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Lesson 14 – Professional Development Plan – Rewrite

16 weeks ago I was asked to talk about my professional development plan in relationship to institutional research. Back then, I felt like a small fish in a big pond. Today, is no different, in fact, now I realize that not only am I a small fish in a big pond, there are many obstacles and challenges that are floating in the pond as well.

I started out reflecting on my passion and dedication to being a student affairs practitioner and focusing more on the day to day interactions with the life of my students than an academic focusing on the research of the higher education community.

Today, 16 weeks later, I am still a student affairs practitioner with a greater appreciation of the work that institutional researchers do for the entire community. Numbers are complex and usually lead to a definitive answer, but one thing I have learned over the past few weeks is that the methods and means to arrive at those numbers can be quite different.

After having taken this course though, I have really discovered the importance of the intelligences that Pat Terenzini outlined as important to institutional research. Knowing these intelligences and how they interact to the job student affairs practitioners do is vital in creating a better practitioner that is armed with the foresight student success.

Analytical research is important. Being able to collect, analyze and present data in a clear and efficient manner is extremely important. And the results of this assessment can be extremely valuable and important to decision making for institutions, especially when it comes to forecasting and predicting numbers for enrollment, measuring student learning outcomes, assessing programs, looking at retention and perseverance and the factors that relate to whether a student will be successful in college or not. Knowing the factors that relate to whether a student will or will not be successful in college can ensure that student

affairs practitioners are providing the necessary resources to help aid the student in their journey to graduation. When it comes to developing an intentional curriculum that focuses on student outcomes and creating assessment, I have a pretty sound knowledge of those processes. However one area that I could be a lot more knowledgeable about is predicting/forecasting outcomes, utilizing data inputs to create formulas to help foster these predictions and then presenting the findings from this research. It is important to have a sound knowledge of how to examine data, determine if there is a causal relationship between variables and then make adequate changes for improvement. As Volkwein notes, assessment and institutional research is all about external accountability and internal improvements, so the job that institutional researchers do on a daily basis will always be ongoing and important.

Terenzini also talks about issues and trends in Higher Education. If you are not well informed about the changes and emerging trends in the field, a practitioner will not know what questions to ask around important topics. Though I do not want a career in institutional research, it is extremely vital to understand important trends and analytical approaches to better inform the questions I want answered. Contextually it is also extremely vital to stay engaged in the field, to have a sound knowledge of any institutional policies and procedures and to constantly talk with other professionals in the field about emerging trends, new developments and statistical advances that can be used to better help students.

The strengths that I possess is that I have a sound passion for learning and for gaining knowledge and information. This is beneficial because this propensity for learning sparks a healthy level of curiosity allowing me to ask important questions and always seek opportunities for improvement. I am also flexible, which I think allows me to avoid the status quo, keep an open mind and make changes that are necessary based upon the results

of the assessment that is conducted.

My biggest weaknesses is that numbers remain Greek to me. I need more knowledge on statistical analysis and how to conduct the analysis on numbers. I know how to collect the information and I know how to design the assessment but its formulating the plan of what to do after the data is collected. To further my knowledge and understanding on these topics and to strengthen these areas I would like to complete an internship with an institutional research office to actually look at real numbers and how these numbers can be used in real-world settings. Utilizing the Kahn Academy and their intuitive competency-based learning platform, I want to learn more about statistical approaches. I have also realized that one thing that is important with institutional research is that even though I may not know all of the statistical details or analytical approaches, I do know context and that context is important in helping establish what needs to be addressed or how to address those important questions that will help navigate opportunities for improvement.

Regardless of wherever I end up in the field of Higher Education, I always want to make sure that I am building a strong relationship with institutional researchers on campus and working with them to come up with assessment plans. If I ever end up in a position of authority where I can make decisions such as a Vice President or Dean of Students, I am going to be committed to investing money into research and assessment.

How can a student affairs practitioner care about student success if they are not constantly looking for ways to improve? These 16 weeks have reaffirmed my commitment to and my respect for the need to look for improvement and implementing assessment that can help measure needs for the future.