

Leader and Staff Perceptions of Assessment and Related Professional Development in Divisions  
of Student Affairs

by

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## Abstract

This study aimed to examine the effects of several factors (professional role, perceived level of assessment training, and perceived level of assessment competence) on student affairs staff members' views of what constitutes effective assessment and what they value in an assessment culture, measured through seven survey constructs. Adapted from Thoennes' (2017) original study, the distributed survey instrument explored perceptions of the integration of assessment into student affairs work and the development of an assessment disposition. The online survey administration for the current study yielded 953 usable sets of responses from a range of student affairs professionals at SACSCOC doctoral degree granting institutions.

Results suggested significant variance between each of the independent variables (role, training, and competency) and the survey constructs pertaining to views of effective assessment. Respondents in assessment leader roles expressed a higher level of agreement with survey items related to assessment values and best practices than respondents in other student affairs roles. Agreement with the survey items also varied by level of perceived training; respondents who felt more highly trained in assessment through certain avenues (e.g. training through their student affairs divisions or through academic coursework) indicated higher levels of agreement with the survey items. Additionally, agreement with the survey constructs varied with respondents' perceived levels of competence in several assessment skill areas. Respondents who perceived themselves as competent in the areas of interpreting, reporting, and using results; describing

terms and concepts; and/or knowledge of values, ethics, and politics were more likely to agree with the ideals and behaviors expressed in the survey items in each construct.

Several key recommendations emerged from the study. The researcher suggests further exploration of factors related to differing assessment values among student affairs professionals. Additionally, it would be advantageous to capitalize on assessment training and professional development avenues shown to be most effective by the current study. Student affairs leaders should work to provide robust training opportunities for all levels of staff as well as encourage opportunities for graduate coursework in higher education that would build capacity in assessment. The research also recommends building competence in particular assessment skills among student affairs practitioners, focusing on the weaker skill areas from the current study (e.g. method, data collection, and data analysis). Overall, results indicated a need for student affairs divisions to focus on building capacity at each step of the assessment cycle and striving for agreement concerning assessment values and practices, in order to build a culture of learning and of evidence.

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## List of Abbreviations

AACU	Association of American Colleges and Universities
AAHE	American Association for Higher Education
ACPA	College Student Educators International, formerly the American College Personnel Association
ASK	Assessment Skills and Knowledge Standards
CAS	Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education
NASPA	Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (formerly the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators)
NILOA	National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment
SAAL	Student Affairs Assessment Leaders
SLO	Student Learning Outcome
SACSCOC	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
VALUE	Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education Rubrics

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

While assessment in higher education has been encouraged by external forces for some time, this does not imply that faculty and staff members are assessing intentionally to measure what is meaningful or that assessment is being used to inform decisions (Blaich & Wise, 2011). Particularly, in divisions of student affairs, as co-curricular work becomes increasingly complex, professionals in these units are more often pressed to examine their roles and to ask questions of their programs, processes, and services (Culp, 2012). Despite the present need to strive for stronger assessment cultures, issues affecting buy-in and the value that practitioners place in assessment may hinder the growth of robust and intentional assessment (Blimling, 2013; Elkins, 2015; Miller, 2012). Naturally, assessment is occurring on campuses (Bresciani, 2011), but it is not always organized or connected to accountability (Ewell & Cumming, 2017).

Higher education institutions are complex entities that may be better understood by educators and administrators through applying a range of lenses and theoretical perspectives to view and learn about their organizations (Manning, 2013). Faculty and staff should wish to learn and inquire about the organizational cultures in which they work (Bresciani, 2011); outcomes-based assessment is a sustainable way for this learning to occur, as it provides for inquiry within a structured process that allows professionals to connect their work to the overall learning goals of their institutions (Bresciani, 2011; Jonson, Guetterman, & Thompson, 2014; Kuh et al., 2015). In the three decades since the call for student affairs divisions to take a leadership role in assessment on campuses (Erwin, 1991; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996), co-curricular assessment has

grown from a mandate or rising trend to an expectation that all practitioners should work to foster a culture of evidence in which staff are disposed to place value in assessment activity (Banta et al., 2015; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Thoennes, 2017).

As today's higher education culture is rapidly evolving, faculty and staff will need support to make important changes. There is a need for opportunity to gain abilities and understanding in areas of inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and problem solving (Groccia, 2010). A recent decline in the public's trust of the quality and value of higher education has led to a greater need for accountability and evidence of the value-added and impact of the college experience (Bresciani, 2011; Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016; Henning, Mitchell, & Maki, 2008; Shavelson, 2007). Highly trained faculty and staff will be a necessity. As for professional development in the area of assessment, training should focus on strategies for valid and reliable measurement, establishing a culture of assessment, demonstrating the impact of programs and activities, and efforts that lead to outcome attainment (Groccia, 2010). Current literature suggests that practitioners and leaders are coming to terms with assessment realities and working to strengthen assessment efforts (Banta et al., 2015; Miller, 2012).

