

# Barriers and Enablers of Integrating Assessment with Curriculum and Instruction



## Authors:

Rebecca E. Gibbons, Ph.D.  
*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University*

Arthur Hernández, Ph.D.  
*University of the Incarnate Word*

Teresa Flateby, Ph.D.  
*Independent Consultant*

Karla Hardesty, Ed.D.  
*Colorado Mountain College*

Yuerong Sweetland, Ph.D.  
*Franklin University*

## ABSTRACT

The extent to which three essential processes—assessment, curriculum, and instruction—are systematically integrated provides a window into the efficacy of assessment in improving higher education. This paper explores findings from open-ended responses to a survey of assessment stakeholders to understand this integration. The authors synthesize respondents' perceptions of how the factors outlined in the Assessment Integration Model derived from a previous interview study (Flateby et al., 2023; 2024): Leadership Support, Assessment Processes, Assessment Purposes, Recognition & Reward, Faculty Support/Development, Collaboration, and Accreditation, contribute to integration. Respondents emphasized the critical impact of leadership, leadership changes, and siloing (even at small institutions) on integration. In addition, responses from assessment stakeholders suggest a shared sense of urgency and a desire to establish integrated systems despite the numerous challenges. The findings indicate that some institutions have well-developed assessment processes; however, the processes are not often integrated with curriculum and instruction.

**Correspondence E-mail:** [Rebecca.gibbons@erau.edu](mailto:Rebecca.gibbons@erau.edu)

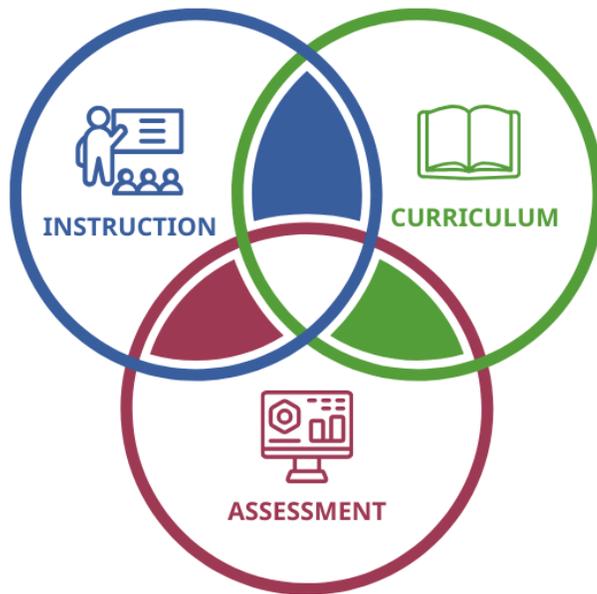
**Keywords:** Higher Education, Assessment, Integration, Curriculum, Instruction

Faculty and staff at institutions of higher education (IHEs) seek insight and strategies to increase the relevance and quality of instructional programs. Data derived from the assessment process (specifically, assessing student learning outcomes) is commonly used as a source of information to achieve that end (Kuh & Ewell, 2010). Assessment scholars have posited (Flateby et al., 2023; 2024) that institutional success in meeting the instructional/educational mission requires integrating assessment as an essential component of curricular and instructional planning to foster student learning outcomes effectively. Faculty regularly use formative assessment processes (Wiliam & Black, 1996) to gauge and (in more advanced practice) enhance student learning in the classroom (Webber & Tschepikow, 2011). However, outside the assessment profession, the assessment process is not often used as a tool in curricular and instructional implementation beyond the course level (Banta & Blaich, 2010; Peterson & Augustine, 2000). We assert that integrating three specific components of IHE operations—assessment, curriculum, and instruction—can serve as an enhancement lever.

The assessment process was designed to integrate with curriculum and instruction (National Institute of Education, 1984). The primary role of assessment, to improve student learning, has been supported since the assessment movement began in the mid-1980s (Ewell, 1991). After the movement began, assessment was formalized by institutional accreditors within standards (Gaston, 2018). More IHEs completed assessment activities, most often operationalized as the completion of assessment reports for academic programs, after they were included in accreditation standards (Jankowski et al., 2018). Two paradigms for assessment grew from this environment: accountability and improvement, which can be in tension (Ewell, 2009). Ewell (2009) characterized the improvement paradigm as internally focused on enhancing teaching and learning. The improvement paradigm, then, is similar to the manufacturing/industrial concept of continuous quality improvement widely embraced in the medical context (Colton, 2000). On the other hand, the accountability paradigm has a compliance and external reporting focus.

Under the accountability/accreditation standards paradigm, institutions have generated assessment processes within a positivist mindset. The faculty perception of assessment through the lens of the accountability paradigm can be characterized as unwelcome, rooted in the perception that assessment could be used punitively toward underperforming instructors (Pepin, 2014). In the improvement paradigm, assessment is embedded in curricula and goals are “continually mapped to, and reinforced by, the teaching and learning process throughout the curriculum...” (Ewell, 2009). This assessment can be transformative, enhancing student learning and equity at institutions (Henning et al., 2022).

We conceptualize the improvement paradigm through the lens of integration to provide a framework to approach the ideal of assessment. The inquiry described in this manuscript explores assessment stakeholders’ perceptions of the factors that influence the integration of assessment with curriculum and instruction (Figure 1). An integrated system emphasizes the importance of faculty and staff in engaging with assessment data to effect change in their programs. We posit that the benefits of creating an integrated system span alignment and clarity, evidence-based decision-making, improvement for learning’s sake, and accountability/accreditation.



**Figure 1.** *Assessment Integration*

In practice, “curriculum” refers to the structured educational experiences provided to learners within a specific program or course. Effective instruction, informed by educational theory and tailored to diverse student needs, is how the curriculum’s goals are realized. Assessment, within this integrated model, is more than measuring student achievement; it is an ongoing process of inquiry that explores and enhances the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction.

