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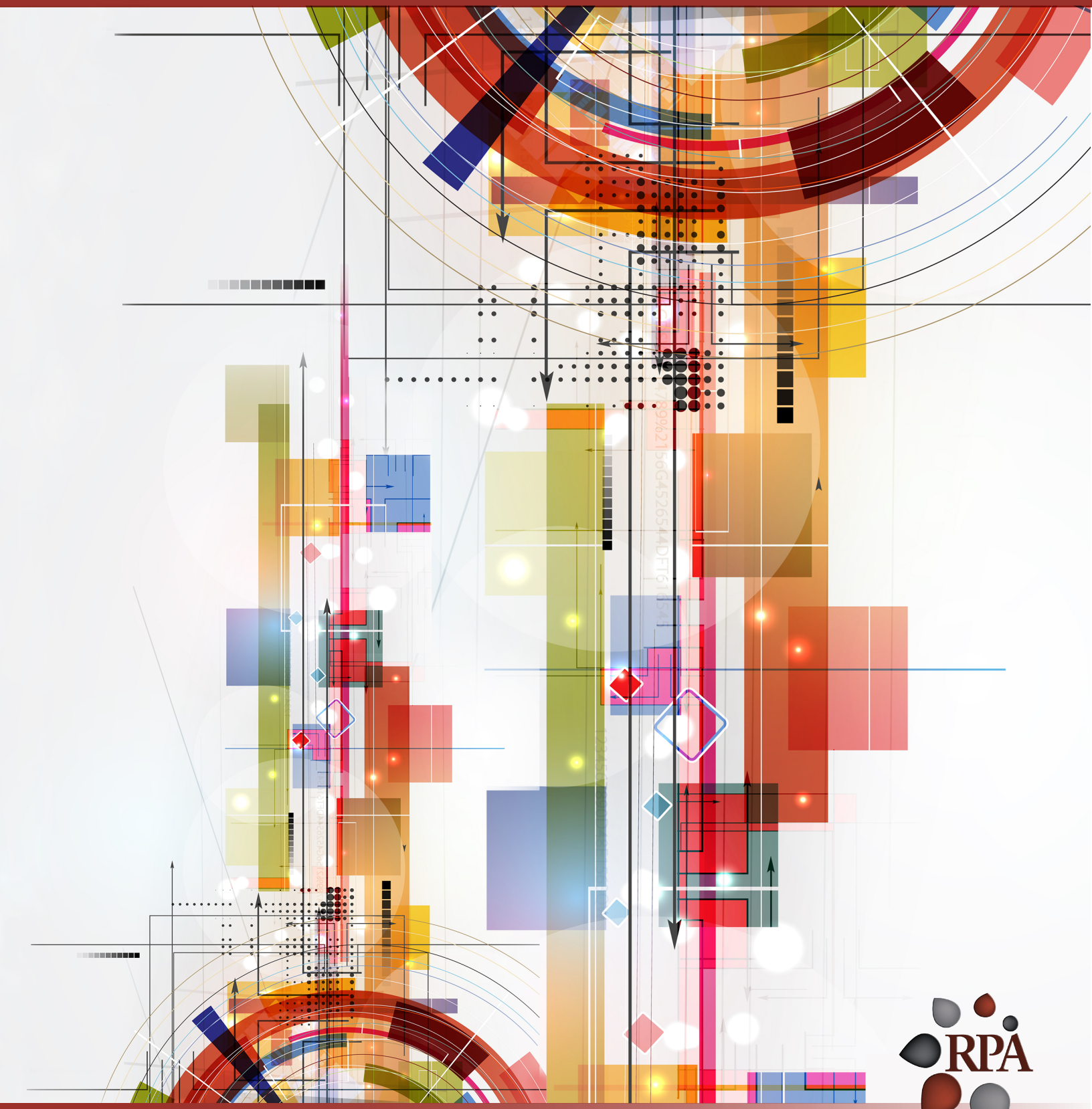

RPA

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RESEARCH & PRACTICE IN ASSESSMENT

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Manuscripts submitted to RPA may be related to various higher education assessment themes, and should adopt either an assessment measurement or an assessment policy/foundations framework. Contributions are accepted at any time and will receive consideration for publishing. Manuscripts must comply with the RPA Submission Guidelines and be submitted to our online manuscript submission system found at rpajournal.com/authors/.

RESEARCH & PRACTICE IN ASSESSMENT

The goal of Research & Practice in Assessment is to serve the assessment community as an online journal focusing on higher education assessment. It is dedicated to the advancement of scholarly discussion amongst researchers and practitioners in this evolving field. The journal originated from the Board of the Virginia Assessment Group, one of the oldest continuing professional higher education assessment organizations in the United States. Research & Practice in Assessment is a peer-reviewed publication that uses a double-blind review process. Approximately forty percent of submissions are accepted for issues that are published twice annually. Research & Practice in Assessment is listed in Cabell's Directory and indexed by EBSCO, ERIC, Gale, and ProQuest.

History of Research & Practice in Assessment

Research & Practice in Assessment (RPA) evolved over the course of several years. Prior to 2006, the Virginia Assessment Group produced a periodic organizational newsletter. The purpose of the newsletter was to keep the membership informed regarding events sponsored by the organization, as well as changes in state policy associated with higher education assessment. The Newsletter Editor, a position elected by the Virginia Assessment Group membership, oversaw this publication. In 2005, it was proposed by the Newsletter Editor, Robin Anderson, Psy.D. (then Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness at Blue Ridge Community College) that it be expanded to include scholarly articles submitted by Virginia Assessment Group members. The articles would focus on both practice and research associated with the assessment of student learning. As part of the proposal, Ms. Anderson suggested that the new publication take the form of an online journal.

The Board approved the proposal and sent the motion to the full membership for a vote. The membership overwhelmingly approved the journal concept. Consequently, the Newsletter Editor position was removed from the organization's by-laws and a Journal Editor position was added in its place. Additional by-law and constitutional changes needed to support the establishment of the Journal were subsequently crafted and approved by the Virginia Assessment Group membership. As part of the 2005 Virginia Assessment Group annual meeting proceedings, the Board solicited names for the new journal publication. Ultimately, the name Research & Practice in Assessment was selected. Also as part of the 2005 annual meeting, the Virginia Assessment Group Board solicited nominations for members of the first RPA Board of Editors. From the nominees Keston H. Fulcher, Ph.D. (then Director of Assessment and Evaluation at Christopher Newport University), Dennis R. Ridley, Ph.D. (then Director of Institutional Research and Planning at Virginia Wesleyan College) and Rufus Carter (then Coordinator of Institutional Assessment at Marymount University) were selected to make up the first Board of Editors. Several members of the Board also contributed articles to the first edition, which was published in March of 2006.

After the launch of the first issue, Ms. Anderson stepped down as Journal Editor to assume other duties within the organization. Subsequently, Mr. Fulcher was nominated to serve as Journal Editor, serving from 2007-2010. With a newly configured Board of Editors, Mr. Fulcher invested considerable time in the solicitation of articles from an increasingly wider circle of authors and added the position of co-editor to the Board of Editors, filled by Allen DuPont, Ph.D. (then Director of Assessment, Division of Undergraduate Affairs at North Carolina State University). Mr. Fulcher oversaw the production and publication of the next four issues and remained Editor until he assumed the presidency of the Virginia Assessment Group in 2010. It was at this time Mr. Fulcher nominated Joshua T. Brown (Director of Research and Assessment, Student Affairs at Liberty University) to serve as the Journal's third Editor and he was elected to that position.

Under Mr. Brown's leadership Research & Practice in Assessment experienced significant developments. Specifically, the Editorial and Review Boards were expanded and the members' roles were refined; Ruminate and Book Review sections were added to each issue; RPA Archives were indexed in EBSCO, Gale, ProQuest and Google Scholar; a new RPA website was designed and launched; and RPA gained a presence on social media. Mr. Brown held the position of Editor until November 2014 when Katie Busby, Ph.D. (then Assistant Provost of Assessment and Institutional Research at Tulane University) assumed the role after having served as Associate Editor from 2010-2013 and Editor-elect from 2013-2014.

Ms. Katie Busby served as RPA Editor from November 2014-January 2019 and focused her attention on the growth and sustainability of the journal. During this time period, RPA explored and established collaborative relationships with other assessment organizations and conferences. RPA readership and the number of scholarly submissions increased and an online submission platform and management system was implemented for authors and reviewers. In November 2016, Research & Practice in Assessment celebrated its tenth anniversary with a special issue. Ms. Busby launched a national call for editors in fall 2018, and in January 2019 Nicholas Curtis (Director of Assessment, Marquette University) was nominated and elected to serve as RPA's fifth editor.

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FROM THE EDITOR

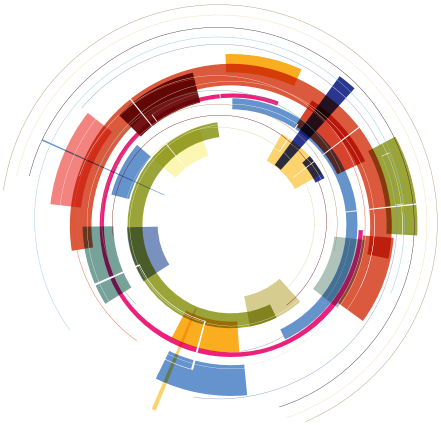
ARTICLES

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

"The 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!

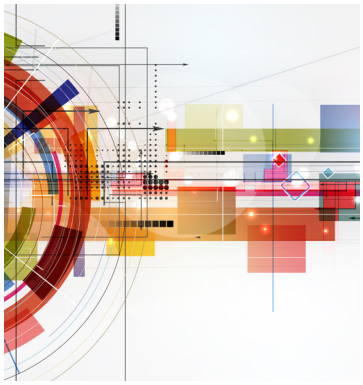
Regards,

Gina S. Polychronopoulos
S. Jeanne Horst

Guest Editors
Research & Practice in Assessment (special issue)

Abstract

Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (ALHE) has, since its roots in the early 1980s, grown into a routine activity in higher education institutions in the United States that is led by thousands of professionals who contribute to a growing body of scholarship. Yet, there are few formal ALHE training programs, no licensure or certification for ALHE professionals, no accreditation for ALHE programs, and only a handful of dedicated journals, resulting in limited outside recognition of ALHE as a discipline. Failure to fully establish ALHE as a discipline puts ALHE in a dangerous position, leaving its progress in advancing student learning vulnerable to external forces. The purposes of this paper are to examine the progress ALHE has made in advancing as a discipline and to explore the benefits and tensions inherent in growing ALHE as a discipline. Using lessons from Library Science, the paper concludes by identifying steps that show promise for continuing the advancement of ALHE as a discipline and ensuring ALHE is ready to meet the needs of future generations of learners.



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Advancing Assessment of Learning in Higher Education as a Discipline: Benefits, Tensions, and Next Steps

Higher education institutions provide significant benefits to their students and to the communities they serve (Bloom et al., 2006). Individual benefits from higher education may include higher salaries and benefits, higher employment rates, improved health and life expectancy, and improved quality of life for the children of college graduates. Public benefits may include decreased reliance on government financial support, increased engagement in civic activities, increased tax revenues, and greater productivity (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). Despite these benefits, higher education institutions are under pressure to meet political and corporate demands, to cut costs by reducing services and programs, and to meet rapidly changing workplace and community needs with decreased public resources.

Establishing assessment of learning in higher education (ALHE) as a discipline is an important strategy to pursue to support institutions' ability to respond to these pressures. Doing so will help: 1) maintain focus on student learning and success; 2) enhance mechanisms for ongoing self-critique and growth; and 3) provide quality control for ALHE preparation programs and ALHE professionals. The overarching goal of this paper is to examine the progress ALHE has made in advancing as a discipline. First, the paper begins by defining academic disciplines, using the history and development of library science as an example. Next, the paper explores the extent to which ALHE has made progress in

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becoming a discipline, including the possible tensions in working toward this goal and the importance of establishing ALHE as a discipline. The paper concludes by outlining next steps and important considerations for advancing ALHE as a discipline.

What is a Discipline?

The educational technology industry is not an enemy to be feared. But it does need to be held accountable, which requires thoughtful scholarly critique which is enhanced by a strong, independent discipline and professional organization.

The influence of academic disciplines on higher education is "inescapable" (Post, 2009). The selection of courses by students, the content and design of those courses, the appointment of faculty into departments, the flow of research dollars, and institutional governance decisions are all influenced by the power of academic disciplines. Academic disciplines have a history that can be traced back to the seven 'liberal arts' in medieval universities, described as logic, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (Fanghanel, 2009). Disciplines have sometimes been described as a cartel due to their role in controlling access to professional roles (Turner, 2000) or as a tribe (Becher, 1989). While the definition of members of a discipline as a "tribe" was later criticized for its colonial roots and for creating problematic discourse (Manathunga & Brew, 2012), this notion of disciplines as socially constructed by individuals with a vested interest or agenda remains an important concept as disciplines serve as an important source of identity for faculty (Donald, 1995).

While important to understanding disciplines, taking only a socially-constructed understanding of a discipline is insufficient as Young (2008) argues that epistemological dimensions of disciplines must also be considered. Scholars who have considered disciplines from both the social and epistemological dimensions have described them as "ways of knowing," which are defined by a set of "behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses, and motivations" (Trowler, 2014, p. 24). For members of a discipline, these dimensions "reshape them in different practice clusters" with an "organizational form" and "internal hierarchies" (Trowler, 2014, p. 25). Another important aspect of disciplines is their active, non-static nature. Disciplines have boundaries and identities that are "constantly shifting" (Malcolm & Zukas, 2009), which can make them difficult to describe without limiting that description to a specific point in time. For instance, while the discipline of arithmetic, one of the first seven liberal arts, is still very significant and influential, its practice today would be nearly unrecognizable to its earliest members. Consider, for instance, that the current signs used for addition (+) and subtraction (-) did not come into much widespread use until the late 1500s and early 1600s (Cajori, 1928), not to mention how calculators, computers, and artificial intelligence in the last 50 years have dramatically changed the practice of mathematics.

In summary, disciplines include both social and epistemological dimensions that are constantly changing and moving. They have an extremely long history, have been highly influential in higher education and offer benefits such as providing a national voice to promote good practices, enhancing mechanisms for ongoing self-critique and growth, and supporting quality control. Efforts to establish ALHE more fully as a discipline would benefit from learning from existing disciplines that have gone through this process. Closely examining an exemplar will also help elucidate the characteristics of a discipline in a concrete manner. After considering several disciplines to serve as an exemplar, Library Science was selected because it is relatively new, has a well-documented history, has been successful in becoming established as a discipline, and has some presence in nearly all higher education institutions.

History of the Development of Library Science into a Discipline

The discipline of Library Science grew out of a "move to professionalize vocational activities" in libraries in the late 19th century (Richardson, 2010, p. 1). At that time, existing librarianship programs focused on providing practical knowledge in running libraries rather than on producing academic research. A report in 1923 by Charles C. Williamson motivated a philosophical separation between clerical tasks in libraries, (e.g., organizing materials) and more professional tasks, (e.g., implementing research on how to best design and run libraries). This report was greatly influential in the development of Library Science

as a discipline because it specifically identified the knowledge and abilities required for professional preparation and it recommended that preparation for professional librarians occur in an accredited college program specifically dedicated to this purpose.

