
Evaluating the Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Process in Undergraduate Parks and Recreation Academic Programs

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Abstract

Institutions of higher education are increasingly being held more accountable for assessing student learning both in and out of their classrooms along with reporting results to their stakeholders. The purpose of this study, which examined assessment of student learning outcomes in undergraduate park and recreation academic programs, was two-fold: 1) to capture a snapshot of the assessment methods being used to measure and evaluate undergraduate student learning in parks, recreation, and leisure studies curricula, and 2) to learn how undergraduate program coordinators perceive the value of a variety of assessment methods. The purpose of assessment, the overall assessment process, assessment methods and challenges in park, recreation, and leisure studies academic programs are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Assessment process, learning outcomes, accountability

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Within the past few years there has been a noticeable decline from the general public in the trust of higher education to deliver a quality education (Ramaley et al., 2012) as well as from state and federal governments. With this apparent lack of trust and the economic recession the nation is currently experiencing, there has been a persistent demand for more accountability in higher education from stakeholders including students, parents, employers, administration, and legislators (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Bresciani & Oakleaf, 2009; Ewell & Jones, 2006; Suskie, 2009).

There has been a loud and clear call for colleges and universities to validate their educational effectiveness. Hersh (2004) noted that there are more than 40 states with statutes requiring public institutions of higher education to provide evidence of student learning. Furthermore, each of the regional accreditation associations (e.g., North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, etc.) specifies assessment of student learning as an indicator of quality education. Regional as well as discipline-specific accrediting bodies (such as the Council on Accreditation of Parks, Recreation, Tourism and Related Professions—COAPRT) and their external reviewers want to review measureable evidence showing how academic programs are accountable and actively engaged in assessing what students are learning. Bresciani (2011) further suggested that in order to meet these growing demands for institutional accountability regarding the rising tuition costs and student learning in the classroom, higher education will be required to provide “an articulated definition of ‘quality education,’ rather than the ill-defined conceptualizations currently in use” (p. 1).

The call to be accountable and demonstrate student learning trickles down through the university hierarchy to department and program levels. While many educational institutions offering curricula in parks, recreation, and leisure studies do conduct successful program reviews and assessments, there are others that may struggle with accomplishing this ongoing task. Primary concerns with program review and assessment revolve around logistical issues ranging from lack of financial resources and support staff in assessment data gathering to broader faculty issues such as the potential violation of academic freedom, increased workload, and assessment results being used in performance evaluation decisions (Walvoord, 2004). To overcome some of these obstacles, it would be helpful to know how undergraduate program coordinators are addressing the assessment of undergraduate student learning. As a result, the purpose of this study was two-fold: 1) to capture a snapshot of the assessment methods being used to measure and evaluate student learning in parks, recreation, and leisure studies curricula, and 2) to learn how undergraduate program coordinators perceive the value of a variety of assessment methods.

Literature Background

The goal of any academic program is to be accountable by having a detailed data-driven assessment process in place allowing faculty, administrators, and accrediting agencies like COAPRT to review data on a regular and on-going basis. Assessment is a dynamic, ongoing, and systematic process of inquiry that seeks to determine what is working well and what needs to be improved in academic programs (Maki, 2004). This section provides a brief look at the literature addressing assessment in educational settings as well as providing insight into how accreditation, program assessment, and student learning outcomes play a part in the process.

Accountability v. Assessment

While accountability and assessment are not new to higher education (Martell & Calderon, 2005), it is important to examine the definition and purposes of each term. The literature reveals that the terms accountability and assessment are often used interchangeably (American Council of Education—ACE, 2004), and therefore can be misinterpreted. Beno (2004) suggested that the term *accountability* is “often incorrectly used to reflect a singular interest in quantitative measures of student progress through an institution rather than the public’s fundamental interest in what students are supposed to learn and how well they are, in fact, learning” (p. 66). Accountability is entrenched in integrity, meaning the responsible party has a duty to provide whatever has been promised. In terms of institutions of higher education, accountability means fulfilling the promise that students are learning what they are purported to learn, and that funds are being used responsibly for that purpose (Bresciani & Oakleaf, 2009). Assessment, on the other hand, is a stepping stone to accountability, or a method through which accountability is demonstrated. The ACE (2004) further suggested that assessment of student learning should be rooted into a variety of accountability methods available to institutions and academic programs. To distinguish the terms, ACE suggested the following definitions which were adopted for this study:

Accountability: public presentation and communication of evidence about performance in relation to goals.