When considering the impact of employing faculty and staff who are well-versed in assessment best practices, it is important to ask the following question: "How can professional educators articulate Student Learning Outcomes, assess those outcomes, and use the results to further inform attention to student learning if they lack the knowledge and skills with which to do so?" (Henning et al., 2008). Additionally, it is essential to note that higher education practitioners will not be committed to building a culture of assessment if they are not convinced of its value (Blimling, 2013).

## **Statement of the Research Problem**

This study explored perceptions of effective assessment, as identified by higher education assessment leaders and staff in student affairs units. It is an established best practice to conduct training and provide professional development related to higher education assessment. However, the existence of this standard does not imply that assessment is effectively integrated by staff or that staff members are disposed to value assessment activity. There are demonstrated needs for the development of competency in the area of assessment, for greater communication among campus partners about assessment activities, and for promotion of a general understanding of the institutional expectations for effective assessment practices. In order to work toward building such a culture of evidence (Culp & Dungy, 2012), student affairs professionals must be able to articulate their commitments to assessment and express its value to their work.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of effective assessment among student affairs professionals, including how these perceptions compared among several demographic factors. This study explored perceptions of how student affairs staff effectively integrate assessment into their practice and what it entails for these professionals to develop a disposition toward assessment activities. The concepts were measured through survey items corresponding to several constructs. Responses in each construct were compared against demographic variables, perceived levels of assessment competence, and perceived levels of assessment training.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) Do perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs differ by a student affairs practitioner's professional role?

- 2) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's reported level of assessment training and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs?
- 3) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's perceived level of assessment competence and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs?

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite its reputation as a newer specialty area within higher education professions, assessment in institutions of higher learning is not a new concept. Assessment was addressed by the American Council on Education in *The Student Personnel Point of View* (1949). The authors emphasized that an institution should focus on the providing of learning experiences and the ability of campus groups to affect student development. This seminal work addresses the need for faculty, staff, and administrators to work together toward common objectives so that learning is enhanced in the curricular and the co-curricular areas of campus (American Council on Education, 1949). This common purpose of enhancing student learning will require efforts in assessment, evaluation, and development of staff and programs:

The college or university which accepts these broad responsibilities for aiding in the optimum development of the individual in his relations to society will need to evaluate carefully and periodically its curricular offerings, its method of instruction, and all other resources for assisting the individual to reach his personal goals. Among its important resources, it also will need to provide and strengthen the type of services, as outlined in the next section, encompassed within the field of student personnel work. (American Council on Education, 1949, p. 21)

Shaping faculty and staff as constituents who will help build a robust culture of evidence is vital in the current higher education climate. A recent decline in the public's trust of the

quality and value of higher education has led to an increased push for accountability measures and evidence of impact from institutions in the United States. To provide such a culture of evidence, higher quality professional development will be needed (Groccia, 2010). Campus administrators, the Department of Education, the state, accrediting bodies, parents, and students are asking for justification of learning and the value added to the student's experience through higher education (Bresciani, 2011; Henning et al., 2008). Assessment is the way to give this natural inquiry and expected curiosity a systematic framework (Bresciani 2011).

Too often, institutions view their commitment to assessment as periodic, perhaps spurred by an external motivator (such as an accreditation visit). However, this periodic approach is a poor motivator; internal curiosity is much stronger. Institutional curiosity leads to faculty and staff jointly seeking answers; this is when working committees and assessment teams are formed (Maki, 2002).

Henning (2016) discussed how assessment fits into the concept of scholarship. He suggested that assessment can be placed into many types of scholarship, but perhaps it should also be its own form. This focus on professional development in assessment and the scholarship of student learning may have initially originated on the academic side, but should stretch to the co-curricular aspects of a campus as well (Henning et al., 2008).

Kinzie et al. (2014) discussed efforts in higher education to involve more staff in assessment through availability of professional retreats, materials readily accessible through websites and other avenues, and formation of assessment committees. Several authors have cited the need for more development and training in higher education; some focused on faculty/academic professionals (Groccia, 2010), while others honed in on this need among co-curricular practitioners (Henning, 2016).

Higher education assessment experts Banta, Suskie, and Walvoord (2015) reflected on the current state of assessment within institutions of higher learning. They indicated that there is evidence to suggest that staff members are in fact learning about assessment. Accepting the need for assessment activities on a campus is compared to moving from denial to acceptance. The authors indicated observing a greater acceptance of assessment on campuses in recent years; it is starting to be viewed as essential. The questions of why must higher education practitioners conduct assessment have begun to transform into how to better conduct assessment.