We consider the challenges and opportunities facing those implementing assessment at IHEs. We leverage qualitative data sources from a United States-scale survey, enabling us to demonstrate the factors that assessment stakeholders (i.e., practitioners and faculty) articulate are influencing the dynamics between the three integrated components. Our analysis is anchored in the Assessment Integration Model (AIM, described below).

### **Rationale for Integration**

Assessment can make gains for learning and improvement in IHEs when integrated with curriculum and instruction (Kinzie, 2019). Pending a large body of literature on the nature of integration, we propose, through the researchers’ lived experiences, that integration can “move the needle” on the perceptions of faculty as an “add-on” or unnecessary practice (Flateby et al., 2023; 2024).

The definition of integration as articulated here emerges from the foundational works in assessment, although no extant literature specifically describes integrating curriculum, instruction, and assessment into a single system. Scholarly interpretation of the former American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Principles of Good Practice (Astin et al., 1992) nods to integration (Hutchings et al., 2012). For instance, Principle 2 states, “Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multi-dimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.”

Further, in Principle 4, the authors mention attending to outcomes and also the “experiences along the way – about the curricula, teaching, and kind of student effort that led to particular outcomes.”

Our lived experiences as assessment professionals and faculty within IHEs indicate that when faculty are focused on the curriculum, integrated assessment changes their perceptions about assessment. For example, well-implemented integration can help faculty to realize that assessment is essential for answering important questions for themselves and their programs. One of the authors’ institutions, a doctoral-granting regional university with approximately 25,000 students, developed a university-wide voluntary initiative to improve students’ written communication skills and specific critical thinking skills within their majors, intending to transfer these skills to their careers. Because the initiative director was an Institutional Effectiveness administrator, it was initially perceived primarily for accreditation. After the initiative was implemented for several semesters and centered on faculty development, integration emerged organically when faculty viewed assessment as tied to instruction (Flateby et al., 2023; 2024). Specific faculty participating in the program saw such benefits in this integration that they voluntarily began leading curricular revisions in their programs.

Integration positively reinforces aligning curriculum with program learning outcomes, as neither curriculum nor assessment can deviate from the other in an integrated system. One of the goals of assessment processes is to create a context in which decisions about instruction and curriculum are based on data and evidence. In most IHEs, these decisions are made ambiguously. Where integration is successful and the curriculum is tightly aligned with learning outcomes, decisions to impact student learning are directly informed. This is especially relevant in the case of updating the curriculum; in some cases, curricular decision-making is limited to those aspects of disciplinary knowledge that appear current to faculty experts’ perspectives. While this input is essential, the information provided by assessment can enhance curricular innovation born of disciplinary trends by identifying those current curricular areas that might require more emphasis across the courses and experiences in a program.

Integration also fosters a cultural drive toward continuous improvement, as it promotes environments where reflection on instructional practice serves as a key decision-making tool, creating opportunities to utilize assessment results for enhanced learning. This culture cultivates a more agile IHE, adaptable to changing student learning needs and encouraging instructional innovation to meet those needs.

Thus, the integrated and reciprocal relationship between curriculum, instruction, and assessment in IHEs forms one interdependent system where each element continuously informs and shapes the others.

### **Assessment Integration Model: Development and Components**

In a previous qualitative investigation, the perspectives of assessment practitioners at IHEs recognized by the assessment community for high-quality assessment work (Flateby et al., 2023; 2024) provided unique insights. The Assessment Integration Model (AIM, Figure 2) was developed after this interview-based study with eight representatives from mostly large, research-oriented institutions. These institutions were identified by a group of assessment experts in the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE’s) Knowledge Development Task Force via reputation and a review of

websites as institutions that demonstrate highly successful assessment practice. The interviews with representatives from these institutions were qualitatively analyzed to identify the representatives' stated factors that impact their integration work. Upon conclusion of this analysis, the AIM identifies seven influential factors: Leadership Support, Assessment Purposes, Assessment Processes, Collaboration, Recognition & Reward, Faculty Development/Support, and Accreditation. All factors worked together to cultivate an environment for integration (although not always fully realized) in the IHEs that were identified by the Task Force as having effective assessment practices. The comprehensive approach of AIM emphasizes the synergy between the seven factors for improving student learning. AIM is predicated on the understanding that effective integration requires more than just the implementation of assessment tools; it necessitates a holistic and strategic approach that engages all stakeholders, is driven by faculty in collaboration with assessment practitioners, and is aligned with the institution's broader educational objectives.

### *Leadership Support*

The first factor considered in AIM is Leadership Support, which is foundational in navigating the challenges associated with integration, including resource allocation, faculty buy-in, and alignment of assessment with institutional goals and accreditation standards. All assessment professionals in the original study indicated that effective leadership is crucial for championing integration implementation. Leaders can also articulate a vision and mobilize financial and human resources to support assessment initiatives. Institutional leaders' (e.g., presidents, provosts, deans) commitment and active involvement are critical for setting the tone and priorities of assessment initiatives and creating an institutional culture that values and supports assessment as the principal means to enhance student learning and success. Effective leadership support also involves advocating for assessment initiatives and addressing barriers to implementation by provisioning resources through strategic and operational planning.

