

A spiral-bound notebook with a silver pen resting on it. The notebook is light blue with a silver spiral binding on the left side. The pen is silver and lies diagonally across the top right corner of the notebook. The text is centered on the notebook page.

# **Why Aren't We Closing the Loop?**

**Identifying and Resolving Common  
Problems that Impact the  
Assessment Cycle**

*Larry J. King, Ph.D.*

# Workshop Purpose

- Review the assessment cycle.
- Identify issues that may prevent us from “closing the loop” in assessment.
- Review assessment plans and reports to identify the presence of these issues.
- Identify solutions to these issues.
- Make appropriate revisions in assessment plans and/or reports.



## **The Assessment Cycle**

# What Prevents Closing the Loop?

- Our thoughts about assessment.
  - An unclear purpose.
    - The purpose of assessment is not:
      - To satisfy an accreditation agency.
      - To meet a criteria.
      - Because we have to.
    - We assess:
      - To improve our operations.
      - To inform others of the contributions and impact of our units.

- To demonstrate what we are accomplishing for our students, faculty, staff, and community.
- To support the university's strategic plan and accountability activities.
- Fear of or lack of appreciation for collaboration.
  - To close the loop it is important to collaboratively review the assessment results and consider the best alternatives for action plans.

- Issues with objectives.
  - Non-Specific Objective/Outcome (NSO) <sup>1</sup>.
    - This error is commonly reflected in assessment plans where objectives are general or vague.
      - NSO examples.
        - » Improve student services.
        - » Increase customer satisfaction.
        - » Faculty will learn to use the library.
        - » Staff will learn to use Banner.

- The solution for NSO.
  - Make sure that the intended objective/outcome is stated in measurable terms and that it reflects the mission and goals of the unit.
- Examples of Specific Objectives/Outcomes.
  - Create and maintain a central support group to enhance the effective administration of the e-mail system.
  - Increase the quality of distance learning instruction at SFA by training faculty to increase their expertise in the use of instructional technology for distance learning.
  - Faculty and students will demonstrate an increased understanding of various library resources (e.g., journal articles, educational DVDs, Reference section, etc.).

## – Non-Effectiveness Objectives/Outcomes (NEO).

- This issue occurs when objectives/outcomes are not focused on improving the effectiveness of operations.
  - NEO Examples.
    - » The department chair will complete the annual reviews of faculty and staff.
    - » The department will process all required enrollment forms.
- The solution for NEO.
  - Be sure that you focus objectives/outcomes on some type of improvement for your unit.
  - Be sure not to focus your objectives on the accomplishment of routine tasks.



- **Examples of Effectiveness Objectives.**

- The department will process all requests for assistance in a timely fashion.
  - » Criterion: Requests for assistance will be processed within a day.
- Provide and maintain a dependable and functional learning management system that is effective in helping faculty meet their instructional goals.

- **Issues with assessment criteria.**
  - **Easily Attained Criteria (EAC).**
    - Occurs when an assessment criterion is set at a level that it can and will be reached each time an objective is assessed.
    - This issue grows out of the attitude that it is important to meet our criteria.
    - **EAC examples.**
      - 50% of respondents will indicate that the department's academic advisors are able to respond to questions about the academic major.
      - 80% of students will rate the department's academic advising as acceptable or above.

- The solution for EAC.
  - Set criteria that stretch your unit to reach higher levels of effectiveness. If you find that you reach your criterion, then increase the criterion to a level above the unit's observed performance.
  - Remember we are not assessing to reach a criteria, but to improve our operations.
- Examples of Stretch Criteria.
  - 90% of respondents will indicate that the department's academic advisors are able to respond to questions about the academic major.
  - 80% of students will rate the department's academic advising as Excellent .

## – Vague Criteria (VC).

- Occurs when assessment criteria are not stated with sufficient specificity to infer the means by which unit improvement can occur.
- Example of VC.
  - Student responses to the customer satisfaction survey will show an average 10% increase in their satisfaction with our department.
- Solution for VC.
  - Make sure that the assessment criteria are stated clearly and connected to the objective.
  - If a survey is used you should make sure that only relevant items are used for assessment.
- Example of specific criteria.
  - At least 80% of students will rate our departmental staff as very helpful in resolving problems.

## – Focus on Criteria Attainment (FCA).

- Occurs when a unit's assessment results reach the identified criteria for success and the unit takes no action to deal with the portion not reaching the criteria.
- Examples of FCA.
  - Our criterion was reached so no action plan is necessary.
  - The department was able to meet its established criteria.
- The solution for FCA.
  - It is important to identify areas for improvement, even if your criterion has been met.
    - » Examine your assessment plan and your operations for relevant areas of improvement.

- Issues with assessment methods.
  - Incomplete Data Feedback Loop (IDF) <sup>1</sup>.
    - Occurs when the assessment method is not stated with sufficient specificity to infer the means by which unit improvement can occur.
    - Example.
      - Several intended objectives may be “batch measured” by a single method e.g., a customer satisfaction survey. However, if the survey contains items that are clearly disconnected from the unit objectives, its relevance as an assessment method used to “close the loop” is lost. Also, if certain items on the survey are relevant to specific objectives, but the entire survey and not those specific items are used to measure an objective then the usefulness of the measure is lost.

- Solution for IDF.
  - If you use a survey, make sure that the items contained in the survey as well as the presentation of the findings/results are clearly connected to the mission, goals and intended objectives of the unit. Also, make sure that the assessment method is stated clearly and connected to the objective.
- Example of more clearly stated assessment method.
  - The Customer Service Survey will be administered to a random sample of students annually, and items related to staff helpfulness will be analyzed.