To offer such a program required the creation of a group of scholars who not only had the knowledge and skills they sought to impart to their students but who also performed research as professionals in this area. Williamson's report led to a call from many, such as Tai (1925), for the development of graduate programs for Library Science resulting in the first 'Graduate Library School' being started at the University of Chicago in 1926 (Richardson, 2010). In addition to the development of formal preparation programs for Library Science professionals, the 1920s and the decades that followed witnessed continuing efforts to create an accreditation system for Library Science programs, to develop a research agenda for Library Science, and to establish respected research journals dedicated to Library Science. Efforts to develop accreditation for Library Science preparation programs began in the United States in 1923 with the American Library Association's appointment of a board to set standards for accrediting programs (American Library Association, 1996).

In tandem with the development of a research agenda was the establishment of credible research journals in which such research could be published. The first widely recognized Library Science journal dedicated to research was *The Library Quarterly* whose development required years of debate and the identification of sufficient resources which were finally received in the form of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation (Norman, 1988). The development of *The Library Quarterly* was viewed as a "significant advance in librarianship's progress toward professional status" (Norman, 1988, p. 327). In the very first issue of *The Library Quarterly*, Charles Williamson defined an early research agenda for Library Science by stating how he was "in some doubt as to whether libraries are doing their job much better than they did before the great war" (Williamson, 1931, p. 3). In this way, the first component of the research agenda for Library Science was of a practical nature– to ensure libraries were fulfilling their purpose as effectively as possible. Other research needs included the study of the "human material," such as the "attitudes of the staff, of the patrons, and even of the non-reading public" (Williamson, 1931, p. 15).

To summarize, a historical review of the development of Library Science as a discipline identified the following noteworthy elements: A) identification of the knowledge and abilities needed for those who wish to engage in the profession; B) creation of formal preparation programs that intend to develop this knowledge and these abilities in its students; C) a system to accredit preparation programs to ensure those entering the profession had the required knowledge and abilities; D) development of a research agenda that sought to expand knowledge in the area and to ensure highly effective practices; and E) the creation of dedicated research journals where those performing research could easily share their work with other scholars. Importantly, success in achieving progress on these five elements was driven by demand for professionals who were able to solve important problems in Library Science. With this background in mind, it is now possible to consider the extent to which ALHE may be considered a discipline. The next section provides a brief history of ALHE and explores progress and current indicators of ALHE's status as a discipline.

Is ALHE a Discipline?

There is evidence that assessment of student learning has been an educational practice since at least 589–613 AD (Pinar et al., 1995), although ALHE has a much more recent history. Shavelson (2009) identified four distinct eras of assessment in higher education in the United States. The first era, from 1900-1933, was called the "origin of standardized tests." During these years, the first objective multiple-choice tests were devised and came into use for the evaluation of individual student learning and the value-added learning associated with attendance at specific institutions. Learned and Wood (1938) were among the first to make use of these multiple-choice tests to implement a large-scale evaluation of student learning across multiple higher education institutions in the late-1920s and early-1930s. The second era, 1933-1947, extended assessment to non-cognitive areas and saw the development of the Graduate Record Exam as a test for

entrance into graduate school. The third era, 1948-1978, was identified by Shavelson as the "era of the rise of the test providers," whose services were in much demand to screen veterans eager to make use of their G.I. Bill funds to attend college. The fourth era, and the one that gave rise to ALHE as recognized today, from 1979-present, was described by Shavelson as the "era of external accountability."

The most influential report during the era of external accountability was *A Nation at Risk* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), a landmark report on education that propelled interest in educational reform through accountability at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. Specifically, the report recommended "schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance and student conduct" (p. 27). In the very next year, the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, 1984) converted these expectations into recommended practices, proposing "assessment as a means to provide information about the teaching and learning process and as feedback to help improve the effectiveness with which students, faculty, and the institution carry out their work" (p. 53). The Study Group also recommended "accrediting agencies should hold colleges, community colleges, and universities accountable for clear statements of expectations for student learning, appropriate assessment programs to determine whether those expectations are being met, and systematic efforts to improve learning as a result of those assessment" (p. 69). These recommendations–including both assessment as improvement and assessment as accountability–propelled numerous state mandates and substantial changes to accreditation (Ewell, 2007) such that by the mid-1990s nearly all accredited higher education institutions in the U.S. reported some type of engagement with assessment (El-Khawas, 1995). With institutions compelled to engage in assessment of learning, but lacking clear guidance on which assessment practices were effective, and lacking formal preparation programs for those who would lead this work, ALHE was born.

Progress and Current Indicators of ALHE as a Discipline

To understand the progress of ALHE developing as a discipline, I will return to the characteristics of a discipline described earlier. First, I will consider how ALHE addresses Trowler's (2014) description of a discipline as "ways of knowing…behavioural practices, sets of discourses, ways of thinking, procedures, emotional responses, and motivations" (p. 24). More well-established disciplines will tend to have more, although not complete, agreement on these items, while emerging disciplines will be in early stages of debating these fundamental issues. After that, I will examine ALHE using the more visible elements of a discipline as identified through the Library Science case summary. A summary of the progress of ALHE developing as a discipline and priority areas for future action is provided in Table 1.

Ways of knowing in a discipline are about much more than understanding the primary concepts in a discipline; rather it is about procedural knowledge (Carter, 2007) involving how those in the discipline know what they know. In ALHE, there is a consensus that evidence of student learning, as part of a cycle of inquiry that includes collecting and using that evidence, should be used to frame what is known (see, for example, Maki, 2004), although there remain significant debates over the level of rigor required for assessment data (Eubanks, 2017). This gap in agreement around ways of knowing leaves space for additional maturation of ALHE as a discipline.

Efforts to establish ALHE more fully as a discipline would benefit from learning from existing disciplines that have gone through this process

Behavioral practices of ALHE, as it is situated inside higher education institutions, follows typical higher education administration practices including working with faculty, students, and staff members, implementing policies and procedures, and ensuring organizational effectiveness. These elements are not unique to ALHE and borrow heavily from higher education administration research and practices. Behavioral practices have been described in detail in many excellent assessment practice books, such as *Assessment Essentials* (Palomba & Banta, 1999).

Table 1
Summary of progress in ALHE developing as a discipline and priority areas for future action.

Category	Progress	Priority for future action
Ways of knowing (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Behavioral practices (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Discourses (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Procedures (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Emotional responses and motivations (Trowler, 2014)	Substantial	No
Agreement on knowledge and abilities needed	Moderate to low	Yes-develop widely agreed-upon competency list
Formal preparation programs	Low	Yes-a need for more programs accessible to diverse students
Accreditation for preparation programs or professionals	None	Yes-no framework or known progress
Shared research agenda	Early stages	Yes-follow-through and sustain current progress
Dedicated journals and other mechanisms to share research	Low	Yes-develop resources to support more dedicated journals of varying scope

Discourses are "wholly or partly made up of language use as part of wider social practices" (Bergstrom & Boreus, 2017, p. 6). ALHE has a well-developed language and there are numerous examples of ALHE dictionaries or glossaries. Examples of terms that are commonly used within ALHE that might be understood differently outside of ALHE include "student learning outcome statement," "rubric," "direct assessment of learning," and "value added" (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, n.d.). Peter Ewell's 2001 article, written for the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, has been highly influential in not only defining key terminology–much of which remains in use today–but also in setting the policy framework accreditors use to determine their ALHE accreditation standards (Ewell, 2001). Specifically, Ewell (2001) identified three dimensions on which accreditors needed to make important ALHE policy decisions. The first was around the prescription of outcomes, which ran from complete institutional discretion on one end to complete dictation of outcomes by the accreditor on the other. The second dimension addressed the unit of analysis for ALHE, with individual competency attainment on one end and overall institutional effectiveness on the other. The third and final dimension described the focus of the accreditor's review of ALHE, with a process-focused review on one end of the dimension to examination of direct evidence of student achievement on the other. In this way, Ewell's (2001) paper identified important terminology and described the context in which that terminology should be used, thereby providing a structure for ALHE's discourse.

The primary procedure used in ALHE is the assessment cycle, which includes the "systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development" (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4). While this process has been refined and modified since 1999, including the use of new technology tools and software platforms, the cycle of assessment and its associated closing of the assessment loop remain the primary procedures used in ALHE. The "Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning" report, published in 1992 by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), is regarded as a description of widely accepted practices for ALHE (Astin et al., 1992).

Emotional responses and motivations of ALHE are around ensuring and improving student learning in higher education. While there is no agreement in ALHE regarding

whether the current level of student learning in higher education is sufficiently high (see, for example, the numerous critiques of the 2011 book *Academically Adrift*, such as Lederman, 2013), there is broad agreement in ALHE that its primary motivation is to improve student learning by improving the effectiveness of students' experiences within higher education institutions. An excerpt from a foundational statement approved by the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education's (AALHE) membership in January of 2020 describes the motivation for assessment as:

> The aim of student learning assessment and institutional effectiveness assessment is the ongoing enhancement of quality. AALHE supports these efforts in quality improvement by promoting assessment not just "of learning" but more importantly "for learning." (Adanu et al., 2020)

Notably, this description of the aims of ALHE does not include external accountability as a motivator for assessment. (However, all efforts to improve include some type of implicit accountability, whether that be to our students, our disciplines, or even to ourselves.)

To summarize ALHE's fulfillment of Trowler's (2014) definition of a discipline, while ALHE can address many aspects, there remain significant disagreements and controversies around several important elements, such as the ways of knowing and what counts as sufficiently rigorous evidence. The reasons for these disagreements and controversies will become more apparent below, as the paper turns to the more visible outward indicators of a discipline pulled from the review of the Library Science's development as a discipline.

Agreement on the knowledge and abilities needed for those in the discipline. While there are some existing lists of competencies, knowledge, and skills for ALHE, such as those by the combined American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and NASPA project from 2015 on assessment in student affairs (ACPA College Student Educators International & NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015), or a competency framework proposed in 2021 by two authors from James Madison University (Horst & Prendergast, 2020), there is little evidence that such lists have influenced hiring practices of institutions seeking those with training in ALHE or the development of formal programs for preparing individuals in ALHE. This suggests a lack of practical agreement on the competencies, knowledge, and skills needed for those in ALHE. Reaching agreement on a set of knowledge and abilities needed for the discipline occurred early on for Library Science and should therefore be an area of emphasis for advancing ALHE.

Formal preparation programs for ALHE. While there exist a few formal preparation programs for ALHE, (e.g., James Madison University, Boston College, Walden University, and others), most practitioners of ALHE were prepared in non-ALHE fields. Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) indicated that ALHE practitioners were prepared in the fields of education (44%), social sciences (30%), natural sciences (12%), arts and humanities (7%), business (5%), and theology (1%), and they maintained a mix of degree levels including doctoral (63%), master's (35%), and bachelor's (2%) (Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Other scholars noted the "chaotic" routes that many take on their way to becoming assessment professionals, highlighting the current importance of providing professional development opportunities aligned with assessment competencies for those who do not have opportunities for formal assessment preparation programs (Ariovich et al., 2018; Curtis et al., 2020). Expanding access to preparation programs developed around a common set of competencies remains a significant challenge for the establishment of ALHE as a discipline.

Accreditation for ALHE programs or ALHE professionals. Accreditation for programs and professionals is a means of ensuring those working in ALHE have acquired the requisite competencies, knowledge, and skills identified as important by the discipline. Although there are no formal accreditation programs for ALHE, there are numerous organizations that offer professional development outside of a formal academic program for those who are working in ALHE or would like to work in ALHE. Based on a quick web search, there are at least 10 regional higher education assessment organizations (University Assessment, 2021), at least one national higher education assessment organization that has been active for more

than a decade (Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, 2019), and numerous higher education assessment-related conferences such as the Assessment Institute at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and the Annual Conference of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (Zelna & Dunstan, 2012). Accreditation for ALHE preparation programs is important for ensuring a high level of quality in the practice of ALHE and is a powerful tool for providing quality assurance (Wergin, 2005) and should be thoughtfully considered as a critical strategy for growing recognition of ALHE as a discipline.

A shared, formal research agenda for ALHE. While prior to 2020 there was no sustained effort to explicitly define a research agenda for ALHE, some trends are noted. A review of the first ten years of scholarship published in *Research & Practice in Assessment* from 2007 to 2017 found early articles focused on methodological and psychometric concerns, while more recent publications have shifted attention to issues of improvement and the impact of college across an individual's lifespan (Anderson & Curtis, 2017). A presentation at the 2017 Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education's annual conference noted trends in assessment presentations and articles around community engagement, eportfolios, faculty development, global learning, graduate/professional education, high impact practices, and student affairs programs and services (Black et al., 2017). The 2021 Assessment Institute conference covered an astounding 21 different tracks, including areas such as accreditation, general education, leadership, STEM, community colleges, use of technology, and institutional data collection (IUPUI, 2021). In recent years there has been a sustained push to identify a set of grand challenges that is hoped will drive funding and research progress in the future (Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020). However, it is not clear the extent to which these grand challenges will be embraced or whether they will drive research funding support for ALHE and result in an established research agenda for ALHE. Nevertheless, there remains a need for more high-quality, self-reflective research in ALHE that addresses issues of shared importance to ALHE and those who use its scholarship.

Areas where progress is needed are the development of more formal preparation programs, agreement on competencies for ALHE professionals, accreditation of programs and professionals, a stronger research agenda, and dedicated journals and other mechanisms to share research.

Ways to share scholarly work for ALHE. Disciplinary journals are important in the growth and development of a discipline since they "provide one window into the social, cognitive, and rhetorical dimensions of a disciplinary enterprise" (Goggin, 1997, p. 324). Currently the "window" provided by journals into ALHE might be best described as murky, as there are few dedicated journals of limited recognition. Even though many journals publish items related to ALHE, such as *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, there are few that are truly dedicated to ALHE, such as *Research and Practice in Assessment*, *PARE Online*, *Intersection*, and *Assessment Update*.

Overall, ALHE's status as a discipline is tenuous. Its strongest successes have been in the adoption of ALHE's procedures by higher education institutions, in the acceptance of the motivations driving the work of ALHE, and in the number and scale of regional and national professional organizations. Areas where progress is needed are the development of more formal preparation programs, agreement on competencies for ALHE professionals, accreditation of programs and professionals, a stronger research agenda, and dedicated journals and other mechanisms to share research.

The Importance of Establishing ALHE as a Discipline

There are several reasons why it is important to establish ALHE more fully as a discipline. First, without a strong national voice, there is an increased risk that decisions about ALHE will be made by external forces reflecting political whims or motivations. A discipline provides a professional identity (Taylor, 2008) and academic identity (Henkel, 2000) to the members of the discipline, providing empowerment and a shared voice on issues of importance. For example, one member of the influential Spelling's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) reported surprise at the lack of discussion about teaching and learning in the commission's deliberations on how to improve higher education.

> My biggest surprise, however, was the near absence of insights about teaching and learning in either the materials presented to us or in the discussions within the commission. We talked a lot – at times seemingly endlessly – about testing what students knew and didn't know. But we barely discussed at all how students learn and whether different learning approaches would yield better results. (Zemsky, 2007)

Establishing ALHE as a discipline would provide a shared professional identity, allowing members of the discipline to support each other and advance their success through advocacy for policies, effective practices, and external support for improving student learning.

