

Abstract

Assessment practitioners in higher education follow a variety of paths to their roles. Diverse preparation supports creative problem-solving in a changing educational landscape. However, it can also lead to inconsistency in language, preparation, and background knowledge. Further, the chasms between assessment practitioners' paths can lead to confused professional identity: who are "assessment professionals"? What do they do? What do they value? How do they understand their roles? This manuscript seeks to elucidate how expert assessment practitioners understand assessment, its role in the modern university, and the future of its practitioner community. Six established voices in higher education assessment provided responses to questions exploring assessment in higher education, the practitioner's role and identity, and the relationships between practitioners and the institutions in which they work. Their contributions indicate the primacy of interpersonal skills and position the diverse pathways to assessment work as an asset to the practitioner community.



Fields, Professions, and Disciplines: Exploring Professional Identity in Assessment

Higher education assessment has long been a strange and unintended professional home for many of its practitioners. As Curtis et al. (2020) note, undergraduate and graduate students rarely set out with the intention to become assessment practitioners. Instead, practitioners follow diverse and unstandardized paths to their assessment roles (Curtis et al., 2020; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018; Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019). While some practitioners may enter the field through formal training routes (e.g., graduate coursework in higher education, assessment, and/or educational measurement), the more common path is to accrue assessment responsibilities through service obligations and then seek conferences, webinars, books, and journal articles to aid in on-the-job learning (Curtis et al., 2020). Nicholas and Slotnick's (2018) survey of assessment professionals found that most respondents held degrees in education and the social sciences, although their areas of specialty ranged widely. Because of this broad array of pathways to assessment work, a common sense of identity as assessment professionals may be difficult to discern. Different professional backgrounds, degrees, orientations toward research, and frameworks for understanding education are likely to lead to different perspectives on how—and why—assessment should be conducted.

As assessment work continues to crystallize into a formal career path and domain of scholarly work, conversations have arisen about the benefits and consequences of these varied entry points. Diversity of training and experience creates rich fodder for creative problem-solving in an ever-changing educational landscape. However, it also

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leads to inconsistency in language, preparation, and background knowledge. Further, the chasms between assessment professionals' paths can lead to confused professional identity: who are "assessment professionals"? What do they do? What do they value? And how do they understand their roles? Previous research has argued that ill-defined answers to these questions might lead to confusion among new and experienced assessment professionals, both as they evaluate job opportunities and as they define their positions within an institution (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Conversely, others have argued that diverse disciplinary backgrounds within the community of assessment practitioners should be seen as a strength, as they provide opportunities for deeper connections with faculty and staff partners (e.g., Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019; Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). This manuscript provides reflections upon these questions from leaders in the field of assessment. Given that higher education assessment lacks a governing body and professional standards, practitioners' perspectives are a useful method of understanding the profession's past, present, and future.

One explanation for the fragmented sense of identity in higher education assessment is the wide array of responsibilities, foci, and epistemological orientations across assessment practitioners (Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Stated simply, the people who do this work view their jobs differently. For example, Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) broadly defined "assessment practitioners" as the people responsible for leadership and coordination of course-, program-, and institution-level assessment and reporting (p. 79). Underneath that umbrella, they identified five major roles practitioners may adopt (or be asked to fill) by examining assessment job postings and interviewing four leaders in assessment. The *assessment/method expert* is well-versed in methodological considerations ranging from assessment design to data analysis. The *narrator/translator* is able to bridge the language of assessment with that of key stakeholders to facilitate conversations and understanding. The *facilitator/guide* acts as a mentor to those people conducting assessment, guiding colleagues through the assessment process and linking the efforts of centers for teaching and learning, student affairs divisions, and academic faculty. The *political navigator* has a keen eye for policy considerations, navigating campus leadership as well as state, federal, and accreditation demands. Finally, the *visionary/believer* advocates for the power of assessment in improving student learning and strives for innovation in higher education systems. Similar roles were found by Ariovich et al. (2018), who also added two new roles: the *change agent* and the *project manager*. Respectively, practitioners fulfilling these roles advocate for assessment-driven change and provide logistical coordination for assessment work.