### **Definitions of Terms**

1. Assessment- “Assessment is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving student learning and development. The term assessment in higher education has also come to encompass the entire process of evaluating institutional effectiveness.” (Banta & Palomba, 2015, p.2)
2. Accreditation- “Disciplinary accreditation is a form of assessing program effectiveness in a major field. Regional accreditation is a form of assessing institutional effectiveness. Both are powerful influences in motivating and guiding campus approaches to assessment” (Banta & Palomba, 2015, p.2)
3. Alignment- “In the context of education, alignment can be broadly defined as the degree to which the components of an education system—such as standards, curricula, assessments, and instruction—work together to achieve desired goals. Most recently, alignment studies examine the degree to which standards and assessment address the same content” (Case, Jorgensen, & Zucker, 2008)
4. Training- “The process of developing skills in order to more effectively perform a specific job or task” (Beebe, Mottet, & Roach, 2013, p. 315)



5. Outcome- Intended outcomes are the desired result of a planned intervention or experience; measured outcomes are the changes that are found to have occurred because of engagement (Schuh, Biddix, Dean, & Kinzie, 2016)
6. Professional Development- “An individual’s gradual and continuing mastery of a field’s body of knowledge, methods, and procedures” (Rothwell & Kazansas, 1992, p. 328)
7. SACSCOC- “The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges is the regional body for the accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions in the Southern states. It serves as the common denominator of shared values and practices among the diverse institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Latin America and other international sites approved by the SACSCOC Board of Trustees that award associate, baccalaureate, master’s, or doctoral degrees”  
  
([www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org))
8. SACSCOC Level VI- Classified according to the highest degree offered, member institutions are placed into one of six categories. Level VI represents 4 or more doctorate degrees offered at the member institution ([www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org))
9. Student Affairs/Student Services- a profession comprised of “staff members dedicated to the growth and development of students outside of the formal curriculum” (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011)
10. Student Learning Outcome (SLO)- Student learning outcomes statements clearly state the expected knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, and habits of mind that students are expected to acquire at an institution of higher education. (National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, 2012)

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

While assessment in higher education has been encouraged by external forces for some time, this does not imply that faculty and staff members are assessing intentionally to measure what is meaningful or that assessment is being used to inform decisions (Blaich & Wise, 2011). Particularly, in divisions of student affairs, as co-curricular work becomes increasingly complex, professionals in these units are more often pressed to examine their roles and to ask questions of their programs, processes, and services (Culp, 2012). Despite the present need to strive for stronger assessment cultures, issues affecting buy-in and the value that practitioners place in assessment may hinder the growth of robust and intentional assessment (Blimling, 2013; Elkins, 2015; Miller, 2012). Naturally, assessment is occurring on campuses (Bresciani, 2011), but it is not always organized or connected to accountability (Ewell & Cumming, 2017).

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assessment on campuses (Erwin, 1991; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996), co-curricular assessment has grown from a mandate or rising trend to an expectation that all practitioners should work to foster a culture of evidence in which staff are disposed to place value in assessment activity (Banta, Suskie, & Walvoord, 2015; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Thoennes, 2017).

As today's higher education culture is rapidly evolving (Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Keeling et al., 2008; Maki, 2017), faculty and staff will need support to make important changes. There is a need for opportunity to gain abilities and understanding in areas of inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and problem solving (Groccia, 2010). A recent decline in the public's trust of the quality and value of higher education has led to a greater need for accountability and evidence of the value-added and impact of the college experience (Bresciani, 2011; Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016; Henning et al., 2008; Shavelson, Schneider, & Shulman, 2007). Highly trained faculty and staff will be a necessity. As for professional development in the area of assessment, training should focus on strategies for valid and reliable measurement, establishing a culture of assessment, demonstrating the impact of programs and activities, and efforts that lead to outcome attainment (Groccia, 2010). Current literature suggests that practitioners and leaders are coming to terms with assessment realities and working to strengthen assessment efforts (Banta et al., 2015; Miller, 2012).

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## **Foundations of Higher Education Assessment**

Establishing a culture of routine and robust assessment activity is often still discussed as an aspirational idea in higher education, particularly in student services. However, it is important to note that the concept of incorporating assessment into professional higher education work is long-standing. Assessment was discussed in the *Student Personnel Point of View*, one of the earliest scholarly publications discussing the significance of student affairs work in higher education (American Council on Higher Education, 1949). The authors cited the influence that various campus departments may have on student development and the learning experience. This foundational work emphasized that faculty, staff, and administrators should work together to enhance learning and achieve common goals throughout the curricular and co-curricular programs; achieving this end will require efforts in assessment and evaluation. An institution must evaluate all resources it uses to reach goals related to instruction and student development, then use this information to strengthen services (American Council on Higher Education, 1949).

Student affairs leaders must rely on important scholarship within the field, accepted professional standards and competencies, and trusted resources when building a culture of assessment within their divisions. Important works such as *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling &

Dungy, 2004) noted the need for assessment efforts in co-curricular settings. The authors discussed that student affairs professionals must be leaders of institutional efforts to assess student learning. It is the responsibility of co-curricular practitioners to track the role of diverse learning experiences in student learning outcome achievement. The authors called for a push to make assessment a way of life in student affairs divisions, a process motivated by internal curiosity concerning student learning and development (Keeling & Dungy, 2004).