Assessment: an analytical tool for evaluating performance (p. 9).

Additionally, Suskie (2004) stated that assessment is a cyclical, outcome-oriented process. Faculty should develop clearly written, measureable, and achievable program outcomes for students which are then systematically measured and evaluated with the results serving as an impetus to increase student learning, and subsequently, the quality of the program.

Accreditation

Assessment is also an essential component in the higher education accreditation process. With an increased emphasis being placed on assessing student learning outcomes, regional and discipline-specific accrediting agencies are increasing their focus and attention on assessment results (Suskie, 2004). Accrediting agencies certify that institutions and academic programs are enhancing the quality of higher education and verify that student learning outcomes are being met. Buzzetto-More and Alade (2006) concurred and stated “assessment of student learning outcomes plays an important role in educational effectiveness, improvement, and sustainability that is increasingly being recognized and required by accrediting bodies” (p. 1). Assessment, if conducted properly, is an excellent method of assuring that an academic program is meeting required standards and competencies as well as a way of providing measurable evidence of student learning required to seek and maintain accreditation (Love & Cooper, 2004). COAPRT, which was formally established in 1974, oversees, develops standards, and conducts the accreditation process for recreation, park resources and leisure services curricula. Currently, there are 83 accredited undergraduate park and recreation programs (COAPRT, 2011). Further, COAPRT predicates that accreditation serves two

fundamental purposes: one is to assure the quality of an academic program and the other is to assure academic program improvement. This is accomplished through the development and enforcement of standards which are statements describing both organization and academic program quality as well as the program content or competencies students are required to learn while enrolled in the program. Accreditation alone cannot guarantee the quality of individual graduates. According to COAPRT, not only can it provide stakeholders with a sense of assurance to the quality of the higher education institution and the academic programs, but it also demonstrates accountability.

Program Assessment

Program assessment is an integral component that university institutions have in ensuring that overall learning goals are being met. However, the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U, 2008) has taken a very definitive stand suggesting that in “the current climate it is not enough for an institution to assess its students in ways that are grounded in the curriculum; colleges and universities also must provide useful knowledge to the public about goals, standards, accountability practices, and the quality of student learning” (p. 11). This accentuates the importance of a deliberate, planned program assessment originating at the department curricular level.

Thorough curricular planning and review can and should occur at various levels of higher education: the course level, the academic program level (major), the general education core curricula level, and at the college or university level. While such planning does not necessarily ensure the depth and breadth of student learning, careful and thoughtful curricular and program design, including measuring outcome assessment resulting in changes to the curriculum, can maximize student learning. Program assessment refers to evaluation of a specific major(s) and how the entire academic curriculum is contributing to student learning as a whole (Allen, 2004). At the academic program level, goals and assessments are generally broader than those at the course level where assessing the quality of student learning is a primary aspect of the program review process (Suskie, 2009).

Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes are statements describing what students are expected to learn after successfully completing an academic program or an individual course. Student learning outcomes focus on the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired and demonstrated after completion of the learning experience (Suskie, 2004). While these learning outcomes are of most interest to stakeholders, they are the most challenging by which to gather data and to subsequently measure.

Suskie (2009) stated “students learn better when their college experiences are not collections of isolated courses and activities but are purposefully designed as coherent, integrated learning experiences in which courses and out-of-class experience build on and reinforce one another” (p. 4). Yet, how do faculty and program administrators assess whether their programs and courses are meeting their curricular goals and objectives? How, when, and where is student learning being measured?

