Abstract

The integration of equity into the assessment process is a prevalent topic in higher education with conferences devoting tracks and event themes to this concept. While popular, there has been little research regarding practices that constitute equity-centered assessment. In this piece, the authors provide an argument for integrating equity into assessment as well as describe the current landscape of equity-centered types, practices, and strategies being employed by faculty and staff on college campuses.

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Equity-centered Assessment Practices: Survey Findings and Recommendations

*T*he promise of higher education has not been fulfilled. The demographics of students on college campuses is changing as students are older (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b) and they are more diversified in their identities. (Espinosa et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a) than in the past. But the increase in diversity of the college student population makes the gap in graduation rates across racial and ethnic groups more apparent and critical to address. Asian American and White students graduate in six years at the highest rates (74% and 64% respectively). However, only 54% of Hispanic students, 51% of Pacific Islander, 40% of Black, and 39% of American Indian/Alaska Native students graduate in 6 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b).

These disparate graduation rates have long-term effects for individuals as they perpetuate economic disparities between Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) folks. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), people with a bachelor's degree had a median annual income of $55,700 annually while those with only a high school diploma had a median annual income of $35,000. This $20,000+ differential has an exponential impact. Over 10 years, a college graduate would earn $200,000 more than an individual with a high school degree; this is a difference of $800,000 dollars in 40 years, which would be near retirement age for most individuals. If this differential follows trends for race, gender, and pay equity, the difference in student post-graduate earnings is

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substantially different across race, gender, and the intersection of these identities. Imagine if even some of this additional income would be invested, the financial difference between those with a bachelor's degree compared to a high school diploma would have an even greater impact.

Aside from increased income, there are additional benefits for college graduates related to employment, health, and housing (Belfield & Levin, 2007). Furthermore, college graduates are more likely to hold a job and to be healthy (Ma et al., 2019). There are also societal advantages to these individual benefits. Those with college degrees earn more money and thus, they pay more taxes. They are also less likely to be on public assistance (Ma et al., 2019).

The disparate graduation and long-term outcomes for (BIPOC) students is one of the primary drivers for greater focus on equity in higher education. The issue at hand is how can colleges and universities improve educational outcomes for all students regardless of social identity. While institutions have implemented support systems for BIPOC students such as tutoring and mentoring programs, providing diversity training to faculty and staff, and even hiring retention professionals, there are some unconsidered options for addressing and furthering equity on campus. Assessment is one of those untapped opportunities.

The purpose of this study was to find out from those implementing assessment at colleges and universities their perspectives, knowledge, and practices regarding the intersection of equity, diversity, inclusion, and assessment to advance and facilitate equity-minded assessment in higher education.

The conceptual model that undergirded this study was the equity-minded and equity-centered assessment framework developed by Lundquist and Henning (2021). The framework incorporates key concepts in the assessment and evaluation literature and builds on Lundquist and Henning's (2020) continuum of equity-minded assessment to include additional types of assessment and couple equity-minded and equity-centered assessment into one model as depicted in Figure 1. Equity-minded assessments are assessment types that ensure that the assessment process is equitable while equity-centered practices leverage assessment to further equity. While the study covers both categories, equity-minded and equity-centered assessment, the research team used equity-centered assessment as an umbrella term.
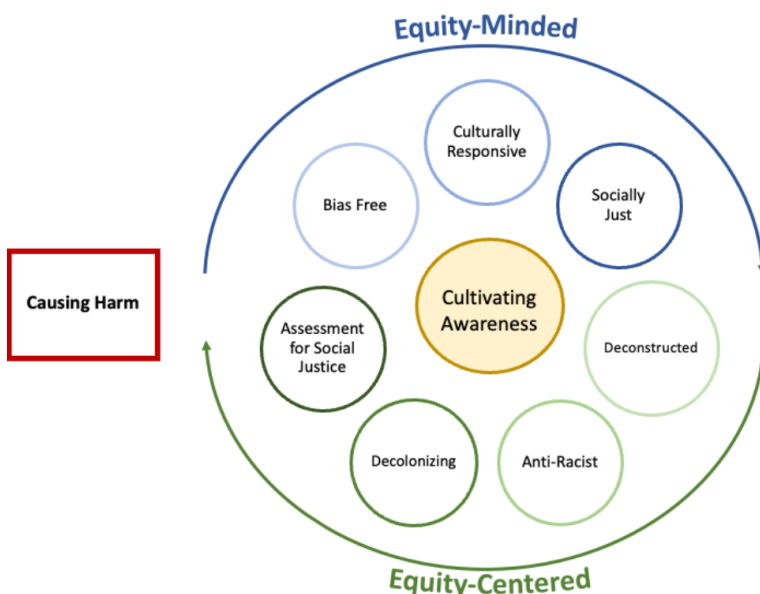
> **The disparate graduation and long-term outcomes for (BIPOC) students is one of the primary drivers for greater focus on equity in higher education. The issue at hand is how can colleges and universities improve education outcomes for all their students regardless of social identity.**

