

BRIC Technical Assistance Program

Inquiry Guide

**Assessing Strategic
Intervention Points in
Student Services**

bric

Bridging Research
Information & Culture

An initiative of the Research & Planning Group
for California Community Colleges

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Preface

Overview of the Bridging Research, Information and Culture (BRIC) Project

BRIC is a Hewlett Foundation funded project with a general goal to help community college faculty, staff, and administrators discover or recapture passionate, thoughtful inquiry and then use it to help students. The project hopes to encourage more people to ask a wider collection of questions, and then to use their evidence and conclusions to enhance the broader student experience at their college. One tool to promote this goal is the RP Group's collection of inquiry guides such as the one you are currently reading.

The BRIC Inquiry Guides

Collectively, the guides developed for BRIC provide a set of tools to address different areas of the college and the activities outlined in the BRIC Framework below. Where BRIC is able to serve schools directly through its Technical Assistance Program (TAP), these guides will be bolstered by facilitated conversations on the college campus during technical assistance site visits. For colleges that we are not able to serve directly through TAP, these guides can be used by the colleges to start their own campus conversations about these critical issues.

The guides have been designed to respond to the needs of college constituency groups—faculty, staff, institutional researchers, and administrators—in all areas of inquiry-based practice, including data collection and interpretation, data usage, research, planning, and evidence-based decision-making. The guides recommend best practices and strategies to promote increased and authentic use of inquiry and evidence, with suggestions for potential directions for processes, procedures, standards, and protocols. One important observation is that colleges will need to find their own fit between their campus culture and the set of possible approaches outlined in these guides. The suggestions made here are done in a spirit of collaboration and with an understanding that there are a range of tools and approaches that can result in the successful evolution of a culture of inquiry.

BRIC Framework

Institutional Domains –

What areas of the college and activities does BRIC hope to impact?

The BRIC Framework provides an organizational structure for responding to the various areas of data and information usage within a college in the following five broad domains:

- **Evaluation and Assessment:** The bundle of activities, skills, and practices a college uses to assess student learning and practices leading to student success.
- **Planning and Decision-making:** The practices a college uses to make decisions, evaluate effectiveness, and create short and long-term plans.
- **Communication:** The mechanisms and approach a college implements to communicate information at all levels and to all constituents.
- **Organizational Structures:** The processes, procedures, and policies that provide a frame or structure for college practices.
- **Culture and Climate:** The spoken/unspoken, accepted/unaccepted guidelines for behaving in a college and creating an environment that is conducive to collaboration and to effective teaching and learning.

Expected Outcomes –

What does BRIC hope to achieve?

The following five overarching outcomes are the goals of BRIC. The college will:

- **Develop Actionable Data** by applying evaluation and assessment techniques, practices, and models that are grounded in good assessment principles and result in evidence that is used to help students succeed.
- **Interpret Data through Discussion** by using research evidence and assessment data in meaningful and thoughtful discussions that leads to a wider variety of improved program interventions and classroom teaching and learning strategies.
- **Facilitate Dialogue** by employing facilitation skills in discussions of institutional research and assessment with an increased number of participants from all college constituency groups.
- **Integrate Data into Institutional Processes** by creating integrated planning strategies that are equity focused and have well-defined links to budget and other core decision-making processes.
- **Build an Inquiry-Based Practice** by developing an infrastructure for a culture of evidence that promotes thoughtful, evidence-based collaborative inquiry as a normal, ongoing activity.

Background

This inquiry guide responds to the need for viable models of assessment in student service areas. Student services covers a diverse array of student functions – including Outreach, Orientation, Placement Testing, Financial Aid, EOPS, DSPS, Admissions & Records, Counseling, Health Services, Psychological Services, and numerous others. Current understanding of the critical role student services programs play in ensuring student success has never been higher. Faculty, staff, and administrators are working together to incorporate student services and instruction into a holistic college-wide approach, thus creating optimal conditions for student success.