Empirical studies exploring student learning outcomes and the educational quality of parks and recreation curricula are scarce (Cole & Cole, 2008). Although most faculty and administrators agree upon the importance and value of measuring student

learning, Chun (2002) admonished that “few agree on how best to assess it” (p. 25). Since the central goal and ultimate purpose of higher education is student learning, this paper is focused upon the academic program assessment process and methods currently being used to measure student learning in undergraduate park, recreation, and leisure studies academic programs.

Methodology

In late fall 2011, an e-mail invitation administered through SurveyMonkey was sent to a convenience sample of 263 park and recreation faculty members and administrators in the United States, asking them to participate in a national study examining assessment of student learning outcomes in undergraduate park and recreation academic programs. If this initial contact was to a person not directly involved in administering undergraduate program assessment, he or she was asked to forward the correspondence to the appropriate faculty member in the department. Eight individuals responded that they were not the appropriate person to participate in the study or requested to opt out of subsequent involvement in the study. Two reminder e-mails followed the initial correspondence over the course of seven days. Of the 255 e-mail contacts, 48 individuals responded for an 18.8% response rate.

The five-part questionnaire used in this study was a modification of the instrument used in Smith's (2006) assessment of student outcomes in undergraduate health information administration programs. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of four demographic questions that asked program coordinators to indicate whether their institution was public or private, their current accreditation status, how long their program had been in existence, and how long they had conducted formal outcome assessment. In Part II, they were then asked to rank order reasons they conducted assessment (e.g., satisfy accreditation requirements, program improvement, and improve teaching) from most important to least important. Part III contained a list of both direct (e.g., capstone experiences, comprehensive projects, and course tests) and indirect assessment measures (e.g., alumni surveys, employer interviews, and student exit interviews) that could be used to document student learning. Respondents were asked to indicate their perceived usefulness of each measure. Part IV consisted of several questions regarding how the assessment process was administered and the reporting of results to the institutions' community. Part V asked coordinators five open-ended questions about their outcomes assessment practice. The respondents were asked to share their beliefs about assessment effectiveness in determining strengths, weaknesses, and areas that need improvement; the most valuable assessment methods used to measure undergraduate student learning and undergraduate program quality; greatest challenges of implementing an assessment program to measure undergraduate student learning and program quality; and their greatest challenge for using the results of student learning outcomes assessment.

Results

Part I: Demographics

The majority of the respondents were from fully accredited (71%), public universities (73%) with programs that had been in existence for over 20 years (73%).

Over half of the programs had conducted formal assessment of student learning outcomes for only one to six years. This seems to suggest that while a substantial number of academic programs have been accredited for over 20 years, a large number of those have just begun to implement a formal program assessment process. Detailed demographic information is reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of the Undergraduate Park and Recreation Departments

| | N | % |
|--|----|----|
| Type of Institution | | |
| Public | 35 | 73 |
| Private | 13 | 27 |
| Accreditation Status | | |
| Fully accredited | 34 | 71 |
| Conditional accreditation | 0 | 0 |
| Candidacy for accreditation | 1 | 2 |
| Not accredited | 13 | 27 |
| Age of Program | | |
| Less than 1 year | 0 | 0 |
| 1 to 5 years | 1 | 2 |
| 6 to 10 years | 2 | 4 |
| 11 to 15 years | 5 | 10 |
| 16 to 20 years | 5 | 10 |
| Over 20 years | 35 | 73 |
| Years of Conducting Program Assessment | | |
| Less than 1 year | 6 | 13 |
| 1 to 3 years | 10 | 21 |
| 4 to 6 years | 10 | 21 |
| 5 to 9 years | 7 | 14 |
| 10 to 13 years | 8 | 17 |
| 14 or more years | 7 | 14 |

Part II: Purpose of Assessment

For this section, respondents were asked to rate seven reasons they believed were most important for conducting undergraduate student learning outcome assessment from one (strongest reason) to seven (weakest reason). The top two reasons for program assessment were to improve student learning and program improvement. The least important reasons were resource allocation (i.e. faculty time, financial support for materials and postage, and staff support) and demonstrating accountability to stakeholders. Table 2 provides the respondents' rating for all seven reasons for conducting student learning outcome assessment.

