

**The Insight**

“Should we call our efforts to learn about programs and outcomes “research” or “assessment”? The name can make all the difference. And trying to adhere to the standards of research may get in the way of doing effective assessment.”

**Implications**

Understanding the differences between research and assessment studies can help decision makers better utilize data from assessment studies and avoid developing policies and practices based solely on intuition, prejudice and preconceived notions.

“So the question becomes, when it comes to the usefulness of a study for policy and practice, is a study with substantial limitations better than no study at all?”

**Assessment vs. Research:  
 Why we should care about the difference**

Assessment experts often refer to the assessment cycle as synonymous with the research cycle, and many elements of this ring true. Both types of studies gather and interpret data to answer specific questions, may use quantitative or qualitative methods, analyze evidence, and evaluate hypotheses. The focus of this Learning Insight is an article by Upcraft & Schuh (2002) that outlines significant differences between research and assessment studies that are important for anyone using assessment results to inform decision making in higher education.

Assessment studies guide good practice, but unlike research studies, do not develop theories or test concepts. Failure to understand this fundamental difference may result in assessment studies being disregarded simply because they do not adhere to strict research protocols, even though they provide valuable information for decision making and practice. The authors point out that decisions will be made with or without data, so it is better to understand how assessment studies differ from research and start using them appropriately, than not at all.

The table below is my summary of the key differences between research and assessment studies presented in Upcraft & Schuh (2002) and my “take away” from each:

	RESEARCH STUDIES	ASSESSMENT STUDIES
RESOURCE LIMITATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations for faculty to engage; funding available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fewer expectations for faculty to engage; underfunded</li> </ul>
	<i>Take Away: Faculty and staff may need more training and support for designing and interpreting assessment studies</i>	
TIME LIMITATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be designed to provide sufficient time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longitudinal studies often not feasible</li> </ul>
	<i>Take Away: Assessment designs must be modified to fit shorter timelines for policy and practice needs</i>	
ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mostly independent of changing organizational contexts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject to changes in institutional leadership &amp; organizational priorities</li> </ul>
	<i>Take Away: Assessment agendas must be flexible and study designs adaptable</i>	
DESIGN LIMITATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May adjust and start over when flaws occur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More pressure to salvage project when flaws occur</li> </ul>
	<i>Take Away: Assessment design limitations must be clearly identified and appropriately considered with results</i>	
POLITICAL CONTEXTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mostly apolitical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political context influences design</li> </ul>
	<i>Take Away: The “good enough rule” is reality – choose the best design possible to produce useful, credible results, but don’t dwell on getting it perfect</i>	

Source: M. L. Upcraft & J. H. Schuh (2002). Assessment vs. research: Why we should care about the difference. *About Campus*, 7(1), 16-20.