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Myths and misconceptions about using qualitative methods in assessment

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Faulty assumptions explain, at least in part, why qualitative approaches are underused in institutional research. Some of the most complex assessment questions could be answered with greater clarity if these fallacies were explicated and dispelled.

Myths and Misconceptions About Using Qualitative Methods in Assessment

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The value of qualitative assessment approaches has been underestimated primarily because they are often juxtaposed against long-standing quantitative traditions and the widely accepted premise that the best research produces generalizable and statistically significant findings. Simple, straightforward approaches to problem identification and data interpretation are thought to be superior for generating methodologically defensible reports to inform institutional action and policy. Furthermore, "the general" continues to be privileged over "the specific" in most offices of institutional research, even though the limitations of such views are widely known. For instance, more than three decades ago, Thorngate (1976) suggested that because of "commensurate complexity," no theory of social behavior (or the research on which it is based) can be simultaneously general, accurate, and simple. As Weick (1979) explained, "The more general a simple theory is . . . the less accurate it will be in predicting specifics" (p. 36). As higher education becomes more complex and expectations for documenting educational effectiveness increase, more needs to be known about the specifics.

A similar sentiment is echoed in one of the major conclusions from Pascarella and Terenzini's updated synthesis of studies on college students (2005): most of the nontrivial differences in student engagement and college outcomes are conditional. That is, different teaching approaches, environmental factors, and collegiate experiences seem to affect certain students

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more than others. Sophisticated statistical analyses can reveal some of the conditional and group-specific effects that Pascarella and Terenzini noted, but they cannot tell us why certain students experience college the way they do or provide multiple, deeper, and accurate interpretations of what seem to be similar events in students' lives that individual students experience very differently. As Shulman (2007) observed, "Numbers may offer an illusion of irreducible accuracy and credibility, but they can only be interpreted in the context of the narrative selected and, indeed, the narrative not taken" (p. 22).

Institutional researchers avoid qualitative methods for at least three reasons. First, they are more comfortable with the quantitative paradigm, the kinds of questions it addresses, the tools to answer these questions, and statistical forms of sense making. Second, they are at the same time unfamiliar with qualitative methods, its assumptions, and standards of rigor and trustworthiness. And third, they have been socialized to accept the supposed superiority of qualitative methods. Like the other authors in this volume, we endorse the use of qualitative approaches because they can help answer some of the complex, vexing questions that concern various stakeholders in higher education. Yet despite growing recognition of the power and utility of qualitative assessment methods, concerns remain about employing these approaches in institutional research.

Many of these concerns are shibboleths that stand largely in opposition to the qualitative paradigm. Nonetheless, institutional researchers will not likely embrace and realize the power and potential of qualitative methods as long as myths regarding their worth are unchallenged. In this chapter, we seek to dispel ten common misconceptions about using qualitative methods in assessment, while acknowledging the relative strengths and limitations of these approaches.

Misconception One: Objectivity Is the Gold Standard in Research

Because the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007), some people assume that the findings of qualitative assessments are unreliable and contaminated by the views and predilections of the inquirer. As a result, they say, qualitative inquiry cannot produce neutral reports of the experiences of those being studied. The problem with this reasoning is that no inquiry or assessment approach—quantitative, historical, qualitative, or multimethod—can be completely objective. As Janesick (2000) put it, "There is no value-free or bias-free design . . . the myth that research is objective in some way can no longer be taken seriously. At this point in time, all researchers should be free to challenge prevailing myths, such as the myth of objectivity" (p. 385).

To illustrate, the questions that appear on a survey and their phrasing are influenced to varying degrees by the dispositions, language, and hypotheses of those who designed the instrument. Completely separating oneself

from the research process is neither necessary nor possible. Moreover, trying to be "objective" often constrains one's capacity to identify inequities and injustice, something sorely needed on contemporary college and university campuses. Neither quantitative nor qualitative methods are inherently superior for identifying effective educational practices and guiding institutional improvement efforts; both can be instructive, and both have limitations. The key is to ensure that the biases and assumptions of those engaged in the assessment work are identified and clearly articulated, which will enable users of the assessment data to understand how the findings have been interpreted.

Misconception Two: Subjectivity Compromises Accuracy and Trustworthiness

Although complete objectivity in assessment is unattainable no matter what inquiry approach is used, this does not mean that accurate accounts of institutional realities and students' lived experiences are unachievable. To ensure that qualitative data provide fair and truthful representations, Lincoln and Guba (1986) presented four criteria for evaluating quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria "replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 21).

Among the steps that assessment staff can take to meet these criteria and ensure high-quality qualitative findings are member checks (Patton, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), participant-researcher reciprocity (Harrison, MacGibbon, and Morton, 2001), peer debriefing (Spall, 1998), internal auditing (Manning, 1997), critical subjectivity (Lincoln, 1995), and qualitative triangulation (Golafshani, 2003; Seale, 1999). Used in concert, these approaches help to enhance the authenticity of findings concerning complicated circumstances and experiences with sometimes contradictory elements.