Both Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) and Ariovich et al. (2018) acknowledge that these roles often overlap, and a given practitioner may find themselves fulfilling different roles in different situations. However, it is clear that the roles require different skills, domains of expertise, and dispositions. Further, Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) and Ariovich et al. (2018) largely focused on assessment practitioners' relationships to colleagues, the faculty and staff with whom they partnered, and university administration. These relationships broadly define the day-to-day work of the assessment practitioner, but this work is also situated within a broader community of practice. How do assessment practitioners identify with each other and with the community of people conducting similar work at other universities, given that their responsibilities, roles, and responsibilities may operate in very different corners of the domain? How do individual assessment practitioners conceptualize themselves as part of a larger network of assessment practitioners?

Professional training, too, exhibits wide variation among assessment practitioners. Explicit graduate training in assessment, evaluation, measurement, statistics, and psychometrics is fairly rare among people employed in assessment-related roles, although graduate programs in these domains do exist. For example, Nunley et al. (2011) found that most community college assessment practitioners who responded to their survey had some graduate training in quantitative or qualitative research, but only about a third had completed graduate coursework in assessment or program evaluation. However, formal graduate training is far from the only path to developing assessment skills: Ariovich et al. (2018) found that assessment practitioners use varied professional development opportunities—conferences, webinars, journals, training, blogs, and social media—to improve their skills. Without a

unified concept of the competencies acquired for assessment work or a clearly identified professional community, it is difficult or impossible to determine which of these approaches (if any) provides adequate preparation for assessment practitioners.

Of course, a lack of specific graduate training in assessment does not preclude strong foundations in quantitative or qualitative research, research methods, or other relevant domains. Assessment does not hold primary ownership over these skill sets. Many assessment practitioners enter their roles after obtaining terminal degrees in other academic disciplines, gradually developing an interest in assessment (or being assigned assessment responsibilities) in addition to their primary interests. Such varied paths to assessment work provide a rich diversity of approaches, methods, and perspectives (Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019), but they also contribute to unclear definitions of the domain.

This manuscript seeks to elucidate how expert assessment practitioners understand assessment, its evolution, and its community of practitioners. Six established higher education assessment practitioners responded to questions about professional identity in the field. The contributors to this article were selected based on their status as well-regarded experts within the domain. Each contributor has worked as an assessment professional in higher education for a significant portion of their career. They each contribute to professional communities through their scholarship, mentorship, leadership, and facilitation of conferences, professional organizations, and publications. Contributors were purposively sampled to represent respected voices from various corners of the assessment world: leaders from national and regional assessment professional organizations, facilitators of major assessment conferences, directors of research and professional development institutes, and leading voices in higher education and student affairs. The contributions provided by these experts reflect their perspectives and not necessarily those of their institutions.

Responses from the panelists were solicited via email. Each panelist was sent a list of nine questions organized into three major themes: the profession at large, the practitioner, and evolution of the assessment role (see Appendix A for the full question list). Questions were developed in collaboration with two assessment experts who have conducted research and produced scholarly work regarding identity in the assessment field and the role of the assessment practitioner. Panelists were asked to respond to at least one question from each theme, although some panelists provided additional responses. Questions about the *profession at large* concerned how the panelists conceptualized, defined, and situated the community of assessment practitioners. Questions about the *practitioner* asked panelists to reflect on the practitioner's role on an individual level, including necessary skills, attributes, dispositions, and responsibilities. Questions about the *evolution of the assessment role* considered the past and future of the role of assessment practitioners within higher education. After the responses were submitted by the panelists, they were organized thematically. Common phrases and concepts were used to group responses under each of the three themes.

The Profession

The first question block asked panelists to reflect upon the *profession* of assessment broadly, including their perspectives on defining the community of assessment practitioners. Similar questions have been raised by others in conference presentations (e.g., Penn, 2021) and in the pages of this journal (e.g., Curtis et al., 2020). Assessment has variously been referenced as a profession, a discipline, and a field. These terms carry different weight and imply different levels of consistency, professional training, and cohesion. Post (2009) defined disciplines as academic enterprises identifiable by their attachment to scholarly journals, societies, and degree programs. “Fields” may seep outside of academia (Post, 2009), while the “profession” conjures the image of a job or career. Choices in language reflect differences in how people conceptualize the work of assessment and the community of people who implement and oversee it.