Table 2

Purposes for conducting undergraduate student learning outcome assessment

| Purpose for Assessment | Rating Average |
|--|----------------|
| Improve student learning | 2.21 |
| Program improvement | 2.87 |
| Improve teaching | 3.35 |
| Planning | 4.16 |
| Satisfy accreditation requirement | 4.40 |
| Demonstrate accountability to stakeholders | 4.89 |
| Resource allocation | 5.78 |

Note: Responses are ranked from 1.0 (strongest purpose) to 7.0 (weakest purpose)

Part III: Assessment Methods

Assessment methods can be categorized into two ways of obtaining evidence of student learning: direct and indirect measures (Palomba & Banta, 1999; Shulman, 2011; Suskie, 2009; Walvoord, 2004). Direct measures include the direct quantitative measurement of student work that require students to display their knowledge, skills, and abilities learned while a student in the program. Direct measures include the traditional assessment measurements of papers, projects, exams, etc. called embedded course assessment methods. Conversely, indirect assessment measures are designed as a means to evaluate student progress and require students or others to reflect on how well they thought they learned rather than to demonstrate learning (i.e., alumni survey, employer survey, course evaluations). Indirect measures are more *about* learning rather than a direct demonstration *of* student learning (Allen, 2004).

Of the 10 direct measures respondents were asked to rate in terms of perceived usefulness (see Table 3), 90% believed that supervisors assessing student learning on professional experiences (e.g. practica and internships) were useful or very useful, which was closely followed by course exams (88.0%). Course assignments (86.3%) and the capstone experience at the conclusion of the senior year (85.5%) were also perceived to be highly useful in assessing student learning. The direct measures perceived as being only somewhat useful or not useful in assessing student learning were pre- and post-tests (22.0%) along with exit exams at the conclusion of all professional coursework

(14.0%). Not only were these two methods perceived as not that useful, but nearly two-thirds of the respondents indicated they did not use these methods. A possible reason for this is that respondents could not assess the usefulness of methods that they did not use.

Respondents were asked to rate 11 indirect methods in terms of perceived usefulness in the outcome assessment process (see Table 4). Overall, seven of the 11 indirect measures were not used by 50% of the respondents. Administering surveys to current students regarding courses (61.8%) was perceived as the most useful method followed by job placement data (53.0%) and alumni surveys (51.0%). Over 75% of respondents indicated that conducting student focus groups upon completion of the academic program and employer focus groups were not used, and consequently, were not perceived as being very useful in assessing student learning. The perceived usefulness of both indirect and direct measures included in the study can be found in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3

Assessment Methods – Direct Measures

| | Very Useful | | Useful | | Somewhat Useful | | Not Useful | | Not Used | |
|---|-------------|------|--------|------|-----------------|------|------------|-----|----------|------|
| | N | % | N | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Assessment by supervisors of students on professional experiences | 35 | 70.0 | 10 | 20.0 | 3 | 6.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 4.0 |
| Capstone experience at the conclusion of the senior year | 33 | 68.8 | 8 | 16.7 | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 7 | 14.6 |
| Course presentations | 24 | 48.0 | 16 | 32.0 | 5 | 10.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 5 | 1.0 |
| Course assignments | 23 | 45.1 | 21 | 41.2 | 4 | 7.8 | 1 | 2.0 | 2 | 3.9 |
| Comprehensive project | 22 | 44.0 | 9 | 18.0 | 1 | 2.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 18 | 36.0 |
| Periodic analysis of students' academic progress (e.g. midterm, semester, yearly) | 20 | 40.0 | 17 | 34.0 | 3 | 6.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 10 | 20.0 |
| Course tests | 19 | 38.0 | 25 | 50.0 | 4 | 8.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 4.0 |
| Student portfolios | 18 | 36.0 | 10 | 20.0 | 1 | 2.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 21 | 42.0 |
| Pre-tests/Post-tests | 5 | 10.0 | 2 | 4.0 | 9 | 18.0 | 2 | 4.0 | 32 | 64.0 |
| Exit exam at conclusion of all professional coursework | 2 | 4.0 | 8 | 16.0 | 5 | 10.0 | 2 | 4.0 | 33 | 66.0 |

