Assessment Spotlight: Student Life Data Dive with University Recreation

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Collecting and reviewing data are critical parts of any assessment process. Within Student Life at The University of Alabama, the Assessment & Planning department (A&P: Tim Salazar, Sam Payton, Suja Rajan) coordinates "data dive" sessions to help programs with those activities. Through a divisional database that is continuously updated, program staff can explore trends, answer key questions, and drill down into student data to gather actionable insights. Those insights translate into specific changes and interventions designed to enhance program effectiveness.

Recently, the A&P team conducted a data dive with key University Recreation staff (UREC: Laura Thomas, Domonique Dunn, Brooke Turner). UREC serves students and the greater UA community by providing programmatic opportunities to foster health, well-being, and inclusion—for example, intramural sports, sports clubs, and exercise classes. As with other departments in Student Life, their desired outcomes dovetail with Division goals—including strong student engagement, retention, and success across demographic groups.

A data dive is a dynamic meeting that's driven by inquiry, curiosity, and exploration. The UREC team

began with simple questions (e.g., *How many students participated in intramurals last year?*). That led to a flurry of more detailed questions—*How does that compare to previous years? Can we disaggregate by race and gender? What about in-state versus out-of-state?* Through skilled use of analytic software (JMP), the A&P team quickly displayed answers on the big screen in the form of tables and graphs. The UREC team took notes, and each analysis was saved for further review/sharing.

UREC offers dozens of programs and serves tens of thousands of students. Without big data, it would be impossible for staff members to see the whole picture and gauge the impact of their collective efforts. During the data dive, participation patterns were disaggregated in dozens of ways to identify longitudinal trends and underrepresented subgroups. The team explored success variables and was pleased to find that over several years, the GPAs of students participating in UREC programs have been (on average) higher than those of non-participating students. Many patterns were consistent with staff observations and/or national trends, but that wasn't always the case. At one point, someone hesitated to ask what she called a "nosy" data question. The response? *Be as nosy as you want; that's why we're here!*

It's empowering to ask key questions about program effectiveness and have them answered on the fly. However, that's not the end of the assessment process. The last part of the UREC data dive was a "What now?" segment. The saved analyses would be shared with the full UREC department and used to develop plans for program improvement. *How can we better achieve our goals? How can we reach and engage underrepresented students?* Thanks to the data dive, UREC is positioned to address such questions and make informed, data-driven changes whose impact can be monitored over time.