Gavin Henning, past president of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and program director of higher education programs at New England College, argued that assessment is an emerging academic field. Pointing to various professional organizations

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for assessment in higher education (e.g., the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education [AALHE] and Student Affairs Assessment Leaders), special interest groups within broader higher education professional associations, and ethical standards of practice for assessment (e.g., the ACPA/National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Professional Competencies and ACPA's Assessment Skills and Knowledge Standards), Henning predicted that “as the field continues to evolve, there will be more academic degree programs, specialized assessment journals, and a solidification of standards for ethics and practice across the field.” Monica Stitt-Bergh, a former president of AALHE and Specialist of Assessment at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's Assessment and Curriculum Support center, shared a similar vision of the future:

As the field matures, useful models and practice theory will continue to emerge. For example, explanations or predictions of how assessment professionals' actions affect or connect with other actions in particular contexts to produce (or not) the desired outcomes at the student, instructor, and institutional levels.

Stitt-Bergh shared Henning's definition of assessment as a field, but she also considered assessment to be a profession. Crucial to this dual classification is the presence of a scholarly community that can critique itself, develop and investigate new theories, and provide support to practitioners (echoing Post, 2009). Susan Kahn, Director of Planning and Institutional Improvement Initiatives at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), also emphasized the importance of self-reflection and first-hand experience in understanding the assessment community:

Perhaps the best way for me to say it is that assessment is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses both research (on assessment itself as well as on questions about student learning) and professional practice. Assessment professionals and scholars of my generation (Boomers), for the most part, never took a course in assessment or studied higher education in any formal sense. Our expertise comes from our own professional practice, our work with colleagues across many disciplines, the ballooning assessment literature, and our observation of and participation in the development of what is now the field of assessment over the last 35 years.

Linda Townsend, Director of Assessment at Longwood University and president-elect of Virginia Assessment Group, similarly pointed to the prominence of experience-driven knowledge in assessment. She noted that while few of her collaborators have degrees in assessment, “many are recognized for their assessment expertise at state, national, and international levels.” Townsend also pointed to the codification of skill sets in job descriptions as evidence that assessment has been recognized by institutions as a profession, noting that these expectations seem to be driven by the increasingly stringent expectations of regional and professional accreditors.

Conversely, other panelists emphasized the differences across campuses in the demands of the assessment role. Kate McConnell, Vice President for Curricular and Pedagogical Innovation and Executive Director of VALUE at the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), described assessment:

...as a rather diverse collection of potential positions and activities that often are operationally defined locally in unique ways, given the culture and context of individual campuses. I think “field” sounds most appropriate to our current assessment landscape, considering the inherent diversity and range of what an assessment position can entail.

However assessment is conceptualized, Gianina Baker (Assistant Director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment [NILOA]) argues that its practitioners can and should be positioned as leaders within the higher education ecosystem:

With our varied backgrounds and common interest in improving postsecondary education for all, we ask the tough questions, make hard

decisions, decide on which evidence to use in making such decisions, and use our skills learned in our various disciplines to help make up what is the current field of assessment. If truly listened to, we can play extremely important roles in our institution where our voices/evidence are sought before decisions are made. And in turn, our assessment can serve as a place of support, even refuge for some, mainly those hoping to improve their course, program, and/or institution.

In summary, the conversation over the classification of assessment work appears all but settled. However, the panelists pointed to similar characteristics of the domain in explaining their chosen language: a scholarly community, a history of professional experience, and a solidifying core of skills and knowledge that are necessary for effective practice.

The Practitioner

Questions regarding the *practitioner* called for the panelists to reflect upon the qualities, skills, and knowledge that are necessary for successful assessment practice. Given the variation in preparatory paths noted by Townsend and Baker, visualizing an “assessment professional” may conjure a murky image. No degree, professional certification or license, clearly-delineated skill set, or institutional role is held in common by all assessment practitioners. What, then, does an assessment professional look like?

