Solving the Disconnect Between Planning and Evaluation, and the
Prevention of Liability: How to Implement Assessment Mechanisms
In Law and Policy Initiatives

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Introduction

There are many sources of potential liability in higher education settings. Frequently, liability arises from the behavior of students, faculty, staff, or visitors, including alcohol, drug use, and related consequences, aggressive or criminal behavior, and other behaviors that lead to harm or injury. For the purposes of this paper, the term “prevention” is used in the public health sense, that is, engaging in proactive efforts designed to reduce or avoid problems that could lead to liability. For our purposes, then, “law and policy initiatives” include campus programs, policies, and procedures designed to reduce an array of potential problems. The examples in this discussion focus on health and safety issues such as sexual harassment, campus violence, and student alcohol use, but the concepts may be applied broadly to a wide variety of problems among campus constituents. For simplicity, the term “program” will be used to refer to these programs, policies and procedures.

Often, campus programs are designed solely based on federal, state, and local laws, statutes, and case law. Ensuring that policies adhere to the parameters established by these mandates is essential. However, the scope of legal mandates is limited, primarily addressing what is required with respect to campus policies. If protecting the health and safety of the campus community is the ultimate defense against liability (in addition to the right thing to do), then it is essential that policy-makers also examine what is effective in preventing problems. The answer to this question comes not from law, but from science. Scientific effectiveness is determined through assessment and evaluation.
**Assessment and Evaluation**

The term assessment is a broad one that can refer to a range of data collection activities such as monitoring of campus statistics and trends, administering surveys, maintaining, compiling, and reviewing official records such as disciplinary and medical services records, and conducting interviews or focus groups with campus stakeholders. Often, assessment refers specifically to “program evaluation,” that is, designing studies to assess the effectiveness of particular programs, policies, and procedures. Program evaluations are generally designed to answer two types of questions: accountability and effort questions ("What are we doing?"); and effectiveness and efficiency questions (“Has the program brought about the desired results?” or more simply, “Did the program work?”) All of these assessment efforts share a common characteristic: the systematic collection of data.

**Won’t Collecting Data Increase Our Liability?**

Many campus attorneys advise administrators against collecting data based on the assumption that information about campus problems could be used against the institution in a lawsuit. This may have been true in the past, when courts were less likely to hold campuses responsible for harm to students and others. However, recent court decisions reflect the expectation that campuses will deal proactively with foreseeable risks to students (Bickel and Lake, 1999). Thus, attorneys and policy-makers must consider whether their prevention efforts follow scientific standards of best practice. These standards invariably include data collection and program evaluation as a basic requirement of program success. For example, in 1998, the U.S. Department of Education established a set of “Principles of Effectiveness” to guide program design and evaluation for school-based programs to reduce drug use and violence among youth (U.S. Department of Education, 1998):

1. Base programs on a thorough assessment of objective data about the drug and violence problems in the schools and communities served;
2. Establish a set of measurable goals and objectives and design programs to meet those goals and objectives;

3. Design and implement programs based on research or evaluation that provides evidence that the programs used prevent or reduce drug use, violence, or disruptive behavior among the target audience;

4. Evaluate programs periodically to assess progress toward achieving goals and objectives, and use evaluation results to refine, improve, and strengthen programs.

More recently, in the area of college drinking, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism issued a report entitled “A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Campuses” (NIAAA, 2002a) summarizing the existing research evidence supporting various interventions to reduce college drinking and recommending the use of a data-driven planning and evaluation process in developing and assessing prevention programs (NIAAA, 2002b; Saltz and DeJong, 2002). Such reports are likely to become increasingly important to policy-makers by serving as the basis by which the courts judge whether campuses have taken appropriate steps to adopt effective prevention efforts. As one legal scholar has asserted, “I predict that the courts will look to the NIAAA report as the standard for exercising all due care to prevent foreseeable risk [related to campus drinking behavior.]” (Peter Lake, personal communication.)

