



## All About A-Teams

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One night a week from 1983 to 1987, you could find me watching "The A-Team," one of my favorite TV shows when I was growing up. One reason I liked the show was that each character brought different strengths to the group. John "Hannibal" Smith brought leadership and unorthodox, yet effective, planning skills. Templeton "Faceman" Peck was able to appropriate the necessary resources to realize their plans. "Howling Mad" Murdock was an expert pilot who seemed to have extensive knowledge about almost any subject, which always came in handy when, as usual, the plan didn't go as planned. Finally, B.A. "Bad Attitude" Baracus was the strong man who achieved as much with his attitude as he did with his physical might. While each character had his own skills, they were able to accomplish much more as a team than any of them could individually.

Student affairs assessment teams can work the same way by capitalizing on the individual talents within the group. Fostering and maintaining a culture of assessment in a division of student affairs is a challenging endeavor. Even if someone is charged with overseeing assessment for a division, such as a director of student affairs assessment or a coordinator of assessment, that person will need additional support. Assessment teams, committees, and councils, are valuable resources.

### Roles and Responsibilities

The roles and responsibilities of divisional assessment teams depend on factors such as divisional and institutional culture, level and types of assessment taking place within the division, and, more importantly, the assessment needs of the division. Responsibilities may include:

- ◆ Guiding assessment for the division by setting the assessment agenda
- ◆ Monitoring, tracking, and reporting on divisional assessment projects
- ◆ Monitoring the division's strategic plan or other planning efforts
- ◆ Assisting individual departments with assessment projects
- ◆ Fostering collaborative assessment across departments
- ◆ Providing assessment skills and knowledge
- ◆ Sharing assessment successes and challenges across departments
- ◆ Serving as an advisory or approval board for assessment projects.

As you begin to develop your assessment team, practice good assessment by considering the team's purpose as well as its goals. Think backwards in its design.

On many campuses, the assessment team's role may evolve over time. When I became the director of student affairs planning, evaluation, and research at Dartmouth College in 2006, we were just beginning to build a culture of assessment. The assessment team's role was to help the staff build assessment capacity, so our monthly meetings focused on professional development regarding assessment skills and knowledge. As assessment projects increased, we used the time to discuss important assessment topics and hold assessment showcases. The last 30 minutes of each meeting were set aside for a department to discuss its latest assessment project, almost like a mini-conference presentation. These showcases helped demonstrate to other team members that assessment was occurring across the division and enabled team members to see the various assessment methods and metrics

that were being used in different situations. They also provided an opportunity to give positive feedback and celebrate the work of other departments.

At Dartmouth, we will be completing strategic goals by the end of the current academic year. Now that the team members have developed their assessment skills and knowledge and we have an important planning document, the role of the assessment team will change even more. Our team will begin to set the assessment agenda for the division and guide the process. They will develop metrics for goal attainment, monitor progression on those metrics, and report on them to the divisional leadership.

## **Structure**

The structure of an assessment team is often driven by the roles and responsibilities of the group. If the team serves an advisory role to divisional leaders, it may have five or fewer members and meet a couple of times during the year. If the role is to drive divisional assessment or to help members build assessment skills and knowledge, it may meet every month or every other week. When the Dartmouth assessment team began, our main goal was to build a culture of assessment in which the staff had the confidence, skills, and knowledge to perform assessment. We needed to meet often to accomplish this goal, so we met twice a month. After the first year, members were performing more assessment so we switched to monthly meetings.

The assessment team should be an organic structure. While there should be clearly defined goals to delineate roles and responsibilities for the group, there should be flexibility to let the committee evolve to meet the emerging assessment needs of the division.

## **Composition**

The composition of the assessment team may also be determined by its role and purpose. If the role is advisory, the membership may include divisional leaders. If the role is to build capacity or to guide divisional assessment, members from the various departments should participate to ensure that multiple voices and perspectives are represented and that assessment information is relayed back to those departments. When considering who should participate, remember the purpose of your assessment team.

Assessment teams may include people outside student affairs as well. Some include faculty members as a way to connect with academic affairs. In order to have a cohesive institutional approach to assessment, the team may also include the assessment professional who coordinates institution-wide assessment or academic assessment. Some committees include members of the institutional research office because they often perform assessment and are able to access a great deal institutional data. Students can also be important members of assessment committees. We perform assessment to improve student learning and the student experience, so it is helpful to include their perspective in our efforts.

Some assessment committees have voluntary participation given that there is extra work and not everyone has an interest in assessment, while others may have one person from each department assigned to sit on the committee. The Dartmouth assessment team is a hybrid. Representatives volunteer to serve as liaisons from each department and they are responsible for communicating information back to their departments. We know that all members may not be able to attend every meeting, so we use Blackboard to communicate with one another and to store notes and other important documents that help keep all members connected and informed.

## **Examples**

Two interesting examples of assessment committees are the Student Affairs Assessment Council at Oregon State University and the Division Assessment Resource Team (DART) at Western Washington University.

*Oregon State University Student Affairs Assessment Council*

Started in 1996, the OSU Student Affairs Assessment Council is a working group responsible for leading the assessment efforts of the division, which includes setting policy about reporting periods, developing report structure, establishing consistent assessment language, and ensuring that units are developing their assessment expertise. The council also assumes a variety of other tasks, such as guiding division-wide assessment projects, providing feedback on departmental projects, monitoring departmental assessment, developing divisional learning outcomes, and ensuring that a structure is in place that will produce a common data reporting structure. Additionally, all departments must report their assessment work and plans to the council for feedback and suggestions for improving their assessment efforts. Chaired by the director of student affairs research and evaluation, the council works as a learning community where all are teachers and all are learners. All members are volunteers, and anyone who wants to work on assessment and learn more—even those from outside student affairs—is welcome to join. The council is the heart of assessment in OSU's Division of Student Affairs.

#### *Western Washington University Division Assessment Resource Team*

The Division Assessment Resource Team (DART) was formed in fall 2007 to build capacity for outcomes-based planning and assessment within the Division of Student Affairs and Academic Support Services. The team is made up of a cohort of practitioners from different backgrounds and experiences who meet on a weekly basis to expand their assessment knowledge, skills, and abilities. Members volunteer for a two-year commitment and go through a semester-long assessment course facilitated by a faculty member in the student affairs master's program. They follow a curriculum, attend class once a week, and have homework. After completing their course, they serve as consultants and help others in their department and division design and implement assessment projects. More consultants are trained each year to provide support for the division. The DART team has contributed to the building of an assessment culture within the Division of Student Affairs at Western Washington University.

#### **Conclusion**

As you develop or revise your assessment team, spend some time thinking about what purpose the team will serve. Let the division's assessment needs drive the mission, goals, and responsibilities of your group. This will help you decide on its structure and composition. And, don't forget to assess how effective your team is at fulfilling its goals.

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