One way to define the assessment professional is to situate their work within their home institution. McConnell recalled two decades of “try[ing] on” ways of describing her work, landing finally upon, “I help colleges and universities demonstrate that the promises they make in their marketing materials—that if you come to our college, we will make you a critical thinker, effective communicator, and lifelong learner—are indeed true.” In this conceptualization of the assessment professional, the purpose of the position is to help shape institutional narratives and hold an honest (though supportive) mirror to the institution itself.

Baker described the appearance of an assessment professional succinctly: “An assessment professional looks like me.” She noted that the combination of her training as a counselor, her experience in qualitative research and evaluation, and her focus on equity in education equip her well for assessment work. Other panelists echoed her sentiment, identifying a variety of skills, dispositions, and habits that create effective assessment professionals. Henning, Townsend, Kahn, and Stitt-Bergh all pointed to the importance of communication skills. Henning and Stitt-Bergh both noted the importance of “translat[ing] the concepts of assessment, which seemed abstract, and mak[ing] them concrete and applicable to myriad functional areas” (Henning). Stitt-Bergh emphasized the importance of being able to explain the “many viable and correct options at each step in an assessment process.” Assessment requires a series of decisions, each with benefits and disadvantages that must be navigated carefully. These panelists emphasized the importance of the assessment professional in both translating and guiding the decision-making process, to echo the language of Jankowski and Slotnick (2015).

Like Stitt-Bergh, Kahn voiced the importance of flexibility and collaboration in describing the key skills and dispositions of an assessment professional. According to Kahn, “it’s essential that assessment professionals be able to bring an open mind and collaborative attitude toward discussions about assessment with faculty and staff. We need to listen more than we talk.” Approaches to student learning, desired outcomes, concerns, disciplinary standards, and forms of evidence may vary across disciplines and people, Kahn says, and being able to address the questions, existing structures, and constraints that faculty and staff bring to the table is an invaluable skill. Failing to do so, opting instead for a uniform approach to assessment:

...is likely to reinforce any tendency for faculty and staff to see assessment as a meaningless bureaucratic exercise. (Indeed, most of the complaints we read or hear about assessment in popular and higher education media are about top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches.) (Kahn)

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The centrality of strong relationships with faculty and staff collaborators echoes the RARE Model (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019) which positions relationship-building, acknowledgement of strengths, reflection, and empowerment as key components to building effective relationships with faculty and staff during the assessment process.

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Other panelists noted the importance of acknowledging the stress often associated with assessment (again, echoing the “relate” and “acknowledge” components of the RARE Model; Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). In reflecting on her career, Townsend recalled faculty and staff expressing gratitude for her patience and kindness as she guided them through assessment planning and reporting. Lack of formal—or, often, informal—training or experience in assessment coupled with faculty and staff service required for assessment responsibilities often leads to anxiety and frustration. Patience from the assessment professional “enables faculty/staff to feel comfortable ask[ing] questions and acknowledg[ing] their needs for further support and resources” (Townsend). Henning and Kahn similarly noted the importance of helping faculty and staff to understand the importance of effective assessment as “a necessary component of effective teaching and learning” (Kahn). In their view, practitioners serve important roles as ambassadors for the utility and importance of assessment.

Evolution of the Assessment Role

The final question block asked the panelists to reflect upon the *evolution of the assessment role* by recalling the changes they have observed over the course of their careers and predicting future shifts as well as barriers to the success of higher education assessment. The role of the assessment professional within the institutional hierarchy varies widely across programs, colleges, and universities. The power held by assessment professionals at all levels has changed dramatically in the past twenty years as assessment has solidified its role in the modern university. In tandem, the roles played by assessment professionals have changed as the field has matured.