In addition to protecting teaching and learning from external pressures, establishing ALHE as a discipline would provide a mechanism for ongoing self-critique and growth. One of the early goals of ALHE was to increase the number of institutions and degree programs that engaged in assessment. Recent surveys have indicated this goal is nearly completed, with a large majority of institutions reporting having statements of learning, using assessment for compliance and improvement, supporting faculty use of assessment, and a trend toward the use of authentic measures of student learning (Jankowski, et al., 2018), perhaps to the point of assessment becoming a routine practice. However, assessment becoming routine is also a risk as routine practices can become a case of doing the wrong thing repeatedly with more confidence. A discipline provides connections between scholars who study its practices and procedures with a critical lens and provides mechanisms to share the results from those investigations through dedicated journals and conferences (Becher, 1989).

Without establishing a strong discipline or professional identity, there is potential risk of promoting practices that do not have student learning and students' success at the center. For example, in K-12 education, there is a long history of principals and teachers making intervention decisions without demanding rigorous evidence of effectiveness (Slavin, 2020). Although this has been changing with the creation of clearinghouses on reviews of effectiveness, such as *Evidence for ESSA* (www.evidenceforessa.org), this still leaves decision-makers open to influence from for-profit educational services providers who need to meet that quarter's earnings goals. The educational services and technology industry is not an enemy to be feared; however, it needs to be held accountable, which requires thoughtful scholarly critique that is enhanced by a strong, independent discipline and professional organization. The unbiased scholarly study of effective practices in ALHE that becomes possible through a discipline helps to reduce the influence of external motives and keep focus on the needs of students and institutions.

A second tension in more fully establishing ALHE as a discipline is that it may increase inequities around the individuals who are able to gain access to the profession

A third reason it is important to advance ALHE as a discipline is to improve its ability to provide quality control for preparation programs and for the professionals who practice. A lack of quality control for ALHE increases the likelihood for assessment malpractice, leading to dissatisfaction with ALHE. For instance, Karin Brown complained in her 2021 article that learning goals for assessment "are handed down as edicts to be followed" (2021, para. 13). Yet, the widely accepted *Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning* specifically recommend against this practice, stating "assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved" (Astin et al., 1992). Brown's institution may very well have included representatives from across the community in identifying learning goals without Brown's knowledge, but that is not the point. The point of this example is to illustrate how ALHE can be subjected to intense criticism and even rejected entirely *even if institutional practices do not align with best practices in ALHE*. In addition to assessment malpractice disillusioning faculty, staff, and academic leaders, decreasing the likelihood that they will actively engage in assessment again in the future, assessment malpractice also risks damaging student learning, decreasing equity, and harming the very students ALHE seeks to support. Advancing ALHE as a discipline improves its ability to provide quality control and quality assurance by clearly communicating the competencies professionals need to be successful and by ensuring preparation programs are preparing effective professionals.

Tensions in Establishing ALHE as a Discipline

Efforts to establish ALHE as a discipline produces several tensions. First, disciplines can produce tunnel vision where "one becomes obsessed with a singular field," which prevents the application of "problems, methods, ideas, and inspirations from other fields" (Nichols, 2012, p. 12). This presents a tension in establishing knowledge, skills, and abilities in ALHE preparation programs and professionals while allowing for diversity of disciplinary expertise and background to avoid ALHE becoming an echo-chamber of narrowly focused individuals.

Beyond simply disagreeing with ALHE, Fendrich seems to not understand the problems ALHE attempts to solve, which are: how to collect high quality evidence of student learning and how to use that evidence to ensure and improve quality.

A second tension in more fully establishing ALHE as a discipline is that it may increase inequities around the individuals who are able to gain access to the profession. In the United States, there are "deep, persistent disparities in higher education outcomes" by race, ethnicity, and income (Kazis, 2020, p. 129). Accreditation for ALHE programs would increase the cost of the programs and limit the number of institutions who would be willing to invest the resources needed to compete for students. This could result in a funnel-narrowing effect where students who already have difficulty accessing higher education could find it increasingly difficult to access a small number of higher-cost ALHE preparation programs. This tension could be addressed with resources dedicated to institutions that serve underrepresented students and low-income students, by reducing the overall cost of college (Kazis, 2020), and by offering programs in accessible formats, such as online or in the evenings or weekends.

A third tension in more fully establishing ALHE as a discipline is the perception of ALHE as trying to carve out improving student learning as its exclusive domain rather than recognizing student learning as a shared effort across many disciplines. Imagine a novice physician, when confronted with a disease she does not recognize, trying to blame her ignorance on her medical school's lack of a fully developed assessment program instead of many other possible factors (e.g., her failure to attend a particular lesson, a gap in the curriculum as set forth by the program's faculty, an error in a textbook, a gap in her clinical practice experience, or, yes, on assessment). This tension could be addressed by intentionally building collaborations, partnerships, and relationships between ALHE and other disciplines that have a similar desire to improve student learning and development.

Next Steps

ALHE has made tremendous progress in its development as a discipline from the early 1980s. Recognizing the tenuous nature of ALHE's status as a discipline, along with the benefits and tensions in moving forward, it is instructive to return to the lessons from Library Science in determining next steps. Following is a discussion of potential next steps for establishing ALHE as a discipline (see Table 2 for a summary of these steps).

Communicate the Problems ALHE Can Solve

The first lesson from Library Science is to communicate a clear message about the important problems the discipline can solve. For Library Science, the problems they solved were around how to "ensure the preservation of such materials…and then delivering access to these materials" (Richardson, 2010, p. 2). Library Science then worked to identify the specific clerical and professional skills needed and worked to ensure their preparation programs developed these skills in their students.

For ALHE, the message about what important problem ALHE solves has not always been clearly communicated. For example, consider how Fendrich (2007) described assessment:

> Outcomes-assessment practices in higher education are grotesque, unintentional parodies of both social science and 'accountability.' No matter how much they purport to be about 'standards' or student 'needs,' they are in fact scams run by bloodless bureaucrats who, steeped in jargon like 'mapping learning goals' and 'closing the loop,' do not understand the holistic nature of a good college education. (para 1)

Table 2
Next Steps for Advancing ALHE as a discipline.

Next Step	Who needs to be involved	Important considerations
Communicate the problems ALHE can solve	All ALHE practitioners	Develop agreement on what problems ALHE solves
Advance ALHE as a discipline with intentionality	Professional organizations	Requires resources such as volunteers and money
Sustain efforts for the long term	All ALHE practitioners	All for one, one for all

Beyond simply disagreeing with ALHE, Fendrich seems not to understand the problems ALHE attempts to solve, which are: how to collect high quality evidence of student learning and how to use that evidence to ensure and improve quality.

Having clarity about the problems ALHE solves will point to what preparation is needed for those who work in ALHE. In a decision that should be copied by ALHE, Library Science decided to offer training in Library Science at different levels to meet different needs. In ALHE, this suggests separating more administrative or clerical assessment tasks, such as collecting reports, operating software tools, or checking on assessment status, from more assessment leadership-related responsibilities, such as developing philosophical and theoretical approaches for an institution's assessment activities, collaborating with faculty and administrators, ensuring the rigor of assessment evidence, and ensuring and improving learning and development.

All ALHE practitioners must take on the work of this first task by updating websites, changing business cards, and changing the way we talk about our work to include ensuring and improving student learning. If we do not agree that these are the important problems that ALHE solves, then we had better get busy discussing our disagreements and seeking common ground on the problems ALHE seeks to solve that will benefit our institutions, our students, and our communities.

Advance ALHE as a Discipline with Intentionality

All ALHE practitioners must find ways to sustain these efforts for the long term and take an all for one, one for all approach to this important work.

The second lesson from Library Science is to be intentional and strategically target energy and efforts toward initiatives that advance ALHE as a discipline. The areas identified as gaps in this paper–more formal preparation programs, agreement on competencies, knowledge, and skills, accreditation of programs and professionals, and a stronger research agenda with places to share that research–all require resources and dedicated development effort. These initiatives are likely best led by a professional organization given their complexity. The Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) is currently the largest and most well-resourced professional association for ALHE practitioners, but success in this area will require collaboration and cooperation across many organizations and institutions at a scale not yet achieved.

Sustain Efforts for the Long Term

The third lesson from Library Science is to recognize that it is a long-term play–a marathon, not a sprint–and it will take additional decades to fully establish ALHE as a discipline. It is notable that Library Science continues to evolve today and, according to some, Library Science "has still not reached the maturity of other disciplines" (Stielow, 1994). ALHE is about 100 years behind Library Science and a long-term play suggests several decades of concentrated effort remain for ALHE to fully develop as a discipline. All ALHE practitioners must find ways to sustain these efforts for the long term and take an all for one, one for all approach to this important work.

Hope for the Future

Even though ALHE has made considerable progress in developing as a discipline and the lessons from this paper provide guidance on how to continue and accelerate that

progress, some more cynical scholars might despair from the belief that ALHE will never be as well developed as a discipline as we may desire. In times when despair seems to overwhelm, it can be reassuring to look at another scholarly domain that finds itself in a similar situation. Tourism is a domain that some have suggested will never be a discipline because of its "pluralistic nature and lack of a cohesive theoretical framework" (Krause, 2012, p. 189), despite the efforts of numerous scholars to resolve methodological issues in the study of tourism (Butowski, 2011). But even if tourism remains an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary area of study, there will always be tourists, people who serve tourists, and people who are interested in understanding the phenomenon of tourism. In the same way, those who care about the advancement of ALHE may rest soundly knowing that the cause they have championed and continue to champion–to put student learning at the forefront of practice in higher education with a focus on evidence of student learning–has taken strong root in academia and will continue to grow long into the future even if ALHE fades into the background of disciplinarity.

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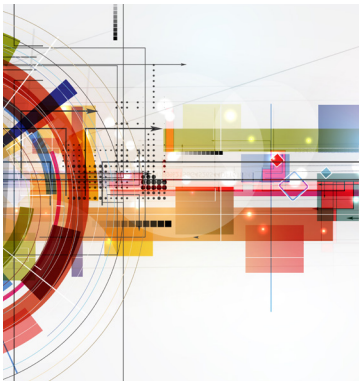

Abstract

What skills and dispositions are most important for higher education assessment professionals to be successful in their work? Emerging professionals and their instructors must be cognizant of what skills and dispositions are necessary in order to be adequately prepared for this work. Utilizing a survey instrument that was developed based on recent research and validated by a panel of experts in higher education assessment, we surveyed 213 higher education assessment professionals from across the United States, assessing their perceptions on the importance of 92 skills and 52 dispositions. We analyzed responses by utilizing descriptive statistics for closed-ended items and thematic analysis of open-ended items. A discussion of the findings, including what skills and dispositions were deemed most important, as well as implications for future research and professional identity are discussed.

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A Snapshot of Needed Skills and Dispositions through the Lens of Assessment Professionals in Higher Education: Findings from a National Survey

Assessment has gained momentum as a key player in higher education over the past two decades. With compliance-driven beginnings, the field of higher education assessment is shifting its focus toward learning improvement while balancing accreditation needs (e.g., Kuh et al., 2015). Currently, higher education assessment professionals come from a variety of educational backgrounds, with the most representation in the social sciences (30%) and education (44%) fields (Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Our disciplinary diversity and varied paths toward engaging in this work can be seen as a strength (Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019); at the same time, there is a wide range of professional development needs across the field (Ariovich et al., 2019). Assessment professionals (APs) in higher education continue to fulfill a broad range of responsibilities and roles within and across institutions (Ariovich et al., 2019); however, we have yet to define a collective professional identity. As such, there is tension and a lack of clarity about what competencies, specifically which skills and dispositions, are most important for APs to develop in order to be successful in their work.

The Roles of Assessment Professionals in Higher Education

To date, few research studies have examined the role of assessment professionals in higher education. Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) developed the Five Role Framework which categorized the major roles APs use in their work: assessment/method expert, narrator/

translator, facilitator/guide, political navigator, and visionary/believer. This framework was developed from reviewing literature and job descriptions, analyzing four interviews with assessment leaders, and the authors' examination of their own experiences as APs. By digging into the multiple hats that APs wear to be effective at their institutions, it also illustrated the "conflicting pressures" and "potentially contested terrains" (p. 96) existing within higher education institutions that define the complex nature of our work. While this study was instrumental in providing a common language for assessment professionals to describe how they exercise their job responsibilities, it did not seek input from a broad representation of practitioners at the national level to verify the skills needed for each of the five roles.

[As such,] there is tension and lack of clarity about what competencies, specifically which skills and dispositions, are most important for APs to develop in order to be successful in their work.

In their national survey, Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) provided the first comprehensive demographic picture of where assessment professionals work, the scope of their skillset, and the tasks that consume their time. The findings shed light on the evolving nature of the assessment professional's role, the limited and often inadequate resources available to them, and the disciplinary diversity within the assessment profession. While this study was crucial for identifying the range of ways that APs accomplish their responsibilities, what matters to them in their work, and the value they provide to higher education institutions, it did not capture APs' perspectives regarding what specific skills are necessary for them to be effective.

Relatedly, Ariovich and colleagues' (2018) white paper, a collaborative work with the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) and Watermark, examined data from two national surveys: the University of Kentucky survey (Combs & Rose, 2015) and the Watermark survey (2017). The purpose was to identify: (1) APs' perceptions of their assessment work; (2) what they liked most and least about their roles and responsibilities; and (3) their professional development needs and interests. The findings of this research offered a greater understanding about the perceived challenges of APs, institutional limitations they face in doing multi-level assessment work, and the need for a responsive approach to professional development. Most importantly, this study identified the wide range of professional development needs that APs have based on the distinctiveness of their positions within institutions nationally. However, one missing aspect from this and previous research studies was an in-depth examination of which specific skills and dispositions are necessary for APs to be successful in their work. In order to better understand this important aspect, as well as attempt to narrow the gap in professional development needs, it seems essential to hear from practitioners themselves. By asking APs, who are currently engaged in this work, to identify an agreed upon set of standards and competencies, the future of professional development in higher education assessment can be directly informed by our work as it continues to grow and evolve.

Important Skills for Assessment Practice

Leadership in higher education assessment practice has been largely informed by practitioners themselves, through sharing case studies, examples of their work, and models that have been successful via professional conferences and publications. While there is a growing body of this scholarship in higher education assessment, it has not yet informed the development of shared skills that govern our practice nationally. Simply put, there is not one universal scope of practice nor set of agreed upon competencies for what an AP in higher education needs to master.

In their recent study, Horst and Prendergast (2020) introduced the Assessment Skills Framework (ASF), outlining what knowledge, skills, and attitudes are essential for assessment work in academic affairs, including learning outcomes for each domain. The ASF is a comprehensive framework for providing professional development to faculty who engage in assessment practices at their institution, outlining three levels of the faculty assessment practitioner-Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced. It was developed in collaboration with their institution's assessment office and other professionals involved in assessment on their campus. The ASF was designed with the professional development needs of faculty members in mind. It offers training facilitators the opportunity to adapt professional development to the varying needs of participants, starting with the foundational knowledge required for assessment work and then moving into eight skill areas which align with different phases of

the overall assessment process. However, as the authors point out, there may be gaps in some of the requirements depending on institutional context and varying roles/responsibilities for APs at institutions other than where it was developed (Horst & Prendergast, 2020). Therefore, while some of the attendees might one day shift into a full-time assessment role, the ASF may not reflect all of the skills and dispositions necessary for APs to be successful because it was not designed specifically for future APs.