### *Assessment Purposes*

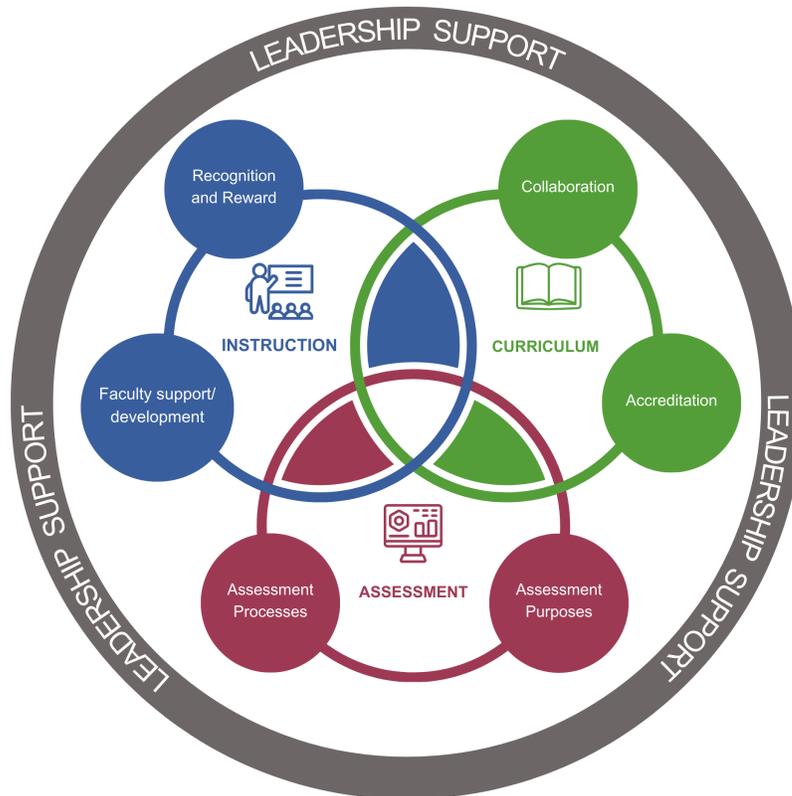
The next factor is the Assessment Purposes. The purpose and driving motivation for completing assessment work is one of the most influential aspects of a successful integration environment. As detailed in the literature reviewed above, the focus on assessment for accountability via accreditation serves one route, and the focus on assessment for continuous quality improvement opens the door to successful integration initiatives. While IHEs must conduct the assessment process to demonstrate accountability through accreditation requirements, the purpose of assessment moving beyond this requirement and towards improvement is key for integration.

### *Assessment Processes*

Assessment Purposes are considered distinct from Assessment Processes in AIM. Transparent and sustainable assessment processes are vital for ensuring the relevance and efficacy of integration. An institution cannot progress toward successful integration without an existing process that can seamlessly integrate assessment, curricular, and instructional work.

### *Recognition & Reward*

AIM highlights the importance of Recognition & Reward mechanisms to foster faculty and staff engagement in integration. Acknowledging the efforts and contributions of individuals and teams participating in assessment activities can significantly enhance motivation and commitment. The prior study revealed such strategies as formal recognition in performance evaluations, professional development opportunities, monetary rewards, or public acknowledgment of individual contributions to enhancing educational quality.



**Figure 2.** *Assessment Integration Model*

### *Faculty Support/Development*

Faculty Support/Development is a critical component of AIM, recognizing that faculty members play the central role in curriculum design and delivery and, consequently, in the implementation of integration. This factor includes professional development opportunities focused on assessment methodologies, data analysis, curriculum alignment, and using assessment results for continuous improvement.

### *Collaboration*

No individual assessment professional can create integrated processes alone at an IHE. AIM incorporates Collaboration because collaboration across departments and units, such as the assessment office, institutional research, faculty governance bodies, and

curriculum-decision-making bodies and disciplines, can facilitate the sharing of best practices and promote a cohesive approach to integration. Another unit hosted by many institutions, a center for teaching and learning, or a similarly-named unit, is a centralized space for faculty development in pedagogy that can be another key collaborator in integrated assessment. The importance of collaboration across the institution is echoed in reflections on the AAHE's Principles (Astin et al., 1992; Hutchings et al., 2012). The previous interview-based study revealed that collaboration will vary from institution to institution.

### *Accreditation*

The final factor in AIM is Accreditation. The impact of accreditation on integration is an important driver in that it provides the environment in which assessment processes occur within IHEs. However, when narrowly perceived as the single objective of assessment, accreditation becomes a double-edged sword for integration. Accreditation standards generally go beyond recommending implementing isolated assessment processes by emphasizing informing improvements with assessment.

Note that AIM does not assume the directionality of impacts. So, the impact of work on the development of curricula on Collaboration is considered in the same way that Collaboration impacts the work done on the development and revision of curricula. The interview study demonstrated that these factors can all work as facilitators and hindrances to implementing integration; for example, a lack of collaboration between a centralized assessment office and a faculty committee working on general education might reduce the effectiveness of the impact of assessment on general education.

### **Research Aim**

Following the previous in-depth interviews, this survey inquiry's goal was to gather further information about the integration of the assessment process with curriculum and instruction from a wide body of IHEs. In this manuscript, we detail additional qualitative information to contextualize the details generated in the interview study and will explore quantitative information in further writing.

## **Method**

### **Data Sources and Methodology**

The insights presented in this paper are derived from qualitative comments in response to open-ended questions from an instrument designed to measure the respondents' impressions of the impact of each AIM factor on their institutions' integration status. While no quantitative data collected by the closed-response items to the instrument will be discussed in this manuscript, the instrument was iteratively designed, beginning with the original research team generating a large pool of potential items. These items were reviewed by a team of 5 external assessment experts to identify the extent to which the content of the constructs being identified (i.e., the factors in AIM) were captured by the items. Based on the response from these experts, some items were deemed unnecessary and therefore removed from the pilot instrument. For example, in the "Assessment Purposes" category, the original items included "Student learning assessment informs instruction and curriculum," "Faculty use student learning assessment information to make evidence-based changes to improve their instruction,"

and “Faculty use student learning assessment information to make evidence-based changes to improve curriculum.” These were deemed redundant as a group of three, and the first was removed from the final instrument. A pilot administration of the instrument was then conducted to establish response processes, resulting in changes to the scales used to measure individual quantitative items. The final instrument consisted of a series of closed-ended, Likert-type items about specific aspects of each AIM factor, with open-ended, qualitative items included for each factor. A final question on the survey asked respondents to reflect not only on integration but also on their professional development needs in terms of integration.

The survey was distributed from 5/17/2023 to 7/10/2023 via Qualtrics software. The survey was administered via the ASSESS listserv, a United States-based group of assessment professionals, faculty, administrators, and staff, hosted by AALHE and the University of Kentucky. The survey was shared with weekly reminders sent to the entire listserv each week after the initial posting until the survey closed. Ultimately, 150 responses were collected. Fully null responses (N = 59) were removed, resulting in 91 analyzed responses. These responses offer a panoramic view of the current state, challenges, and potential of integration in U.S. higher education because they were collected from diverse academic stakeholders.