Planning Successful Programs

As illustrated by these basic principles, program design and evaluation are integrally connected, and whether a program is “evaluable” depends on careful and systematic program planning. There are several key planning mistakes that reduce the chances of program success. Often, program and policy-makers fail to:
1.) Clearly articulate and thoroughly understand the problem to be solved;
2.) Specify how the planned programs or policies will solve the identified problems;
3.) Use existing research evidence to inform and justify the planned initiative;
4.) Include critical program elements that research has shown increase the likelihood that a program will succeed.
It is important to note that these “disconnects” are found frequently within public health practice as well as policy and law. Research and practice have found that more successful prevention initiatives:

1.) Respond to specific local problems ascertained through data collection processes;
2.) Are designed using a systematic planning process involving multiple stakeholders;
3.) Draw from existing research, supplemented with theory and logic about what might work to solve the specified problems;
4.) Use multiple and coordinated prevention approaches designed to achieve synergy among program components;
5.) Avoid relying on approaches that have been found to be ineffective;
6.) Build infrastructure in support of specific strategies;
7.) Are evaluated and use results for improvement.

Thus, a prerequisite to successful program evaluation is to engage in a systematic planning process. The next section outlines and describes such a process.

A Planning and Evaluation Process

Below is a planning and evaluation process that can be used to plan campus interventions designed to prevent an array of campus problems.

1. Conduct problem analysis/ needs assessment
   a. Gather data
   b. Examine resources and assets
   c. Analyze and summarize the data
2. Establish long-range goals
3. Consult science, theory, and assumptions to determine promising approaches to achieve those goals
4. Create a strategic plan
   a. Select program strategies, goals, and activities
   b. Create a program “logic model”
   c. Plan for evaluation
5. Implement program activities and evaluate whether goals were achieved

While presented as a linear process, in practice planners will often rework earlier steps as more information is gathered and assessed. In addition, planning processes are most effective when conducted as a collaborative effort, allowing key stakeholders to contribute information and collaborate on program design, implementation, and evaluation. Because problems are rarely confined within campus boundaries, campus officials should consider including appropriate members of the surrounding community in their planning efforts. However, some campuses initially create a campus-based task force and later expand the group to include community representatives. While experience has shown that successful efforts to create systematic change in the campus and community environment will eventually need to engage many constituencies, there are numerous possible models for developing these partnerships and alliances.

Each step in the strategic planning process is outlined in more detail below.

1. **Problem Analysis/ Needs Assessment**
   a. Gather data

   The key goal of this step is to understand the extent and nature of the problems in a particular campus and community setting; while often referred to as “needs assessment,” the term “problem analysis” is more accurate. The rationale is simple: without a thorough understanding of the problem of interest, planners are less likely to choose appropriate solutions. The information gathered during the problem analysis is used for program development and serves as baseline data for evaluation.

   A problem analysis consists of systematically gathering information about campus problems and assessing existing programs, policies, and resources dedicated to solving these problems. Information can be gathered through a variety of means, including survey data, environmental scans, key informant interviews, focus groups, and archival (indicator) data.
This analysis must use a broad framework to fully understand the range of factors that cause and contribute to the problem of interest. Public health prevention work has been guided by a social ecological framework, which recognizes that behavior is affected through multiple levels of influence: intrapersonal (individual) factors, interpersonal (group) processes, institutional factors, community factors, and public policies (Stokols, 1996). Historically, institutions of higher education have focused their prevention efforts on educational and intervention strategies that influence and meet the needs of individual students (Larimer and Cronce, 2002). Such programs are essential, of course, but only a part of what is necessary to reduce health and safety problems on a large scale. Community-based prevention research suggests the need for a broader effort, one that also seeks to reshape the physical, social, economic, and legal environment that affects behavior (Holder et al., 1999; Perry et al., 1996). While instituting policies is a key part of the solution to health and safety problems, comprehensive prevention approaches will require multiple, coordinated, and sustained initiatives aimed at achieving the same goals (DeJong & Langford, 2002; DeJong et al., 1998).