In terms of assessment, student services practitioners are faced with a set of unique challenges as their interaction with students quite often occurs outside the classroom, through a wide range of potential touch points. Given the variety of functions that student services perform, Student Service professionals need a toolbox of potential approaches for assessing their effectiveness. This inquiry guide will spark conversations among practitioners in specific student services so that they can share their expertise while designing assessments. Similar to their instructional colleagues, these practitioners will need to design assessments that provide information useful in the improvement of their processes and services.

Description

Student services practitioners tasked with assessing their work are being asked to navigate not only a sea of choices but respond to a variety of questions—does everything need to be tied directly to student learning? If so, how? Should we use a single assessment for all student services? Is measuring satisfaction or utilization enough? When the Board asks us to demonstrate the value of student services programs, how do we respond?

Evaluation and assessment efforts in student services quite often begin with counting the number of students who receive services and/or to evaluating student satisfaction. While these are absolutely useful and important measures for student services practitioners to consider, student counts and satisfaction measures only scratch the surface of potential approaches to evaluating student service areas.

In her recent book on assessing student services, Bresciani (2008) speaks about moving from the assessment of “satisfaction to student learning and development in Student Affairs to more detailed and in depth assessments of other aspects of services.” Bresciani argues that student satisfaction, utilization, and needs assessment are very important. However, they do not help you understand the contributions of your program, nor do they tell how your program contributes to student development or learning, and seldom does this help you make decisions for continuous improvement of your programs. It is therefore imperative to find myriad ways to assess and be clear about the expected outcomes that will drive the assessments.

While acknowledging the importance of satisfaction measures, this guide provides a framework that encourages colleges to identify additional critical indicators for student success as they relate to student services and ways to measure these indicators. The guide also provides an overview of key concepts pertinent to assessing the quality and effectiveness of student services, including:

- **Backward Design** Starting with the end game of the student outcome you’re attempting to produce and working backward toward an approach that will help measure whether students have achieved the outcome.
- **Initial Assessments** Utilizing pre-tests or initial assessments to help illuminate the effect of student services programs.
- **Comparison Groups** Selecting comparison groups that will accurately provide a sound foundation for evaluating student services programs and interventions.
- **Research Agenda** Developing a balanced student services research agenda that promotes inquiry and continuous improvement.

The framework in this guide outlines a variety of useful ways in which to assess the quality and effectiveness of student services, as well as some strategies for moving through the assessment process. Some of the questions the framework will help colleges begin to address are:

1. What are some of the key measures for student services programs?
2. Which assessment techniques, strategies, and methods best evaluate the quality and/or effectiveness of the service?
3. What are the most appropriate comparison groups?
4. How can the college organize and prioritize research for student services?
5. Will you need a sample of student responses or responses from all students?
6. How will the results be documented and shared?
7. How will you know that students have benefitted?

Impact

There are many benefits associated with a more robust and authentic approach to assessment in student services. The push toward accountability in student services has clearly reached a new high. While accreditation mandates have dominated the student services accountability landscape in the last five years, the recent California budget crisis and attendant decisions to slash categorical funding for student services programs have thrust these debates even more squarely into the state limelight. In a double, triple, or quadruple whammy, local boards and governing bodies also struggle with the access vs. success debate, which is often reduced to either maximizing the number of available class sections or minimizing funding for student services programs.

Nevertheless, many innovative student services programs have been created in the past decade, and other long-standing programs have evolved and improved. Demonstrating the value of these programs by using robust assessments will not only serve the purposes of accountability and funding justification, but will also help drive well-informed decision-making in these troubling budgetary times. Most importantly, these assessments can also drive improvement of practice within student services programs.