Respondents’ experiences with integration were broadly represented by a wide range of IHEs (specifically targeted, although not limited, to IHEs in the United States). Respondents had an average of 9.5 years of experience, with a range of 0 - 25 years, a mode of five, and a median of eight. They represented administrators, faculty, staff, and those in faculty/administrator roles. Respondents represented institutions from below 1,000 full-time equivalency (FTE) students to above 20,000, with the largest group representing institutions between 1,000 and 4,999 FTE. Public and private, 2-year, 4-year, and for-profit institutions were all represented by respondents, with the majority being 4-year and above. All of the institutional (formerly regional) accreditors were represented, with the majority of respondents coming from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) regions, aligned with the national distribution of institutions in the U.S. at the time of survey administration. The institutions’ Carnegie classifications spanned associate’s, associate’s/bachelor’s, bachelor’s, professional, master’s, doctoral, and special focus. Therefore, the sample represented a more diverse body of institutions than the original interview study, which nearly exclusively included large public 4-year institutions; however, there is still a smaller representation from the 2-year sector in these data.

## **The Present Investigation**

### *Analysis Methods*

The researchers engaged in inductive coding to identify the key themes within responses to the open-ended items affiliated with each factor of AIM (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Responses to each item were coded by two independent reviewers, who listed codes in shared codebooks. Discrepancies between reviewers were discussed to a consensus. These codes were refined into themes. Simultaneously, a generative AI tool (ChatGPT 3.5, OpenAI, 2023) was engaged to perform a thematic analysis. The results from both independent reviewer notes and AI notes were compared and evaluated to synthesize insights gained from the responses. To identify any threats to the trustworthiness via

confirmability of the analysis as the result of reviewer bias (Shenton, 2004), member-checking in the traditional sense (Hoffart, 1991) could not be completed as the respondents were anonymous. Because all members of the research team represented respondents' professional roles as assessment professionals and/or faculty, they engaged in a checking procedure, wherein final insights from the two-reviewer team assigned each question were reviewed with other members of the research team.

### *ChatGPT Data Analysis*

Given the novelty of applying an AI to data analysis in the scholarly literature at the time of this publication, it is important to describe the process used for this study. Incorporating ChatGPT as a tool for thematic analysis necessitated a careful balance between the exploratory nature of qualitative research and the structured rigor expected in scholarly analysis. For our purposes, this integration was guided by principles rooted in the Critical Reflective Practitioner (Thompson, S. & Thompson, N., 2023) approach, which prioritizes empathy, reflexivity, and cultural responsiveness while adhering to established methodological standards. The core objective was to direct GPT in a manner that facilitated meaningful engagement with qualitative data while systematically uncovering patterns and themes without prematurely imposing rigid analytical frameworks. By leveraging thoughtful prompts, ChatGPT iteratively refined its analysis, providing nuanced and credible interpretations aligned with recognized qualitative research practices (e.g., Maxwell, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To achieve this, the design of the prompting process focused on key aspects of qualitative data analysis such as data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and reflection on bias and credibility. Each analysis stage was explicitly framed through task-specific prompts to ensure that ChatGPT's responses aligned with rigorous qualitative standards. These prompts guided GPT step-by-step through coding, identifying themes, and refining them, allowing for both structure and flexibility within the interpretive process. A notable feature of this approach was the deliberate avoidance of rigid frameworks at the outset, instead fostering an iterative analytical process to enhance depth and reliability.

One of the central strategies involved instructing GPT to adopt the persona of a Critical Reflective Practitioner. This persona emphasized holistic, human-centered analysis, balancing empathetic engagement with critical inquiry and reflection. Such an approach was essential for uncovering insights that respected the complexity of the informants' lived experiences while remaining grounded in the practical objectives of the research. Within this framework, ChatGPT was encouraged to reflect on its interpretations, explore alternative perspectives, and account for possible contradictions in the data, fostering a more nuanced and comprehensive analysis.

Providing clear context and background information was another essential component of the prompting process. Detailed descriptions of the research objectives, background institutional and informant characteristics, and data type (i.e., survey) ensured that GPT had the necessary contextual understanding to prioritize and interpret information accurately. This clarity enabled GPT to focus on relevant aspects of the data, avoiding misinterpretation or tangential responses. Structured prompts further enhanced this focus by specifying the exact task at each stage of the thematic analysis, such as initial coding or synthesizing themes, thereby preventing vague or unfocused outputs.

Reflection was embedded as a critical part of the process, with prompts encouraging the GPT to consider potential biases and alternative interpretations. These sub-prompts guided the GPT to critically evaluate its outputs, question its assumptions, and explore contradictory evidence. By integrating reflective practice into the analysis, the GPT provided deeper, more robust insights while ensuring no significant perspectives were overlooked. Culturally responsive framing further enriched this reflective component, wherein prompts were designed to acknowledge diverse perspectives and power dynamics. Although the data pertained to institutional characteristics rather than individual experiences, culturally responsive instructions were included as a matter of thoroughness.

The iterative nature of the thematic analysis was another key factor in ensuring rigor and depth. Prompts were designed to encourage ChatGPT to revisit and refine its outputs continuously. This iterative revision process allowed for ongoing evaluation of initial codes and themes, with attention to internal coherence, interrelationships among themes, and gaps in the analysis. Through this recursive approach, ChatGPT made necessary adjustments based on emerging insights or contradictory evidence, thereby enhancing the overall quality and credibility of the analysis.

The design and execution of this approach reflect an intentional effort to integrate artificial intelligence into qualitative research in a way that honors the complexity and rigor of human-centered inquiry by thoughtfully structuring prompts, fostering reflexivity, and embedding culturally responsive practices.