Using the social ecological framework as a guide, planners should examine individual, group, institutional, community, and public policy factors during this process in order to understand the problem fully. For example, student survey data can yield information about the nature and scope of the problems among students (what are the problems?) and can be used to describe individual-level factors that are correlated with problem behaviors, such as knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, norms, and beliefs. In addition, planners should examine how environmental factors may be contributing to problems on campus. Officials must examine where and when problems occur, as well as assessing specific environmental contributors, for example, alcohol and weapons availability, the price of alcohol, the promotion of alcohol to students, the extent of misperceived norms about high-risk behaviors, and enforcement of existing laws and policies. The College Alcohol Risk Assessment Guide (CARA) provides many concrete tools and resources for environmental assessment and problem analysis related to high-risk student behavior (Ryan, et al.,
1994). Other tools have been designed to assist community members in performing a “safety audit” to identify settings where crime and violence are more likely to occur (Security on Campus, 2002).

b. Examine resources and assets

In addition to collecting data about the problems, the group should collect data on existing efforts to address the problem, including programs, policies, staff, and resources. Which campus departments and staff members are involved in these efforts? What community agencies, citizens groups, or individuals are involved in similar work? The assessment should include existing educational programs, current policies and procedures within the judicial and law enforcement systems, and other campus and community resources available to campus stakeholders, including counseling, early intervention, and alcohol and other drug treatment programs. This step will serve to identify potential organizations and allies who are not already part of the planning group, help to avoid duplication of efforts, and ensure that the eventual program is comprehensive in addressing the problems.

c. Analyze and summarize the data

The next step is to review the data and summarize the problems of interest on campus and in the local community. This summary should highlight the incidents most frequently observed, who is involved, where and when the problems occur, gaps in programs and policies, and other key findings from the data. Gaining a clear understanding of the problem in this way is a key first step in designing an appropriate prevention program.

2. Establish long-range goals

The next step in a strategic planning process is to choose long-range goals for the program. Long-range goals refer to the “big picture” outcomes achieved collectively from all prevention efforts rather than from any single initiative (although ideally each initiative will individually contribute to achieving these
goals). Long-range goals should be based on the results of the problem analysis. These goals will also be shaped by priorities and concerns held by senior administrators, grant-makers, or other stakeholders. For example, long-range goals for college prevention efforts might include a decrease in substance use among students; reductions in crime-related consequences or costs; increased retention; improvements in academic outcomes; or reduced campus and community violence and crime. Bearing in mind the program’s long-range goals is critical in ensuring that selected program activities are capable of achieving those outcomes.

3. **Consult the research literature for research and theory to determine promising approaches to achieve those goals; supplement with logic and assumptions**

   The next step is to examine prior research and theory to assess possible strategies for addressing the specific issues identified in the problem analysis. The key is to stay problem-focused when seeking solutions, rather than adopting programs that seem promising but do not address the identified campus problems. First, explore whether researchers have published evaluation findings for similar programs in college settings. Because the college-specific research literature is relatively sparse, it will be necessary to consult research about community-based programs with similar goals. For example, there is considerable literature addressing alcohol control options in non-college settings; many of those strategies may be transferable to campus settings. Finally, it is useful to network with other campus administrators to learn from their experiences. In some cases, there may be unpublished evaluation data supporting the potential efficacy of a program. Even in the absence of formal evaluation, other program planners may provide valuable feedback on their experiences that can help guide planning efforts and avoid stumbling blocks.

   With any program or idea, consider the quality of the information and how well it fits with the local situation. Better quality evaluation studies use comparison groups or otherwise control for non-program factors that are likely to affect results. If surveys are used, the sample should be representative of the population. Other
marks of high-quality evaluation results include sustained change as measured in follow-up studies and successful replication in other sites.

It is important to remember that no single study “proves” the effectiveness of a particular approach. Often program planners are faced with limited research regarding particular programs. In response to this limitation, federal agencies have funded efforts to review and compile the current state of the research literature, often using the term “science-based” or “research-based” prevention to describe these reviews. One recent example of an important literature review in the college prevention area, mentioned earlier, is the April 2002 NIAAA report “A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Campuses” (NIAAA, 2002a). This report summarizes available interventions based on their level of research support as well as describing a planning and evaluation process (NIAAA, 2002b; Saltz and DeJong, 2002). In addition, federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention have compiled lists of model prevention programs. While many of these programs address alcohol or other drug problems in younger populations, the approaches may be applicable to campus settings.