### **Higher Education Assessment History**

Even before assessment existed as the movement it represents in today's higher education culture, there were roots of a developing scholarship of assessment in postsecondary education (Ewell, 2002). In fact, the profession of higher education assessment, as known presently, evolved from the convergence of several related areas of interest including student learning, retention, and program evaluation. Ewell (2002) noted that the practice of examining the applications of collegiate learning dates back to developmental psychology in the 1930s. Student learning theory gained steam a few decades later. An increased focus on both retention and program evaluation occurred in the 1960s and 1970s. Complemented by growing trends of strategic planning and budgeting efforts within the same decade, these once separate ways of thinking promoted attention to student outcomes (Ewell, 2002).

Chickering (1969) discussed the attitudinal and cognitive outcomes of the college student experience through his widely cited seven vectors of identity development. This theory outlined several steps or tasks that college students may experience, in some order and to some extent, as they progress through college (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Astin (1977) coined the idea of value-added, examining the net effects of learning in college. He explored students' attitudes, beliefs, actions, and achievements during and after college, as well as their

satisfaction to determine how policy makers and higher education institutions should create an enriching and success-promoting college environment (Astin, 1977). Ewell (2002) discussed that the rise of retention scholarship during the mid to late twentieth century organized around a cycle of theory, analysis, and intervention; this seems somewhat similar to the assessment cycle followed by assessment practitioners today (Maki, 2002; Bresciani, 2003).

McClain and Krueger (1985) discussed a case study from the 1970s involving Northeast Missouri State University. As the college grew and its mission expanded, leaders understood that something was missing. Administrators at the college felt that they understood what constituted good teaching; however, there was no solid evidence to support the value of students' education. In order to promote confidence in academic and non-academic decisions, the institution needed evidence-based actions. Following an outcomes assessment model, the university implemented a plan to collect data on student achievement at certain contact points throughout the college experience. This plan to intentionally measure students' curricular and co-curricular growth was certainly novel at its time (McClain and Krueger, 1985).

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when assessment became its own movement, there are certain important moments within higher education assessment history, including a call for education reform that occurred in the 1980s (Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Ewell & Cumming, 2017). In 1985, the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education was held and sponsored by the National Institute of Education and the American Association for Higher Education (Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002). Three major recommendations stemmed from this conference: establishing expectations for students, creating active learning environments in which to involve students, and providing students with feedback. Additionally, reports from the

conference urged that colleges and universities should seek feedback on their own performance as well (Ewell, 2002).

As the assessment of learning grew to become a form of scholarship within the post-secondary institution, an external voice emerged, calling for greater accountability in higher education (Ewell, 2002). This voice was primarily state systems, and the push initially stemmed from K-12 education expectations. Schuh, Jones, and Harper (2011) discussed rising scrutiny in the 1980s concerning the quality of public education, beginning with primary and secondary schools and extending to higher education institutions. The confidence of state governments in public education was declining, leading to a wave of reports and commissions addressing pressing issues. There was a wide call for reform in higher education, which would ultimately lead to the creation of mandates requiring documentation of effectiveness (Schuh, Jones, & Harper 2011).

In a report entitled *A Nation at Risk* (Department of Education, 1983), a commission of 18 members from private, government, and educational roles responded to concerns that educational systems in the United States were failing to produce a competent workforce. The commission set out to assess the quality of teaching and learning in K-12 and postsecondary education, benchmarking both nationally and internationally. Ultimately, the report called for reform, addressing recommendations in areas of content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support (Department of Education, 1983).

Assessment, as defined today, has roots in these calls for educational reform that occurred in the 1980s with a focus on both institutional improvement and external accountability (Elkins, 2015). As legislators placed interest on postsecondary education, states began adopting assessment mandates for public institutions of higher education, calling for an examination of



learning outcomes and reporting of results. Resulting from a meeting of the members of the National Governors' Association, their published report *Time for Results* (1986) discussed the creation of several task forces to examine issues with American education. The task force explored a range of problems in education, including college quality. Among the recommendations included in the report was the notion that states should require colleges to assess what students were actually learning through the college experience (National Governors' Association, 1986). By 1989, more than half of states had mandates related to assessment and accountability measures (Ewell, 2002). Another important report, *Involvement in Learning* (National Institute for Education, 1984), contained ideas on both the achievements and shortcomings of postsecondary institutions, put forth by a study group on conditions of American higher education. The study group suggested that student involvement and motivation resulted in richer student learning and that learning at the postsecondary level is for the greater good of society. Because of these conclusions, the group published recommendations on desired outcomes of undergraduate education, the importance of setting high expectations in higher education settings, and multiple recommendations on assessment and feedback. Additionally, the study group addressed accreditors and state officials on the achievement of these goals (National Institute for Education, 1984).