Educational and career backgrounds influence the ways assessment professionals approach and implement best practices. Drawing from knowledge and experience from the authors' shared disciplinary counseling lens, the RARE Model provides a conceptual framework for fostering a positive assessment culture through offering a set of strategies for developing participatory and inclusive relationships with faculty and staff (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). This strengths-based model adopts multiple theories to employ an interpersonal approach that can be used by the assessment practitioner in collaborative assessment practice. The RARE Model identifies interpersonal strategies and relationship-building skills as an inherent part of APs success within four overarching components-Relate, Acknowledge, Reflect, Empower. Strategies within the Relate (R) component focus on building rapport and trust with individual faculty and staff partners. Acknowledge (A) techniques emphasize learning about the challenges stakeholders face while also identifying strengths and resources that will help them achieve their goals in the assessment process. Reflect (R) encompasses facilitating readiness toward change by identifying motivation for an actionable decision-making mindset. Empower (E) strategies promote meaning and self-assurance for the assessment partners as they take steps toward their goals. While informed by previous research and assessment literature that articulated the necessity of developing these skills (Kinzie, Jankowski, & Provezis, 2014) and identified roles that consist of interpersonal tasks (Ariovich et al., 2018; Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015), the RARE Model was developed with the disciplinary/professional training lens of counseling professionals and did not explore other aspects of APs' work that may be important for success, such as non-interpersonal skills or competencies.

Both the ASF and the RARE Model focus on skills they deem important for APs in higher education to be successful in their work. The ASF looks specifically at how to train faculty members to perform assessment through the lens of their program developers; the RARE Model framework focuses specifically on interpersonal skills through the lens of counseling professionals. Both of these frameworks are inherently people-centered, i.e., the practitioner's focus is on collaborating with or serving others. Several people-centered professions assess dispositions in their preparation programs (e.g., K-12 teaching, counseling, social work, nursing; see Diez, 2006; Spurgeon et al., 2012). Dispositions often refer to an individual's character or habits and have been looked at in other people-oriented professions; however, neither framework looked at what dispositions may be important for APs to be successful in their work.

There is not one universal scope of practice nor set of agreed upon competencies for what an AP in higher education needs to master.

Only two published studies have asked APs in higher education about the skills or competencies they believe are most important in their work. The University of Kentucky survey provided insight about how they spend their time, the types of professional development they engage in, and professional development topics they would like to receive to help them be effective in their work (Combs & Rose, 2015). The AALHE/Watermark study (Ariovich et al., 2018) further examined the roles of APs and identified an additional role, "project manager," which merged two of the previous ones, facilitator/guide and political navigator, and renamed visionary/believer into "change agent", to represent concisely the tasks associated with these roles. While both of these studies concentrated on the perceptions of APs, neither identified competencies or trainable skills beyond adding to, reorganizing, and clarifying the existence of six major roles that comprise our work. Additionally, no study to date has explored what dispositions would be most important for APs' success in their work.

Summary of the Problem and Purpose Statement

Assessment of learning in higher education is working toward establishing itself as a discipline (Curtis et al., 2020; Penn, 2021); however, a few indicators of an established

discipline have yet to be defined. APs in higher education do not have a collective professional identity, scope of practice across institutions, set competencies or standards, an overarching or governing body that outlines those standards, or a direct educational path of training to enter the profession. In order for our profession to continue advancing and for APs to further enhance their competencies, both doctoral educators and our professional associations need to offer relevant professional development opportunities. Presently, graduate programs geared toward preparing higher education APs are not directly informed by scholarship that defines the most important skills and dispositions that APs need to be successful in their work at various institutions of higher education. Certainly, these programs are considered rigorous and have referred to current literature, best practices, and professional organizations' data in their design, yet the curricula may unintentionally miss some aspects of our roles that could be strengthened in training programs. Horst and Prendergast (2020) noted that their framework, while comprehensive and rigorously developed, may not fit everywhere. To adequately prepare emerging APs, we must first understand what skills and dispositions are most important to cultivate in order to be effective.

It is incumbent upon APs to grow our field and define our professional identity; understanding the professional competencies that matter most in our assessment work will help us achieve this outcome.

Presently, the journey into becoming an AP in higher education may be as "unique as the individual themselves" (Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019, p.1). Because there is not a clear path for entering the profession (Curtis et al., 2020; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018; Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019), our emerging professionals may vary considerably in their competencies as they begin their assessment career. In order to understand the perceptions APs have about the skills and dispositions necessary for competence in our field, we conducted a study to gather this information from a national sample of both emerging and experienced APs in higher education. Our purpose was to hear from a diverse group of APs about the skills and dispositions that are relevant to our field. These findings will benefit educators of emerging professionals as well as those overseeing professional development opportunities within our professional organizations and graduate training programs. It is incumbent upon APs to grow our field and define our professional identity: understanding the professional competencies that matter most in our assessment work will help us achieve this outcome.

Method

Design and Survey Development

For this study, we collected data from higher education assessment professionals using a cross-sectional survey that was developed by the authors[1]. The authors utilized recent literature (Ariovich et al., 2019; ACPA/NASPA, 2015; ALA, 2017; Gregory & Eckert, 2014; Herdlein et al., 2013; Hoffman, 2015; Hoffman & Bresciani, 2012; Holzweiss et al., 2018; Horst & Prendergast, 2020; Janke et al., 2017; Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Lindsay, 2014; Shipman et al., 2003; Simcox & Donat, 2018; Sriram, 2014;) to develop a comprehensive list of skills and dispositions that higher education assessment professionals might need in order to be effective in their job. We then utilized feedback from an expert panel of five higher education assessment professionals/survey methodologists to modify the survey and to establish face and content validity (Colton & Covert, 2007). The final survey contained 92 skills and 52 dispositions that we asked participants to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (0-Not at all important, 1=Slightly important, 2=Important, 3=Moderately important, 4=Very important) the level of importance of higher education assessment professionals having each skill/disposition in order to perform their work. We also included four open-ended questions asking participants to discuss any other skills/dispositions that we may not have asked about that they deemed important for a higher education assessment professional to have. Lastly, we asked participants a series of demographic/background questions in order to describe our sample of respondents.

[1] A forthcoming article describes the development of our survey in more detail. Please contact the lead author for a copy of the survey.

Participants

A total of 285 participants completed some of the survey. After reviewing the data for completeness and anomalies, the final sample size for this study is 213 participants who completed at least 80% of the survey. Of these 213 participants, 72% reported that their job title was that of an assessment professional director (i.e., assistant director or higher), 22% were assessment professionals, and just 6% reported that their main job title was faculty. Respondents reported conducting assessment activities as part of their job role between 5-100%, with an average of 69% of their work devoted toward assessment. In regards to their experience in higher education assessment, participants' number of years in the field ranged from <1 to 32 years with an average of 10 years in the assessment field.

The majority of participants in the study worked at 4-year institutions (84%) and public institutions (70%). Twenty-three percent of participants reported working at a minority-serving institution. Sixty-six percent of participants reported having a Ph.D. or professional terminal degree. Participants' fields of study for their degrees varied with the majority in the field of Education (55%), Humanities (25%), Psychology (12%), Natural Sciences (6%), and Business (2%).

Procedure

First, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained at the lead author's institution to conduct the expert panel review of the preliminary survey items. Feedback from the expert panelists was reviewed by the research team and survey items were modified accordingly. IRB approval was then obtained to disseminate the survey nationally. We utilized both purposive and snowball sampling to recruit assessment professionals from across the United States of America to complete a confidential online survey. We posted an email announcement that included a URL to the survey (hosted securely on the Qualtrics platform) on a variety of assessment-related listservs (e.g., AALHE, Student Affairs Assessment Leaders) and posted survey recruitment ads on assessment-related Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook feeds. The research team also reached out to personal contacts in the assessment field to assist in disseminating the survey link. We collected data for approximately six weeks.

Assessment is about PEOPLE. Those who believe it's mostly about numbers and data have misunderstood the reason the profession even exists.

Data cleaning and quantitative analyses. Once all data were collected and downloaded from Qualtrics, we performed preliminary data cleaning following Morrow and Skolits' (2017) guidelines. After cleaning all quantitative data, we conducted descriptive analyses (i.e., percentages, measures of central tendency, measures of variability) to summarize the data.

Thematic analysis for open-ended questions. We analyzed the open-ended survey questions for themes, following the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a guide. Employing a theoretical approach and latent level of analysis, two research team members coded through the lens of our research question, searching for "repeated patterns of meaning" (pg. 16), employing a constructionist paradigm and moving beyond description into interpretation of themes. First, we immersed ourselves in the data by reading through all of the responses several times (Phase 1). Next, we generated initial codes in parallel/asynchronously, coming together twice during the process to engage in "consensus" meetings which, in the reflexive approach to thematic analysis, were collaborative discussions between researchers intended to check our assumptions with each other, generate richer interpretations, and more deeply explore meaning (Byrne, 2021). We often used "in-vivo codes" (Saldana, 2016) to maintain participants' voices in the data when possible (Phase 2). After initially coding the data, we began collapsing the codes into broader, potential themes as part of an initial codebook (Phase 3). Then, we created a new column of consensus codes next to the descriptive text, sorted them, and visually mapped the themes to better understand how they may be connected (Phase 4), making sure not to overwrite previous iterations of coding to keep an accurate audit trail. After reviewing themes, we began constructing explanations of the "essence" of each theme, discussed how they fit or did not fit into the overall thematic picture and data story, being mindful that themes did not

overlap too much (Phase 5). We also created a thematic map/visual display using Jamboard (Google application) to demonstrate how themes connected with the quantitative results to represent the data in a mixed methods capacity and holistically capture the data story. We described our process here and highlighted thematic findings throughout the forthcoming results section (Phase 6) using quotes and excerpts to capture participant voice.

Trustworthiness strategies and reflexivity statement. Our strategies for trustworthiness included an audit trail to document our process and maintain rigor throughout the analysis phase, copying the re-categorized data to demonstrate this trail and also maintain data integrity. We created analytic memos during each coding phase including our reactions to the data based on our individual perspectives, disciplinary lenses, and professional experiences as higher education assessment practitioners. We discussed these memos throughout consensus meetings to better understand how our perspectives informed our analysis. The first researcher identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual, white woman. She has a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology and currently is an associate professor in Evaluation Statistics and Methodology at a four-year university. She has worked for over 20 years conducting evaluation and assessment projects in higher education and training emerging applied researchers in research methodology. The second researcher, who identifies as a woman of Mediterranean descent, is a higher education assessment professional at a four-year public university. She has a Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision, has previously engaged in scholarship about professional identity in assessment, and has professional experience in program evaluation, clinical research, mental health counseling, and teaching in higher education. The third researcher, who identifies as a white woman, has an Ed.D in Educational Leadership in Higher Education with a professional background in teaching, assessment, student affairs, and mental health counseling. She actively publishes in the fields of higher education assessment and adult learning and currently works as an assistant dean in a two-year public and minority-serving institution. The fourth researcher identifies as a white, non-hispanic/latino female and is a doctoral student in Evaluation, Statistics, and Methodology. She is employed as an assessment professional at a public four-year institution and is involved in academic program, college, and university-wide assessment practices.

People skills-being able to create connections with and build trust with colleagues/clients. No one wants to hear about assessment unless they feel like they can trust you and that you meet them where they're at.

Findings

Prior to conducting descriptive statistics, we thoroughly inspected and cleaned the original data following the 12-steps of data cleaning (Morrow & Skolits, 2017). Open-ended survey data were sanitized by removing any identifying information as well as to fix any grammatical errors. Closed-ended survey data were reviewed for non-normality, outliers, and missing data. There were no issues with non-normality or outliers and any participants with more than 20% missing data were removed from the sample. There were 242 responses across the four open-ended questions. We only included those that had at least one response to one of the open-ended questions and excluded blank entries and entries that indicated "N/A," "Nothing," etc. unless it was meaningful as a response or offered additional narrative.

Perceptions of Needed Skills

Participants rated the importance of 92 distinct skills for higher education assessment professionals in order to perform their work. These skills were organized into nine categories for the electronic survey (disseminating information, interpersonal skills, assessment design, leadership, developing assessment tools, data management, project management, and engaging in assessment activities). In our presentation of the findings below, we have organized participants' responses into broad categories, integrating the closed and open-ended questions thematically.

Interpersonal Skills

By far, the most salient themes we identified throughout the open-ended responses fell into the category of interpersonal skills, often referred to in the data as "people skills," which included interacting with other people across their institutions for assessment-related activities. One participant explained this theme concisely: "Assessment is about PEOPLE. Those who believe it's mostly about numbers and data have misunderstood the reason the

profession even exists." APs considered interpersonal skills to be the most important aspect of their work which was also reflected in the closed-ended results. For example, out of the nine interpersonal skills, the two skills that were rated as moderately/very important by nearly all participants were as follows: collaborating with others on assessment-related processes (94%), and developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders (92%). See Table 1a for summary of results.

Table 1a
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal Skills	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
collaborating with others on assessment-related processes	94%	3.68	0.64
developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders	92%	3.67	0.72
working with faculty on assessment projects	84%	3.40	0.97
navigating organizational politics	85%	3.38	0.84
working with administration on assessment projects	84%	3.32	0.83
serving as an assessment consultant	74%	3.09	1.05
resolving conflicts	62%	2.82	0.99
mentoring novice assessment professionals	58%	2.71	1.11
working with students on assessment activities	44%	2.00	1.23

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

Four themes of interpersonal skills resonated throughout participants' descriptions: (1) Building relationships; (2) Collaboration; (3) Facilitation; and (4) Communication. Following, we define and provide examples of each theme from participants' responses to the open-ended questions. Then, we summarize and reflect on the closed-ended questions, noting connections between the findings.

The collaborative aspect is essential, both collaboration within the assessment team, at the institution, and in the assessment community. I can't imagine doing this job without the support and interaction of all three groups.

Building Relationships. This theme referred to APs' perceptions about the necessity of making personal connections with faculty and staff members across the institution to effectively support assessment work. Assessment professionals reported that skills related to developing trust, listening, and empathy are powerful for engaging others in assessment processes. As one AP explained, "People skills--being able to create connections with and build trust with colleagues/clients. No one wants to hear about assessment unless they feel like they can trust you and that you meet them where they're at." In describing this skill, it seemed that some participants were providing a rationale along with it, perhaps related to misconceptions, either about assessment professionals in general or within their institutions. One participant elaborated:

> I think there's a tremendous need for assessment professionals to have soft skills and to focus on the relationship-building aspect of our roles. Too many assessment professionals lack the ability to connect and engage with faculty and staff and instead focus on task behaviors.

The skill of building relationships was not explicitly listed in the closed-ended items; however, it is a precursor to the five most highly-rated interpersonal skills we saw in the quantitative data outlined in Table 1a: (1) collaborating with others on assessment-related processes; (2) developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders; (3) working with faculty on assessment projects; (4) navigating organizational politics; and (5) working with administration on assessment projects.