## Results

Respondents identified the challenges and successes they had experienced concerning each of the identified AIM factors. What follows is a key-point summary of the themes and codes identified in the analysis process described above under each AIM factor, presented in the same order as the factors of AIM are presented above and as they were presented to the respondents in the survey. The evidence collected in this study demonstrates only the respondents' self-described experiences rather than a ranking of the importance of each factor in the respondents' assessment experience. This survey did not ask respondents to rank their responses or the importance of the factors in their experiences with integration.

### Leadership Support

Open-ended responses offered by survey respondents ( $N = 20$ ) related to leadership indicated that respondents believed that their institutional leaders thought the purpose of assessment and its value was for accountability and accreditation. In general, there was little evidence of institutional leaders understanding any value of assessment beyond accreditation. Several respondents reported that associate provosts (i.e., not senior, but high-level leaders) in charge of curriculum understand the value of integrating curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices more than other institutional leaders. Although a limited number of respondents mentioned receiving support for the integrated process, typically they suggested that institutional leaders had little understanding of or support for an integrated process or its potential. Furthermore, respondents indicated that leaders offered little assessment resource allocation short of a basic administrative structure for assessment, with one respondent stating, "Outward support. Little resource

allocation has been my experience.” However, a few respondents indicated that they were provided adequate staffing.

More than one assessment respondent mentioned political issues on campus that excluded them, with one even stating, “No, I, as the Assessment Director, am literally barred from even being in the room” when conversations or meetings related to curriculum and instruction arose. Although not all respondents were pessimistic, one suggested that a greater understanding of the assessment’s value may occur with the forthcoming leadership change.

The respondents’ articulated Leadership Support challenges were conceptualized by the authors as a beautifully packaged gift that is revealed to be empty inside. Leaders may speak of support for assessment, but few follow through with resource allocation aligned with this spoken support, as represented in Figure 3.



*Note. Image conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*

**Figure 3.** Leadership Support challenges articulated by respondents, as conceptualized by the authors.

### **Assessment Purposes**

A recurring theme among respondents was that the purpose of assessment at their institutions remains accountability, with a primary focus on data collection or a “box-checking” approach grounded in a positivist mindset. Some respondents assumed that integration of assessment was taking place and that sometimes data is used to make improvements in specific departments or programs. However, these respondents were housed in institutions without a robust information-sharing system or a central assessment office for information about improvements to be delivered. Many did not think their institutions had established a broad culture of integrating assessment with curriculum and instruction. Only one response commented on having a strong culture of assessment ( $N = 24$ ).

Respondents indicated that the purpose of assessment varied widely across departments and programs within their institutions, leading to inconsistent practices. The extent to which faculty and programs integrated assessment into curriculum and instruction also differed: some were actively participating, and others either lacked involvement or did not fully understand the purpose of assessment. One respondent

indicated that some faculty misunderstood the concept of “closing the loop,” focusing on changing assessment methods rather than using data to improve curriculum. Most respondents suggested that while curricular improvements were relatively more feasible, instructional changes posed greater challenges.

The authors conceptualized the Assessment Purposes challenges articulated by the respondents as inconsistency, with variations within and between institutions. This is conceptualized in Figure 4 as bars of varying heights.



*Note. Image conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*

**Figure 4.** *Assessment Purposes challenges articulated by the respondents, as conceptualized by the authors.*

### **Assessment Processes**

Respondents commented on their institutional experiences with assessment processes' impacts on integration ( $N = 16$ ). The responses provided a general insight that assessment processes and integration happen at most institutions, but not in concert.

The distinct themes that emerged from the item about processes were: the uneven distribution of information about processes among levels of the institution; senior leadership changes impacting process engagement; and, the involvement of the assessment office and center for teaching and learning (or similarly-named units) as providing professional development as well as facilitating the processes.

The most prevalent theme was the uneven distribution of adherence to assessment and integration processes within institutions. One respondent exemplified this by indicating that the impacts of processes were “definitely true for some faculty/programs, but not all.” Another shared additional context: “...programs are asked to share and discuss relevant assessment findings with the appropriate stakeholders, and their (sic) is some evidence in the assessment reports that programs are doing this, but it's difficult to determine if this is happening systematically and with which stakeholders...” This sentiment addresses one of the key needs of integrating assessment with curriculum and instruction: communication between all groups involved. Some responses detailed that the role of leading assessment was distributed between the colleges and assessment offices.

While one theme revolved around the consistency of process implementation, another challenge faced was the role of the centralized assessment office in accessing information about process implementation or integration in general. For example, one

respondent indicated that “the work is being done, but it is not across and transparent at the institutional level,” others discussed review processes in which reading and evaluating assessment reports is a distributed model across colleges and individual assessment offices, without centralization. On the other hand, centralized assessment offices might suffer from a lack of engagement with embedded units: “There is a one-person office that facilitates program learning outcome assessment, including organization and facilitation of the use of the data, but has no role in \*actual\* use of the data.” This kind of “silos” is noted across the results for all items, particularly in this theme. Based on these responses, the “right hand” of institutional assessment does not necessarily know what the “left hand” embedded within curricula and classrooms is doing.

Another theme that emerged was that assessment processes, even if well-established, might not be resilient to changes in senior leadership. While integration is impacted by assessment processes, assessment processes are similarly impacted by various contextual factors. The respondents indicated that a change in leadership has an impact, sometimes detrimental, on the progress of integration at their institutions.

Overall, Assessment Processes challenges articulated by the respondents can be conceptualized in the common metaphor of the silos found at most IHEs, demonstrated in Figure 5.



*Note. Image conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*

**Figure 5.** Assessment Processes challenges articulated by the respondents, as conceptualized by the authors.

### **Recognition & Reward**

Of the responses about Recognition & Reward ( $N = 14$ ), the consensus was that the institution does not provide these for assessment. However, assessment may be recognized as a portion of other rewards given to faculty members. For example, one respondent stated, “Department-level assessment coordinators are given a full or partial course release for their assessment work, and many of them do work with their departments’ curriculum committees.” In certain cases, “non-monetary incentives” have either been used in the past or included in some units but not all. There was also a plurality of respondents looking toward the future for recognition & reward. For example,

“resources are not dedicated in this way, but the desire is there to change that.” Moreover, one reported, “We do not do these things currently, although we should do more,” and another stated, “I feel like faculty at my institution want to see students learn and see assessment as important. It would help if it was incentivized a little more.”