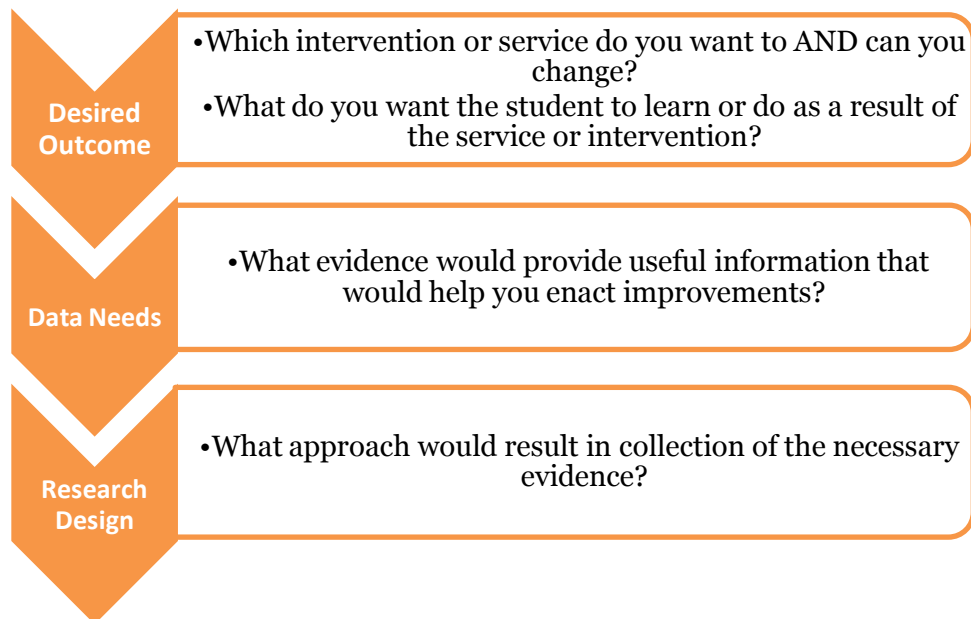
Guided Inquiry

- 1 Institutional Snapshot: Use the numbered questions on the previous page to describe the state of assessment in student services at your institution.**
- 2 Moving Forward: Identify some strengths and some areas of growth in student services assessment.**

Components & Strategies

I. BACKWARD DESIGN

A constant tension exists between developing more robust measures and defaulting to the easy-to-collect, easy-to-understand measures of utilization and satisfaction. While there is value in utilization and satisfaction measures (see the Utilization and Satisfaction Measures section below), there is much to be gained from having subject matter experts (usually the program area personnel themselves) conduct a thorough analysis of each student services area and its key outcomes. In general, the idea behind backward design is that you start with the end game—in this case, the end game is determining what evidentiary information would best help the student services area make future decisions and/or plan for strengthening the student experience and encouraging their ultimate success in college. The graphic below provides a visual representation of the process for identifying research needs using the backward design.



Of course, these desired outcomes will vary widely by service area. You might develop an outcome of understanding the CSU transfer requirements for a transfer counseling session, or an outcome of completing a FAFSA for a Financial Aid group session, or an outcome of satisfaction with the wait time in an Admissions & Records setting. In the end, we suggest that practitioners in each student services area utilize their subject matter expertise to determine the key outcomes that students are expected to achieve after completing their interaction with the service. Note that the student experience will vary widely in intensity and duration depending on the service being received and can often vary within the same service.

Once you have defined these outcomes you can begin identifying the indicators and ways in which to measure them. Once a key outcome is determined, the service area practitioners can work consultatively with their institutional research colleagues to determine an appropriate research design and data collection strategy, who would proceed to implement the research protocol and collect and analyze the data. The student services practitioners can then engage in thoughtful reflection on the evidence/results, and determine appropriate courses of action for making improvement or moving forward.

In the end, the key message in this process of backward design is to make sure that the proposed outcomes are authentic and that they represent the big ideas that the service area is hoping to develop in students. While it would be helpful for the measures to be more closely tied to direct student learning when possible, this should not result in forcing measures or methodologies where they do not make sense. Student services outcomes will often assist or enhance other more direct student learning outcomes in instructional areas.

