

**Office of Residence Life  
Research Agenda  
Report #1 on Strategic Change “Assessment and Information Sharing”  
Originally presented to RL Professional Staff September 26, 2006**

**Draft One September 15, 2006  
Updated June 8, 2007**

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- Documented use of student learning assessment information as part of institutional assessment.  
<http://www.msche.org/>

University of Delaware Office of Educational Assessment identifies the purpose of assessment as:

*The student outcomes assessment program has one central goal, which is to create a University of Delaware culture of continuous academic improvement which is based upon accountability and learning.* However, there are several aligned goals that have been identified at other institutions and which are shared by the University of Delaware:

- Increase our confidence that we are putting our time and resources into



studies, they are to be considered as additional to the required action research expectations, not as a replacement.

Improvement focused assessment begins in a commonsense way, that is, on what needs to be improved.

The qualifier “improvement focused” is important in conceptualizing front-line assessment strategies. By selecting this distinction, we are also selecting to NOT engage in other forms of assessment, such as developing predictive models or preparing techniques to be generalized across a population. I came upon an enjoyable quote related to this frame by Trudy Bers in an About Campus article on benchmarking by Joe Pica (Jan/Feb 2004, p. 5). She states that “you don’t fatten a pig by weighing it.” Our assessment efforts will be focused on measuring things that help us to “fatten” our educational offerings through continuous improvement, not simply weighing it.

At this stage of our growth cycle, we likely have more things that need improvement than proven strategies. This reality requires that

inappropriate study in this area would be based on determining if membership in a particular social identity leads to higher gains for students in

conclusions. Members of the Residence Life Research Team will take on the primary responsibility for designing summative measures of student competency attainment.

Our educational priority of c

the specific competencies and will be utilized heavily by the Residence Life Research Team.

### **The Role of Assessment in Maintaining Focused Energy on Priorities through Accountability**

Assessment also has a specific role in our department's future in maintaining our focus. Historically, we have used assessment to prove our worth, justify expenses, and on occasion to alter strategy. The role of assessment is now being more specifically addressed from the lens of expectations and accountability.

Expectations can be a fairly powerful change agent and should serve to inspire both students and staff. A test of quality for our eight curricula is whether or not they can be translated into clear expectations for what students must do in order to meet the learning goals. The process of crafting and communicating clear expectations for students has a side benefit of increasing student expectations for their residence hall experience and the role of Residence Life staff. We often assert a general departmental belief that when students become intentional learners, education is enhanced. If we hope to actualize this belief, it is incumbent upon us to express the learning we seek to stimulate. The reason that the topic of clear learning expectations for students falls into the assessment frame is that these clearly communicated expectations are the things we are measuring. Student progress on the learning expectations is examined through assessment and is to be reported back to students throughout the year. Our expression of expectations for student learning also helps signal to students and staff members the type of role we seek to play in the educational experience.

We must also use assessment to hold ourselves accountable to both our assertions and our professional team. We make many claims both directly and indirectly through our curriculum designs. We assert that particular learning goals lead to particular competency attainment. We assert that attainment of competencies in a particular order lead to an ability to be a change agent and to demonstrate civic engagement toward the development of a sustainable society. Our assertions based on our professional experiences, our understanding of various theories and literature, and some trial/error has limited validity over time. The nature of our existing validity will need to be replaced with assessment construct based validity. Through assessment, we will at times meet, and at times fail the accountability test. We will however, be able to make highly informed decisions for our future.

Assessment will also be utilized for professional development and employment decisions within the professional team. Our sequence of learning and competency map requires that success is achieved on year-based competencies. We will have agreed upon definitions for each competency which in turn direct the design of educational strategies by individual complexes. The first-year strategies must act in concert with the second and third year strategies. Assessment will reveal strengths and weaknesses of various approaches and will steer the full-group discussion







focus in on the impact of the actual lesson plan, or treatment as the area of study rather than other factors in the living environment.

2. One “environmental” study on a topic to be proposed by the CC to the Assessment Team. Environmental studies are designed to develop a better understanding of students, staff perceptions related to curriculum, etc. When considering an environmental study, CC’s should review Renn, K. A., & Arnold, K. D., (2003). Reconceptualizing research on college student peer culture. The Journal of Higher Education, 74 no. 3, 261-291. This study can occur in concert with the departmental expectation that each Complex Coordinator and each Hall Director conduct two individual interviews per month with randomly selected students living within the complex (please note, the random selection is important, I also expect that CCC members be excluded from the sampling). Recognition that it is natural in residence life to possess a skewed view of students is important in this area. Our traditional roles place us in constant contact with RAs, hall leaders, and with students with behavioral issues. These three groups constitute numerically small and trait-unique samples.
3. CC’s will also assume responsibility in conjunction with the Assistant Director for Residential Education for developing mechanisms for providing students with information about assessment results from in-complex studies.

**Assistant Director of Staff Development and Selection** – The AD of Staff Development and Selection is responsible for the competency studies below, but is also responsible for developing assessment models to inform our recruitment, training, and development strategies for staff. The competency studies assigned to this AD are our “end-points.” As such, they make up a comprehensive report on our staff effectiveness. As more definitive curriculum content areas are developed, the AD of Staff Development and Selection will concurrently be assessing the affect of the content on the above competencies and the staff skill level on delivering content.