Overall, the Recognition & Reward challenges articulated by the respondents can be described like a child writing a letter to Santa (Figure 6); these respondents have hopes, and many indicate having plans, of future work in recognition & reward or fond memories of past recognition & reward systems without demonstrable recognition & reward at present.



*Note. Image conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*

**Figure 6.** Recognition & Reward challenges articulated by the respondents, as conceptualized by the authors.

## Collaboration

While participants ( $N = 12$ ) seemed to agree on the need for collaboration between assessment and other institutional offices or stakeholders, the current situation, as reported by participants, varied across institutions. One respondent highlighted the collaborative efforts that started during COVID-19 and continued afterward at their institution, involving the assessment area, center for teaching and learning, student affairs, advising, library, and technology departments, resulting in beneficial outcomes such as resources for faculty. Another respondent reported being “a part of everyone’s team,” indicating widespread collaboration between assessment and other functional areas at their institution. However, other respondents reported a lack of collaboration at their institutions, leading to siloed operations by individual units such as offices, departments, councils, and committees. Several respondents reported that assessment units could be excluded from discussions on curriculum or program reviews. Various factors could have contributed to these siloes, including the “decentralized and territorial” nature of some institutions or a lack of infrastructure for facilitating and supporting such collaborations, particularly in smaller, underfunded community colleges, as pointed out by one respondent. However, despite the historical lack at some institutions, there was hope that collaboration would occur in the future, as expressed by some respondents.

Respondents reported positive movement toward institutional collaboration, occasionally faced with roadblocks (Figure 7).



*Note. Image conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*

**Figure 7.** Collaboration challenges articulated by respondents, as conceptualized by the authors.

### **Faculty Support and Development**

Faculty support and ongoing professional development (PD) are necessary for integration; however, responses ( $N = 15$ ) indicate that while most institutions offer PD, many have room for improvement and are growing in this area, especially with PD focused on assessment. The level of faculty support and PD varied across responses, from a couple reporting a lack of professional development at their institutions, with most others indicating some PD is available. Some participants commented that voluntary faculty participation in PD is low and that events are not well attended. Some institutions offer PD for integration more formally through offices of teaching and learning, and some through the assessment office. Many participants reported that faculty support and development were continually being improved at their institution, especially after seeing a decline in PD due to the pandemic.

The respondents' experiences with Faculty Support and Development are nascent (just beginning/experiencing low attendance) or reminiscent (recognizing that PD was more widely attended in the first years of COVID-19). The authors conceptualize this as institutions prepared and ready at the starting line for providing holistic PD related to assessment and integration (Figure 8).



*Note. Image conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*

**Figure 8.** Faculty Support challenges articulated by the respondents, as conceptualized by the authors.

### **Accreditation**

The responses to the open-ended item about accreditation ( $N = 11$ ) showcased the respondents' complicated relationships with the accreditation enterprise as assessment stakeholders. There was a nearly even split of respondents providing a generally positive view of impact and negative, for both professional/specialized and institutional accreditors. The respondents indicated that they believed that both levels of accreditation contribute to integration in the sense that they mandate assessment activities to happen, as articulated by one respondent: "People don't want to do it, but still, without it, there wouldn't be assessment happening." This sensation of mandating assessment did not seem to extend into fully formed models of integration: "The relationship between accreditation requirements and assessment is clear, but less so with the integration of assessment with curriculum and instruction." Therefore, accreditation serves as a foundational aspect that creates assessment activities, which then can be integrated when other institutional environmental characteristics are fit. This item also reiterated that assessment, as an ongoing practice, is not integrated per se with curriculum and instruction, but that integration would be another level of assessment implementation. Respondents did not report this perception (and reality) of assessment activities as a "requirement" of accreditation bodies as a positive feeling among their institutional assessment stakeholders, but begrudging at best.

Overall, the respondents' sentiments related to accreditation were that assessment (non-integrated) would not occur without the influence of accreditors at both the institutional and individual program level. Respondents see assessment as a positive influence, but unfortunately, it is brought out only through the pressure of accreditation expectations, conceptualized as the pressure of a hand squeezing a stress ball to produce assessment processes (Figure 9). The respondents did not feel this pressure was leading to effective integration of assessment with curriculum and instruction.



*Note. Image conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*

**Figure 9.** Accreditation challenges articulated by the respondents, as conceptualized by the authors.

## Discussion

In the previous study, all factors within the Assessment Integration Model (AIM) were well-developed and contributed positively at the identified IHEs to creating a context conducive to successful integration. The findings of this study are more representative of all involved stakeholders, such as both large and small, 2- and 4-year institutions from all regions of the U.S. The findings suggest that most institutions have well-established assessment processes, consistent with trends observed by other scholars since the 1980s in examining the evolution of assessment practices (Peterson & Augustine, 2000). However, while these institutions possess well-developed assessment processes, our respondents indicate that the processes are often siloed rather than fully integrated at the institutional level.

This lack of integration can be attributed to variations in how factors of AIM, particularly Collaboration and Assessment Purposes, impact the process. Respondents indicated that barriers to collaboration, stemming from institutional roadblocks and internal politics, hinder integration efforts. Specifically, limited collaboration with curriculum-defining bodies, such as faculty committees or individual faculty members completing assessment reports, at both institutional and college levels, has reduced awareness of integration activities among assessment practitioners. The extant processes for assessment are only enacted due to accreditor requirements, per the respondents, rather than for the purpose of continuous quality improvement.

Leadership Support emerged as the most frequently mentioned critical factor from AIM that has stagnated progress toward fully integrated systems. Respondents highlighted leadership changes as a significant challenge to sustainability. Institutions appear to benefit most from context-specific strategies to initiate integration, with respondents consistently emphasizing the importance of sustained leadership support to ensure that assessment processes are durable and widely implemented enough to achieve integration.