While it is the case throughout the institution it is especially true in student service areas that measurement, methodology, and accountability need to be tailored to both the student populations and functions being served.

Guided Inquiry

- 1 Institutional Snapshot: Have you used backward design in any of your current student services assessment processes? If so, what have been the strengths and weaknesses of the approach?**
- 2 Moving Forward: Identify student services areas that might benefit from a backward design approach.**

II. INITIAL ASSESSMENTS

One key challenge in assessing student service areas is the issue of self-selection, or “positive selection.” This usually plays out when a student services program reports a positive finding such as:

Students receiving services from the Learning Center have been found to have course success rates of 77% in Beginning Algebra, compared to success rates of 62% from students not receiving services from the Learning Center.

A reasonable critique of this finding is that we do not know if there is a difference between students who utilize the Learning Center and those who choose not to use it. Students may be “positively selected” because they have skills or motivation that are critical to success. Because we do not randomly assign students to support service options, it is difficult to determine whether it is the service alone that makes a difference in student success.

While acknowledging this limitation, we should not completely discount such a finding, assuming that it exists because of self-selection or positive selection. One supporting piece of information that would help us determine the impact of the program would be to do a better job at performing initial assessments—commonly referred to as pre-tests. These up-front assessments allow research practitioners to account for any differences between students receiving the service and those not receiving the service.

The potential range of areas on which you could perform initial assessments is relatively infinite. However, the reality of providing student services is such that you will rarely get the opportunity to do a detailed up-front assessment. Still, even short intake questionnaires could go a long way toward providing data that could be used to alleviate self-selection concerns. Factors such as: 1) academic preparedness, 2) hours worked per week, 3) domain-specific expertise such as financial aid awareness or transfer regulations, and 4) motivation and hope—all of these are ripe subjects for initial assessments. Note that these initial assessments can also be used for a pre-post type of analysis that can be useful in student learning outcome (SLO) assessment, where a service area is trying to document the change they are effecting in student’s perceptions, knowledge, or other factors.

As a final observation, it should be noted that when research practitioners have investigated these initial assessments in student service areas, they often find something that is counterintuitive to some, namely that students receiving services are often less prepared than those who do not avail themselves of services. This can occur when students realize they need help to succeed, or perhaps more commonly when counselors, faculty, and outreach professionals identify at-risk students and direct them toward a variety of services.

Either way, the use of the initial assessments not only adds some methodological rigor, it also fleshes out students' stories in a way we might not otherwise be able to access.

Guided Inquiry

- 1 Institutional Snapshot: Have you used initial assessments in any of your current student services assessment processes? If so, what have been the strengths and weaknesses of the approach?**
- 2 Moving Forward: Identify student services areas that might benefit from the use of initial assessments.**

III. COMPARISON GROUPS

There is a common desire when assessing student service areas to look at key metrics for program service users vs. non-users. For example, you might compare college-level achievement in mathematics for a program targeting African-American students starting two levels below college-level with a comparison group of students also starting two levels below. This use of comparison groups provides a useful contrast, and is easy to understand for a wide range of campus and external constituents. It is imperative, however, that careful consideration be given to selection of the comparison group. Commonly, the default comparison group to which a group of students receiving a service is compared is everybody else at the same level who did not receive the program/service.

This broad “everybody else” strategy may miss key nuances, however. For example, if you are evaluating the program noted above that targets African American students starting two levels below college-level, comparing the college-level achievement rates of these students with all other students starting two levels below in the same year has serious limitations. On many campuses, the historical rate of college-level achievement for African American students starting two levels below is 15-20 points below that of general population. Thus, using the rest of the general population as the comparison group is actually not a level playing field on which to evaluate the program’s effectiveness.

A better comparison group would be all African-American students starting two levels below in the same year who are NOT in the program. It would be a good idea to run the cohort tracking for all three groups—African Americans in the program, African Americans not in the program, and the remainder of students not in the program—to get a fuller picture of the effectiveness of the program. With this use of multiple comparison groups, you might very well find that the program results in the so-called “achievement gap” being removed, where the African American students in the program perform at the same rates as the general population comparison group, but at rates 20 points higher than the non-program African American comparison group.