Collaboration. Aligning with the closed-ended findings in Table 1a, the theme of Collaboration resonated throughout participants' open-ended responses as a necessary skill for assessment professionals. Collaboration refers to working effectively with others, either as part of a team or in conjunction with existing teams, and can involve multiple layers of assessment work. As one participant noted, "the collaborative aspect is essential, both collaboration within the assessment team, at the institution, and in the assessment community. I can't imagine doing this job without the support and interaction of all three groups." Respondents described specific examples of collaboration that supported success in their work, such as sharing and making sense of data within groups, engaging in on-

going discussions about outcomes to inform evaluation and decision-making, and working in concert with multiple departments across their institutional community. One participant succinctly summarized the greater good of this skill in terms of how they view it helping them as "an arbiter and collaborator in service to the faculty."

Helping faculty to see the purpose of assessment and how it can improve their instruction and student learning is huge.

Facilitation. Facilitation was another salient interpersonal skill that we identified in participants' open-ended responses. This theme referred to one's ability to support and encourage others in decision-making, solving a problem, or working toward a conclusion without exerting authority over the process. Based on participants' language and filling in gaps from our experiences, we inferred that this skill can involve a delicate balance for the AP, depending on the specific individual or group of individuals involved, and seems particularly necessary when the aim is working to link assessment findings toward action, from one cycle to the next. One participant included their explanation of this as:

> An ability to guide individuals (especially faculty and administrators) toward a conclusion or a decision. Not necessarily the one you think is correct-just getting them to commit to action or a determination; otherwise, they can often spend months or even years discussing assessment results without acting upon them.

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions shed light on a new interpretation of the skill of facilitation. In the closed-ended responses, the items that referenced facilitation were about facilitating workshops, facilitating change in an organization, and problem-solving. The closed-ended questions, as written, did not tap into the group dynamics aspect of facilitating others in their decision-making processes, which adds to our understanding of what this important skill fully entails for APs.

Communication. Communication was a dominant theme throughout participant responses, referring to one's ability to share and explain information to various stakeholders, including oral and written methods. In the open-ended responses, participants described the need to translate information to diverse audiences, finding a way to help others understand assessment findings in a way that makes sense specifically for them, being able to have an awareness of another's perspective, and adapt their delivery to meet the needs of other perspectives. One participant clarified the tension involved in this specific type of communication skill as "be creative but be careful to make sure you first understand your audience's needs and capacities to receive your information." Another summarized this as a type of conversational code-switching between various departments and levels of positions:

> At an administrative level, I think it's very important to be able to translate information... being able to communicate to people with differing communication styles. There is a distinct difference in how you communicate with someone who teaches Philosophy, someone who teaches Physics, and the President of the institution.

In the closed-ended items, we asked participants to rate the importance of 17 skills related to disseminating information. The five most highly rated skills that participants deemed important for assessment professionals to have to conduct their job were: (1) communicating assessment results to stakeholders; (2) communicating assessment results in writing; (3) disseminating assessment results; (4) presenting assessment results to stakeholders; and (5) summarizing quantitative assessment results. Throughout participants' responses, it was clear that various forms of communication, including written and oral, were most important in their work. See Table 1b for additional information.

When it came to scholarship and research activities, perceptions of importance were mixed. Few participants rated writing a scholarly article on an assessment topic for publication (only 17% moderately/very important; 17% not at all important) and delivering a scholarly presentation (34% moderately/very important; 7% not at all important) as important skills for an assessment professional to have.

Leadership. Participants indicated the importance of several skills related to leadership. Two themes became apparent in the open-ended responses: 1) advocating

Table 1b
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Disseminating Information

Disseminating Information	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
communicating assessment results to stakeholders	94%	3.76	0.57
communicating assessment results in writing	93%	3.67	0.63
disseminating assessment results	93%	3.67	0.63
presenting assessment results to stakeholders	86%	3.40	0.75
summarizing quantitative assessment results	85%	3.39	0.82
communicating assessment results orally	84%	3.38	0.84
writing an assessment report	83%	3.38	0.82
developing a communication system for assessment results	82%	3.27	0.93
summarizing qualitative assessment results	80%	3.27	0.83
writing assessment report narratives	82%	3.23	0.86
creating a presentation of assessment results	78%	3.17	0.89
facilitating workshops or trainings on assessment topics	72%	3.12	1.04
writing an assessment executive summary	73%	3.09	1.00
creating an assessment results infographic	66%	2.87	1.02
synthesizing assessment and research literature	50%	2.49	1.04
delivering a scholarly presentation	34%	2.00	1.05
writing a scholarly article on an assessment topic for publication	17%	1.49	1.04

for the value of assessment, and 2) awareness. In the closed-ended items, participants rated several skills related to leadership and project management which we consider to be thematically similar to leadership. The sub-headings in this section highlight the interconnectedness and complexity of the themes related to the overarching category of leadership. In the following discussion, we describe each theme with examples from participants' responses to the open-ended items and note connections with their responses to the closed-ended items related to leadership.

One person shouldn't have to do it all; collaborative efforts yield the most effective and meaningful assessment practices.

Advocating for the value of assessment. Throughout the open-ended responses, participants described advocating for the value of assessment practices and related leadership skills as some of the most important aspects of their positions. Advocacy skills were best exemplified through an "evangelist" (Kawasaki, 2015) style of communicating the merits and advantages of assessment with faculty and staff. In other words, bringing the good assessment news minus the sales feel. One participant summarized that APs "must find ways to keep moving assessment forward whether valued by a culture of assessment or not. Assessment matters." Another participant shared this as, "Helping faculty to see the purpose of assessment and how it can improve their instruction and student learning is huge." From the ways this theme was described, it appears that this competency is used frequently and on-going, especially in working to create changes in their institution's assessment culture and allocating resources for assessment. One participant expressed:

> It's important to be able to articulate why assessments are important and to connect their importance back to institutional effectiveness and quality assurance and accreditation. I have encountered a number of faculty members who do not make this connection, which is reflected in the assessments they complete (i.e., poor quality).

In the closed-ended responses, participants rated 11 items related to leadership skills. Of those, the five that were rated most highly (by 85% or more) were: (1) developing a culture of assessment within an organization; (2) leading assessment efforts and initiatives; (3) facilitating change in an organization using assessment data; (4) advocating for assessment initiatives; and (5) advocating for assessment resources. The theme of advocating for the value of assessment resonated throughout the open-ended responses and it aligned with two of the most highly rated items in the closed-ended responses related to leadership: (4) advocating for assessment initiatives; and (5) advocating for assessment resources (86% and 85% respectively) (see Table 1c).

Awareness. Throughout the open-ended responses, participants often referred to the importance of awareness: of one's own position in relation to others, institutional context, and the ability to shift one's perspective to that of other stakeholders. One

Table 1c
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Leadership Skills

Leadership	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
developing a culture of assessment within an organization	94%	3.67	0.72
leading assessment efforts and initiatives	92%	3.62	0.62
facilitating change in an organization using assessment data	88%	3.41	0.80
advocating for assessment initiatives	86%	3.35	0.85
advocating for assessment resources	85%	3.35	0.82
tracking assessment activities across an organization	81%	3.28	0.88
identifying relevant stakeholders	80%	3.27	0.88
managing an organization-wide assessment team	67%	2.95	1.05
strategic planning at the institutional level	66%	2.84	0.99
managing assessment staff	58%	2.69	1.12
advocating for the higher education assessment profession	57%	2.66	1.07

***% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important**

participant explained the central role that awareness skills play as it pertains to developing assessment plans:

> Tailor assessment plans to meet the needs in different contexts. Could also be 'design assessment plans that take context into consideration.' Especially at large campuses, cannot have a one-size fits all so being able to use context to guide the development of an assessment plan is crucial to being effective.

Awareness also encompassed having a deep understanding of how different parts of the institution connect and acumen for bringing in other departments when necessary. One participant expressed this as "understanding your institution-how do traditions or various activities impact results." This skill is somewhat related and perhaps adjacent to good collaboration skills. As one participant shared, "the ability to identify and collaborate with the appropriate stakeholders at the institution depending on the task (e.g., student affairs, IR office, center for teaching & learning, university libraries, registrar)." Institutional awareness was described as a necessary ingredient for assessment professionals' prosperity.

The challenge remains: if we are to advance the assessment profession as a discipline, our necessary competencies and roles need to be more consistent across the milieu of higher education and not be dependent upon where we land a job.

Participants articulated that awareness is a crucial part of obtaining and sharing data effectively. As one AP stated, "where to go to have access to information needed (student demographics for example), and who to share information with so the 'right' people have the information to make data-driven decisions." Inherent throughout the theme of awareness was the ability to shift one's perspective to understand the needs of others, as another participant stated, "The ability to meet faculty/departments where they are," which was especially important to support effective communication with diverse stakeholders. The importance of awareness only became apparent through analyzing the open-ended items; there were no closed-ended items that aligned with this theme, adding to our understanding of what aids APs to be successful.

Project Management. Participants did not specifically reference project management in the open-ended responses, although these skills were rated highly in the closed-ended items and are a relevant aspect of leadership. The majority of participants (85% or greater) rated four of the project management skills as highly important skills for an assessment professional to have. Managing time (93%), managing assessment projects (92%), managing multiple assessment projects (90%), and project management (85%) were all rated highly. Only managing fiscal resources was rated as less important (only 40% of participants rated this highly). See Table 1d.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data highlight the importance of advocacy, leadership, and management skills. While assessment practitioners rated these skills as overwhelmingly essential, from the qualitative data, they also voiced the necessity of having institutional influence, or persuasiveness, without institutional power. One participant described managing this conflict precisely, "when data is collected that admin doesn't care to address, the practitioner sometimes must be the gadfly that ensures that the data isn't

Table 1d
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Project Management

Project Management	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
managing time	93%	3.65	0.65
managing assessment projects	92%	3.61	0.72
managing multiple assessment projects	90%	3.53	0.72
project management	85%	3.46	0.85
managing fiscal resources	40%	2.18	1.15

***% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important**

shelved and ignored." All of these skills require a balance of being assertive while also tactful, skills which are inherently interpersonal in nature.

Assessment Design, Tools, and Data

It is unrealistic to expect that an AP can "do it all," which could explain why collaboration is so important to success in assessment work

The most commonly understood aspects of assessment work, developing the nuts and bolts of learning outcomes and assessment planning, were identified solely through the closed-ended data. Of the 10 skills related to assessment design, there were four skills that were rated as moderately/very important by at least 80% of participants-creating an assessment plan, creating program outcomes, creating student learning outcomes, and mapping learning outcomes. Only 32% of participants rated conducting a research study on an assessment-related topic as a highly important skill for assessment professionals to have and 10% rated this as not at all important. Of the 8 skills related to developing assessment tools, only one (evaluating existing assessment tools) was rated as highly important (84% of participants). Creating assessment databases and creating assessment dashboards were two skills that fewer than 50% of participants rated as highly important. There were three skills related to data management that were rated as highly important by at least 80% of participants. These are selecting appropriate data points/assessment measures (87%), measuring student learning outcomes (84%), and analyzing quantitative data (82%). There were two skills that fewer than 40% of participants rated as moderately/very important-conducting univariate statistics (12% rated as not at all important) and conducting advanced multivariate statistics (13% rated as not at all important). Within the open-ended questions there was no new information or overlapping themes related to these sets of skills. See Tables 1e through 1g.

Table 1e
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Assessment Design

Assessment Design	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
creating an assessment plan	93%	3.67	0.65
creating program outcomes	83%	3.45	0.91
creating student learning outcomes	83%	3.44	0.90
mapping learning outcomes	85%	3.42	0.84
conducting a program review	76%	3.16	0.98
conducting a program evaluation	75%	3.12	1.03
conducting curricular or program mapping	72%	3.08	0.90
conducting a needs assessment	65%	2.81	1.08
conducting mixed methods assessment projects	63%	2.76	1.05
conducting a research study on an assessment-related topic	32%	1.95	1.15

***% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important**

Finally, participants rated 17 different skills related to engaging in assessment activities on how important these were for an assessment professional to have in order to do their job. Five of these were rated highly by at least 85% of participants: engaging in ethical assessment (92%); engaging in critical thinking (95%); utilizing data to inform policy and practice (93%); using assessment data to make decisions (91%); and solving problems (88%). Skills such as managing an assessment dashboard (40%), improving curricula (57%), and

Table 1f
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Developing Assessment Tools

Developing Assessment Tools	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
evaluating existing assessment tools	84%	3.32	0.84
developing survey instruments	73%	3.01	1.01
creating assessment reporting templates	71%	3.00	0.96
developing assessment instruments	66%	2.92	1.05
creating rubrics	67%	2.90	1.04
developing an assessment management system for an organization	59%	2.72	1.17
creating assessment databases	45%	2.40	1.15
creating assessment dashboards	40%	2.22	1.09

***% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important**

Table 1g
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Data Management

Data Management	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
selecting appropriate data points/assessment measures	87%	3.49	0.75
measuring student learning outcomes	84%	3.42	0.87
analyzing quantitative data	82%	3.35	0.87
disaggregating data	76%	3.18	1.00
creating visual representations of data	74%	3.15	0.95
analyzing qualitative data	75%	3.14	0.96
conducting descriptive statistics	72%	3.08	1.13
collecting survey data for assessment purposes	72%	3.06	0.97
administering assessment instruments	60%	2.76	1.15
collecting focus group data for assessment purposes	56%	2.61	1.08
conducting a focus group	49%	2.46	1.10
conducting interviews	44%	2.27	1.14
conducting data mining for assessment purposes	42%	2.15	1.18
conducting univariate statistics	40%	2.13	1.31
conducting advanced multivariate statistics	29%	1.87	1.18

***% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important**

Table 1h
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Engaging in Assessment Activities

Engaging in Assessment Activities	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
engaging in ethical assessment	92%	3.66	0.63
engaging in critical thinking	95%	3.65	0.65
using assessment data to make decisions	91%	3.52	0.73
utilizing data to inform policy and practice	93%	3.52	0.70
solving problems	88%	3.45	0.77
employing assessment in an equitable way	83%	3.42	0.84
reflecting on assessment practice	82%	3.38	0.82
understanding accreditation standards and state policies	80%	3.34	0.88
using assessment results to foster equity	82%	3.30	0.90
explaining accreditation needs and expectations to faculty	79%	3.28	1.01
utilizing rubrics for assessment purposes	73%	3.05	0.99
managing ethical risks	64%	2.97	1.08
evaluating the quality of previous assessment studies and research	67%	2.95	1.00
understand characteristics of effective instruction	62%	2.74	1.06
using an assessment management system	56%	2.65	1.17
improving curricula	57%	2.59	1.12
managing an assessment dashboard	40%	2.23	1.16

***% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important**

using an assessment management system (56%) were not seen as highly important skills for an assessment professional to have. See Table 1h for additional information.

Teaching Experience

Teaching was not a specific skill that we asked about in the closed-ended questions; the most relevant item was "facilitating workshops and training on assessment topics (74%

of respondents perceived this skill as moderately to very important). However, teaching experience resonated strongly throughout the open-ended responses. Participants frequently described having teaching or classroom experience as important to the assessment process:

> You didn't ask if I had taught in the classroom as a faculty member. I think this is VERY important. As a former full-time faculty member, I understand that faculty experience so that I can relate to them and 'speak their language'.

