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. It is, perhaps, thanks to the movement Upcraft and Schuh started that VPSA’s Lee Gordon now represents student affairs on Purdue’s Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Workgroup.

Upcraft and Schuh wrote a brief and useful article some years ago about assessment and research and why we should care about the difference. They called it, *Assessment v. research: Why we should care about the difference*. And if you are like me, that is just the sort of straightforward title that makes me interested in what a person has to say. You can jump to the entire journal issue here, but 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 the 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.

VPSA’s 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 we have these programs and services, but that they make a difference for the students.

Andy Zehner
3/11/11
Citations and links:

http://www.amazon.com/Assessment-Student-Affairs-Practitioners-Education/dp/0787902128

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