Based on the findings from this study, assessment stakeholders agree that the factors outlined in AIM have provided a foundational structure for integration. However, respondents indicated that integration remains in its early stages. They stated that

integration is not merely a best practice but an essential strategy for realizing the full potential of assessment in enhancing student success.

While many professionals are actively working to promote the value of integration within their institutions, few perceive these efforts as currently successful. Institutional structures and politics present significant barriers to advancing this conversation. For example, siloed reporting practices, where programs submit a single, decontextualized report to a central assessment office, limit opportunities for collaboration across different offices, teams, and committees. This, in turn, hinders the ability to create and implement faculty development initiatives effectively.

Fluctuating impacts on integration come from factors such as Recognition & Reward and Faculty Development. For instance, during the recent pandemic, the shift to remote communication led to increased faculty engagement, but this engagement diminished as institutions returned to a "new normal." Similarly, while some leadership teams have promoted incentives such as rewards or grants for successfully integrated assessment work, leadership changes often shift the institutional political climate, reducing support for resource-based efforts toward integration. Although some departments and faculty are actively using assessment to improve instruction and curriculum, most institutions lack a consistent, cross-disciplinary collaboration structure necessary to expand this practice. Despite these challenges, there is a shared sense of urgency and a strong desire among assessment practitioners to establish systems that effectively integrate assessment with curriculum and instruction. A visual interpretation of these findings in the context of the overall AIM can be found in Figure 10.

While the advantages of integration are clear, implementation is not without challenges. Institutions must navigate issues of stakeholder buy-in, resource constraints, and the need for the skills and knowledge to successfully interpret data into useful information. General resistance to change is one characteristic noted by the respondents, both institutional assessment professionals and faculty members. Institutions' existing practices, such as siloing decision-making around assessment and curriculum and isolating faculty to their instructional context only, can prohibit successful integration. There can be limited faculty engagement in existing assessment structures and processes. The needs of both institutional and specialized accreditors must be interpreted for minimum compliance and balanced with the contextual needs of faculty within the IHE environment. Overcoming these challenges requires a concerted effort to build institutional capacity for assessment.

Based on the perspectives shared by the respondents, we argue that the compelling value proposition, combined with clear cost benefits, underscores the necessity of integration in enhancing educational quality, ensuring institutional effectiveness, and promoting student success. Here, we offer strategic recommendations to leverage the factors of AIM to best cultivate an environment where integration can thrive.



*Note. Sub-images conceptualized and described by the authors and generated by CoPilot (Microsoft, 2025).*  
**Figure 10.** Assessment Integration Model with visual representations of respondents' challenges within each factor.

### **Integration: Value Added**

#### *Value Proposition of Integration*

Integrating assessment with curriculum and instruction offers institutions a tangible means to demonstrate the benefits of their academic programs. Specifically, by delineating expected student learning outcomes, faculty and IHEs now possess a tangible framework for evaluating educational effectiveness. The value proposition of integration lies in its ability to facilitate evidence-based decision-making processes. While also creating an environment for making decisions rooted in data, systematically collecting and analyzing data allows IHEs to showcase the concrete learning outcomes achieved by students. This focus on demonstrable student learning ensures graduates are prepared for their chosen fields and life's multifaceted challenges. Furthermore, well-integrated assessment, curriculum, and instruction systems enable institutions to remain agile and align their educational offerings more closely with industry standards, societal needs, and, most importantly, student needs. Integration can be transformative for IHEs in how curriculum and instruction are delivered to center students and their learning experiences with cultural responsiveness (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017).

### *Cost Benefits and Institutional Advantages*

Beyond the educational merit, integration presents significant potential in cost benefits. In the responses provided by survey respondents analyzed here, it is clear that some institutional stakeholders (e.g., faculty, assessment professionals) perceive and often have assessment work as an “add-on” to existing responsibilities. In addition, at most institutions, curricular decisions happen via committees and other gathered bodies of faculty and staff. By leveraging assessment data for curricular and instructional decisions, institutions can optimize resource allocation in the time and talents of those participating in such assessment work and committee sessions, ensuring financial prudence. Despite the initial investment required for developing and implementing assessment processes, the long-term benefits include improved educational quality, increased institutional accountability, and enhanced student learning experiences and satisfaction. Moreover, these processes can enhance an institution's accreditation standing, potentially unlocking additional funding avenues.

### **Recommendations**

We now provide strategies for effective implementation, resource allocation, leadership involvement, and continuity to address these challenges. These recommendations are rooted in IHEs' responsibility for their students' learning and success rather than accountability to external accreditors or regulatory bodies.

For example, we recommend that assessment leaders and practitioners engage in the following activities as part of daily practice to help promote integration:

- Educate institutional leaders about the benefits of integrating planning and implementation processes as described in AIM, which may require building partnerships with others who have more direct contact with the leaders. Build knowledge about the benefits of the integration in academic chairs' training.
- Build collaborations with offices and units, such as student affairs, centers for teaching and learning, and the library, to inform them about integration and to highlight benefits to student learning, academic programs, and the institution.
- Build curricular integration into assessment reporting structures. When faculty members and staff are required to submit reports, respondents indicate that they perceive these reports to be decontextualized and complete the reports due to the requirement, so incorporating the aspects of curriculum and instruction improvement into the required report can start to build a culture of considering these other components with assessment.
- Build assessment infrastructure into the institutional fabric and culture so the integrated system survives leadership change. Design succession activities for integration to be beneficial and sustainable when assessment leadership within the IHE changes.
- Design and maintain professional development and encourage/promote sustainable recognition and reward structures within the institutional context.
- Engage in a collaborative and guidance approach to the assessment leadership role.