Figure 1
Equity-Minded and Equity-Centered Assessment Framework

The first component of the model is causing harm. Thus, while not a form of equity-minded or equity-centered assessment, Lundquist and Henning (2020) included this as a reminder that unless those performing assessment are attending to equity, they may be causing harm, albeit unintentionally. Bias-free, culturally responsive, and socially just assessments are categorized as types of equity-minded assessments. The goal of bias-free assessment is to remove cultural and contextual biases that may affect the assessment process. Culturally responsive assessment is based on the work of Montenegro and Jankowski (2017), which is grounded in the literature of culturally responsive evaluation (Hopson, 2009; Hood et al., 2015) and considers students' cultural backgrounds when implementing assessment. Socially-just assessment aligns with critical theory and centers on the impact that power has on understanding students' experiences including how students' voices are represented in assessment, but also how the power of those implementing assessment can influence the assessment process, data interpretation, and reporting.

Equity-centered assessment includes deconstructed, anti-racist, and decolonizing assessment as well as assessment for social justice. Deconstructed assessment is an extension of socially-just assessment positing that systems of power and oppression are embedded in social structures and the assessment process can expose the power in those structures to deconstruct it (Henning, 2019). Anti-racist assessment builds on deconstructed assessment and centers on how policies, practices, programs, and services are built on White supremacist assumptions and bias and assessment can be used to uncover these assumptions and biases as a step towards addressing them. Decolonizing assessment takes this approach even further by critically analyzing higher education through a non-Western lens to uncover the unconscious ways that European ideals and Western beliefs undergird what constitutes knowledge, how knowledge is created, and how knowledge should be demonstrated. Assessment for social just builds on the work of Bell (2007) who stated that social justice is both a goal and a process. This point was applied to assessment by McArthur (2016) who argued that assessment should be implemented in a socially just manner, but also that assessment can be a vehicle to further equity on college campuses.

Literature Review

While the intersection of equity and assessment may be new to many readers, it has roots in the evaluation field and began with the work of Reid E. Jackson (1935, 1936, 1939, 1940a, 1940b) who evaluated segregated schools in Kentucky, Florida, and Alabama. In 1975, Stake promoted responsive evaluation. While his focus was not specifically on diversity and inclusion, he did argue for understanding the characteristics of a specific program and the context in which it exists when implementing the evaluation.

> Equity-centered assessment includes deconstructed, anti-racist, and decolonizing assessment as well as assessment for social justice.

Merryfield (1985) was one of the first to address cultural competence in the evaluation process in their study of cross-cultural evaluation focusing on evaluation that includes interaction of people from different cultures. Hopson (1999) argued for a focus on "minority issues" in evaluation arguing that inclusive evaluation practices were needed for equitable involvement of diverse stakeholders in evaluation. The concept of multicultural evaluation arose through the work of Bamberger (1999), Nguyen et al. (2003), and Hopson (2004). Bamberger (1999) outlined the importance of respecting local customs and values when performing evaluation internationally while Nguyen et al. (2003) and Hopson (2004) outlined the characteristics of multicultural evaluation. During the same time, Hood (2001) and Frierson et al. (2002) developed frameworks for responsive evaluation highlighting the importance of cultural context in the evaluation process.

Mertens (1999) criticized contemporary evaluation models for not accurately representing the experiences of marginalized populations and developed her inclusive evaluation framework to address the shortcomings of other models. Building on previous literature, Symonette (2004) developed culturally competent evaluation while Hood et al. (2015) developed the concept of culturally responsive evaluation built on models of culturally responsive pedagogy. One of the first references to the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion in assessment is Popham's (2012) work regarding bias-free assessment which mainly focused on testing in K-12 settings.