Competency summative studies:

- Demonstrate the skills necessary to be a change agent
- Demonstrate civic engagement toward the development of a sustainable society

**Director of Residence Life** – Responsible for overseeing the design and creation of a data warehouse and archive for assessment efforts, gathering and disseminating residence-hall information from Institutional Research, Office of Educational Assessment, Office of Admissions, and other potential sources of information within UD.

**Assistant Director for Student Conduct and Departmental Operations** - Develops annual analytical reports on the following:

- Residence Hall Damage
- Judicial referrals

- Develop an identification and tracking mechanism for student action toward residence hall community improvement

**Associate Director** - Maintains oversight of the department-wide assessment efforts and budgeting. Specific responsibilities include chairing the Research Team and coordinating Research Team activities. Associate Director functional focus will be primarily on:

- Overseeing approval of assessment proposals
- Determining funding allocations for assessment
- Advancing the development of the summative civic engagement and change agent skills competencies
- Assess staff development needs in areas of assessment and design training in conjunction with Assistant Director of Staff Development and Selection.

**Hall Directors** – The Hall Director role in assessment is still emerging and job description changes have not been put in place with formal assessment design expectations, though they may be called upon to assist the CC in the design stage. In fact, several of our HD’s are highly skilled and versed in the area of research and assessment and have played a critical role in complex-level assessment design, implementation, and final report writing. At a minimum, HD’s are expected to facilitate various data collection strategies, primarily in the areas of surveys, formal interviews, focus group facilitation, and summarizing data collected by RA staff. Those HD’s with high interest and high talent are certainly asked to play a major role.

**Resident Assistants** – RA staff play a key role in recruiting participants. The RA staff should also play a primary role in observation research methodology and reporting. Portions of lesson plans are being allocated to assessment and RAs are asked to provide information summaries on these areas.

**The Research Team** – Chaired by the Associate Director and consisting of select professional and HD staff, the Research Team is responsible for establishing assessment direction, standards, and tools for the department’s assessment efforts (see Strategic Change Section F for details). The Research Team will also assume responsibility for initiating assessment training and development activities for staff and for supporting the design of summative (competency) studies.

### **Skill development responsibilities**

Designing quality assessment methods is an area that Residence Life professionals often lack education or experience. Developing these skills requires both departmentally created professional development series as well as professional staff self-directed learning strategies. We will also be engaging in reaching out to offices and professionals within the University of Delaware community for assistance. The AD for Staff Development and Selection and the Associate Director partner to develop the professional development approaches. Individual professional staff members need to inventory current skill and comfort levels and work with their direct supervisor to create a

unique growth plan. While this may seem to be an odd reminder, it is important to

competency in establishing clear assessment learning strategies (or grounding research questions), developing proper interview and focus group protocols for question development and reporting, and formulating survey questions suitable for basic statistical analysis (frequency, basic item analysis, and basic factor analysis). As noted earlier, we have much learning and unlearning to do. We will capitalize on a shared belief within our departmental culture that educators are also learners. We are on the right path, but realizing the path is a long one, with many milestones and curves is an important place to start.

# Assessment Proposal & Report Outline

## 1. Purpose

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- A. Clearly defined learning goal
  - *The researcher at this time does not know the answer – he/she honestly wonders about likely explanations.*
  - *The statement should clearly express what the researcher is seeking to learn through the assessment process*
  
- B. Hypothesis or research question (what you believe exists; claims you want to test; what you suspect or what you *believe*...)
  - *Research hypotheses/research questions offer tentative answers to the main problem.*
  - *Research hypotheses/questions rarely answer the question once and for all. Usually, hypotheses/research questions are partial explanations.*
  - *Research hypotheses/questions must have initial credibility.*
  
- C. Definitions for all conceptual terms referenced in problem statement
  - *Definitions/explanations for all terms used that may have varying interpretations by different audiences*
  
- D. Rationale for the study (the need, issue, or concern central to furthering our ability to provide citizenship education that warrants serious attention and should be resolved).
  
- E. Connection between this study and our Citizenship educational priority/Competencies/the Civic Engagement toward Sustainability study
  
- F. Any additional rationale you would like to offer

## 2. Guiding Framework & Design

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- A. Theoretical framework - sources informing the project. This area can be *supplemented* with your experiential frame.
  
- B. A brief description of strategies
  - *A researcher must document that the treatment/intervention was faithfully applied (ex: specific lesson plans were delivered to every student, etc.)*
  
- C. Explanation of the method of analysis and rationale for the questions to be used. Please provide:
  - a. All protocols, instrument, or tools

- b. Target audience; population & sampling
- c. Method (quantitative/qualitative; direct/indirect measures) and rationale
- d. Participant recruitment plan
- e. Data collection plan
- f. Method to be utilized to summarize and translate data
- g. Electronic format in which the Research Team will receive the data

D. Assumptions

- *Assumptions bridge the gap between evidence and conclusions.*

E. Limitations

F. Financial needs

**3. Intended use for results**

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- A. Explanation of how results will be utilized to improve strategy
- B. Explanation of how results will be represented back to students
- C. Potential learning for students
- D. Potential application for training and staff development

**4. Findings & analysis**

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- A. Summary of data (please include graphs, charts, numeric summaries, etc. when appropriate)
- B.

*Residence Life Educational Priority:*

*Citizenship- Become an engaged and active citizen by understanding how your thoughts, values, beliefs, and actions affect the people with whom you live and recognize your responsibility to contribute to a sustainable so*