In reflecting on her own career, Stitt-Bergh recalled a shift from teaching-centered assessment practice to student-centered learning:

In the 1990s, a substantial part of my position included large-scale placement testing. My role, as an assessment professional, was to sort students into what we deemed the most appropriate curriculum for them. The test was high stakes gatekeeping in that low-scoring students would be required to pay for additional (remedial) coursework or spend additional time in mandatory tutor sessions. My goal was to create the best possible test that would positively impact students’ test preparation. I was very concerned with the fairness of the test, reliability, and validity across student groups. Fast forward 8-10 years: I and others argued that the money and resources spent on the test would be better spent on direct student support. In the literature, the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning was occurring and more directed self-placement programs were being tried. For me, the role of an assessment professional as a gatekeeper was replaced by the role of supporter.

Stories of the movement from test-centered assessment approaches to philosophies that centered student learning and development were common in panelists’ reflections on their careers. Kahn identified a new focus on the process of learning and student development:

The assessment profession is no longer focusing solely on identifying learning outcomes and methods for assessing those outcomes; we’re also thinking and talking about the ways in which outcomes are cultivated, shaped, and improved through our pedagogies, curricular constructs, and the learning environments and experiences we design.

Like Stitt-Bergh, Kahn’s experience underscored a culture shift in assessment. As the understanding of assessment’s role on a college campus expands beyond studying validity and reliability, the partners of the assessment professional shift as well. Townsend identified

“faculty recognition of the connections between teaching, learning, and assessment” as one of the greatest recent successes of the assessment profession. She identified collaborations between assessment offices and centers for teaching and learning as a spark for “faculty recognition, engagement and commitment to an interconnected relationship of teaching, learning, and assessment for the ultimate purpose of student learning success.” Like Kahn, Townsend perceived these cross-campus partnerships as keys to advancing the role of the assessment professional. However, as McConnell noted:

Individuals in assessment-related roles usually have very little positional authority; the most fortunate have exceptionally supportive, strong leaders who help contextualize assessment and ensure it is integrated into the broader teaching and learning environment. That, unfortunately, is not the environment on all campuses. I worry about the toll working in assessment can take on individuals, from an emotional management and professional burn-out perspective.

Stated differently, while assessment practitioners can influence their colleagues across campus to engage in the important work of evaluating student learning and program effectiveness, the institutional structures in which they are situated often prevent them from doing so.

Another seismic shift in assessment concerns the expanding focus on equity-centered assessment as well as assessment’s role in advancing educational equity on campus and beyond. Henning referenced the work of Jan McArthur (e.g., McArthur, 2016), Erick Montenegro, and Natasha Jankowski (e.g., Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020), all of whom have advanced the assessment profession’s understanding of equity and its applications to the field. He predicted that “as equity-centered assessment scholarship continues to emerge, moving from abstract concepts to concrete strategies, assessment will be leveraged in new and powerful ways.”

Discussion

This paper lends the voices of assessment leaders to the ongoing conversation regarding classifying, defining, and positioning assessment practice within the higher education landscape. In describing the nature of the community of assessment practitioners, these panelists pointed to the ongoing evolution of the scholarly community, including journals, conferences, and relevant disciplinary standards. Some panelists defined assessment as a field (referencing larger scholarly conversations and standards) while others defined it as a profession (pointing to the skills and knowledge required for assessment work). When asked to describe an assessment practitioner’s qualities, many of the panelists focused on the interpersonal skills, collaborative spirit, and supportive approach required by the work. Their reflections upon the evolution of the assessment role reflected philosophical shifts toward student- and learning-centered assessment approaches as well as observations about the power dynamics that accompany the assessment practitioner’s role.

Ultimately, the categorization of assessment practitioners seems to matter far less than understanding its current structure, its legacy, and its goals for the future. As the panelists discussed while describing the evolution of the assessment field, assessment is changing, developing new philosophies, responsibilities, and tools along the way. While some assessment practitioners can point to a variety of formal academic legacies (e.g., psychometrics and educational psychology), these disciplines are not familiar to all practitioners.