Clearly, careful consideration of comparison groups when assessing programs will provide more accurate information.

Guided Inquiry

- 1 Institutional Snapshot: Have you used comparison groups to evaluate student services programs to this point? If so, what did you find?**
- 2 Moving Forward: Identify any student services programs that would benefit from analysis using comparison groups.**

IV. UTILIZATION AND SATISFACTION MEASURES

Although utilization and satisfaction measures may be overused in student services assessment, they remain a key component of a multi-pronged or multiple measures approach. Service utilization holds a special promise as we begin to see more robust electronic service tracking systems evolving on our campuses. As these electronic systems to track students and the services they utilize become a standard tool, we will be able to look more closely at frequency and intensity of service utilization to understand their relationship to student persistence and success (e.g., the correlation between the number of counseling visits to term persistence or retention). Early attempts to look at patterns of service utilization have yielded interesting results, and also give a sense of the types of students who are using the service—and perhaps more importantly, the types of students who are not using the service.

Student satisfaction with services and the personnel providing them certainly remains an important factor as programs reflect on their effectiveness. In some areas (e.g., Admissions & Records) it likely remains the primary domain on which the service should be evaluated. These service areas often benefit from information derived from point of service surveys given at the time the service was received, and may be distributed via comment cards, suggestion boxes, or short narrowly focused surveys. The key for effective assessment is to provide a mechanism for receiving on-going and readily available feedback from the students. Many colleges use online surveys for this purpose in which the surveys are posted on the department website and data are collected throughout the semester so that continuous feedback from the students may be provided. Survey questions may cover any or all of the following areas:

- Helpfulness of staff
- Courtesy and/or friendliness of staff
- Convenience of office hours
- Usefulness of materials/handouts provided
- Reasonable wait time and/or appointment time
- Ease with which to make an appointment or drop in
- If they got what they needed from the service/program
- What could be improved

Guided Inquiry

- 1 Institutional Snapshot: Have you used utilization and/or satisfaction measures to evaluate your student services programs? If so, what did you find?**
- 2 Moving Forward: Think about the student services programs on your campus—for which programs should utilization and/or satisfaction approaches remain the primary assessment technique? Where are more direct assessment approaches more appropriate?**

V. A BALANCED STUDENT SERVICES RESEARCH AGENDA

While the previous sections are focused on some key specific concepts in assessing student services programs, it is also critical to develop a larger framework that surrounds the process of inquiry. One critical step in this framework is to establish a detailed student services research agenda. The purpose of a research agenda is to help organize and prioritize research requests that might otherwise be disjointed or not integrated into college-wide or other departmental planning and decision-making. In addition, it allows us to identify the highest-leverage decisions that need the most research support. In the end, a well-designed research agenda can serve as a valuable catalyst to action.

In terms of student services assessment, a research agenda will provide opportunities to talk about what services are offered to students, when they are offered, and where. For example, one topic of conversation might be the availability of online counseling sessions as another point of access to student services information. This discussion could prompt research into the number of students taking online classes compared to those who select on-campus classes. Research might also provide demographic information about the online students to identify populations who might be slow to avail themselves of online counseling resources. The research agenda in student services will provide yet another lens through which practitioners may gain answers to their important questions.