Many authors discussed assessment and social justice. Through her framework for socially just assessment, McArthur (2016) contended that assessment should be implemented in a socially just manner and that assessment can be used as a tool for social justice, which was echoed by Zerquera et al. (2018). Bourke (2017) argued for considering student affairs assessment as advocacy to address systemic issues while Dorimé-Williams (2018) argued for applying a social justice lens to assessment of student learning. Heiser et al. (2017) discussed the application of critical theory in assessment to further social justice. Henning and Lundquist (2019) and Lundquist and Henning (2020, 2021) incorporated socially just assessment and assessment for social justice into models of equity-minded and equity-centered assessment.

The equity in assessment movement in higher education was jumpstarted by Montenegro and Jankowski's (2017) NILOA Occasional Paper regarding culturally responsive assessment. Singer-Freeman et al. (2019) applied these general concepts to course assignments in her research she termed culturally relevant assessment. Lundquist and Heiser (2020), built on this work and provided greater specificity for equity-centered assessment practices arguing that these practices validate students' identities, consider system bias and its implications for student learning, expose policies that promote bias, and foster inclusive and equitable educational practices. Applying a post-structural paradigm, Henning (2019) conceptualized deconstructed assessment as the use of assessment to expose and understand how systems of power and oppression are embedded in the social structures of higher education. Eizerdirad (2019) outlined decolonized assessment which centers on how education and thus the educational assessment process is colonized and based on Western paradigms and ways of knowing. Anti-racist assessment is an extension of anti-racist pedagogy that forces educators to ask what counts as legitimate knowledge, whose knowledge counts, and who has access to the knowledge (Collins, 2009).

The literature regarding the intersection of diversity, equity, and inclusion goes back to the 1930s work of Reid Jackson. Over the next century, the concept of equity in assessment has evolved from understanding cultural context when implementing program evaluation to using assessment to further equity on college campuses. This literature is the foundation for the equity-minded and equity-centered assessment model (Lundquist & Henning, 2021) used as the conceptual framework for this study.

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Methods

The goal of the study was to describe the attitudes and practices regarding equity-centered assessment that practitioners across higher education were using. The survey instrument was developed by a small, diverse group of assessment and diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners with feedback solicited from a set of partners representing key stakeholders in the assessment and higher education community.

In July 2021, survey invitations were sent via a web-based survey platform to the higher education assessment community at large via assessment listservs and promoted by survey partners through their regular email newsletters and social media.

There were 568 people who participated in the anonymous survey, 80% of whom completed the entire instrument. Demographic data related to the participants' institutions and their professional roles were collected. However, data regarding participants' social identities were not. Three-quarters of respondents worked at public institutions as well as at four-year institutions. A third of the respondents worked at institutions with 20,000 or more students and a third were at institutions whose enrollment was between 5,000 and 19,999. Thus, the respondents were predominately from mid-size to large public, 4-year institutions. Table 1 below includes details regarding institutional characteristics.

Almost half of the respondents identified as staff members and over half worked in academic affairs. More than one third of respondents coordinate assessment for a unit or set of units while almost three quarters have been working in higher education more than 10 years. Table 2 provides additional details regarding respondent characteristics.

The findings focus on attitudes and beliefs, types of equity-centered assessment, as well as equity-centered assessment strategies and practices.

Table 1
Institutional Characteristics

Characteristic	*n*	Percentage
Institutional Governance		
Public non-profit	327	75.0
Private non-profit	101	23.2
Private for-profit	8	1.8
Length of Study		
2-year	79	18.2
4-year	325	75.1
Other	29	6.7
FTE Enrollment		
<500	10	2.4
500-1,999	55	13.2
2,000-4,999	68	16.3
5,000-9,999	61	14.7
10,000-19,999	78	18.8
20,000 or greater	144	34.6

Note. Demographic questions were optional. Respondent count for these questions varied from 426 to 447.

Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Assessment and Equity

Participants were asked questions regarding the importance of equity and assessment; the background, training, and skills needed to conduct equity-centered assessment; and the institutional support they had to do this type of work. While the study included types of equity-minded and equity-centered assessment, the research team used the term equity-centered assessment in the survey to refer to both categories of assessment. For the survey item related to the importance of the intersection of equity, diversity, and inclusion and assessment practices, the response options were not important, slightly important, moderately important, important, and very important. Nearly 90% of respondents (89%) reported that the intersection of equity, diversity, and inclusion and assessment practices was very important or important. There were no missing data for this item. Regarding the questions related to having the background, training, and skills to conduct equity-centered assessment as well as having the support to conduct equity-centered assessment, the 5-point Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree and a sixth option was "unsure." Less than 50% (46%) of respondents, however, strongly agreed or agreed that they had the necessarily background, training, and skills to conduct equity-centered assessment. Twenty-four (4.23%) respondents did not answer this item. A similar percentage of respondents (47%) strongly agreed or agreed that they have the support they need from their organization to conduct equity-centered assessment. Twenty-four (4.23%) respondents did not answer this item.

Equity-Centered Assessment Types

Participants identified the types of equity-centered assessment that they implement in their work. The options were taken from Lundquist and Henning's (2021) equity-minded and equity-centered assessment framework. Over 50% of respondents reported using equity-minded assessment types including culturally responsive (61%), socially just (56%), and bias-free assessment (55%) practices. The two least frequently used equity-centered

Table 2
Institutional Characteristics

Characteristic	*n*	Percentage
Role		
Staff member	216	49.5
Faculty	94	21.5
Senior administrator	85	19.5
Graduate student/intern	8	1.8
Other role	34	7.8
Division affiliation		
Academic affairs	247	58.0
Student affairs	112	26.3
Other division	67	15.7
Assessment responsibility		
Coordinate/lead assessment for unit(s)	151	37.2
Perform assessment for me or my unit	119	29.3
Coordinate/lead assessment for institution	116	28.6
Assessment researcher or instructor	15	3.7
Assessment student	5	1.2
Length of time in assessment		
<5 years	35	7.9
5-10 years	86	19.3
More than 10 years	324	72.8

Note. Demographic questions were optional. Respondent count for these questions varied from 426 to 447.

assessment practices included deconstructed assessment (35%) and decolonizing assessment (23%). Table 3 provides percentages for each type of equity-centered assessment type.

Equity-Centered Assessment Strategies

Participants also reported specific strategies they used when implementing equity-centered assessment practices. The list of response options included never, seldom, about half the time, usually, always, and not applicable. Table 4 includes the percentages of respondents who usually or always used these strategies. Four-hundred and sixty-two people responded to this survey item. Almost a quarter of respondents reported ensuring that demographic questions/categories were inclusive. Over 60% reported ensuring demographic questions/categories were inclusive (66.7%), avoiding deficit-based reporting (64.1%), considering how inclusive institutional demographic categories were (61.0%), and disaggregating data (60.4%). Less than 20% reported engaging students in mapping outcomes to learning experiences.

Equity-Centered Assessment Practices

The research team also asked about issues respondents consider when implementing the assessment process. Response options included strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree, and not applicable. Table 5 highlights the percentage reporting each type of equity-centered practice. As can be seen in table 5, Over 80% of respondents reported using five of the eight practices listed. Less than half reported including their own identity or

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Table 3
Percentage of Type of Assessment

Assessment Type	n	Percentage
Culturally responsive assessment	347	61.1
Socially just assessment	316	55.6
Bias-free assessment	315	55.5
Anti-racist assessment	233	41.0
Assessment for social justice	216	38.0
Deconstructed assessment	198	34.9
Decolonizing assessment	64	23.4

Note. The percentage is based on 568 respondents to this survey item.

Table 4
Percentage of Equity-Centered Strategies Usually/Always

Strategy	n	Percentage Reporting Usually or Always
Ensure demographic questions/categories are inclusive	308	66.7
Avoid deficit-based reporting	296	64.1
Consider how inclusive institutional demographic categories are	282	61.0
Disaggregate data	279	60.4
Use data from multiple sources	266	57.6
Use qualitative data collection	246	53.2
Use multiple methods to measure learning	239	51.7
Use data to identify barriers for equity	225	48.7
Ensure populations with small "ns" are included in assessment	212	45.9
Include stakeholders in development of outcomes	211	45.6
Use data from assessment to advocate for structure change to advance equity	208	45.0
Engage stakeholders in data interpretation	203	43.9
Review learning outcomes for inclusion	197	42.6
Review standardized measures to ensure inclusion	177	38.3
Co-create assessment measures with stakeholders	161	34.8
Engage students in mapping outcomes to learning experiences	78	16.9

Note. The percentage is based on 462 respondents to this survey item.