Misconception Three: Only Assessment Findings That Are Generalizable Can Inform Policy and Practice

As with the objectivity expectation, it is unrealistic to assume that assessment data in any form hold for all students at one school or for learners at other institutions. Qualitative methods enrich the descriptions and understandings of students' educational experiences in a given context and under certain conditions. Donmoyer (1990) contended that alternative ways of conceptualizing generalizability are needed, as educators, administrators, and assessment professionals should be concerned with what happens to individuals, not aggregates. Indeed, to state the obvious, the measures of central tendency often reported to depict the experiences of various groups of students actually represent no person.

Qualitative research is admittedly time and context bound and shaped by the culture of the institution under study (Kuh and Andreas, 1991). With this in mind, Lincoln and Guba (1986) described how transferability—the ability of the findings to be transferred, to some degree, to settings with similar characteristics—in contradistinction to generalizability, can establish a level of similarity between the reader's context and the context in which the inquiry was conducted. Lincoln and Guba also referred to transferability as "fittingness," which holds the qualitative researcher responsible for ensuring that the setting and context in which the data were collected are clearly described in research reports. This allows policymakers, faculty, and staff to act with confidence and is especially important in comparative and between-institution assessment activities.

Misconception Four: The Perspectives of Few Do Not Represent Many

Some reject qualitative methods for institutional assessment because there are usually limited numbers of participants from whom information can be collected. The presumption is that if data come from only small, nonrandomized segments of a population, the results cannot represent the experiences of others. For example, if eight black undergraduates report alienating views of the campus racial climate in a focus group, chances are they are not the only black students at the institution who feel that way. In fact, such reflections would be consistent with previous research findings that among all racial/ethnic groups, black students are usually most dissatisfied with the campus racial climate (Harper and Hurtado, 2007; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2001). But even if these eight students represent an outlook that is not shared among the majority of their same-race peers, their perspectives should not be dismissed. Those who work at institutions that are truly committed to enacting espoused commitments to multiculturalism and inclusivity will use these data to improve the experiences of students who feel this way, no matter how many or how few there are.

Misconception Five: Self-Reported Data Are Unreliable

Some institutional researchers question the reliability of qualitative findings because the data are self-reported. Perhaps the persons interviewed had a bad day (or a good day) and would report something different if asked the same questions a month later. Although it is prudent to be sensitive to such possibilities, there is little evidence to suggest that qualitative studies, when done well, are any less reliable than data collected quantitatively.

Ensuring the accuracy of self-reports is not peculiar to qualitative data-gathering approaches. Respondents to surveys, for example, might answer differently if the questionnaire were distributed at some other time during

the school year (Gonyea, 2005). Certainly some students completing surveys do not know the information they are asked to provide but do so anyway. Others move through surveys quickly and carelessly, shading in the same bubble (for example, "5" for "strongly agree") for every item. This is more likely to be the case among students who are surveyed numerous times and for multiple purposes, a condition known as survey fatigue (Porter, Whitcomb, and Weitzer, 2004). While competent survey researchers spot-check and exclude surveys with such response patterns from the analysis, the effects of this circumstance cannot be completely mitigated. It is also worth noting that accountability for the accurate representation of voice and sense making is actually more possible in qualitative work, as individual perspectives are not lost in a regression with two thousand other participants. To clarify, a research participant could actually read a qualitative assessment report and confirm that her or his perspective was represented accurately. Researchers also can follow up with participants to understand more deeply the undercurrents of their experiences and the sources of change in their perspectives over time.

Misconception Six: Qualitative Data Are Useful Only When Corroborated By Numbers

The contributors to Howard and Borland's *New Directions for Institutional Research* volume (2001) made a convincing case for the use of mixed methods, but not all qualitative studies require a quantitative stamp of approval. In fact, Creswell (2003) maintained that research questions should drive the selection of methods. As such, some questions lend themselves exclusively to qualitative approaches. Furthermore, qualitative findings have the ability to stand on their own and provide useful insights to guide policy, practice, and institutional decision making. Qualitative methods have been used to develop surveys and questionnaires (Borland, 2001; Rea and Parker, 2005; Umbach, 2005) or to simply augment quantitative findings with participants' voices (Fowler, 2002). But not all qualitative studies require quantitative verification, and vice versa.

Misconception Seven: Administrators and Decision Makers Respond Only to Numbers

One of the most erroneous assumptions about qualitative findings is that they will not be taken seriously, primarily because they cannot be quantified. For some reason, it is believed that college presidents, governing board members, and state policymakers will base their decisions and actions only on reports in which charts, graphs, and data tables are presented. This flawed view neglects to consider the emotional appeal and political power of qualitative data. Perhaps this is best made clear using an example involving the University of Missouri–Kansas City (UMKC).

In March 2006, the Office of the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs commissioned an audit of the campus racial climate. An outside consultant collected data through interviews and focus groups with students and staff members. The day after findings from the audit were presented, the *Kansas City Star* newspaper printed this headline: "UMKC Gets Poor Racial Report Card" (Williams, 2006). The story was picked up by the Associated Press and published in various media outlets across the country. Consequently leaders at the institution were compelled (and to some degree forced) to respond.

