify assumptions related to focus of the assessment as well as to articulate a professional opinion about what knowledge is and how it is constructed. As outlined by Wilkinson and McNeil (1996) in commenting on multicultural research and assessment, these assumptions and opinions can include those that define normal behavior, the degree to which constructs may or may not be universal, and the degree to which

those planning the assessment continually seek to improve their cultural knowledge and challenge their own perspective.

Ability to identify those who have a stake in the assessment results and to integrate their needs into the design and analysis of assessment(s) as well as the reporting of results.

Ability to determine the type of assessment desired or anticipated as being most useful by a specific audience. For example, the senior student affairs officer at a given institution most may need summative assessment information for use in preparing accountability documents. By contrast, a unit director may need formative assessment information to guide her in further shaping or positioning her program or services to encourage student learning and development. This type of information could be used to track students' progress towards outcomes in order to make immediate co-curricular changes.

Ability to formulate an assessment budget and to identify and manage funding resources to support ongoing assessment efforts.

Content Standard 2: Articulating Learning and Development Outcomes

Ability to articulate intentional student learning and development goals and their related outcomes. In establishing those goals, the ability to use cognitive and psychosocial development theories germane to the student populations (e.g., traditional age, cultural background, adult education, and so on) as well as an awareness that different subpopulations may have different patterns of development (Love and Guthrie, 1999).

Ability to identify the appropriate philosophical or research underpinnings (such as positivist, constructivist, critical theory, and so on) for the articulation of outcomes, dependent on the outcomes themselves.

Ability to design programs and services likely to foster the proposed outcomes.

Ability to gather evidence through formative and summative assessment of the degree to which students demonstrate the projected outcomes.

Ability to determine the degree to which the educational practice contributes to the intended learning outcome. Ability to determine the efficacy of educational practices used to foster learning and development.

Content Standard 3: Selection of Data Collection and Management Methods

Ability to identify the types of data/information needed to perform the assessment. This includes understanding the benefits and disadvantages of quantitative and qualitative data and exploring what data already exist and do not need to be collected. These data decisions would then determine which method (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method) would be used to collect data.

Ability to identify indirect and direct methods (Maki, 2004) of assessment as well as to use intentional informal assessment (Love and Guthrie, 1999) when warranted.

Ability to select methods of data collection and analysis appropriate to answering the questions posed by the assessment project.

Ability to establish assessment and data collection procedures and processes that are manageable, appropriate, and cost-effective for one's work function/division/department.

Ability to choose and implement appropriate data collection techniques, including but not limited to the following:

- (a) Surveys
- (b) Focus groups
- (c) Interview
- (d) Documentation review

Ability to choose appropriate sample size for the assessment depending on assumptions underlying the assessment plan (such as whether the results are intended to be generalized or not).

Ability to collect, manipulate and manage databases when part of large institutional databases or smaller, functional area specific databases.

Ability to aggregate and disaggregate data to identify patterns of student achievement and development.

Content Standard 4: Assessment Instruments

Ability to use assessment instruments with rigor appropriate to their intended uses.

Ability to identify strengths and weaknesses of established assessment instruments and select most appropriate instruments for the desired measurement target. Those strengths and weaknesses could include the standardization samples on which the instrument may have been developed and whether or not psychometric information is available for members of various racial/ethnic groups or other groups who have completed the instrument. Assessment instruments could include those that have been constructed using established psychometric properties such as reliability and validity and for which information about those properties is available for previous uses of the instruments.

Ability to develop rubrics to guide the evaluation of authentic assessment methods (Tombari & Borich, 1999) such as portfolios, videotapes, and similar types of assessment evidence used to measure student achievement of intended learning outcomes.

Ability to determine the manner in which participants with disabilities will utilize any assessment instruments selected. That determination could include consultation with institutional professionals in disability support.

Ability to review an instrument for inclusive and accessible language likely to be viewed as informed and respectful by those for whom use of the instrument is intended.

Content Standard 5: Surveys Used for Assessment Purposes

Ability to evaluate and create a rigorous survey with focus on effective question wording, effective survey format for the intended sample population (which may include participants with disabilities, members of various cultural groups, and so on), appropriate administration method, along with ability to achieve appropriate response rate.

Ability to use selected skills in sampling statistics to include types of sampling (random, stratified, cluster, systematic, and so on) as well as sample size estimation, variance estimation, confidence intervals, ratio and regression estimation, and appropriate analytic responses to non-responses and missing data.