Table 5

Percentage of Agree/Strongly Agree for Equity-Centered Practices

Practice	n	Percentage Agree or Strongly Agree
Integrate policies/practices that promote equity and	380	82.3
Discuss and critique how meaning is attached to data or results	374	81.0
Consider how systemic bias and discrimination can affect learning or the student experience	373	80.7
Consider my own identity or positionality when engaging in the assessment process	363	78.6
Consider the consequences of the assessment work for marginalized populations	362	78.4
Keep in mind various cultural backgrounds and identities of stakeholders throughout the assessment process	343	74.2
Engage stakeholders to mitigate bias in analysis and reporting of assessment data	309	66.9
Include my own identity or positionality when presenting assessment reports or findings	209	45.2

Note. The percentage is based on 462 respondents to this survey item.

positionality when presenting or reporting assessment findings. Four-hundred and sixty-two people responded to this survey item.

Overwhelmingly, respondents believe that the intersection of equity and assessment is important, which is somewhat expected as a survey such as this would likely attract respondents who believe the topic is important. While respondents felt that the intersection of equity and assessment was important, about half reported that they did not have the institutional support nor the skills or training to do this type of work. Although participants may not feel prepared to engage in equity-focused assessment, more than half implemented equity-minded types of assessment including bias-free, culturally responsive, and socially-just assessment.

The strategies to which more than half responded that they implement usually or always could be considered methods to ensure equitable assessment such as ensuring demographic categories are inclusive, avoiding deficit-based reporting, disaggregating data, and using multiple data sources. The practices to which over 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed included 1) integrating policies/practices that promote equity, 2) considering how systemic bias affects learning, 3) critiquing how means is attached to assessment results, 4) considering how their own positionality when implementing assessment, and 5) considering the consequences of assessment work on marginalized populations. Whereas fewer than half of respondents reported usually or always using the following three assessment strategies to further institutional equity: including stakeholders in development of outcomes, creating assessment measures, or interpreting assessment data; reviewing learning outcomes for inclusion; and using assessment data to advocate for structure change to advance equity.

One particularly interesting finding is that the least used strategies for equity-centered assessment were those involving stakeholders. Such strategies were including stakeholders in the development of outcomes, engaging stakeholders in data interpretation, co-creating assessment measures with stakeholders, and engaging students in mapping outcomes to learning experiences. These results beg the question: how can assessment advance equitable outcomes for students when students are rarely invited to the table?

Although participants may not feel prepared to engage in equity-focused assessment, more than half implemented equity-minded types of assessment including bias-free, culturally responsive, and socially-just assessment.

Recommendations

It is incumbent upon the field to support assessment practitioners by providing examples, resources, and research to do this important work. The disparate educational outcomes for various student populations must be addressed and assessment may be one tool in an institutional toolbox that can be used.

Both the responses to this survey and the increasing prevalence of conference sessions and resources regarding equity-focused assessment demonstrate the importance of equitable assessment and using assessment to further equity by addressing disparate educational outcomes that have lifelong and societal impacts. To help address the lack of skills, knowledge, and support, the research provide has the following recommendations.

The first recommendation is for individuals to review existing resources on the topic. Organizations including National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), Student Affairs Assessment Leaders, and Anthology have curated free, open resources that are accessible online. There are also presentations on this topic available in the online archive of the 2021 Assessment Institute.

A related recommendation is for individuals interested in learning more to read key papers, articles, and books related to equity and assessment cited in the reference list.

A third recommendation is for institutions or professional associations to develop a certificate program integrating equity into assessment practice. Lindenwood University has created a certificate in culturally-responsive assessment.

A fourth recommendation is to encourage individuals to conduct further research on equity-focused assessment. This survey provides foundational descriptive data with institutional and professional demographic data collected, but data regarding participants' social identities were not. It would be helpful to explore how social identity may impact engagement in equity-centered assessment practices. In addition to survey data, the research including examples of equity-minded and equity-centered assessment will help practitioners understand how these types of assessment can be implemented. Thus, more case studies and research regarding specific strategies can inform the field.

Conclusion

There is much interest regarding the integration of equity and assessment so that assessment practice is not only equitable, but that assessment can be used as a vehicle to further assessment. It is incumbent upon the field to support assessment practitioners by providing examples, resources, and research to do this important work. The disparate educational outcomes for various student populations must be addressed and assessment may be one tool in an institutional toolbox that can be used.

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