Within a year, the university had hired a chief diversity officer (a position that did not exist prior to the audit), planned a conference on black and Latino males (two populations the auditor found were especially neglected), and approached the hiring of faculty of color more aggressively. In addition, an article in *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* included a picture of the UMKC chancellor and the new deputy chancellor of diversity, access, and equity signing a memorandum of understanding with the Kansas City chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), pledging to create a more inclusive environment for black students (Moore, 2007). Again, these institutional actions were ignited by data emerging from a qualitative assessment.

Misconception Eight: Qualitative Data Are Easy to Collect and Analyze; Anyone Can Do It!

"The integrity of qualitative data depends on the competence of the data collection instruments—human beings. That is, the data are only as good as the qualifications of the inquirer" (Kuh and Andreas, 1991, p. 402). As most institutional researchers know, structural equation modeling, event history analyses, hierarchical linear modeling, and other sophisticated statistical procedures require advanced training in quantitative research methods. This too is the case with approaches to qualitative design and analysis. The best data emerge from systematic, thoughtful, and rigorous procedures for which methodological regulations have been written.

There are methods textbooks such as the three editions of Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* other comprehensive volumes (examples are Jones, Torres, and Arminio, 2006; Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002), and a peer-reviewed journal, *Qualitative Inquiry*, in which design and analytical techniques are introduced and reevaluated. In addition, Sage publishes an extensive series of books and monographs on qualitative methods, some introductory and others advanced. The point here is that qualitative assessment work has well-established standards of rigor that, when adhered to, produce high-quality results. Institutional researchers who attempt to employ qualitative approaches in assessment should recognize the learning required for rigor. Put another way,

the artful science of qualitative inquiry requires much more expertise than simply drafting some questions, starting the audio recorder, and reading prompts from a interview protocol, as is made clear in the *Handbook of Interview Research* (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002) and other texts (such as Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

Misconception Nine: Interviewing Is the Only Qualitative Assessment Technique

Qualitative data gathering is often deemed synonymous with interviews and focus groups. Although these methods are frequently used, they are only two among many options that can potentially yield insightful and instructive data. Various qualitative data collection methods are derived from and reflect different philosophical underpinnings and techniques that stem from five traditions: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 2007).

Contributors to *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry,* coedited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln in 2003, describe a range of methodological options, such as observations, document analyses, and reflective journaling, all of which have applications for institutional assessment. The analysis of writing samples, for example, can provide rich information about students' ability to communicate clearly and persuasively. And as described by Melissa Contreras-McGavin and Adrianna Kezar in Chapter Six of this volume, portfolios are becoming increasingly popular ways to document student learning outcomes. Depending on the student, the substance of portfolios may contain information obtained through qualitative methods. In addition, as Saupe (1981) noted, "The subject of institutional research is the individual college, university, or system" (p. 1). Given this, case study approaches that bring together a range of qualitative data sources might be particularly useful in assessment activities, and Yin's book (2003) is a good resource.

Misconception Ten: Qualitative Methods Are Too Labor Intensive and Cumbersome to Be Practical for Institutional Assessment Work

Certainly doing comprehensive case studies as we just recommended requires considerable time and effort, especially if undertaken by a single person. Compared with distributing and collecting several hundred surveys and using a statistical software package to analyze the data, conducting qualitative studies at a single institution or across multiple sites can be overwhelming. As an alternative, teamwork could lead to more efficient data gathering and sensemaking, especially for research questions that warrant ethnographic fieldwork, analyses of several long documents, or numerous interviews and focus groups.

University of Southern California (USC) professor Estela Mara Bensimon and researchers at the USC Center for Urban Education developed the Equity Scorecard process to investigate racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes (see Bensimon, 2004; Bensimon, Hao, and Bustillos, 2006; Harris and Bensimon, 2007). Working with teams of faculty, administrators, and students at participating institutions, they collect and collaboratively make sense of qualitative data. Each team includes an institutional researcher who acts as a partner with other members. Kuh and others (2005) described how their in-depth studies of high-performing colleges and universities were also done in research teams. Engaging stakeholders beyond the office of institutional research could alleviate the misperception that one lone researcher must assume sole responsibility for executing a complex, time-consuming qualitative study.

Conclusion

A wide array of inquiry approaches has been developed over the years to address different questions and issues in higher education. Thus, it is no surprise that qualitative methods would find their way into the battery of techniques available to institutional researchers to assess some of the more complex relationships and divergent experiences of an increasingly diverse student population. Qualitative methods cannot answer every assessment question, but they can be used alone or in concert with quantitative approaches to help explain in more detail what different groups of students are learning and experiencing and, equally important, the meanings students and others make of collegiate life and the various factors that affect institutional quality. Equipped with this information, institutional researchers will be able to better understand what is happening to students and the institutional conditions that foster certain dimensions of learning and personal development. By doing so, institutional researchers are better positioned to complete the data-to-action loop, thereby increasing the likelihood that assessment results can be used for institutional improvement and outcomes enhancement.

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