Many participants mentioned how having this experience helped them to better understand faculty perspectives supporting the assessment process: "I've found that having background as a former faculty member has helped me understand assessment from multiple different angles and to be empathetic and understanding of faculty concerns when it comes to assessment and evaluation." Some participants related having this kind of experience to credibility and relatability in working with faculty members:

> Though it is unspoken, I think it greatly helps an assessment professional to have some kind of teaching experience/background. I was never a full time faculty member, but have taught as an adjunct for many years and that helps me to relate to faculty members and gives me what I call 'street cred'.

The closed-ended items related to teaching and instruction received more mixed ratings of importance from participants-understanding the characteristics of effective instruction (60%) and improving curricula (57%). This variability could point to the range of roles and responsibilities APs fulfill across institutions ("It Depends" theme described further below) as well as the importance of collaboration and awareness/shifting perspective (previously described).

Perceptions of Needed Dispositions

Participants rated the importance of 52 distinct dispositions for higher education assessment professionals in order to perform their work. These dispositions were organized into four categories for the online survey: interpersonal, responsiveness, work approach, expression. Below we summarize participants' ratings on the closed-ended items for dispositions and integrate related themes that researchers identified from responses to the open-ended questions. Refer to Tables 2a and 2b for additional information.

Personally, I feel dispositions are more vital than technical skills- You can learn the techniques but without the personality, you will have trouble motivating others!

In the closed-ended items, participants rated most of the 15 interpersonal dispositions as rather important for higher education APs (i.e., all of the dispositions had ratings above 65%). This was also true in the qualitative data as many of the dispositions were reflected throughout the major themes. As one participant noted: "Personally, I feel dispositions are more vital than technical skills. You can learn the techniques but without the personality, you will have trouble motivating others!"

In the interpersonal category, collaborative, honest, helpful, inclusive, and supportive were rated as highly important dispositions to have (90% or higher rated as moderately/very important). All of the 14 dispositions related to responsiveness were rated very highly by participants (>80% rated as moderately/very important) with problem solver (95%) and adaptable (95%) being rated the highest. See Table 2a.

Helpful was one of the highest rated dispositions with 95% of participants rating it as moderately to very important, and this importance was also reflected in the open-ended responses. As one participant concisely summarized, "Helping people -- teachers, students, admins, community stakeholders -- is the core of what I do." Another participant summarized the importance of honesty and transparency which were rated as moderately/very important in the closed-ended items by almost all participants (96% and 94%, respectively):

> It's important to be honest about what we know and don't know as an assessment field. There are many recommendations and 'best practices' that do not have any empirical evidence to support them. We need to be honest about that when we communicate to others.

Table 2a
Perceptions of Needed Dispositions: Interpersonal and Responsiveness

Dispositions	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
Interpersonal			
collaborative	97%	3.86	0.50
honest	97%	3.76	0.54
helpful	96%	3.70	0.58
inclusive	92%	3.61	0.74
supportive	92%	3.51	0.67
team player	89%	3.43	0.74
effective leader	88%	3.33	0.81
encouraging	87%	3.44	0.84
relational	87%	3.44	0.76
tactful	83%	3.43	0.79
politically savvy	79%	3.19	0.96
persuasive	77%	3.20	0.93
empathic	75%	3.03	0.89
compassionate	70%	2.95	0.94
kind	68%	2.94	1.00
Responsiveness			
problem-solver	95%	3.71	0.58
adaptable	95%	3.70	0.58
openness to feedback	93%	3.58	0.67
flexible	93%	3.60	0.64
resourceful	92%	3.55	0.69
reflective	91%	3.57	0.69
inquisitive	90%	3.49	0.76
comfortable with ambiguity or chaos	90%	3.51	0.76
thoughtful	89%	3.47	0.74
life-long learner	86%	3.44	0.77
curious	86%	3.43	0.78
self-aware	85%	3.39	0.80
resilient	85%	3.42	0.80
growth mindset	82%	3.38	0.91

***% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important**

Six out of 13 dispositions related to work approach (trustworthy, reliable, ethical, analytical, detail oriented, and strategic) were rated as moderately/very important by more than 90% of participants. Being fiscally responsible was the lowest rated disposition with only 57% of participants rating this as moderately/very important. Of the 10 dispositions related to expression, transparent (94%), articulate (92%), and professional (90%) were rated the highest. Passionate, humble, optimistic, while still rated highly by the majority of participants (>65% rated as moderately/very important), received lower ratings compared to other expression dispositions (See Table 2b). In the open-ended data, we saw complexity related to expression similarly represented through the need to balance several types of communication and leadership skills, with attention to knowing which approach will work best depending on the context of the situation.

Helping people - teachers, students, admins, community stakeholders - is the core of what I do.

Flexibility. In the closed-ended responses, 95% of participants rated Problem-solver and Adaptable as moderately/very important, but these specific terms were not referenced in the open-ended questions. Relatedly, participants described flexibility as a crucial disposition for APs in multiple areas of their work. Some described flexibility as a skill one practices, e.g., "Be(ing) flexible in presenting data/assessment results and information), and others referenced it more like a disposition one has: "Having flexibility to work with a variety of people within an institution from staff and faculty to admin." Through their words, participants revealed a multilayered definition of flexibility that encompassed both problem-solving and adaptability. As one participant stated,

> We are practitioners, and every department we work with is unique. We need to be flexible and take stock of the opportunities and limitations in the department and at the university, so that we help faculty develop feasible, sustainable assessment, not perfect assessment.

Table 2b
Perceptions of Needed Dispositions: Work Approach and Expression

Dispositions	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
Work Approach			
trustworthy	96%	3.75	0.52
reliable	95%	3.71	0.57
ethical	93%	3.75	0.57
analytical	92%	3.60	0.68
strategic	91%	3.51	0.73
detail oriented	91%	3.62	0.67
equity-minded	87%	3.38	0.90
culturally responsive	85%	3.32	0.82
motivated	84%	3.39	0.76
committed	84%	3.39	0.77
autonomous	78%	3.20	0.94
creative	74%	3.10	0.91
fiscally responsible	57%	2.67	1.04
Expression			
transparent	94%	3.60	0.59
articulate	92%	3.57	0.70
professional	90%	3.62	0.70
engaged	90%	3.46	0.70
genuine	89%	3.48	0.72
positive attitude	85%	3.33	0.85
confident	82%	3.19	0.83
passionate	69%	2.93	1.00
humble	69%	2.87	1.10
optimistic	66%	2.85	1.06

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

You need a thick skin - don't take it personally when people don't make assessment work their priority.

Patience. Participants frequently referred to the importance of patience in assessment work whether describing it as a skill one practices (i.e., being patient) or a disposition one has (patience). This theme only became apparent in participants' responses to the open-ended questions as it was not listed in the closed-ended items for participants to rank. Some responses referred to more systemic concerns, such as the "patience to deal with slow-moving change and cyclical activities," and others referenced patience in working with other people. Patience with people involved adapting to a multitude of unique challenges based on the individual or group. One AP identified:

> Patience is key for the assessment professional. You have to be patient with individuals who are not computer literate, do not understand assessment, miss deadlines, want their hands held, and believe that you are just adding work to their plate.

One participant described how patience can differ from flexibility because an assessment professional may need to accept actions that are outside of their control:

> I think having patience or being a patient person is important for the assessment professional. I think it's more than just being flexible. I think flexible means going along with changes to a plan that you agree with. Patience is needed when there are changes to a plan that you don't necessarily think are beneficial but due to circumstances may need to occur (for example, campus politics).

"Thick Skin." Throughout the open-ended responses, participants frequently described that having a "thick skin" is an extremely important disposition in assessment work. This theme referred to the AP not feeling personally offended when engaging with other stakeholders who may criticize or not consider assessment work to be a priority. One participant shared, "You need a thick skin -- don't take it personally when people don't make assessment work their priority." And another similarly noted, "This is the place to include thick-skinned. [It's] crucially important not to take things personally." Most of the responses within this theme also referred to the need to hear feedback from others in their work,

whether it was warranted or not. One participant strongly stated, "They [APs] also need to be "thick-skinned" with comments and criticism from those who do not understand or like assessment." Aligning with the closed-ended responses, this theme most closely aligns with Resilience which was rated as moderately to very important by 85% of participants.

One needs to display strong interpersonal skills and the ability to build collaborative relationships in order to support success in working with stakeholders on assessment processes.

It Depends

Finally, one overarching theme became apparent while analyzing the open-ended questions that extended beyond the skills and dispositions items: It depends. This theme encapsulated multiple challenges that exist for the AP in taking on all of these varying roles and responsibilities, often with insufficient resources, time, and staff. Some had difficulty condensing this into a response that we could easily understand and noted that it was due to several factors at their institution. We noticed that these responses indicated a unique institution type or position structure, and that their roles were often changing, depending on the day or task to be completed.

> Assessment, while it has some common ground among institutions, also has unique implementation or nuances depending upon the institution type (i.e. assessment doesn't always look exactly the same in a community college as a four year; certain assessment assumed practices don't fit exactly the same in all settings).

From the prescriptive language participants used, they also seemed to be pushing back against the notion that all of these expectations should fall on one (or two) individuals in an assessment capacity. One participant eloquently stated, "One person shouldn't have to do it all; collaborative efforts yield the most effective and meaningful assessment practices." To make matters more complex, they also reminded us that differing levels, areas of expertise, and learning backgrounds exist within our profession, making these questions challenging to answer in a one-size-fits-all approach. One participant summed this up as:

> Many of us come from very different paths into our current roles - therefore, training, knowledge, skills, etc. are all very individualized (...) it is not only what type of position they currently hold/their knowledge of various assessment professional types, but also their road to get there (what they have and have not been required to do/learn).

While there were no specific items in the closed-ended questions that reflected the theme of It Depends, we noticed that some skills received more disparate ratings of importance. For example, conducting univariate and advanced multivariate statistics, writing a scholarly article, delivering a scholarly presentation, synthesizing assessment and research literature, and managing fiscal resources all received a broader range of responses as to how important they are for APs to be successful in their work (i.e., the number of participants who responded "not at all important," "slightly important," "important," "moderately important," and "very important" were more evenly spread out). This variability in ratings aligns with the It Depends theme which may imply that certain skills are more or less important for APs to be successful, depending on the context of their role and institution.

Discussion

There were a number of noteworthy findings obtained from this study. Overwhelmingly, the importance of interpersonal skills resonated throughout the data. One needs to display strong interpersonal skills and the ability to build collaborative relationships in order to support success in working with stakeholders on assessment processes. The RARE Model supports this finding as it positions building relationships and interpersonal strategies as foundational for APs' success in their collaborative work (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). Participants considered collaborative skills and developing collaborative relationships to be essential for an AP in higher education to be successful which is supported by previous research. Ariovich et al. (2018, 2019) and Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) highlighted the key roles of facilitator/guide and political navigator which describe collaborating on assessment activities as an integral part of an AP's role.

Communicating with stakeholders and disseminating assessment results effectively was also deemed as very important by many respondents. APs cannot simply regurgitate assessment data back to stakeholders; they must be able to understand the context and connect with diverse stakeholders, communicating in a way that makes sense to them, which Jankowski and Slotnick referred to as the "translator" role (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015). The newly apparent theme of Awareness was closely related to both communication skills and leadership skills, emphasizing the need to be able to understand context as well as shift one's perspective, in order to more effectively communicate with others.

The interpersonal and responsiveness dispositions were more salient throughout the open-ended data and rated as highly important in the closed-ended questions. Being flexible was widely referenced as essential to assessment work, particularly in relation to interpersonal skills such as communication and collaboration, and the dispositions of problem-solver and adaptable. Patience and having a "thick skin" also resonated as important dispositions for APs to have. Most of the highly-rated dispositions described how one interacts with and responds to others, further emphasizing the importance of interpersonal strategies in assessment work. In the closed-ended questions, Collaborative was the highest rated disposition; but is being collaborative a disposition or is it a teachable skill? The RARE Model, informed by counseling and psychology theories, leverages interpersonal and collaborative strategies as foundational for APs to be successful (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019), which are skills that can be trained and refined. The authors did not, however, outline important dispositions in their framework. Some practitioner-based professions (e.g., counseling, nursing, law enforcement, social work) assess dispositions throughout their training programs; therefore, a greater understanding of the important dispositions for APs would be helpful in preparing future APs for assessment work. Because the current study is the first to explore what dispositions are most important for APs in higher education, further research is necessary.

APs also need to weave an assessment story as well as provide guidance to stakeholders on how to utilize their assessment results. APs should be skilled at data storytelling, the ability to present data that facilitates decision making (Knaflic, 2015). Being able to engage faculty, effectively communicate assessment results, and facilitate professional development training encompass the narrator/translator role described by Ariovich et al. (2018, 2019) and Jankowski and Slotnick (2015). Also, in order to be seen as a change agent (as described in Ariovich et al., 2018, 2019), an AP needs these interpersonal skills to assist stakeholders with utilizing their results to inform decision making. Employing these skills can further support APs in advocating for the value of assessment, which participants referenced as important throughout their responses as a necessary leadership skill for APs to be successful in their work. These descriptions of advocacy skills are consistent with and build upon our understanding of Horst and Prendergast's (2020) framework and Jankowski and Slotnick's (2015) "visionary/believer" role that has been articulated in previous literature on assessment director leadership (Bresciani, 2012; Sayegh, 2013; Smith, 2013).

Most of the highly-rated dispositions described how one interacts with and responds to others, further emphasizing the importance of interpersonal strategies in assessment work.

Many APs indicated that having teaching experience was helpful to better understand the faculty perspective, gain trust or credibility, or maintain a closer connection to classroom learning when conducting assessment activities. Teaching experience enhanced the AP's ability to collaborate more effectively with faculty on assessment teams, especially because of their awareness (i.e., the ability to shift their perspectives) which was a strongly related theme. This finding further portrays APs in higher education as "blended professionals," who toe the line between academic and administrative roles (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Whitchurch, 2009).

APs and faculty often work closely together, suggesting that assessment and faculty development should be closely aligned within and across an institution (Kinzie et al., 2019); however, regardless of where they are positioned, it is important for APs to have a deep understanding of the faculty experience and how the goals of assessment intersect with the goals of instruction (Jankowski, 2017).

Finally, participants emphasized that the essential skills and dispositions for APs to have greatly depends on the AP's role, available resources, and type of institution.

Certain clusters of skills received mixed perceptions of importance, notably those related to scholarship and research activities, developing assessment tools, data management (e.g., collection and analysis), and improving curriculum/instruction. It is unrealistic to expect that an AP can "do it all," which could explain why collaboration is so important to success in assessment work. Previous research studies noted the disparity in our roles across institutions and contexts (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018) which resonated strongly throughout the findings of this study. The challenge remains: if we are to advance the assessment profession as a discipline, our necessary competencies and roles need to be more consistent across the milieu of higher education and not be dependent upon where we land a job. It is essential to define our voice and position within the higher education leadership landscape so that our collective professional identity can provide a clearer path toward this work. Establishing a shared set of competencies can prepare future APs more consistently and adequately, narrowing the gap in professional development needs.