4. Create a strategic plan

A strategic plan includes several elements. Based on the review of previous efforts, the planning group must choose a set of strategies to address the identified problems and then translate these strategies into specific program activities. Next, many program planners find it useful to create a program “logic model” to show how program activities will lead to long-term outcomes. In addition, planners must create a detailed action plan that lays out specific tasks, who is responsible, and a timeline for completing those tasks. Finally, it is critical to draft a detailed evaluation plan at the beginning of the program, before the program is implemented. This plan will ensure that the evaluation design is clearly tied to the program activities, intermediate and long-term outcomes are clearly specified, and resources are in place for evaluation. Tying the evaluation plan to the program
logic model and action plan ensures that all program staff understands the plan, evaluation activities will be conducted as part of the ongoing program work, and evaluation results will be available to enable midcourse adjustments to the program. Each of these steps is discussed below.

a. Select program strategies, goals, and activities

At this point, the group must consider the key issues identified in the problem analysis. Keeping in mind the long-range goals, the group should use the information collected in the review of prior work and theory to match solutions to the identified problems. While a comprehensive program will address several strategic goals with various initiatives, it is often necessary to prioritize one or a few related problems and work on a set of solutions for those issues. The group may choose a problem based on its impact, severity, or a variety of other considerations. Early in the life of a coalition, the group may decide it is important to tackle an issue that is relatively straightforward and mutable in order to achieve an early success and thereby build support for more complex efforts.

As noted above, well-researched college-based prevention programs are comparatively rare. Since the science is still emerging, planners most often must create an intervention based on knowledge from prior evaluation studies combined with lessons learned from practice, theory, and logic.

Considering the problems identified earlier, planners should choose an overall strategy and then articulate specific goals and activities. The next step is to specify exactly how the activities will lead to the desired outcomes. A program logic model is one tool planners find useful.

b. Create a program “logic model”

A logic model is a diagram that shows the program planners’ common-sense understanding of how and why program activities will lead to program goals. A good time to construct a logic model is following the tentative selection of program activities but prior to their implementation. Constructing a logic model as a part of
this planning process makes explicit how the planned activities will lead to the ultimate goals for these efforts (e.g., decreased high-risk drinking). Planning a prevention program is a complex undertaking; even experienced professionals often find that the first draft of a logic model reveals flaws in the logical sequence of the program. A logic model allows these flaws to be corrected on paper before implementing program activities in the field.

While there are various possible structures for logic models, one format is known as a “theory of change” model (Weiss, 1998) (see Figure 1 for an example). Start by listing the program’s long-range goals on the far right side of a sheet of paper and each of the program activities on the far left. Then connect the two by articulating the chain of events between the activities and the goals. The key is for each link in the chain to specify a change that is expected to occur, rather than the program activity that is expected to cause the change. So, for example, rather than state “training for servers” (activity), say “increase server skills to refuse service to intoxicated patrons” (change). Planners can create a separate chain of events to show how each activity leads to desired outcomes, and then compile the diagrams into one larger model; it is common to find that the goals converge towards the right side of the model. When the model is complete, it represents the team’s commonsense understanding of how the program activities will lead to program outcomes.

c. Plan for evaluation

Evaluation is a formal process for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information about a program’s implementation, impact, and/or effectiveness. Basic program evaluation questions include: 1) What are we doing? (“process” evaluation); 2) What is the result of a specific prevention activity? (“outcome” evaluation); and 3) What effect are we having across all prevention activities? (“impact” or “summative” evaluation) (Muraskin, 1993). The purpose of conducting evaluation is to provide information to help improve the program and to assess whether a program has accomplished its goals and objectives.
While a full discussion of evaluation planning is beyond the scope of this paper, a few issues are critical to mention. First, planners should construct the evaluation plan before the program activities are implemented to ensure that the expected outcomes are reasonable and measurable. Incorporating evaluation will sharpen everyone's thinking about the program: its mission, its goals, its objectives, and the activities designed to meet those objectives. Used in this way, evaluation planning can be a valuable management tool.

Second, the evaluation plan should be closely linked with the program design. In fact, a theory of change model is an ideal basis for an evaluation plan. Because this model articulates the set of changes that are expected to occur as a result of the program, the evaluation can be designed to measure some or all of those changes. The ease of translating this type of model to an evaluation plan is a key advantage of this format, compared to other logic model structures.

