A.H.A. Moments

Assessment-Informed Holistic Advising

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DIA
Higher Education Collaborators

Introduction & Background

Noncognitive skills have been extensively shown to predict student success outcomes both generally across the educational lifespan and specifically in higher education (Markle et al., 2013; Poropat, 2009; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012; Robbins et al., 2004). Moreover, initiatives such as *grit* and *growth mindset* have become popular paradigms for educators seeking to gain a more holistic perspective of student potential.

The suggestion of this research is that noncognitive factors should be used by institutions to better understand and support students. But how? While high quality measurements of noncognitive skills exist (e.g., Markle et al., 2013; Markle & Holzman, 2022; Robbins et al., 2004), evidence of their validity has mostly focused on (a) the establishment of a strong theoretical background, (b) the demonstration of strong statistical measures of reliability and validity (e.g., factor analyses, structural equation models), and (c) correlations with external variables, such as student success outcomes (i.e., predictive efficacy).

One potential guide comes from the assessment and measurement field, where *theories of action* (ToA) have been proposed as a means of defining and evaluating the validity of assessment use, rather than mere measurement quality (e.g., Bennett, 2010; Sireci, 2015). These theories of action ask assessment providers to articulate:

- **Assessment components**: Elements of the assessment that provide data and information, such as items, score reports, and supplemental resources.
- **Action mechanisms**: Uses of those assessment components by both examinees and other score users.
- **Impacts**: The short-term, intermediate, and broader impacts of that assessment use across multiple constituencies, including society as a whole.

The Appendix contains a ToA related to ISSAQ – a model for integrating noncognitive assessment into higher education student success strategies (Markle & Holzman, 2022). Like many other noncognitive assessments, the ToA involves a student support mechanism - often embodied on college campuses by advisors, coaches, or counselors – which helps students interpret results, establish an action plan, and connect with resources that can improve their likelihood of success.

However, this onus on "advising" (used here to refer to the broad category of faculty and staff who have direct conversations with students about their success) is confronted by two major challenges. The first is that advising is already an essential function of institutions, but one that is over-burdened and under-resourced (e.g., CCSSE, 2018). Even this expectation of ISSAQ – that is, that advisors should be the ones to have conversations with students about noncognitive skills – is an example of placing yet another expectation on advisors.

The second challenge is its competition with other advising models. Indeed, few institutions of higher education have advising resources that are without meaningful goals and strategy. Existing approaches include Terry O'Banion's foundational advising model (O'Banion, 2012) and transformational (as opposed to "transactional") advising (e.g., Johnson, 2022), among others (e.g., Cuseo, 2003).

Ultimately, if noncognitive factors are to help higher education improve (rather than merely better understand) students' success, then understanding their value, role, and use by faculty and staff is essential.

The ToA proposed here is just one example. Essentially, as it relates to advising, the ToA hypothesizes three essential applications of noncognitive data in the context of student support broadly and advising/coaching/counseling specifically:

1. Identifying levels of support through predictive analytics so that advisors can target their outreach appropriately.
2. Providing a language of student strengths and challenges that can be used to structure conversations with students.
3. Facilitate connections between students and available resources, based on their strengths and challenges, both through individual conversations and other mechanisms (e.g., program outreach).

Project Scope

The goal of this project is three-fold. First, if ISSAQ is to be presented as a framework for delivering assessment-informed holistic advising support that improves student success, DIA needs to better understand how such data are used, as well as the perceived value of that use. Second, assuming value and use is established, DIA should understand which data, resources, and practices are perceived as particularly helpful and effective by advisors. Third, findings about use, general value, and specific tactics should be developed into training resources that disseminate promising practices across the higher education community.

Thus, this project seeks to contribute to the third objective – training resources – through a study of the first two objectives. DIA will seek to gain input from advisors using four guiding questions:

1. What is your role in a student's success?
2. What information do you use in your conversations with students?
3. When meeting with students, how do you spend your time?

4. What do you do in your work with students that you think is particularly beneficial for students?

These questions will be answered through two general approaches. First, an open-ended survey will be distributed, focusing first on colleges and universities currently using ISSAQ, but also distributed widely across the field (e.g., through social media). Second, DIA will work to engage extensively with specific institutions, conducting focus groups and interviews to gather data on these questions.