A unified set of competencies is sorely needed in order to advance the profession and refine best practice. There needs to be a diversity of voices having a seat at the table as we craft and agree upon these competencies and construct our collective professional identity.

Limitations

While our results offer a glimpse into how APs perceive the importance of a variety of skills and dispositions, our study is not without limitations. First, while we made every effort to obtain data from a representative sample of APs, it is unknown if all voices were represented within our data. Also, while we had a lot of diversity in regard to job titles, it was unclear what their specific roles looked like and if those roles were consistent across different types of institutions. Another limitation of our study is that the data were collected at one point in time utilizing just one method-a survey. A mixed-methods design encompassing multiple data collection time points from multiple relevant stakeholders, not just current assessment professionals, would offer a more comprehensive picture regarding needed skills and dispositions for our field. Our results are a general summary of our sample of APs' perceptions; without previous research, we did not have a lens to inform us how to differentiate or delve deeper into the rich descriptive data that we obtained. More in-depth analyses of this data are needed to fully understand what APs deem as important skills and dispositions for our professionals to have in our field, both within and across institutions. Lastly, it is important to note that this data capture an important point in time: during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic; when the enrollment and retention challenges that exist for institutions of higher education are significant; the value of formal education is being questioned in new ways; and the assessment profession is situated to adaptively respond.

Implications and Future Research

The current study is the first to ask APs in higher education what skills and dispositions they believe are most important to be successful. Building upon previous research, the findings offer further evidence of what competencies APs deem as essential for preparing future APs for a career in this field. As of yet, the higher education assessment field does not have an agreed upon set of professional competencies recommended for those in our field. Unlike other related professions (e.g., Evaluation, Students Affairs), there is not a governing body for higher education APs to provide guidance for graduate educators or practicing professionals as to what competencies are required in order to be competent in our field. A unified set of competencies is sorely needed in order to advance the profession and refine best practices. There needs to be a diversity of voices having a seat at the table as we craft and agree upon these competencies and construct our collective professional identity.

It is also apparent that we need to better understand the professional development needs of our emerging and practicing APs. Graduate programs that train emerging APs can utilize this information, along with previous research, to review how their curricula address these various skills and dispositions. However, because the path to becoming an AP varies widely in regard to discipline and type of degree, it is not enough for graduate programs alone to be tasked with developing and enhancing these skills in our emerging APs. Rather, our assessment-related organizations and home institutions need to assess the current professional development needs of their members and offer relevant training to address the demand. Many APs learn about the roles and activities around assessment at their institutions

while 'on the job;' having access to on-demand and applicable training to enhance specific competencies would greatly benefit APs and their organizations. Assessment organizations and home institutions should consider intensifying their professional development beyond conference workshops and brief webinars. Similar to ACPA's Student Affairs Assessment Institute (https://myacpa.org/event/saai-2021/), organizations can offer in-person or virtual week-long assessment 'boot camps' for APs. The availability of meaningful professional development (PD) and support from supervisors to engage in PD may not only entice some to join our field but also assist in retaining already practicing APs who may be considering leaving the profession due to stagnation.

While this initial study answered some of the questions we had about needed skills and dispositions in the higher education assessment field, the authors were left with more questions than clear answers. A more in-depth analysis of this data, as well as other data sources (e.g., job descriptions, organizational membership data), would offer additional clarification as to what competencies are most important in our work. Do perceived needed competencies differ based on job role (e.g., college assessment coordinator, university assessment professional, director of assessment), type of institution (e.g., 2-year vs 4-year), field of discipline, or availability of institutional resources focused on assessment? What characteristics influence APs' perceptions of needed competencies, and what internal/external forces influence an AP's competencies? Exploring these questions further can offer greater insight for those designing professional development opportunities as well as enhance APs' self-reflection regarding their own competencies.

Conclusion

It was our intent to conduct this study in order to better understand the key competencies for higher education APs. As educators and practicing APs, we have a vested interest in moving our field forward, calling attention to our existing and often untapped leadership in higher education institutions while working to define a clearer professional identity and pathway toward this profession. Not only do we want our future colleagues to be successful, we also want them to stay, grow, and contribute to the evolution of our field. Our hope is that this work elevates the urgency regarding needed competencies for APs and encourages others to delve further into this topic.

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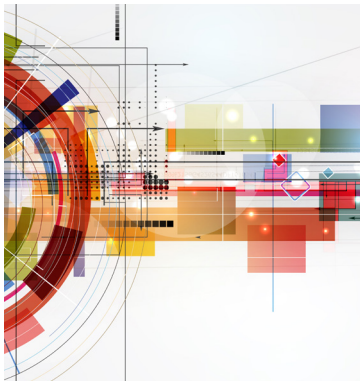
Abstract

Assessment takes place throughout the collegiate context involving a range of diverse individuals and they need to be valued, appreciated, and respected for their unique individual, disciplinary, and professional contributions to assessment. Those working in assessment are encouraged to consider adopting collaborative, shared approaches to leading and accomplishing interdependent processes and outcomes, often described as *distributed leadership*. This article begins by articulating the significance of leadership for assessment, continues by describing how a distributed leadership perspective may be useful, and concludes by defining and promoting conditions to support distributed leadership for assessment. As a concept, distributed leadership has the potential to influence the individual identity development of the assessment professional, involve other stakeholders engaged in the learning enterprise, inform institutional cultures for assessment, and provide opportunities to strengthen the assessment profession.



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Distributed Leadership for Assessment: Considerations for Individuals, Institutions, and the Profession

Introduction

For assessment practitioners, there has been significant recent interest in identifying, describing, and clarifying the various roles and responsibilities associated with the identity development of these professionals (Ariovich et al., 2019; Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018; Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019). Often this identity involves developing and deploying specialized expertise through actions such as using various assessment methods, analyzing findings, communicating results, facilitating change, navigating complex political relationships, managing projects, and engaging in reflective practice and ongoing professional development. Assessment professional identity development for individuals also recognizes and values the various backgrounds and disciplinary perspectives of those involved in this work, along with respecting and appreciating the multiple pathways taken by individuals attracted to assessment as a profession.

Although growing in numbers, importance, and influence on college and university campuses, assessment professionals are not engaged in assessment activities in isolation. Because students increasingly participate in a variety of structured, educationally-purposeful, and aligned learning experiences on their pathway to graduation, they do so in instructional contexts occurring both within and outside the classroom setting (Jankowski

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& Marshall, 2017; Kuh et al., 2017). This has resulted in broadened stakeholder engagement in assessment reliant on an increasingly wide range of individuals from all parts of the collegiate landscape (Hundley & Kahn, 2019). Indeed, as Table 1 highlights, there are hosts of individuals and contexts associated with higher education assessment.

Table 1
Individuals and Contexts for Higher Education Assessment

Individuals **engaged in higher education assessment include:**	***Contexts*** **involved in higher education assessment include:**
• Presidents, Provosts, & Institutional Policymakers • Deans & Leaders of Divisions/Units • Department Chairs & Program Directors • Faculty Governance Leaders/Members • Individual Faculty & Staff Colleagues • Professionals Supporting Assessment Practices & Processes • Institutional & Program Partners • Students & Student Government Members • Alumni • Employers & Community Members	• Institution-wide Goals for Learning • Initial Socialization & Integration Touchpoints • General Education Programs • Academic Programs & Courses • High-Impact Practices & Related Interventions • Support Services & Resources • Administrative Functions • Learning Experiences in Co-curricular, Community, International, & Experiential Learning Settings

The modern-day assessment movement began in the 1980s with calls for greater accountability and transparency of higher education institutions from a variety of influencers: federal and state governments, regional and specialized accreditors, higher education governing bodies, and institutions themselves.

Some of the activities in which individuals are involved in these contexts include identifying and documenting what students should know and be able to do upon completion of an assignment, course, experience, or program (Banta & Palomba, 2015); creating welcoming and student-oriented institutions (McNair et al., 2016); attending to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion through culturally responsive teaching and assessment practices (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020); and using data, experiences, and insights to understand, promote, and improve student learning and institutional effectiveness (Kuh et al., 2015; Webber & Zheng, 2020). To accomplish all of this, "leadership at all levels is necessary to create a student-centric culture that values evidence-informed interventions, improvements, and innovations" (Hundley & Keith, 2020, p. 2.). This article begins by articulating the significance of leadership for assessment, continues by describing how a distributed leadership perspective may be useful for those involved in assessment, and concludes by defining distributed leadership for assessment and promoting its use in various contexts.

Significance of Leadership for Assessment

The modern-day assessment movement began in the 1980s with calls for greater accountability and transparency of higher education institutions from a variety of influencers: federal and state governments, regional and specialized accreditors, higher education governing bodies, and institutions themselves (Astin, 2012; Banta & Palomba, 2015; Hundley & Kahn, 2019; Kuh et al., 2015). During this time, increased attention was being paid toward the issues of teaching and learning, including the real and perceived tensions between assessment for both improvement and accountability purposes, along with how to effectively engage faculty in the assessment process—work that continues today (Banta et al., 2015; Ewell, 2009; Maki, 2012). This was also occurring during a time when institutions began competing in a more crowded higher education marketplace, teaching

more diverse students, operating with dwindling fiscal resources, and increasing their attention to educational quality and value (Van Ameijde et al., 2009). It also meant the need to prioritize and sustain leadership for assessment by involving leaders throughout the institution (Gray, 1997).

Assessment leaders can be broadly classified as those who have primary responsibility for assessment as a principal or sole part of their job descriptions or those who have responsibility for assessment as part of a larger—and often related—set of duties (Hundley, 2019a). The former, as Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) noted, typically include "administrators or faculty with the following job titles: Director of Assessment, Associate/Assistant Director of Assessment, Coordinator of Assessment, and Assessment Specialist" (p. 6). The latter often include other colleagues ranging from institutional leaders to unit or program leaders to individual contributor faculty and staff members—all of whom contribute, either directly or indirectly, to assessment activities on campus.

Assessment in higher education requires broad leadership for its sustainability.

Assessment in higher education requires broad leadership for its sustainability. Everyone has the potential to be an assessment leader (Hundley, 2019b), including *the individual assessment professional*, who works in partnership with others to design, implement, assess, improve, and document learning; *other stakeholders involved in the learning enterprise*, including faculty, staff, students, and employers or community members; and *formal institutional leaders*, such as presidents, provosts, deans, unit leaders, and chairs or program directors. Thus, assessment leaders at all levels will benefit from an understanding of leadership styles, contexts, and perspectives to inform their leadership approaches.

The impact of leaders and their leadership style is critical to academic and administrative effectiveness (Gigliotti & Ruben, 2017). Thus, approaches undertaken by assessment leaders may be informed from the broader leadership literature. Despite its various manifestations, there does not appear to be a single, concise definition of the ambiguous concept of *leadership* (Smith & Hughey, 2006), although since the 1930s, "different views of leadership emerge, from inducing obedience, to moving the organization in a specific direction, to the art of persuading, influencing or inspiring others" (Lu et al., 2017, p. 640). As Gigliotti and Ruben (2017) noted, "leadership efforts and leadership outcomes may be planned or unplanned, formal or informal, may involve verbal and nonverbal messaging, and depend as much on followership dynamics as much as leader activity" (p. 97). Within the broad education sector, Simkins (2005) offered some emerging views of leadership, including the notion that leadership represents processes of mutual influence, takes place as part of a larger social system, can occur anywhere and be demonstrated by anyone, and is often context-dependent.

This view of leadership is reinforced by several scholars and has salience for how professionals in higher education may conceive of their work. Kouzes and Posner (2006) found that effective leaders understand the people with whom they work, including their roles, the function of their specific jobs, and the larger organizational structure; their approach was adapted by Smith (2013) to focus on leadership-centric considerations for assessment professionals. Other scholars discussed how higher education institutions are not as well-suited to top-down approaches to leadership (Bolden et al., 2009), instead preferring to build and sustain cultures respectful of academic freedom, autonomy, and professional expertise over those focused on positional power (Bento, 2011). Finally, Jones and Harvey (2017) provided additional context to leadership in college and university settings that requires new leadership responses to achieve optimal learning outcomes.

Leaders in higher education should be encouraged to work collaboratively and in a participatory manner with colleagues in all areas of the institution on processes related to enhancing the institution's effectiveness (Jones et al., 2012). This means having a high degree of respect for professional autonomy and disciplinary judgement while recognizing that engagement with this work is often context-specific and dispersed among various groups of people (Bento, 2011). Indeed, embracing a shared approach to leadership can help "create collaborative environments, innovative changes, and educational performance excellence" (Migliore, 2012, p. 37). This was corroborated by findings from Bolden et al. (2009) who indicated that "the majority of research on leadership and management in

higher education concludes that leadership in universities is widely distributed" (p. 258). Given the collaborative, interdependent way leadership is—or should be—manifested on college and university campuses, a distributed leadership perspective may be useful in influencing the individual identity development of the assessment professional, involving other stakeholders engaged in the learning enterprise, informing institutional cultures for assessment, and providing opportunities to strengthen the assessment profession.

Distributed leadership for assessment encourages vesting approaches to and decisions about student learning and institutional effectiveness in individuals and groups using collaborative, inclusive, and democratic processes, including sharing responsibility and authority for this work with stakeholders throughout the collegiate learning enterprise.

Distributed Leadership as a Useful Perspective for Those Involved in Assessment

As a concept, *distributed leadership* has gained attention in the United States and abroad in the last twenty years in all types of organizational and institutional settings, largely informed by disciplines such as sociology and political science in addition to the management literature (Bento, 2011). Although there is not an agreed upon definition of distributed leadership (Thorpe et al., 2011), the perspective nevertheless "recognizes that there are multiple leaders and that leadership activities are widely shared within and between organizations" (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 31). Indeed, distributed leadership may more accurately describe interactions between individuals and recognize how leadership qualities are promoted throughout the organization (Gosling et al., 2009). This is corroborated by Hundley (2019b) who notes that for assessment leaders in collegiate settings, such leadership often occurs by influencing others for whom direct authority may be lacking.

There are similarities between distributed leadership and the related concepts of shared, collective, collaborative, emergent, and democratic leadership, although their use varies between organizational and cultural contexts (Bolden, 2011). While distributed leadership is often used interchangeably with related terms, Spillane (2005) made some important distinctions:

> Shared leadership, team leadership, and democratic leadership are not synonyms for distributed leadership. Depending on the situation, a distributed perspective allows for shared leadership. A team leadership approach does not necessarily involve subscribing to a distributed perspective in which leadership practice is viewed as the interaction of leaders, followers, and situation. Similarly, a distributed perspective allows for leadership that can be democratic or autocratic. (p. 149)

There are some ways in which distributed leadership is both conceptualized and implemented in practice. The main premises of distributed leadership are that there exists a group or network of individuals in which openness to leadership boundaries is encouraged and where varying types of expertise is distributed across the many, not the few (Woods et al., 2004). This is reinforced by Van Ameijde et al. (2009) who described such leadership in higher education as a process benefiting from mutual influence and reliant on both individual and group expertise. Gronn (2002) identified two properties necessary for distributed leadership: interdependence and coordination. *Interdependence* is manifested by overlapping and complementary responsibilities, while *coordination* involves managing interdependencies to ensure people and resources are aligned to achieve the required performance. Such interdependence and coordination represent similar themes associated with longstanding approaches to assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2015); emerging assessment trends (Hundley & Kahn, 2019); considerations for improving and scaling student learning (Fulcher & Prendergast, 2021); opportunities to engage students as partners in assessment (Curtis & Anderson, 2021); and the skills, competencies, and approaches identified as important to assessment leaders and professionals (Ariovich et al., 2019; Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Distributed leadership has the potential to embrace *all* individuals involved in contributing to the teaching and learning process. These include faculty and staff engaging in instruction, designing new environments for learning experiences, providing support services for students, and implementing professional activities that sustain an assessment culture (Jones et al., 2012).