The process for developing and using a research agenda is equally valuable as the research agenda itself. It serves as a vehicle for dialogue and a way in which to move beyond a culture of evidence to a more integrated culture of inquiry. More importantly, it provides a mechanism for building research capacity throughout the college rather than isolated pockets of the college. A research agenda should support those major activities and initiatives that serve the department and may contain recurring research requests that are linked to departmental goals or strategies. The research agenda should also have clearly defined indicators and metrics attached to them (e.g., quality of services, satisfaction with services, number of students served). Once you have identified a team to begin developing the research agenda, consider these ten steps for building and integrating a research agenda for your department:

- 1) Review goals, strategies, and/or priorities and conduct a research needs assessment.
- 2) Review existing supporting research and identify gaps in current available research.
- 3) Determine whether additional research is needed and within resource capacity.
- 4) Prioritize existing and additional research based on pre-established criteria.
- 5) Align research to goals, strategies, priorities, and add effectiveness indicators.
- 6) Link research to other college-wide plans and initiatives.
- 7) Establish reporting cycle.
- 8) Share the draft agenda with broader constituency groups for feedback and information sharing.

- 9) Adjust research agenda accordingly based on feedback.
- 10) Implement the research agenda, review research, and re-evaluate the research agenda.

Guided Inquiry

- 1 Institutional Snapshot: Do you have a student services research agenda? If so, what are the priorities for the next year?**
- 2 Moving Forward: Discuss how you would form a student services research agenda. Who should be involved?**

Practical Application

As with instructional SLOs, implementation of student services assessment paradigms has varied widely on the California community college campuses. The bottom line is that colleges need to develop authentic approaches that provide practitioners with the information they need to improve their service delivery and effect the desired change in student outcomes. In addition, also as with instructional SLOs, assessment paradigms developed by a college needs to fit their campus climate and resonate with the practitioners in each area.

Some colleges, such as Cypress College, have based their work on a formal model. Nichols & Nichols (1995) offer a six column model that has each student services area specify:

- 1) Mission and goals
- 2) Institutional competencies
- 3) Student learning outcomes
- 4) Means of assessment/measurement and criteria for success
- 5) Data/results
- 6) Use of results for programmatic improvement

Other colleges such as Skyline College have taken a more informal approach, where a group of student services experts met with the faculty SLO coordinator and the college researcher to jointly determine SLOs for each area and appropriate and authentic methodologies with which they will be assessed. Either way, the end game is the establishment of an ongoing dialogue grounded in the assessment findings, with a call to action to make adjustments to the services that will assist students in reaching their goals.

Below are additional examples that provide a flavor for the approaches that have been implemented across the state.

Counseling – Santa Monica College

The counseling department at Santa Monica College (SMC) has an extensive SLO assessment process that is linked to SMC's institutional SLOs. The counselors determined that some outcomes were easily assessed through examining the student education plan process and actual student education plans. The following outcomes were assessed:

- Students will formulate a realistic self-appraisal of their educational status and its relationship to their overall goals.
- Students will identify their math and English course sequence and chart their individual math and English course sequence to achieve their educational goals as a result of the educational planning

presentation in the Counseling 20 class and subsequent counseling session(s).

The student education plans and process were examined through three different assessment strategies: 1) education plan competencies were evaluated by counselors using a common rubric, 2) students were given a common quiz based upon a case scenario, which was administered approximately eight weeks after the counseling sessions, and 3) at which time a student survey was also conducted to gather student feedback on the process and final plan. The data from these three authentic assessment methods provided both direct and indirect information about what the students were able to do as a result of the counseling class and sessions. The data were collected in 2008 and 2009 and then compared to see whether the process helped students translate the information into a plan, whether the quality of the plans improved, and whether the process itself needed improvement.

Ultimately SMC counselors learned that over the last two years the students were improving in their expertise in educational planning as measured by the rubric. The counselors also learned that they needed to spend more time on certain topics during the counseling class and session. They also learned that students felt that it was important to have more individual time with counselors on certain topics.

Center for Student Involvement - Glendale College

The Center for Student Involvement (CSI), formerly known as the Service Learning Center, began implementing their SLOs in the Fall 2007 semester. The SLOs were developed for all programs offered through CSI and implemented as an anonymous survey through classes (for service learning purposes) and during program trainings (for co-curricular programs).