Expectations

For individuals participating in the individual survey, a reward (e.g., a $100 Amazon gift card given away for every 100 responses) will be offered. Participants will also be given an opportunity to request a preliminary copy of the project's results.

For institutions willing to engage more extensively, DIA will provide a report of local findings (relative to the overall population and results) as well as early access to any deliverables or training materials this project yields.

Deliverables

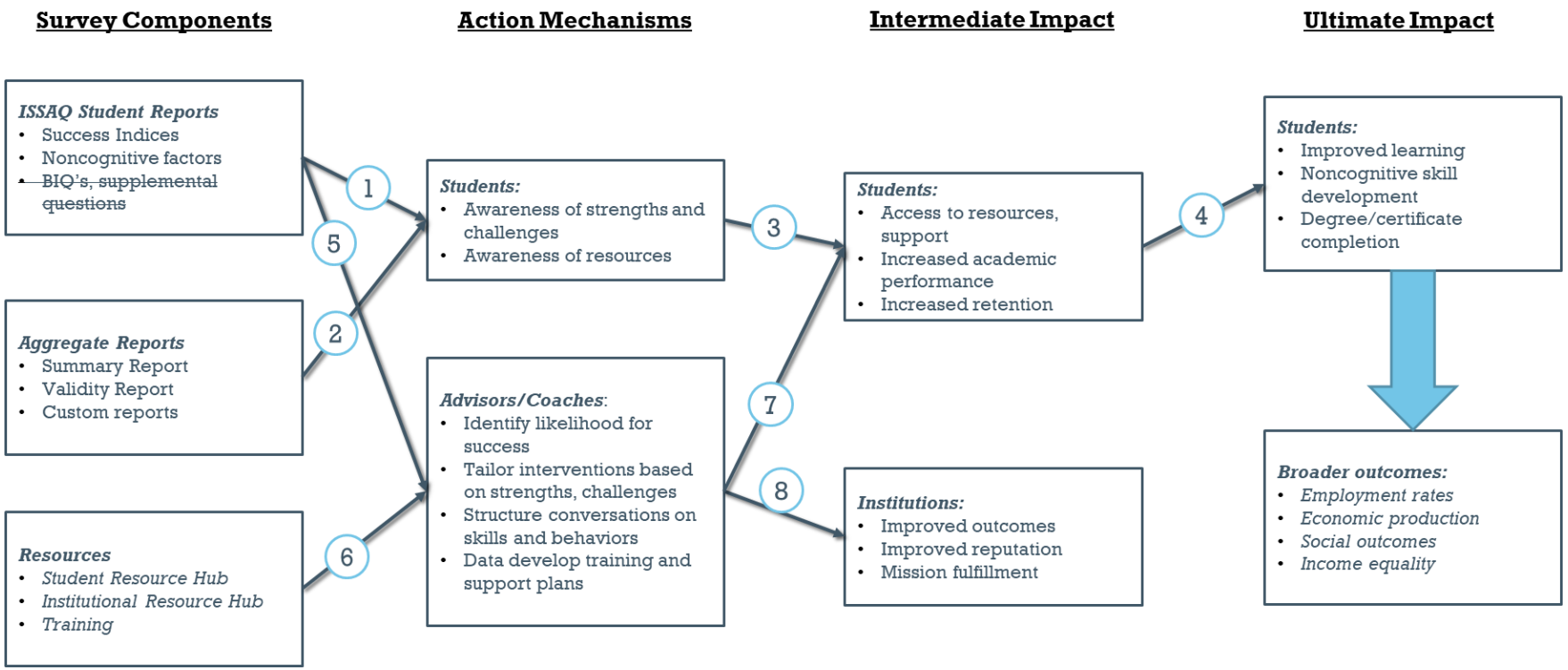
There are three primary deliverables that DIA expects from this work:

1. A summary report, outlining the overall findings, seeking to provide guidance to the field on the viability of assessment-informed holistic advising.
2. A webinar to share results quickly and easily with the field at large.
3. The creation of training materials to improve service to ISSAQ users.

Timeline

- November 1-15, 2023: Create survey, recruit partner institutions
- November 16, 2023 – January 10, 2024: Gather survey data
- November 16, 2023 – Feb 1, 2024: Conduct at least two campus visits
- Feb 21, 2024: First draft of report shared with survey participants
- March 1, 2024: Results webinar
- March 15, 2024: Local Institutional Reports Shared

Appendix: ISSAQ ToA



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