Differentiating Between Research, Assessment, and Program Evaluation

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As student affairs practitioners become more focused on outcomes-based learning, certain key terms and concepts can become confusing. This article will differentiate research, assessment, and program evaluation in an effort to illustrate similarities and differences. Scholarly work for practitioners will help in determining purpose for a project as well as delivering findings to key stakeholders.

Research

Research utilizes methods and analysis that inform theoretical foundations for utilization to large populations. Posavac and Carey (2007) defined basic research as “questions of theoretical interest, without regard to the information needs of people or organizations” (p. 10). Research tends to avoid subjectivity or value-laden commentary (Striven, 2004), especially quantitative research, to determine the worth of its subject of inquiry. Moreover, research informs theory and overall practice and is generalized to the greater population by generating information for fundamental knowledge.

Assessment

Assessment includes efforts to gather analyze and interpret evidence which describes institutional, departmental, divisional or agency effectiveness (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Scholars have defined assessment as methods and analysis that lead to understanding an individual, institution, or agency without a focus on a specific program (Posavac & Carey, 2007). A key aspect of assessment involves using the data gathered to improve the effectiveness.
**Program Evaluation**

Finally, program evaluation involves methods and analysis that answer questions to inform programmatic improvement. Evaluation involves making judgments based on the factual information gathered during an investigation (Scriven, 2004). Some specific questions might include:

- Is the service needed?
- Is it likely to be used?
- Will it meet the unmet identified needs?
- Was the service offered as planned?
- Did the service help people in need?
- Were costs reasonable?
- What were the side effects?

Program evaluation uses many methods from research to assess the merit of specific programs, agencies, initiatives, or services (Posavac & Carey, 2007). Understanding how theory informs practice and development of a program does help evaluators, but developing theory remains outside the bounds of traditional evaluation (Posavac & Carey, 2007).

**Putting Knowledge to Work**

Definite similarities exist between research, assessment, and program evaluation. They share methodological approaches including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Depending on the questions under examination, practitioners should consider choosing an appropriate method regardless of conducting research, assessment, or a program evaluation.
In everyday conversation, you might want to consider using a metaphor of a funnel to distinguish these terms. Basic research addresses concerns for the general population, assessment narrows that focus for a targeted population, and program evaluation further identifies strengths and weaknesses in a specific programmatic endeavor. With these descriptions, practitioners should have the ability to distinguish between research, assessment, and program evaluation.

References