The Service Area Outcome for CSI is as follows: The Center for Student Involvement initiates, implements, and sustains civic engagement opportunities that promote diversity, critical thinking, personal responsibility, and communication skills for all students.

The specific SLOs are:

- Students will indicate that they have improved communication skills as a result of participation in CSI activities.
- Students will indicate that they have gained greater appreciation of diversity as a result of participation in activities and programs.
- Students will report an increase in understanding their role in the community and their contribution to society.
- Students will report an increase in problem-solving skills as a result of participation in the CSI activities.

The participation rate for the first semester of implementation was not impressive, with only 28% responding to the survey. However, that rate had steadily improved with the

following results: 53% for Spring 2008; 66% for Fall 2008; and 61% for Spring 2009. The goal was to reach 75% of participants in the 2009-2010 academic year. Results have been used to make changes in the questionnaire and in programs.

One of the main findings about co-curricular programs run through CSI was that students found the program to be as educational as curricular programs if certain conditions were met, such as training and follow-up meetings. This information is invaluable in showing that learning can be achieved outside the classroom as well as inside the classroom.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the process for developing and reflecting on outcomes in student services programs is quite similar to their instructional student learning outcomes counterparts. It is imperative that the college specifically dedicate venues to discuss evaluation plans, evidence, and results of the data collection/analysis, and most importantly the implications of the findings across the range of student service areas. It is perhaps even more critical in the student services world that there is an interconnected approach to providing the services needed for students to succeed. Of course, these discussions should inform the instructional programs as well (and vice-versa). Professional development/flex days are a clear potential venue for such activity, especially as they often provide a rare opportunity for classroom faculty to interact in a structured setting with their student services counterparts.

Another method of evaluating the effectiveness of learning outcomes assessment is to designate a college committee focused on both instructional and student services outcomes. This body can coordinate efforts to review the college's SLO assessment efforts, identify areas of collective achievement, and suggest areas of opportunities and growth. This effort can be facilitated through the development of a rubric that outlines the college's shared principles and practices for effective instructional and student services outcomes. The findings from this effort can be shared with the campus as well as with faculty, administration, and student services leadership, with the intention that the institution will showcase exemplary efforts and design additional professional development addressing the areas of growth.

Achieving a Collective Wisdom

The techniques outlined in this section can certainly be applied to a range of settings on our individual college campuses, as we look to better understand the relationship between student success and our suite of student services programs. That being said, it would be incredibly valuable to convene subject matter experts at the service area level across campuses to help to provide a more collective wisdom on these issues. This collective group could then hold a series of meetings that would assemble practitioner experts within a domain (e.g., Financial Aid, Transfer Counseling, EOPS, Learning Communities) with the goal of reaching a more shared understanding of key outcomes and a set of potential assessment paradigms.

The goal of these convenings would not be to produce a singular set of outcomes and assessment methodologies, but rather to produce a set of examples that could be considered by the community colleges across the state. More often here than in any other domain on our campuses, we have heard frustrated student services professionals exclaim that they are simply looking for authentic and workable models. We agree that it cannot be an efficient use of resources to recreate the wheel 112 times, and would expect that even a small but talented group of 10-15 practitioners, teamed with a handful of research professionals, could go a long way to providing some needed models to the field.

BRIC TAP Inquiry Guide Series

1. Assessing Student Learning Outcomes
Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty*
2. Using an Equity Lens to Assess Student Learning
Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty, Student Services Staff*
3. Assessing Strategic Intervention Points in Student Services
Primary Audience: *Student Services Staff*
4. Assessing Institutional Effectiveness
Primary Audience: *Institutional Researchers and Administrators*
5. Assessing Basic Skills Outcomes
Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty*
6. Maximizing the Program Review Process
Primary Audience: *Instructional Faculty, Institutional Researchers*
7. Turning Data into Meaningful Action
Primary Audience: *Institutional Researchers*
8. A Model for Building Information Capacity and Promoting a Culture of Inquiry
Primary Audience: *Administrators, Institutional Researchers*