As higher education assessment became a necessity rather than an option, questions of how to implement and carry out assessment became prevalent (Ewell, 2002). By the 1990s, earlier predictions that assessment efforts would be a fading trend proved untrue. At this point, most states mandated assessment, and accrediting bodies were quickly becoming more influential and taking an interest in institutional assessment (Ewell, 2002). Cohen and Kisker (2010) discussed the role that governance played in higher education accountability during the

1970s to 1990. As states were widely issuing calls for evidence of effectiveness, outcomes assessment became a common practice across the country. Accreditors added to this pressure, ensuring that college administrators were on board with these trends. Both federal and state regulations continued to increase in number and concerns of compliance became the usual in higher education assessment culture (Cohen & Kisker, 2010). Survey data in 1987 indicated that about half of institutions had established assessment programs on campus; this number rose to 98% by the mid-1990s. Even if many of these programs were just getting started, assessment was not going away as some practitioners has predicted decades earlier (Ewell, 2002).

**Student Affairs Assessment History.** Erwin (1991) called on student affairs divisions to take a role in assessment, noting that student services practitioners had traditionally shied away from measuring student learning; his work urged that a rising push for assessment efforts was an opportune time for student affairs educators to reflect on the connection of co-curricular experiences to student learning and development. In turn, this relationship between student affairs and opportunities for learning could demonstrate that the co-curricular aspect of the campus should be an integral part of an institution's education and mission (Erwin, 1991). Upcraft and Schuh (1996) also emphasized the opportunity for professionals in student affairs to use assessment to demonstrate the co-curricular role in students' academic success.

Despite resistance, fear, and often minimal efforts to implement assessment activities, the practice and push for assessment prevailed due to several factors. External stakeholders have maintained a role as likely the primary motivating factor for many institutions. State interest remains, accreditation agencies continue to incorporate assessment as a campus-wide requirement, and the public eye and the media are demanding accountability for institutions (Ewell, 2002).

## **History of Assessing Student Learning**

Shavelson et al. (2007) cited the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as the frontrunner in establishing a practice of student learning assessment. The foundation's first president had great concern for the quality of higher education and the trend of objective testing that began in the early 1900s. The third president also expressed concerns for higher education including the need for accepted standards, the importance of appropriate measurement of achievement coupled with accountability, and educational offerings that allow individual students to succeed (Shavelson et al., 2007). Astin (1985) called for assessment of higher education institutions based on quality of outcomes, rather than the historical criteria of simply reputation and resources. Such calls for quality in post-secondary education served to increase a demand for evidence of student learning. Shavelson et al. (2007) stated that the history of assessment of learning can be divided into four eras: standardized tests characterized the early 1900s; the 1930s through mid-1940s brought interest in learning assessment for general and graduate education; the late 1940s through the 1970s was a time when test providers, such as ETS and ACT, were on the rise; and 1979 to the present brought an era of great concern over external accountability.

## **Roots of Professional Development in Higher Education Assessment**

As assessment was on the rise in the curricular and co-curricular areas of campus, a need for practitioners to gain assessment competency became evident. In the early 2000s, student affairs professionals noticed an expectation that knowledge and skill in assessment should be a part of their professional development and training as practitioners (Elkins, 2015).

Professional organizations began to more widely offer sub-groups focused on assessment in the early 2000s. Two such organizations are ACPA- College Student Educators International

(formerly the American College Personnel Association) and NASPA- Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (formerly the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators). Interestingly, a particular assessment focused sub-group, the ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation was established in the 1960s and is cited as the first professional assessment knowledge community (Elkins, 2015). Of course, over time, its focus shifted from testing and surveys to the development of abilities needed to conduct sound and robust assessment (Elkins, 2015).

Bentrim and Henning (2015) discussed the history of capacity building, which grew from theories of organizational development in the 1970s. Theorists discovered that the structure of an organization has the power to influence the behaviors and attitudes of workers. Organizations may achieve success by taking a bottoms-up approach, allowing for ownership from all members of a working team when it comes to improving performance. In the 1980s and 1990s, this concept of capacity building grew from a simple focus on a skilled individual to the idea of building an organization in a way that is in line with larger values and missions (Bentrim and Henning, 2015).

Before the recent stakeholder-driven push for greater evidence of student learning and value-added in higher education, some institutions were already thinking ahead (Palomba, 1997). In 1986, Ball State University added assessment to its mission statement and responded to a request for proposals from its state legislature and asked for funds to establish an academic assessment office. The request was granted, and the office was founded the next year, at which point the institution made an effort to introduce assessment to disciplines and departments across campus. As would be the case today, some staff and faculty were fully on board, some confused, others reluctant. Nonetheless, the institution's assessment office was patient. The office provided

travel funds for faculty to attend assessment conferences, encouraged faculty development workshops, compiled content into an assessment workbook, solicited colleges and departments to host assessment presentations, and created working groups across campus to further the assessment cause. Soon, faculty were applying for summer grants to carry out assessment activities as well as receiving invitations to present on assessment projects at national conferences; a strong culture of assessment developed (Palomba, 1997). While dated, this example sets a standard of developing professionals in assessment that many post-secondary institutions today would rival.