Content Standard 6: Interviews and Focus Groups Used for Assessment Purposes

Ability to determine when individual or focus group interviews are appropriate data collection techniques.

Ability to identify representative cohorts reflecting institutional demographics. Ability to appropriately identify various cultural groups included in the research, recognizing regional differences in preferred terminology.

Ability to plan the cohorts so that important within group differences are considered among larger cultural groupings, such as perspectives that may be held by members of specific cultural groups (e.g., Chinese Americans) that may be different from the perspectives of the larger group (Asian Americans).

Ability to organize and conduct effective individual and focus group interviews with attention to appropriate selection and recruitment of participants, interview logistics (location, room, set-up, equipment), and interview structure (introduction / warm-up, content questions, wrap-up, closing).

Ability to develop appropriate interview questions with consideration of wording, type, sequencing, and number.

Ability to develop rapport with participants, to listen attentively, to follow-up with appropriate questions and points of clarification, to attend to nuances of group discussion (e.g., participant involvement, conversation dominance, and so on) and to take useful field notes.

Ability to create a moderator's guide and to select and train moderators, as necessary, paying particular attention to the knowledge and skills required to conduct individual interviews and discussion groups.

Ability to effectively analyze collected data using techniques of analysis appropriate to qualitative methods.

Content Standard 7: Assessment Methods: Analysis

Ability to analyze and interpret data using the appropriate univariate and multivariate statistical techniques and appropriate software to perform those analyses

Ability to analyze and interpret data using methods appropriate to qualitative inquiry (e.g., constant comparative analysis, ethnography, thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and so on). Ability to use software appropriate to these analyses.

Ability to establish standards of rigor, trustworthiness, and authenticity to assessment projects using qualitative methods.

Ability to aggregate and disaggregate data to identify patterns of student achievement and development.

Ability to interpret the data in ways that are understandable to both technical and non-technical audiences.

Ability to distinguish between statistical significance and practical significance.

Content Standard 8: Benchmarking

When available, the ability to identify national, regional or local programs or sources of benchmarking data for program, department, or institutional use.

Ability to use benchmarking data for strategic planning purposes.

Ability to evaluate benchmarking programs and determine advisability of institutional participation.

Ability to create and use institutional benchmark programs when those do not exist in a specific functional or topical area.

Content Standard 9: Program Review and Evaluation

Ability to implement a program evaluation/program review.

Ability to use CAS Standards or other related standards such as APA for counseling centers, to regularly review and improve assessment efforts within a given institution.

Content Standard 10: Assessment Ethics

An understanding of the purpose and role of an Institutional Review Board and appropriate procedures for human subjects.

Ability to appropriately determine when and where data and findings should be promulgated in a way that respects confidentiality and/or anonymity of the participants.

Ability to interpret and apply FERPA guidelines in assessment and evaluation projects.

Content Standard 11: Effective Reporting and Use of Results

Ability to develop an appropriate written report of findings that recognizes the intended audience(s) and stakeholders in terms of sophistication, areas of sensitivity, and level of detail likely to be effective and helpful

Ability to effectively communicate results orally with use of visual support such as graphs, charts, and/or PowerPoint that recognizes the intended audience(s) and stakeholders in terms of sophistication, areas of sensitivity, and level of detail likely to be effective and helpful.

Ability to apply results to improve programs and services. Ability to discover and question assumptions underlying current practices (“double loop learning” as described by Argyris & Schon, 1974 and discussed in Love & Estanek, 2004)

Ability to affect change with the assessment results.

Content Standard 12: Politics of Assessment

Ability to determine political risks that may apply to assessment results and the audiences likely to be adversely affected by findings.

Ability to use assessment in the context of strategic planning, budgeting, unit or institutional decision-making including use of assessment to effect changes when warranted.

Ability to identify the context/institutional factors that shape the need for the assessment.

Ability to report assessment findings with an awareness of the political context for those results such as who will receive the results, the format in which the results should be reported, and timing of the reporting. Ability to exercise personal and professional maturity, good judgment, and critical thinking skills in the reporting and use of assessment results.

Ability to identify, recognize, and overcome barriers to performing assessment and incorporating assessment results into policy and practice

Content Standard 13: Assessment Education

Ability to educate others about the goals, needs, and techniques of assessment.

Ability to work with educators across the institution on shared outcomes. These educators might well include those in student affairs and those in academic affairs.

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