## – Incomplete Source of Evidence (ISE) <sup>1</sup>.

- This error occurs when a method of assessment appears to be inappropriate or so vaguely stated that its relationship to an objective is suspect.
- ISE example.
  - Objective.
    - » Ensure that technology purchasing at SFA is standardize to make the purchasing process more cost effective.
  - Assessment Method.
    - » Track the workflow process of technology purchases.
- Solution for ISE.
  - Thoroughly describe the nature of assessment methods and their relationship to the intended objectives. Avoid measures that are not directly connected to the intended objective.



- Example of a more specific assessment method.
  - A random sample of purchase orders will be reviewed to ensure they comply with purchasing and cost savings requirements.

– Method Objective Disconnect (MOD) <sup>1</sup>.

- Occurs when the assessment methods used to evaluate the quality of unit services on a given objective are insufficiently precise to make an obvious connection between the intended objective and the method of assessment.
- MOD example.
  - Objective.
    - » Develop a more supportive research culture by ensuring that the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs provides the support services required by SFA faculty
  - Assessment method.
    - » Customer satisfaction survey.

- Solution for MOD.
  - Make sure measures are described with sufficient specificity and that each intended objective referenced has a metric measure in the assessment method/performance target.
- Example of connected method and objective.
  - Objective.
    - » Develop a more supportive research culture by ensuring that the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs provides the support services required by SFA faculty.
  - Assessment method.
    - » A 30 question survey designed to determine if the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs is providing support services needed by faculty in successfully fulfilling their research duties will be administered annually to a random sample of 20% of the faculty.

## – Non-Metric Measures (NM) <sup>1</sup>.

- Error is common in assessment plans for administrative units and centers on the omission of measurement information from the assessment method.
- NM example.
  - Objective.
    - » Increase the awareness on campus among faculty and staff regarding the services provided by the Department of Risk Management.
  - Assessment method.
    - » Publish a newsletter to increase awareness.
- Solution for NM.
  - Be sure to always include a relevant metric or measure in your assessment method.

- Example using a metric.
  - Objective.
    - » Increase the awareness on campus among faculty and staff regarding the services provided by the Department of Risk Management.
  - Assessment Method.
    - » A survey to measure awareness of services provided by the Department of Risk Management will be administered to a random sample of 100 faculty and staff members annually.

## – Compound Assessment Methods (CAM).

- Occur when several assessment methods are grouped together as one assessment method rather than being separated and the results being reviewed individually.
- Example of CAM.
  - Conduct a survey of student satisfaction with the admissions process. Track the number of students who apply and are accepted to the university. Track the number of accepted students who then enroll in the university.
- Solution for CAM.
  - Review, discuss, and consider appropriate actions related to each assessment method separately. Track each assessment methods separately.

- Example of separated assessment methods.
  - Conduct a survey of student satisfaction with the admissions process.
  - Track the number of students who apply and are accepted to the university.
  - Track the number of accepted students who then enroll in the university.

- **Issues with results.**

- **Vague Results (VR).**

- Occurs when assessment results are not stated with sufficient specificity to infer the means by which unit improvement can occur.
    - VR example.
      - Results for 2009-2010 showed a decrease in customer satisfaction.
    - Solution for VR.
      - Make sure the results are stated clearly and with sufficient specificity to allow you to take action.



- Example of more specific results.
  - Results for 2009-2010, showed that 65%, as compared to 75% in 2008-2009, of respondents to the customer service survey rated the staff of the department to be very helpful in resolving problems . . .

## – Disconnected Results (DR).

- Occur when results are not aligned with objectives, criteria, and/or assessment methods.
- Example of DR.
  - Objective.
    - » The department will timely process and route all student applications.
  - Criterion.
    - » The department will process all student applications within a week from receiving the application.
  - Assessment method.
    - » The department will annually audit a random sample of all student applications for time required for processing.

- Results.
  - » The university's internal auditor found that student applications were processed in a timely fashion.
- Solution for DR.
  - Make sure that your results are fully aligned with your objectives, criteria, and assessment methods.
- Example of aligned results.
  - The department's audit found that 95% of student applications were processed within a week after the date they were received.

- Issues with action plans.
  - Postponed Review (PR).
    - Occurs when units propose a review of assessment results as an action plan rather than identifying specific actions that are meant to increase the effectiveness of the unit.
    - Example of PR:
      - Action Plan.
        - » The department will meet to review and develop a response to the results.
      - Action Plan.
        - » Survey results will be used to make changes in our services in the future.

- Solution for PR.
  - Action plans should propose clear and specific actions aimed at improvement. Reviews should take place before the action plan is proposed.
- Example of an acceptable action plan.
  - Our survey indicates that only 50% of respondent, far less than the expected 90%, are satisfied with our department's services. Of special concern, is the low level of satisfaction found with office staff interactions with the respondents. In response to these findings, the department has determined that it is necessary to require all staff to participate in the "Exceptional Customer Service" training program, and reassess this objective at the end of next semester.

# Sources

- Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment, University of Southern Florida, *Assessment of Administrative and Educational Support Units, Primary Methodological Issues with Assessment Methods and Performance Targets and Their Solutions*. Retrieved from ([http://usfweb2.usf.edu/assessment/Admin/Methodological%20Issues%20with%20USF%20Assessment%20plans\\_Administrative%20Plans.pdf](http://usfweb2.usf.edu/assessment/Admin/Methodological%20Issues%20with%20USF%20Assessment%20plans_Administrative%20Plans.pdf)).