### **Roots of Accreditation and Professional Standards**

Ewell (1993) reflected on the role of accreditation and its growth over the 1980s and early 1990s. He discussed the impact that external forces had on assessment and accountability. State governments had been a great motivator for the push for assessment. The author noted that at that time, all but nine states had enacted policies requiring assessment to some degree. Ewell (1993) also stated that the six regional accrediting bodies in the United States required assessment. He cited a survey indicating that over 90 percent of colleges in the nation were participating in assessment efforts, likely due to these external requirements (Ewell, 1993). Astin (1991) noted that by the 1990s, there was a trend of published literature appearing specifically pertaining to assessment. His work, *Assessment for Excellence* (Astin, 1991) was one of these early publications in the field of higher education assessment. The publication addressed advice for methodology and findings, outlining the steps of the assessment cycle through its chapters (Astin, 1991). The 1970s to 1990s was certainly a time of great growth for assessment and policies pertaining to evidence of accountability in higher education. While a significant time of

change for assessment, this was not the last era in which higher education accountability would come into question.

### **Demand for Accountability in Higher Education**

In the current higher education climate, there is much questioning of the cost and value of a college education (Blimling, 2013). A recent push for greater accountability to external stakeholders as well as increasing internal demands to improve learning means that assessment is fundamental and necessary if institutions wish to justify value (Bresciani, 2011; Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016; Henning et al., 2008; Shavelson et al., 2007). Many stakeholders such as campus administrators, the Department of Education, the state, accrediting bodies, parents, and students are demanding justification of learning and evidence of the value-added through higher education attainment (Bresciani, 2011; Henning et al., 2008).

According to Blimling (2013), in addition to stakeholder demands, other concerns have led to scrutiny: student loan debt, concerns about student learning, criticism of lack of academic rigor, unemployment issues for recent college graduates, and other worries. Some educators claim that students are not engaged nor are they spending time on the task-at-hand, learning. Many of today's college students place more emphasis on part-time work and socialization, rather than the academic experience (Blimling, 2013; Hersh & Merrow, 2005). A significant number of students do not show real gains in critical thinking, reasoning, or writing throughout their time in college. These concerns and more mean a greater demand for accountability and documentation of a contribution to students' educational experiences (Arum & Roska, 2011; Blimling, 2013).

Within the first few years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was a push to standardize how colleges and universities were assessed on quality (Eubanks, 2006). State and federal officials with a financial interest in higher education institutions wanted accountability for items such as the value-added through an education and job attainment upon graduation. Some stakeholders pushed for the development of a type of scorecard to compare institutions. The trend of this idea was concerning to other constituents, because these types of metrics and comparisons might have led to institutions assessing for reasons related to a score, rather than addressing meaningful questions through assessment (Eubanks, 2006).

### **Value-added**

As external forces apply increased pressure for institutions to intentionally implement outcomes-based assessment (including the measurement of student learning), administrators may find it advantageous to demonstrate evidence of the value-added through the student experience (Astin, 1977; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Shavelson et al., 2016). The idea of value-added refers to the net effects of a college education (Astin, 1977; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Shavelson et al., 2016). Some would argue that this idea suggests viewing students as products of the institution with learning and development being add-ons (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). However, this idea of expressing the value of an education, for an individual student or as provided by an institution, may be essential for stakeholders in the age of accountability.

Shavelson et al. (2016) stated that the notion of value-added begins with using characteristics of students admitted to an institution to predict the achievement of those students, often measured through test scores at the end of college. In some cases, the prediction will be fairly accurate; at other times, students may perform above or below expectations. One method

for calculating the value-added for a student is subtracting the student's expected outcome score from the student's observed college outcome score. These resulting residual scores can be averaged among students from the same institution to quantify the value-added from attending that university. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) cited studies from the 1990s on the net effects of college. In addition to cognitive gains, these studies suggested value-added or net gains in areas related to career and economic attainment as well. The authors found incoming student ability to be a strong predictor of several outcomes of the college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

### **External Reasons for Assessment**

It has been established that the history of accreditor involvement relates to the roots of higher education assessment. Institutions in the present study are served by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) as their regional accrediting body. There are several standards within the SACSCOC guidelines that address services offered within student affairs, as well as the necessity that all campus units identify and assess outcomes.

Some co-curricular practitioners may wonder where programs and services offered by divisions of student affairs fit into their accreditation standards. In the SACSCOC Comprehensive Standards (2018), the provision of such services is a core requirement for institutional compliance. Standard 12.1 states that the institution should provide "academic and student support programs, services, and activities consistent with its mission" (SACSCOC, 2018, p. 114). Furthermore, the SACSCOC standards address that divisions of student affairs should identify and assess outcomes. Standard 8.2.c states that "the institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of



seeking improvement based on analysis of the results for academic and student services that support student success” (SACSCOC, 2018, p. 73). It is of interest that standards 8.2.a and 8.2.b specifically cite a need for student learning outcomes for the areas of educational programs and general education, respectively. While standard 8.2.c addresses a need for student outcomes in co-curricular areas, these outcomes may be measures of student learning, or alternatively, may measure programmatic goals or other aspects of the student experience relevant to student affairs units. Broadly, standard 7.1 notes that the institution as a whole engages in ongoing and comprehensive planning and evaluation processes, focused on institutional effectiveness and systematic review of properly aligned goals and outcomes (SACSCOC, 2018).

