**Research versus Assessment**

M. Lee Upcraft and John H. Schuh are rock stars in the higher education assessment world. They wrote *Assessment in Student Affairs* (Jossey-Bass, 1996) which brought student affairs programs into the discussion along with academic programs.

Upcraft and Schuh wrote a brief and useful article some years ago called, *Assessment v. research: Why we should care about the difference*. You can jump to the entire journal issue at the link at the bottom of this page. If you want just the main points here is a summary in as brief a space as possible.

**Research guides theory, Assessment steers policy**

Research has universal application. A good research finding is likely to affect the thinking and practices of all universities. And its effect will be long lasting.

Assessment pertains to here and now. We shouldn’t assume that a good assessment at another university tells us anything about Purdue, nor even that results we observed 2-3 years ago still pertain here today.

**Research standards are rigorous, Assessment gets on with the job**

Research must be conducted by strict standards, or else it is simply bad research. If a satisfactory research design cannot be devised, then research simply can’t be done. Assessment, on the other hand, works on a better than nothing principle.

As Upcraft and Schuh point out: “A lack of assessment data can sometimes lead to policies and practices based on intuition, prejudice, preconceived notions or personal proclivities – none of them desirable bases for making decisions.” So even if the available data is incomplete or imperfect, we should – indeed must – go ahead and learn from it all we can so we can go ahead with decisions to improve our services.

**Research is neutral, Assessment occurs in a political context**

Again, here is Upcraft and Schuh: “Assessment virtually always occurs in a political context that investigators must take into account in designing the assessment.” For us, the political context is the financial pressure our state legislature and regulatory agencies are exerting to control costs and show good results. Of course, all conscientious staff want to control costs and obtain good results, too.

Student Affairs programs and services are making the Purdue experience better for thousands of students every day. Our assessment efforts enable us to prove not only that these programs and services exist, but that they make a difference for the students.
Citation:

Assessment vs. Research: Why we should care about the difference, M. Lee Upcraft and John H. Schuh, About Campus, March-April 2002.