Fundamentally, though, the same elements that cause difficulty in defining “assessment” professionally—as a discipline, field, scholarly domain, or something else—are the same things that contribute richness to our practice (Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019). Diverse research methods, new ways of approaching problems, new conceptualizations of student growth and learning, and a multidisciplinary approach to collaboration all present professional strengths. Multiple panelists noted that their backgrounds and training outside of assessment lent them tools and perspectives that strengthened their work. The more important question than that of our definition, then, might be how we can harness the best of both worlds—both the strength of our varied paths

The more important question than that of our definition, then, might be how we can harness the best of both worlds—both the strength of our varied paths and the solid foundation that accompanies a formalized academic discipline—in the coming generation of assessment practitioners.

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and the solid foundation that accompanies a formalized academic discipline—in the coming generation of assessment practitioners. Doing so rests on our ability, as a community of professionals, to agree upon a common set of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that should be held by assessment practitioners (e.g., Horst & Prendergast, 2020).

As we develop a cohesive set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for assessment practitioners, the voices of the people who have shaped the field can provide useful navigation. For example, Ariovich et al. (2018) found that demand for professional development in data analysis was high among assessment practitioners, but these skills were not emphasized in the panelists' responses. However, the panelists repeatedly noted the importance of interpersonal skills: translating complicated concepts into understandable language, patiently addressing the stress and frustration that often accompanies assessment work, and building value for assessment among their faculty colleagues. This is not to say that data analysis skills are not useful to assessment practitioners; rather, that those skills may be of little use to a field that does not also invest in relationship-building. In Kahn's words:

We need to work with colleagues across the university as part of a collaborative enterprise to create cultures of evidence around teaching and learning, improve wherever we find opportunities to do so, and provide students with more powerful and meaningful educational experiences. I hope it doesn't sound too grandiose to say that if we conceive of our purposes in this way, then assessment is a noble profession, aimed ultimately at improving our society and world.

Others have emphasized the importance of strong interpersonal relationships and attentiveness to the strengths and struggles of faculty and staff partners in conducting effective assessment, as well as empowering faculty and staff to take ownership of their assessment approaches (e.g., Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). These responses therefore align with prior calls to strengthen the relationships between assessment practitioners and the faculty and staff implementing assessment across campus. As the community of assessment practitioners continues to explore and define its identity, centering the importance of interpersonal and collaborative skills could help encourage assessment practices that are more responsive to faculty (and student) needs.

Future Directions

As the role of assessment on campus continues to evolve, the identity of the assessment professional will evolve in tandem, each impacting the other. The contributors to this paper provided perspectives from decades of combined experience in higher education assessment. Ultimately, they frame the lack of uniformity of training, background, and roles across assessment practitioners as a strength instead of a weakness. This perspective indicates that diverse theoretical orientations, research methods, and disciplinary backgrounds prepare assessment professionals for multidisciplinary collaborations. Such strategies are, and will continue to be, of tantamount importance to meeting the complex and rapidly shifting educational needs of the modern world.

Our hope is that the reflections described in this manuscript provide guidance for professional development in assessment. As assessment practitioners work to increase assessment capacity on their campuses, for example, they may consider how best to strengthen their relationships with faculty and staff partners. Further, the panelists' reflections upon their careers in assessment may prove useful to new assessment practitioners hoping to predict future directions in assessment (e.g., cross-campus partnerships, student-centered assessment practices, and a renewed attention to issues of equity in assessment). Finally, panelists' perspectives on the community of assessment practitioners may help those practitioners to consider their own positions more deeply within that community. Ultimately, we hope that these contributions will advance the ongoing discussion about professional identity among assessment practitioners.

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Appendix A

The Profession at Large

- Is assessment a profession? A field? A discipline? None of these? What does this mean to you?
- How should leaders in assessment position themselves as leaders in higher education?
- What do you see on the 20-year horizon for the assessment profession? What excites you (or causes you concern) in that vision?

The Practitioner

- What does an assessment professional “look like”?
- What is the most important aspect of an assessment professional’s work (e.g., particular skills or dispositions)?
- How do you describe the assessment portion of your job when someone asks you what you do for a living?

Evolution of the Assessment Role

- What have been some of the greatest successes for the assessment profession in recent years?
- What are some of the greatest barriers to advancing our profession and its position in higher education?
- Over the span of your career, how has the role of the assessment professional in higher education evolved?