### **Compliance with a Lack of Intentionality**

Institutions often view assessment as periodic and tied to accreditation; this is an approach based on external motivators and fear of failing to comply (Maki, 2002). While the necessity of accreditation and other external factors can be powerful incentives, these are not as powerful a motivator as internal curiosity. True institutional curiosity leads to the joint seeking of answer across an institution (Keeling & Dungy, 2004; Maki, 2002). Maki (2010) stated “Therein lies the wellspring of an institutional commitment to assessment-intellectual curiosity...Assessment is the means of answering those questions of curiosity about our work as educators” (p. 3).

Assessment is sometimes a reflection of a culture of compliance rather than an effort to address real concerns. This is a frustrating scenario, but solutions have been proposed. For example, outcomes assessment encourages faculty to create assignments that are in line with institutional goals. However, to accomplish this, faculty and staff must be given the opportunity to work with colleagues to develop greater expertise (Kuh et al., 2015).

Interestingly, as assessment has held steadfast as a necessary part of higher education institutional practice, often assessment activities remain an act of compliance, or an add-on instead of an intentional practice. Demanded by administration as well as external requirements, assessment is conducted because practitioners have been told to do so (Ewell, 2002).

**Motivator for Doing Assessment.** The primary motive for conducting assessment should be improvement of institutions and programs, not government interest or accreditor pressure (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). Practitioners conducting assessment for the right reasons will be committed to the interpretation and implementation of results, whichever direction the evidence suggests. This may be difficult for educators who have ideas about what is valuable for students to experience or how students should behave (Ewell & Cumming, 2017).

**Practices Limiting Intentionality.** There are several pitfalls that often trap practitioners conducting assessment. For one, professionals must resist the urge to gather large amounts of data on many measures in hopes that something will appear meaningful; this does not stem from intentionality. Another common mistake is addressing assessment after the fact. It is not nearly as useful to report on the end results if the intervention was not thoughtfully implemented. Additionally, many practitioners wait for that moment when they can consider their findings final; however, assessment is provisional, cyclical, and should be constantly re-visited (Ewell & Cumming, 2017).

**The Assessment Cycle.** Intentional assessment will follow a robust and routine cycle that has become part of the culture of collecting and reporting data. Scholars have discussed the cyclical nature of assessment (Deitz & Mueller, 2012; Erwin, 1991; O'Brien, 2001; Riel, 2010). This concept has been adapted into an illustrated model (Maki, 2002; Bresciani, 2003) for higher education practitioners and serves as a guide for institutions and divisions to integrate assessment

into practice so that it becomes systematic and intentional. The assessment cycle follows a process of creating and implementing outcomes, gathering and analyzing data, and using data to make improvements. The process is cyclical in that findings are shared and also used to improve processes (Banta & Palomba, 2015). The assessment cycle does not end but rather closes the loop and starts a stronger and more robust round of the same practices.

How does an institution or division know that its assessment efforts are effectively closing the loop? It is difficult to determine if assessment practices are aiding in closing the loop because there is often little evidence of using results to intentionally modify policy and practice (Smith, Good, Sanchez, & Fulcher, 2015). Furthermore, it is even harder to determine if changes in policy and practice are actually making a difference in student attainment. What does it really mean to use results, to make improvements, to develop a plan, or to close the loop? These are vague terms with vague definitions and do not offer much guidance for practitioners (Smith et al., 2015).

When discussing closing the loop, it is important to focus not only on using results to make a pedagogical, curricular, or programmatic change, but also to show improvement in student learning development due to these changes (Smith et al., 2015). A change does not become improvement until the practitioner/educator re-assesses and can demonstrate a positive effect. Instead of relying on vague language and terms, when professionals share their assessment work, they should rely on examples of demonstrated improvement resulting from intentional change (Smith et al., 2015).

### **Alignment**

Holzweiss (2012) asserted that when an institution hopes to implement changes, an important first step is to analyze its mission, vision, and values. Institutions of higher education

have publically shared missions that at times may not match up with the organization's actions. To create a rich co-curricular learning environment, student affairs practices must align not only with divisional goals but also with the mission of the institution (Holzweiss, 2012). Maki (2010) discussed issues of alignment, outcomes, and student learning and stated that the language in outcome statements should guide the selection of assessment measures. Alignment, in this sense, refers to the degree to which a method captures the learning or development intended by an outcome. Maki (2010) also discussed trouble aligning program practices and expected values and indicated that when selecting an appropriate assessment method, practitioners should consider alignment to both values and the type of learning or development described (Maki, 2010).