Table 4

Assessment Methods—Indirect Measures

| | Very Useful | | Useful | | Somewhat Useful | | Not Useful | | Not Used | |
|--|-------------|------|--------|------|-----------------|------|------------|-----|----------|------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Alumni Surveys | 13 | 25.5 | 13 | 25.5 | 4 | 7.8 | 2 | 3.9 | 19 | 37.3 |
| Surveys of current students regarding courses | 13 | 25.5 | 18 | 36.3 | 7 | 13.7 | 1 | 2.0 | 12 | 23.5 |
| Job Placement Data | 11 | 22.4 | 15 | 30.6 | 6 | 12.2 | 2 | 4.1 | 15 | 30.6 |
| Employer Interviews | 10 | 20.0 | 7 | 14.0 | 2 | 4.0 | 1 | 2.0 | 30 | 60.0 |
| Alumni Interviews | 10 | 19.6 | 12 | 23.5 | 3 | 5.9 | 1 | 2.0 | 25 | 49.0 |
| Exit interviews at the completion of the program | 9 | 18.4 | 13 | 26.5 | 1 | 2.0 | 1 | 2.0 | 25 | 51.0 |
| Employer Surveys of Graduates | 9 | 17.3 | 5 | 9.6 | 1 | 1.9 | 1 | 1.9 | 36 | 69.2 |
| Employer Focus Groups | 7 | 14.0 | 4 | 8.0 | 1 | 2.0 | 1 | 2.0 | 37 | 74.0 |
| Focus groups during the academic year | 5 | 10.0 | 6 | 12.0 | 5 | 10.0 | 1 | 2.0 | 33 | 66.0 |
| Focus groups at the completion of the program | 4 | 8.5 | 3 | 6.4 | 2 | 4.3 | 1 | 2.0 | 37 | 78.7 |
| Alumni Focus Groups | 4 | 7.8 | 7 | 13.7 | 2 | 3.9 | 1 | 2.0 | 37 | 72.5 |

Part IV: Outcomes Assessment Process and Institutional Reporting of Outcomes

The items in this section of the instrument inquired as to institutional assessment of undergraduate students and at what level within the institution those results are shared. Ninety-six percent of respondents agreed that faculty members are responsible for designing assessment strategies for undergraduate academic programs. Respondents reported that results of student outcome assessment were provided at the following levels: institutional (56%), school/college (70%), and department (78%). Conversely, changes occurring as a result of the outcome assessment were annually reported at the institution level (46%), school/college level (58%), and department level (74%). While 84% of the respondents indicated their institution conducted assessment of undergraduate student satisfaction or engagement, only 42% indicated institutional-level assessment of alumni. Of those respondents including alumni in the assessment process, 81% shared the results within their academic program or department. Nearly 45% of respondents agreed that their institution supported assessment by providing resources such as clerical support, faculty development, and time, while 36.7% indicated their institution did not support assessment efforts. Finally, 73.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that outcome assessment demonstrated accountability of their academic program.

