

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
STUDENT
DEVELOPMENTAL
ASSESSMENT CENTER

An evidence-based program to develop, enhance, and evaluate the skills of students and staff



Industrial Organizational Psychology
Association of Colorado

Colorado State University Student Developmental Assessment Center (CSU-SDAC)

A developmental assessment center is an integrated program of skill practice, assessment, feedback, developmental planning, and follow-up activities directed at enhancing behavioral skills of undergraduate students in areas of competence needed for success in school and the workforce. Many colleges and universities are moving toward a competency-based assessment system to better prepare their students for entry into the workforce or more advanced education. The CSU-SDAC is a flexible program that was designed to help colleges and universities address such needs. The program builds on the long history of validated behavioral simulation procedures of the assessment center method used extensively in organizations around the world for over 50 years.

Objectives of the CSU-SDAC

The Colorado State University - Student Development Center can be used to:

- Develop individual student's behavioral competencies
- Diagnose individual student's strengths and developmental needs and prescribe training activities
- Assess academic program outcomes.

The program provides a means to assess and develop a number of academic and professional competencies in the areas of decision-making, interpersonal relations, and communication.

Development

The primary objective of the CSU-SDAC is to develop students' competencies. Whereas most university programs (i.e., departments and majors) provide education in their respective disciplines, few provide systematic training in important competencies such as decision-making and interpersonal skills.

Assessment and Diagnosis

The program involves an initial behavioral assessment of each individual student's strengths and weaknesses. Then trained assessors provide feedback and help the participants plan their improvement for the second assessment. The second assessment is an additional opportunity for participants to demonstrate change in behaviors. Following this assessment, the trained assessors provide a second behavioral assessment and diagnosis. Finally, the assessors help participants plan suggestions subsequent action steps for improvement.

Outcomes Assessment

Universities are increasingly asked to provide systematic assessment of academic outcomes beyond course grades. The CSU–SDAC is a tool to help departments assess and document the competency of students’ skills in “quasi-academic” areas of expertise. In contrast to the narrow focus provided by traditional methods—such as class grades, achievement test scores, and portfolio reviews—the CSU–SDAC provides behavioral assessment of a broader and more flexible set of competencies than traditional assessment methods.

Who Could Use the CSU-SDAC?

The CSU–SDAC provides a program that is useful to a variety of units in colleges and universities that wish to develop, assess, and document student competencies.

Department

The educational objectives of many academic departments state that students will demonstrate improved skills such as problem solving, communications, and interpersonal effectiveness, yet few departments have a method to develop and document these improvements for reports to accrediting agencies.

Programs of Leadership Development

University-wide programs in leadership development often include lectures, projects, and mentorship support. The CSU–SDAC process provides structured opportunities for participants to practice and receive feedback on many of the skills important for effective leadership, including participation in group decision making and communication.

Student Development Offices

These offices often provide services to teach the concepts problem solving, planning and organizing one’s time, etc. The CSU–SDAC can be used to give students actual practice and feedback on specific behavior in these competencies related to university and life success.

Residence Hall Staff

Resident hall assistants (RA) need to have competencies in communication with diverse student groups. The CSU–SDAC provides a method to (a) assess the level of these skills in candidates at time of application, and (b) development of these skills during initial training or as an in-service developmental experience for continuing RAs.

Pre-Professional Groups

The program is helpful to pre-professional groups—such as nursing and construction management—develop skills in the areas of interpersonal communication and project management.

Student-Run On-Campus Groups

Much of the success of these groups is dependent on the skills of the groups' officers, who must have the skills of decision-making, planning and organizing, communication, etc. The CSU-SDAC can help develop these skills.

Background on the Assessment Center Method

There is a long history of research and successful implementation of the assessment center method in a variety of organizational settings (Thornton & Byham, 1982; Thornton & Rupp, 2006). Scores of studies have documented the validity of the method to predict performance, to diagnosis strengths and weaknesses, and to enhance professional competencies.

The assessment center method has been used in a variety of university settings (Johnson & Thornton, 2005, 2006), including schools of business and departments of psychology. The most extensive application of the assessment center method in undergraduate education has been in place at Alverno College in Milwaukee for over 20 years.

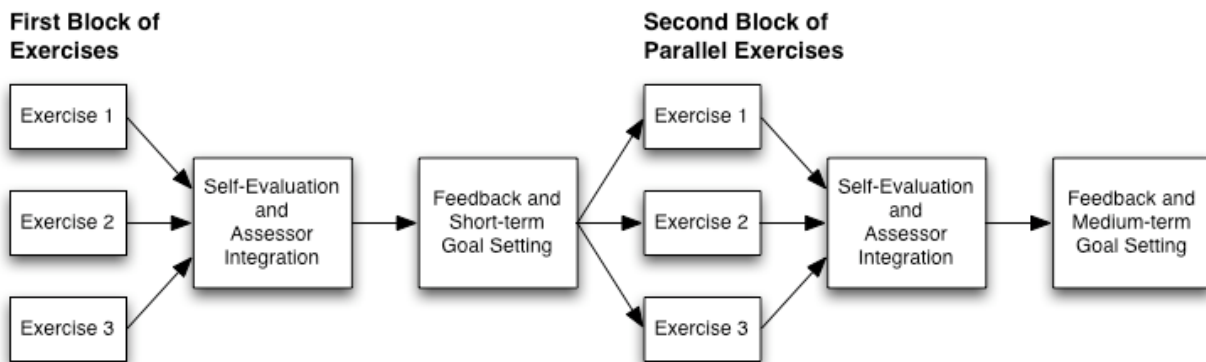
Structure of the CSU – SDAC

The CSU-SDAC program includes a completely integrated set of materials for immediate implementation.