To translate the program theory model into an evaluation plan, first make sure that each step in the model is worded as an outcome, that is, the changes that are expected to occur. Use of the terms “increase” or “decrease” usually signal an outcome, although occasionally other language might be more appropriate, such as “create a new policy.” Once this is done, think of an indicator for each outcome. The key questions are: “What evidence could be obtained to show that the outcome was accomplished? What could you see, hear, or be told that would verify the change had occurred?”

Next, consider possible sources of data for each indicator. Data sources include surveys, official records, observation, document reviews, interviews, focus groups and other sources. Examine how other researchers have measured the indicator, what data are accessible, and the accuracy and quality of those data. Other factors to weigh include the cost and feasibility of obtaining the data. An experienced evaluator can help choose the best indicators and data sources.

Finally, the evaluation plan includes decisions about research design. The goal of research design is increase confidence that observed outcomes are a result of program activities rather than some other factor. For example, evaluators will
often study a comparison group or community so they can compare the outcomes observed in participants who experienced the program with those who did not. Other design decisions include the timing of data collection; choice of study subjects; measurement methods; and what other information might be needed to refute other possible explanations for the findings. Again, most practitioners will want to consult with a trained evaluator to help with these decisions.

**Focusing the Evaluation**

Most often, time and resources limit the evaluation data that can be gathered and analyzed. An essential task of the evaluation planning process is to choose among possible areas of focus. It is critical to involve all stakeholders who will use the evaluation data to determine their priority questions about the program. Those involved in day-to-day operations of the program may have very different questions about the program compared to the administrators who are funding the program or other decision-makers, so the needs of those stakeholders will need to be balanced. Other factors that will influence the evaluation design include the resources available for the study, the feasibility and scientific accuracy of various research methods for answering the questions of interest, and ethical considerations.

5. **Implement program activities and evaluate whether goals were achieved**

A well-written strategic plan that includes an evaluation plan greatly facilitates program implementation and evaluation. The major decisions have been made during the planning phase. Thus, the group can focus on adherence to the plan, successful implementation of each step, troubleshooting, and making adjustments as needed. Meaningful change can be difficult, and the team will have its hands full in carrying out the program activities. However, their efforts are supported by a shared understanding of the program’s activities, goals, and evaluation plan.
Hiring an Outside Evaluator

Many non-researchers do not feel equipped to conduct a program evaluation themselves and therefore decide to hire a professional evaluator. As noted above, evaluation should be planned from the beginning of the program, as it is being developed. Thus, an outside evaluator must be involved early in the process to aid in articulating the program’s goals and objectives and to help create a logic model, since this process may alter the project design.

Establishing a good work relationship begins by selecting an evaluator who will be a good fit with existing staff. Be sure to interview an evaluator just as you would any potential employee. Ask them to describe their work on similar projects, discuss any expectations or concerns ahead of time, and assess the evaluator’s responses. Be sure to check references. Consider creating a written agreement specifying how the relationship will work (Langford and DeJong, 2001).

No matter which evaluator is selected, the collaboration will work best if the non-evaluators on the team are conversant with evaluation concepts. Program staff should expect to work closely with the evaluator to help to articulate the program goals and objectives, and will need to devote time and energy to the systematic recordkeeping that high-quality evaluation requires. Evaluation should not be viewed as a burden, but as an integral part of day-to-day operations.

Realistic Expectations

While conducting full-scale controlled research studies is beyond the budget limitations of most small campus programs, planners do have an obligation to monitor the processes and outcomes of their programs to ensure that the program is being conducted as planned and resources are well-spent. At a minimum, planners should have well-defined program goals and a clear understanding of how planned activities will lead to those goals. Using the theory of change model as a basis, practitioners can then seek low-cost methods to monitor the changes articulated by the model. Examples include having program staff or interns record program activities and examine process and outcomes using data that are already collected
by campus and community agencies. Many campuses have found cost-effective ways to conduct a yearly student survey, including working with faculty or using the services of the Core Institute, a survey group located at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Case Example

See the presentation materials for a case example using this planning and evaluation process.
REFERENCES


