Many of us have heard the children’s story about the tailor who had to make a royal set of clothes that would please the emperor. Under the threat of execution should he fail, the tailor fabricated a set of beautiful, imaginary clothes and convinced the emperor that these imaginary clothes were the finest and most elegant in the land. When the emperor proclaimed how wonderful his new (imaginary) clothes were, none of the emperor’s subjects disagreed for fear of displeasing him. During a processional, however, a young child exclaimed loudly, “But the emperor has no clothes on!”

Clearly, the emperor was not only missing his clothes but also an effective assessment mechanism to evaluate information and make decisions. Our sponsored program operations are not unlike the emperor in this children’s story. We often think our operations are “well-dressed” and performing at an exceptional level, even though we often have no data upon which to make this judgment.

Like the emperor, sponsored programs administrators need information about our operations in order to make effective decisions. Assessment is simply a process used to gather information about a particular area and then that information is used to evaluate objectively the effectiveness of that area. The results of an assessment serve as a basis for informed decision-making on direction and change.

The performance and effectiveness of our sponsored programs operations can be assessed by gathering information about a number of different operational aspects. For this article, five clusters are highlighted. These five assessment clusters can be applied to all or parts of our operations, either individually or in various combinations.

- Results Centered
- Risk Centered
- Service-Satisfaction Centered
- Infrastructure-Management Centered
- Strategic Centered

**Results Centered.** Assessment in this cluster has a focus on process and outputs. Within this area, we tend to look at how well we have met deadlines, timeframes for processes, or staff effort tracked to functions. A characteristic of results-centered assessment is quantifiable measure of a specific output.

**Risk Centered.** The risk-centered cluster includes area reviews based on level of risk and how well that risk is managed. This type of assessment may encompass several aspects, such as reviewing institutional policies against state or federal laws and regulations, and evaluating how well policies are applied within the institution.

**Service-Satisfaction Centered.** This cluster is a very common form of assessment that most often collects satisfaction measures from key constituents (often faculty). A common characteristic of this cluster is quantifying value of service from service recipients through surveys. A less common, but very valuable approach to collecting information from these stakeholders is through focus groups. This facilitated, face-to-face process allows for more in-depth and thoughtful answers from service recipients. The recipient responses can provide more detailed explanations than a survey, and the information provided is valuable in the analysis of a service.

**Infrastructure-Management Centered.** Assessment in this area focuses on leadership, decisions, and the decision-making process within the operation. It involves an assessment of areas such as staffing, staff development, and cross-office functionality. It may extend beyond the sponsored programs operation to the institutional infrastructure, encompassing areas at the departmental, school and/or college, and central areas.

**Strategic Centered.** Strategic planning and goal setting is normally an outcome of operational assessment. However, the strategic-centered focus in the assessment process looks at how effectively the operation is connected to its environment, both internal and external to the institution, and how the operation identifies and responds to emerging issues. This type of assessment may include the examination of a variety of broad aspects, such as connectivity to national sources of information about changing policy or regulation, as well as connectivity to stakeholders within the institution for ongoing feedback, both informal and formal, on emerging issues or concerns.

Assessments do not need to be comprehensive for the entire operation; nor do assessment activities need to be driven from the top down. Assessment can be initiated and conducted at any level of the operation. In many respects, the self-audit and self-review initiated by an individual or team within the larger operation is an effective approach to staff accountability and to building self-awareness of issues and identifying opportunities for enhancements. These self-assessments can provide an opportunity for team-building and for staff to learn or enhance numerous skills integral to the assessment process, such as project management, data analysis, report writing, and communication.

However, much like the child’s fresh eyes on the emperor’s clothes, an external evaluator participating in the assessment brings fresh perspectives, best practices, and a level of objectivity. A range of external evaluators can be involved in the evaluation process. Within the institution, this may include members of your service recipient groups (most often faculty), individuals from related offices, and senior administrators. All of these individuals bring important perspectives to the process. However they also can bring elements of politics, personal biases, and lack of expertise in sponsored programs administrative requirements. Peers in sponsored programs from outside the institution bring the necessary expertise and knowledge of the area, as well as an understanding of many of the factors and regulations that drive policies and procedures.

Sponsored programs operations are a critical area of the university, and there are few others that undergo greater scrutiny from such diverse angles and perspectives. We are subject to critical examination from our faculty, researchers, department chairs, senior administrators, department and central office colleagues, auditors, and sponsors. The list goes on. This level and type of scrutiny is a healthy vehicle for receiving feedback, but should be viewed within its appropriate context and with the understanding that those offering the observations may not have a full picture of what we do or knowledge of the regulatory parameters in which we carry out our jobs. Implementing a periodic assessment that utilizes several or all of the clusters highlighted in this article provides our offices with a solid foundation for decisions, for strategic planning and goal setting, and for answering the important question, “How do your clothes look?”

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