Overview

As outlined in the model below, students participate in two parallel sets of three exercises. Following the first set of exercises, assessors meet to integrate observations while students carry out self-assessment and set objectives for the next exercises, and then hold the first feedback session. Following the second set of exercises, assessors and students engage in another evaluation session where feedback/planning session is held, this time with the focus on what follow-up training is needed.

SDAC Process Model



Dimensions

The dimensions that are assessed in the CSU–SDAC include competencies that have found to be important through careful examination of many objectives of academic departments. In addition, an extensive survey (Potemra, 2008) of colleges and universities revealed a select number of competencies that are considered important and developable. By “developable” we mean that students and faculty believe the dimension was amenable to change with reasonable guidance and effort. The host university adopting the CSU–SDAC can select among standard dimensions provided in the program and/or substitute other dimensions.

Exercises

Two scenarios provide the settings for observation of student behavior: Resident Hall Assistant and Service Learning in Senior Center. In both scenarios the participant engages in three organizational simulations: a leaderless group discussion, a written case study, and an oral presentation.

These exercises were built to elicit behaviors relevant to the dimensions targeted in the program. They were designed to be face-valid for university students, challenging for freshmen and seniors, and appropriate for majors in any academic field. The scenarios and exercises were built in conformance with many principles espoused in Thornton and Mueller-Hanson’s (2004) book *Building Organizational Simulations*.

Observation and Evaluation Methods

Assessors are provided forms for the observation and evaluation of behaviors relevant to the dimensions being assessed. Methods for multiple assessors to integrate their observations are provided.

Assessor Training Methods and Materials

Competent assessors are one key to the success of this program. The optimal ratio of participants to assessors is 1 to 1, but a successful program can be run with a ratio of 2 to 1. A complete set of instructions to train assessors is provided. These include training in basic assessment skills of observation, recording, and evaluation of behavior using principles of frame-of-reference training; definitions of the competencies to be assessed; explanation and practice with the scenarios and exercises in the CSU–SDAC; procedures for integrating observations; methods of giving feedback and planning behavioral improvements in subsequent settings; lists of developmental follow-up activities.

Assessors can include professors, student development staff, graduate students, undergraduate students, and members of the community.

Planning Documents

Forms are provided for participants to conduct self-critique and goal setting, and forms for assessors to observe, record, and evaluate behavior and to provide feedback to participants.

Feedback Suggestions

Tips for helping assessors give feedback to participants after each set of exercises, and then to facilitate a discussion of developmental activities are provided.

Follow up Developmental Activities

For each of several dimensions, suggestions for developmental experiences are provided. These follow-up activities include:

- University courses
- Books
- Articles
- Websites
- Training programs
- Self-initiated activities

The host organization can supplement the list with developmental activities available in your own locale.

Alternative Schedules

The SDAC can be implemented in different configurations. The materials describe a one-day schedule for administration of the two scenarios. In addition, the program can be spread out over two half-days, split into smaller modules administered over a semester or quarter, or embedded in a more complex process of leadership development.

Administrative Support

The materials include an Administrator's Handbook, which contains information to help the administrator organize and run the program. Two lists are provided to help the administrator of the program implement the CSU-SDAC:

1. A list of suggestions for running specific parts of assessor training and administration of the CSU-SDAC itself, and
2. A list of facilities and materials the administrator should provide for implementing a program, e.g., meeting rooms, copies of exercises and forms, pencils, etc.

Purchasing Agreement

The Colorado State University Student Development Assessment Center may be purchased for \$1,000. The purchasing organization will receive a hard copy of all materials in a three-ring binder and on a CD-R. The purchasing organization may make copies of the materials to assess as many participants as it wishes. The purchasing organization may make revisions to the materials, for example, revise the list of dimensions evaluated or revise the matrix of follow-up developmental experiences.

To purchase the CSU-SDAC, please submit a check for \$1,000 made payable to Industrial-Organizational Psychology Association of Colorado, and send to:

Dr. George C. Thornton III
Department of Psychology
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523

For more information, please contact Psych_SDAC@mail.colostate.edu or 970-491-5233.

References

- Potemra, M., Thornton, G., Rupp, D., & Holub, S. (2008, April). University student development: An investigation of students' improvability beliefs. Paper presented at the 23rd Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial & Organizational Psychology, San Francisco, CA.
- Thornton, G.C. III & Byham, W.C. (1982). *Assessment centers and managerial performance*. New York: Academic Press
- Thornton, G.C. III & Mueller-Hanson, R.A. (2004). *Developing organizational simulations: A guide for practitioners and students*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Thornton, G.C. III & Rupp, D.E. (2006). *Assessment centers in human resource management: Strategies for prediction, diagnosis, and development*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum

Acknowledgements

The CSU-SDAC was developed, pilot tested, and packaged through the collaborative efforts of many undergraduate and graduate students at Colorado State University and University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

Program Development Supervisor

George C. Thornton III

Developable Dimensions Surveys

Matt Walter
Mike Potemra
Silke Holub
Manuela Kloibhofer

Assessor Training Development

Lori Anderson Snyder
Sang Eun Woo

Simulation Exercise Construction

Lee Wee Boh
Alyssa Gibbons
Zhiwen Ng
Seth Spain
Sang Eun Woo
Rongchum Zhu

Exercise Pilot Testing

Matt Walter

Final Program Beta Testing

Lauren Duarte