The work of reinvigorating IHE assessment with the opportunity to create integrated environments cannot be and is not solely the responsibility of individual assessment practitioners, many of whom, as indicated in this study, operate in relatively low-resourced and often siloed offices. It is clear from the literature and the responses here that external accrediting bodies' influence is the most influential on the progress of integration at their institutions, as it informs the Assessment Purposes and Leadership Support. Leaders and representatives (i.e., peer reviewers) from the bodies through which regulation is enacted in higher education, the accreditors themselves, can create an environment where there is strong encouragement for institutions to have an infrastructure for sustainable assessment practice. Expectations from accreditor staff and peer reviewers can promote the resiliency of institutions' assessment systems that can survive changing leadership expectations. Individuals affiliated with the external accrediting bodies are positioned to provide strong support for assessment professionals in their quest to develop an integrated system via recommendations for enhancement, especially in cases where leadership is frequently changing or does not strongly emphasize assessment.

## **Conclusion**

The Assessment Integration Model offers a holistic framework emphasizing the interdependence of Leadership Support, Assessment Purposes, Assessment Processes, Recognition & Reward, Faculty Development, Collaboration, and Accreditation. By optimizing the support of and reducing the impact of obstacles provided by each aspect of the model, IHEs can create a culture that values and prioritizes assessment processes as a tool for enhancing student learning via classroom instruction, improving educational quality via curricular enhancement, and achieving strategic institutional goals by creating a culture of continuous quality improvement. As U.S. higher education continues to evolve, the role of assessment as a cornerstone of academic excellence and institutional integrity becomes increasingly evident. Integrating assessment into the fabric of curriculum and instruction brings an IHE to a level beyond meeting accreditation requirements or administrative checkboxes, genuinely understanding and enhancing student learning. This establishes a framework for longer-term learning improvement success and offers a promising pathway to enhance quality and accountability. This qualitative data analysis, utilizing data from assessment stakeholders, demonstrated a high degree of urgency and desire to create integrated systems within their home institutions, driving initiatives despite challenges and in collaboration with leadership. Through a concerted focus on these strategic areas, higher education institutions can achieve comprehensive and sustainable integration. The future of higher education, marked by accountability and a relentless pursuit of excellence, will undoubtedly see integration as a pivotal instrument in the symphony of academic achievement.

## References

- Astin, A. W., Banta, T. W., Cross, K. P., El-Khawas, E., Ewell, P. T., Hutchings, P., Marchese, T. J., McClenney, K. M., Mentkowski, M., Miller, M. A., Moran, E. T., & Wright, B. D. (1992). Principles of good practice for assessing student learning. American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum.
- Banta, T. W., & Blaich, C. (2010). Closing the Assessment Loop. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 43(1), 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2011.538642>
- Colton, D. (2000). Quality improvement in health care: Conceptual and historical foundations. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, 23(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/01632780022034462>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage. ISBN: 978-1544398396.
- Ewell, P. T. (1991). Assessment and public accountability: Back to the future. *Change*, 23(6), 12–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1991.9940589>
- Ewell, P. T. (2009). Assessment, accountability, and improvement: Revisiting the tension. (Occasional Paper No. 1). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Flateby, T., Sweetland, Y., Ghasemi, A., Gibbons, R. E., Hardesty, K., & Hernández, A. (2023, June 5-8). Are you integrating assessment, curriculum and instructional practices and processes? [Conference presentation]. Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education Conference 2023, New Orleans, LA.
- Flateby, T., Sweetland, Y., Hardesty, K., Hernández, A., & Gibbons, R. E. (2024, June 3-6). Assessment integration with curriculum and instruction: Results of a national survey. [Conference presentation]. Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education Conference 2024, Portland, OR.
- Gaston, P. (2018). Assessment and accreditation: An imperiled symbiosis. (Occasional Paper No. 33). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Henning, G., Baker, G. R., Jankowski, N. A., Lundquist, A. E., & Montenegro, E. (Eds.). (2022). *Reframing assessment to center equity: Theories, models, and practices* (1st ed.). Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Hoffart, N. (1991). A member check procedure to enhance rigor in naturalistic research. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 13(4), 522–534. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193945991013004>
- Hutchings, P., Ewell, P., & Banta, T. (2012). *AAHE principles of good practice: Aging nicely*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Jankowski, N. A., Timmer, J. D., Kinzie, J., & Kuh, G. D. (2018). Assessment that matters: Trending toward practices that document authentic student learning. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- Kinzie, J. (2019). Taking stock of initiatives to improve learning quality in American higher education through assessment. *Higher Education Policy*, 32, 577–595. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-019-00148-y>
- Kuh, G., & Ewell, P. (2010). The state of learning outcomes assessment in the United States. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 22(1). <https://doi.org/10.1787/hemp-22-5ks5dlhqbfr1>

- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Microsoft Copilot. (2025). Microsoft visual creator. <https://m365.cloud.microsoft/>
- Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, N. A. (2017). *Equity & assessment: Moving towards culturally responsive assessment*. (Occasional Paper No. 29). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).
- National Institute of Education, Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. (1984). *Involvement in learning: Realizing the potential of American higher education* (ED publication 246833). Washington, DC: Department of Education.
- OpenAI. (2023). ChatGPT (Feb 13 version) [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com>
- Pepin, C. K. (2014). The dilemma of assessment in the US. In Q. Li & C. Gerstl-Pepin (Eds.), *Survival of the fittest* (pp. 85–100). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3642-39813-1\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3642-39813-1_6)
- Peterson, M. W., & Augustine, C. H. (2000). Organizational practices enhancing the influence of student assessment information in academic decisions. *Research in Higher Education*, 41, 21–52. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007038212131>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22, 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Thompson, S., & Thompson, N. (2023). *The critically reflective practitioner*. United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Webber, K. L., & Tschepikow, K. (2011, May 21-25). *Learner-centered assessment: A comparison of faculty practices in US colleges and universities 1993 to 2004*. [Conference presentation]. AIR Forum, Toronto, Canada.
- Wiliam, D., & Black, P. (1996). Meanings and consequences: A basis for distinguishing formative and summative functions of assessment? *British Educational Research Journal*, 22, 537–548. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192960220502>