Lest distributed leadership be viewed as the panacea for all that troubles higher education institutions, there are some limitations to this perspective. First, any leadership

behavior is always influenced by power relations in higher education—including institutional cultures that may not embrace a distributed approach; it simply "recognizes leadership outside lines of authority that are characteristic of formal hierarchies" (Bento, 2011, p. 23). Second, delegation does not equate to distributed leadership, nor does distributed leadership automatically improve conditions; instead, it is "the nature and quality of leadership practice that matters." (Harris & Spillane, 2008, p. 33). Third, distributed leadership does not remove the need for formal leaders in higher education; indeed, "strong, visible, personal leadership is appreciated when it brings clarity and a sense of direction" (Bolden et al., 2009, p. 275). Finally, simply adopting a distributed leadership perspective may not address other longstanding issues within higher education; these include fragmentation and silo mentalities, role ambiguity, slow decision-making processes, individual differences in ability, and unrealistic expectations of performance (Bolden et al., 2009).

Despite these limitations, there are benefits to adopting a distributed leadership perspective. Properly embraced, such an approach can improve "spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized practices" (Gronn, 2002, p. 447). Within higher education institutions, adopting a distributed leadership perspective has been shown to promote responsiveness to stakeholders, provide greater transparency and timeliness to decision-making processes, and foster greater teamwork and communication (Bolden et al., 2009). Moreover, Jones (2014) reported that distributed leadership has the potential to focus on respect rather than regulation, a trusting culture supportive of autonomy, improved conflict resolution skills, and an emphasis on collective versus individual activity. To be successful, distributed leadership "needs institutional commitment, support from formal institutional leaders, and tailoring to the specific institutional context and culture" (Jones, 2014, p. 139).

Organizational culture refers to the artifacts, behaviors, espoused values, and inherent assumptions of an organization (Schein, 2010). The value of assessment is reflected in the mission and the integration of assessment into campus processes; it relies on the intersection of culture, leadership, and institutional policies to shape assessment practices and approaches, including its role in improving student learning (Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016; Kezar, 2013). This requires leaders to "situate the definition of culture in the context of the discipline and institution so that assessment is a meaningful process and outcome" (Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016, pp. 55-56). Against the broad backdrop of a distributed leadership perspective, it is now appropriate to define distributed leadership for assessment, including promoting its use in various contexts.

Defining Distributed Leadership for Assessment and Promoting its Use in Various Contexts

Embracing the perspectives described above and adapting an approach articulated by Hundley (2019a), an emerging definition of distributed leadership, in the context of higher education assessment, is as follows: *Distributed leadership for assessment encourages vesting approaches to and decisions about student learning and institutional effectiveness in individuals and groups using collaborative, inclusive, and democratic processes, including sharing responsibility and authority for this work with stakeholders throughout the collegiate learning enterprise*.

Distributed leadership for assessment encourages vesting approaches to and decisions about student learning and institutional effectiveness in individuals and groups using collaborative, inclusive, and democratic processes, including sharing responsibility and authority for this work with stakeholders throughout the collegiate learning enterprise.

Operationalizing this definition in practice relies on three important considerations. First, distributed leadership recognizes that expertise and experience with assessment ranges from novice to advanced practice; this requires ongoing professional development, mentoring, peer learning, and sharing of promising practices. Second, distributed leadership respects the various methods faculty and staff members employ in designing, implementing, assessing, and improving learning opportunities for students; this rejects a one-size-fits-all mentality and embraces the diversity of our students and learning environments, including the complexities of student learning and the various conditions contributing to that learning. Finally, distributed leadership involves making this work intentional, pervasive, and ongoing; this requires developing the identity of individual assessment professionals, engaging stakeholders involved in assessment throughout the learning enterprise, promoting an institutional assessment culture, and advancing the assessment profession.

Developing the identity of individual assessment professionals

Individual assessment professionals can use their roles to demonstrate and advocate for the principles of distributed leadership in their spheres-of-influence, even if they lack formal leadership authority. In part, this is accomplished through development and refinement of specific, integrated competencies needed by individual assessment professionals, regardless of context: strategic thinker, resource aligner, information user, and relationship builder (Hundley, 2019b). *Strategic thinkers* consider goals for learning and align them to broader plans and priorities of the institution and the requirements and expectations of various internal and external stakeholders. *Resource aligners* ensure sufficient human, fiscal, physical, technological, and information resources are secured, allocated, and used appropriately to support achieving goals for learning. *Information users* insist on using inclusive and credible evidence from various sources and contexts to make decisions and guide improvements in support of student learning and institutional effectiveness. Finally, informed by a model from Clucas Leaderman and Polychronopoulos (2019), *relationship builders* work effectively with students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders in mutually responsive and supportive ways to develop, implement, assess, improve, and communicate the goals for, interventions used in, and outcomes of various learning processes.

These four leadership-oriented competencies complement recently documented ways to construct and support the identity development of individual assessment professionals as described at the beginning of this article (Ariovich et al., 2019; Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018; Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019). Individual assessment professionals working in a context where broader leadership for assessment may be lacking have an opportunity to begin leading by example through demonstrating and practicing these competencies. In settings where assessment leadership is more well-developed, these competencies may help inform professional development opportunities and provide sources of strength on which to build greater capacity. These competencies can also be useful in helping individuals inventory their own professional practice and make changes to behaviors, equipping others with similar habits of mind, embedding them in job descriptions, and promoting a sense of individual identity development. They also inform how the individual assessment professional may engage other stakeholders involved in assessment throughout the learning enterprise.

Engaging stakeholders involved in assessment throughout the learning enterprise

Individual assessment professionals can use their roles to demonstrate and advocate for the principles of distributed leadership in their spheres-of-influence, even if they lack formal leadership authority.

Stakeholders involved in the learning enterprise—individual faculty and staff members, employers, community members, and students themselves—need to be engaged in distributed leadership for assessment, often working with each other and in partnership with individual assessment professionals and institutional leaders. Van Ameijde et al. (2009) identified several conditions to promote distributed leadership reliant on such a team-oriented, collaborative approach. These include autonomy, clearly defined goals and responsibilities, internal support and expertise, information sharing, coordinated activities, and inclusiveness. As Lu et al. (2017) reminded, the goal "should be not only on developing individual leaders, and building human capital, but also on developing leadership throughout the organization, to develop social capital and networked relationships" (p. 646). As with individual assessment professionals, the four specific, integrated competencies described above also have salience for stakeholders engaged in assessment and improvement efforts as these approaches can help develop the distributed leadership capacity of talent across the institution.

The *Excellence in Assessment Designation* (EIA) provides plentiful examples of how to engage stakeholders in assessment and improvement, often using the principles of distributed leadership. Launched in 2016, the EIA is a national recognition focusing "on intentional integration, meaningful alignment, and faculty-led assessment, thereby recognizing campuses that are engaging in the full breadth and depth of vertically and horizontally integrated student learning outcomes assessment" (Kinzie et al. 2017, p. 2). Campuses receiving this designation develop assessment approaches unique to their context.

As examples, Banta and Kahn (2017) discussed how to effectively engage stakeholders in a large, complex, decentralized institution; Fulcher and Sanchez (2018) described how a networked approach to assessment serves colleagues, programs, and students; Baham (2019) outlined the value of shared governance in this work; Horissian (2020) explained the need to develop a supportive infrastructure to connect people, functions, and resources; and Wilkins and Donat (2021) emphasized the importance of collaboration to foster stakeholder engagement. While these exemplars provide compelling examples of how distributed leadership is employed in their various approaches to assessment, formal leaders also play a crucial role in promoting an institutional assessment culture.

Promoting an institutional assessment culture

Given the legitimacy and authority associated with their role, individuals holding formal leadership titles (presidents, provost, deans, unit leaders, department chairs, etc.) have a unique vantage point from which to advance important institutional, unit, department, and programmatic goals for student learning and success. Hundley (2019a) developed five imperatives for such formal leaders to embrace to promote an institutional assessment culture:

1. *Leaders must make assessment a priority*. This includes involving all the relevant stakeholders in assessment work; developing assessment plans that include goals for student learning; securing resources to support assessment, including time, collaboration space, and fiscal and human resources; implementing learning processes to provide students multiple opportunities to acquire and demonstrate competence; and communicating—in a transparent manner—to showcase learning outcomes to stakeholders.

2. *Leaders must attract and retain talent to support assessment*. This involves clarifying roles and expectations for assessment as position descriptions are developed and approved; recruiting and selecting talent with a commitment to assessment; onboarding new talent with interventions, such as mentoring and professional development, aimed at reinforcing assessment as an important priority; and creating ongoing conditions to retain talent by valuing their assessment contributions.

3. *Leaders must develop capacity for assessment*. This involves developing capacity for assessment at all levels of the institution—beginning with institution-wide goals for learning and extending to learning taking place at the program and course levels, as well as in co-curricular and other experiential learning contexts; leveraging institutional systems, processes, and structures to support assessment work; and promoting intentional opportunities for continued engagement in assessment activities and initiatives, both locally and elsewhere.

4. *Leaders must reward, recognize, and promote assessment*. This involves rewarding assessment by providing tangible resources that reinforce desired behaviors at institutional-, program-, and individual-levels; recognizing assessment by identifying and celebrating exemplary practices undertaken by faculty and staff members in support of student learning and institutional effectiveness; and promoting assessment by communicating the outcomes of learning processes and sharing lessons learned with others in both the immediate campus community and throughout the broader higher education community.

5. *Leaders must sustain a culture supportive of assessment*. This involves aligning assessment outcomes to planning, budgeting, and resource allocation decisions and processes; developing learning goals broadly and pervasively throughout the campus; implementing a variety of interventions at several touchpoints to reinforce learning goals; regularly assessing progress on learning outcomes at multiple levels and in

various contexts; using inclusive and credible evidence to communicate findings and guide ongoing improvements; and continually engaging all stakeholder in ongoing assessment and improvement processes.

Granted, these leadership imperatives may represent a tall order to promote an assessment culture that both embraces and relies on distributed leadership for its success. Institutions with less developed or emerging approaches to assessment are encouraged to begin by first making assessment a priority and aligning people, plans, and resources accordingly. Those working on campuses with intermediate-to-advanced assessment programs may find it useful to periodically inventory policies and practices—such as those associated with recruitment, promotion and tenure, professional development, and rewards and recognition—to ensure they are continually supportive of the assessment culture the institution seeks to cultivate and sustain. Senior leaders—presidents, provosts, deans, for example—are in the best position to influence these leadership imperatives at scale, while leaders in other settings—in individual departments or programs, for example—have an opportunity to consider how these imperatives may be adapted to their local context. Regardless of where these leadership imperatives are implemented, colleagues seeking to embrace distributed leadership for assessment will benefit from broader conversations on this topic, including those emerging from the assessment profession itself.

To foster distributed leadership in the assessment profession, more opportunities are needed to showcase when, how, and where such approaches are effective.

Advancing the assessment profession

Individuals attracted to the assessment profession reflect broad, diverse, and growing audiences. These include *practitioners* engaged in the direct work of assessment; *partners*—such as faculty and staff members and external constituents—engaged in assessment as part of larger and related sets of responsibilities; *administrators* who champion and use assessment findings to advance a superordinate student learning and development strategy; and *scholars* who research, disseminate, and encourage evidence-informed approaches to learning, assessment, and improvement. Those employed in the assessment profession will undoubtedly need ongoing development and support to advance their professional identity concerning the "*what*" *of assessment*, including interventions, methods, approaches, structures, and processes, along with the "*why*" *of assessment*, including promoting student learning, addressing equity gaps, developing interventions to serve diverse students, and communicating progress and outcomes of learning to various audiences.

Distributed leadership also has an opportunity to inform and influence the "*how*" *of assessment*. In addition to the *Excellence in Assessment Designation*, discussed above, two other contemporary national assessment initiatives demonstrate how distributed leadership intersects with and advances important priorities in the profession. The *Grand Challenges in Assessment Project* involves the development of national and local strategic plans to address inequities in higher education, increase the responsiveness of pedagogical improvements, improve communication, and integrate planning around actionable assessment findings (Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020). This project exemplifies distributed leadership across the profession through its intentional involvement of national subject matter experts and local practitioners to advance important learning and assessment goals across the higher education ecosystem. Relatedly, the *Equity-Centered Assessment Landscape Survey* is a recent initiative representing "an opportunity to uncover the various assessment practices being implemented around the United States and Canada to support and address equity" (Henning et al. 2021, p. 16). The purpose is to equip assessment practitioners with models and examples to advance equity locally through adaptations of promising practices elsewhere. These national initiatives embrace the emerging definition of distributed leadership for assessment by focusing on student learning and institutional effectiveness; involving various individuals and groups; using collaborative, inclusive, and democratic processes; and sharing responsibility and authority for assessment and improvement with multiple stakeholders.

To foster distributed leadership in the assessment profession, more opportunities are needed to showcase when, how, and where such approaches are effective. National conferences and associations devoted to assessment can be a venue to equip individuals with professional development opportunities to sharpen competence and confidence around distributed leadership. Publications focused on the assessment professional are another

way to disseminate scholarship on how distributed leadership contributes to cultures supportive of student learning and institutional effectiveness. Finally, individual assessment practitioners can serve as mentors in modeling distributed leadership in practice. Indeed, while the initiatives described above provide national examples of distributed leadership for the assessment profession, most individuals will likely find the context of their work more local in nature—on a campus, as part of a program, and even in a classroom or experiential learning setting. In these settings, professional identity development is "about being in the world, but increasingly it must also be about being in a multiplicity of worlds or communities, and professional identity and its development is thus complex" (Trede et al., 2012, p. 378).

Assessment is similarly complex; the work is important and continuous, involving a diverse array of individuals from various instructional contexts. Those involved in championing and supporting assessment efforts are encouraged to lead by example by recognizing the significance of leadership for assessment, adopting a distributed leadership perspective, and promoting distributed leadership in their individual and collective spheres-of-influence. Our students, our colleagues, our institutions, and our profession will be better as a result.

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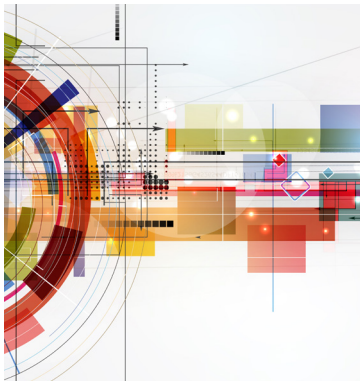
Abstract

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

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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

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.

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?

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.

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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

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.

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 inter-disciplinary 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).

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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)

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.

For me, the role of an assessment professional as a gatekeeper was replaced by the role of supporter.

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.

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.

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

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 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.

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?