Part V: Assessment Challenges

Thematic analysis was used to code data and generate themes associated with the greatest challenges with assessment as viewed by coordinators in undergraduate park and recreation programs. Thematic analysis is a commonly used exploratory method in qualitative data analysis that involves searching through textual data to

identify and develop patterns or themes and interpret how they relate to each other in the data set (Boyatzis, 1998). Three themes emerged as the greatest challenges: time, commitment, and support. One respondent indicated that assessment “generally only seems to matter to administration,” expressing concern that there was a lack of buy-in from other faculty members. Additionally, another faculty member said that there was “desire by the institution for formalized assessment, but never any assistance provided on jump-starting these efforts.”

Discussion

The primary purpose of academic assessment focuses on improving student learning and provides an overview of trends occurring in learning outcomes. Positive trends allow programs to continue the practices they are doing well while negative trends allow program faculty the opportunity to rethink, redesign, and improve curriculum offerings and teaching pedagogies. These two purposes, improved student learning and continuous program improvement, were also identified as the top two purposes by the respondents in the current study.

One of the more interesting findings of this study was that the majority of respondents (55%) have been conducting program assessment for the last six years or fewer. When one considers that 71% of the respondents in this study were fully accredited, it appeared that some respondents did not make the connection between assessment and accreditation. The accreditation process requires the agency to complete a comprehensive self-study report and then hosts an on-campus team of accreditation visitors. This entire process can take anywhere from one to two years to complete. The self-study report is typically the main ingredient for the accreditation process (CHEA, 2006; Walvoord, 2004). The majority of respondents indicated that their program had been accredited for more than 20 years, however, a large number indicated that they had only been conducting program assessment for the last six years or fewer. The implication here is to better communicate the goals of accreditation and make it clear to faculty that when undertaking the accreditation process, the program is also performing a program assessment.

While all respondents indicated they conducted formal program outcome assessment, program coordinators repeatedly expressed several concerns regarding the process. These included: the absence of a genuine commitment and “buy-in” from their administration and faculty colleagues; lack of a skilled assessment resource person and technology support to help guide the planning, implementation and analysis of the data; not enough faculty time to maintain a consistent on-going assessment program; and no real direction provided by the institution. Department chairs and other university administrators and leaders must create a culture of trust and commitment with their faculty and provide the necessary resources in order to build collaborative support for the assessment process. On the other hand, assessment must be a faculty-driven process (Palomba & Banta, 1999) with every faculty member accepting responsibility and being directly involved in some aspect of the planning, development, implementation, and analysis of the various program assessment activities. Approximately 96% of respondents in this study indicated the assessment process was faculty-driven at their institution.

While assessment of student learning outcomes is essential and required for program accreditation, it is equally important for those institutions not accredited. Since nearly 30% of the study respondents were from non-accredited universities, careful and thoughtfully planned program assessment practices must be self-driven and motivated by faculty in these institutions with the ultimate goal of maximizing student learning and demonstrating overall program effectiveness. While assessment results will not be a part of any formal accreditation report, they should be shared with faculty, students, parents, university administrators, and other stakeholders.

Successful program assessment relies primarily on the gathering of quality data which provides a foundation for evaluating student learning outcomes of the academic program (Martell & Calderon, 2005). Effective assessment practices require consistent and continuous efforts to collect, analyze, interpret, and use the data. However, not all data is useful or even needed in every assessment, nor is there a "cookie-cutter" template that works equally well for all programs and institutions. Bresciani (2011) stated the importance of choosing measurement tools based on what the program or faculty are trying to assess rather than what measurement tool is most convenient, appealing, or easiest to employ. It is important to be able to support the selection of any measurement tool and the method chosen. Thus, it is crucial for departments and academic programs to identify a diverse set of assessment tools and gather the most appropriate and useful data in a timely fashion. Shulman (2011) suggested that multiple measures are important and stated "nearly any use of assessment for serious practical and policy guidance should intentionally employ an array of instruments" (p. 24). Suskie (2004) further suggested that "student learning is greater than the sum of its parts" (p. 14) where programs must recognize that implementing a variety of assessment methods gives a more complete picture of student learning.

