

### Collectively Defining our Professional Identity in Higher Education Assessment

*"Tell me with whom you associate, and I will tell you who you are.  
If I know what your business is, I know what can be made of you." - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

**“T**he practice of assessment in higher education has evolved substantially since its inception in the mid-1980’s. In the beginning, assessment scholars focused on tasks, such as defining the term “assessment” and exploring ways of incorporating assessment processes into higher education. Nearly 40 years later, assessment professionals have shifted the focus from compliance to student learning and improvement, while balancing accreditation requirements. The professionals who engage in this work bring countless combinations of education, experience, and skill sets with them, fulfilling the assessment needs of their respective institutions. But are these needs and the role of an assessment professional the same from one institution to the next? There are multiple professional organizations, graduate and certificate programs, professional development and training, textbooks, peer-reviewed journals and other publications focused on assessment in higher education. Yet there is no clear definition of who we are as assessment professionals in higher education. The topic of professional identity has gained momentum in the past few years in assessment-related publications and conferences, which sparked the idea of this special issue of RPA.

We started by reaching out to our assessment colleagues who have published or presented on this topic and asked if they would be interested in submitting an article. Through a series of empirical and theoretical articles, the authors delved into the question of higher education assessment professionals’ evolving identity. The special issue begins with a theoretical piece; Penn discusses the elements of a discipline and its evolution, using library science as an example

and explores the progress of higher education assessment as a discipline. In the second article, Morrow and colleagues summarize findings from a national survey of assessment professionals in higher education exploring what skills and dispositions they perceived to be most important in their work. Next, Hundley discusses how a distributed leadership approach may influence and support assessment professional identity. Finally, Prendergast and colleagues conclude the special issue by synthesizing the perspectives of six leaders in higher education assessment, exploring the evolving role of assessment practitioners, professional identity, and how they are positioned in the field at large.

We hope this special issue kindles the flame and encourages continuous, spirited inquiry surrounding the topic of professional identity in higher education assessment. Thank you for reading, and we look forward to engaging the ongoing evolution of our profession!

Regards,

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Guest Editors  
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