For faculty members/departments who are seeking assistance with assessment, institutional research offices are a good place to start as they can provide expertise regarding assessment instruments, statistics most appropriate for analysis, and how to present results in a meaningful and effective manner (Bers, 2008). Further, they are able to compile information from across the institution while bringing in best assessment practices from other universities. Because institutional research offices are not grounded in a specific discipline, they are able to provide consultation to individual programs and departments on best assessment practices.

There are a number of assessment methods or approaches available to measure student learning. They include indirect measurements which are generally self-reported perceptions from students themselves about the quality of their academic experiences. Information is usually gathered from surveys (e.g. student, alumni, and employer) and individual or group interviews (mostly focus groups). Another method of assessment of institutional quality is direct measurement of student learning usually conducted by faculty of students in their courses which may include approaches such as grades based on clear rubrics, group projects, homework assignments, research papers and other course-embedded assessments (Suskie, 2009). The most useful direct methods identified in this study were the degree ending capstone or internship experience and the amount of supervisor feedback from this professional experience. "Although it may seem to be the most obvious way to assess the quality of undergraduate education, the use of direct measures of student learning is uncommon" (Chun, 2002, p. 25).

Chun suggested that major drawbacks include faculty inconsistency from one course to another as well as the lack of institutional comparisons. However, Shulman (2011) stated that “when we embed assessment in instruction, it is much more likely that what is assessed will contribute to and be compatible with the core objectives of instruction” (p. 24). Regardless of the method chosen, emphasis should always be placed on improving student learning.

The results of this study provided a glimpse into the program assessment of current recreation curricula, albeit, a limited one because of the low response rate. While only 18.8% responses were collected, the literature commenting on survey response rates suggests that online surveys are much less likely to achieve higher response rates than hard-copy surveys (Nulty, 2008). Furthermore, the response rate might be forgiven since there are not many studies published on this topic, and the aim of the study is still important.

This study was the first of its kind relating to parks, recreation and leisure studies curricula and provides a foundation on which future studies can build. Recommendations for the future include replicating this study involving a larger sample size. While this study focused solely upon undergraduate curricula another recommendation would be to target graduate curricula and perhaps compare similarities and differences of the two levels. Another recommendation involves the wide variety of direct and indirect measurement methods. While this study focused upon a select few methods, it would be interesting to investigate a wider variety of those methods in future studies of program assessment. Finally, program assessment is a timely and relevant issue for educators to take seriously because of the continued demand for accountability in higher education from a wide variety of stakeholders.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities are increasingly being held more accountable for assessing student learning both in and out of their classrooms along with reporting results to their stakeholders. Assessment of student learning is an essential part of the teaching and learning that occurs in higher education (Hersh, 2004). It also serves as a means of providing feedback or “closing the loop” (Martell & Calderon, 2005) providing institutional and departmental program accountability while maximizing the benefits for its stakeholders (Love & Cooper, 2004).

The initial purpose of the study to capture a snapshot of the assessment methods used to evaluate student learning in parks, recreation, and leisure studies curricula was accomplished as indicated by the results. The key findings of the current study were: 1) more institutions and curriculums are engaging in program assessment; 2) direct measures are used more often than indirect measures for program assessment and were generally perceived as more useful; and 3) faculty of the participating institutions pursue program assessment measures primarily to improve student learning, to improve the curriculum, and to improve teaching.

Program assessment should be action-oriented, resulting in steps to correct identified needs and concerns. Yet, assessment alone has little impact. For assessment to be valuable, it must be conducted in an environment that is receptive and supported by all participants. It requires the commitment of administration, faculty, students, and other stakeholders. Furthermore, adequate staff resources, support, and time are

essential in conducting an effective process. Most importantly, the focus must first and foremost remain on student learning echoed by Angelo (1999) who asserted, "though accountability matters, learning still matters most"(p. 3).

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