### **Kirkpatrick Model: Training and Alignment with Standards**

The Kirkpatrick model is a well-known approach for evaluating the effectiveness and results of a training program (Kirkpatrick, 1994). The model focuses on participants' reactions, learning, behavior changes, and results (organizational performance) to inform improvement of the development and implementation of programs to train professionals. This model is relevant to higher education assessment, as robust professional development is an important piece to equipping educators with the tools to integrate assessment into their work. Just as there are principles of good assessment around which to model professional development and the execution of assessment activities, this popular model has also been applied to the question of whether or not institutions' assessment activities align with accepted standards (Kinzie, Janowski, & Provezis, 2014). Praslova (2014) suggested aligning criteria for educational effectiveness with indicators of achievement through adaption of the popular Kirkpatrick model, a four-level model of training criteria in professional settings, to fit higher education assessment and student learning outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1994). It is important to address the issue of the lack

of alignment between outcomes and assessment methods. Praslova (2014) used the training criteria of reaction, learning, behavior, and results to move past Kirkpatrick's study of the constructs of professional development in general and relate directly to measurement of outcomes in higher education. Beebe and Mottet (2013) refer to Kirkpatrick's model as levels of assessment and emphasize that Kirkpatrick's levels parallel Bloom's Taxonomy, a popular model for levels of learning often used in outcome writing language at the onset of the assessment cycle.

### **Aligning Methods with Outcomes**

Outcomes assessment is an important practice in higher education because of the opportunity for professionals to complete the assessment cycle by using evidence to make changes and subsequently re-assessing for improvement (Bresciani et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2015). The difficulty in effectively following through with this cycle (planning, gathering and interpreting information, and making informed decisions for improvement, and assessing again) has been noted and remains a prevailing challenge in higher education assessment (Jonson et al., 2014). Perhaps one reason for the difficulty in establishing a routine process of assessing outcomes, implementing changes, and measuring for improvement is the challenge of selecting and implementing appropriate and aligned measures.

When outcomes are not adequately aligned with measures or not aligned with larger goals, there are consequences that stem from this misalignment. Schuh, Biddix, Dean, and Kinzie (2016) stated that outcomes should be linked to the goals of the department, division, and institution. Langham and Fifolt (2014) discussed a study conducted by the primary author exploring changes over time pertaining to academic realignment at a public research institution and its effects on several dependent variables that could impact student success, including

enhanced student services and improved interdisciplinarity. The dependent variables were identified by the authors as desired outcomes of a realignment. No statistically significant impacts on these outcomes were found. The authors suggested that lack of measurable, timely outcomes set by the institution for the realignment could be the reason for these findings. “In an era of high-stakes accountability and limited financial resources, we recommend that academic leaders *intentionally* connect institutional goals to measurable outcomes” (Langham & Fifolt, 2014, p. 13).

### **Alignment of Programs with Institutional/Divisional Values**

Fuller Henderson, and Bustamante (2015) asked assessment leaders in a Delphi study to clarify the purpose of assessment on a campus. All of the participating leaders acknowledged some disconnect between attitudes and actions when attempting to define assessment’s purpose. The leaders emphasized the importance of reiterating how assessment practices serve to support the student-driven mission and goals of an institution.

If outcomes are to align with the mission and values of the institution, administrators must consider students as partners in assessment and work to identify outcomes that align with student success (Kramer & Miller, 2010). There is a gap between what students expect from college and what they experience in the college environment (Kramer and Miller, 2010; Miller, Bender, & Schuh, 2005). When the institution aligns its mission and outcomes with student success, the student experience will be enriched and the gap between students’ perceptions of higher education and reality will lessen (Kramer & Miller, 2010).

## **Assessment is Interdisciplinary**

Banta et al. (2015) forecasted movement from a culture of silos to a culture of integration in institutions of higher learning. Additionally, the authors predicted increased cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration when it comes to assessment in the future.

Some have argued that the concept of the scholarship of teaching and learning should also include assessment in its title (Angelo, 2002; Henning, 2016; Mentkowski & Loaker, 2002). Assessment focuses on student learning but also on integration. Knowledge should be integrated across disciplines in higher education, as “assessment is interdisciplinary” (Henning, 2016, p.7). Bresciani (2011) addressed student affairs professionals, urging that they must connect their work to overall institutional learning goals; this interdisciplinary approach requires collaborative conversations with faculty and other partners. This new trend of a cross-disciplinary approach in professional development in higher education assessment has been demonstrated at institutions employing working teams comprised of both faculty and professional staff tasked with evaluating student work and reviewing outcomes. Successful assessment will require that institutions develop channels of communication across the campus in order to use data for change (Maki, 2002).

We will not be successful in arguing how out-of-class experiences contribute to overall student learning if we attempt to do so while standing on our side of the proverbial junior high gymnasium. We must reach across the divide not with the purposes of getting faculty to collaborate or convincing them of the value of student affairs. Rather we must reach out with intentions of getting to know them, learning about their interests, and seeing students and student learning from their perspectives. (Elkins, 2015)

## **Assessment Involves Student Learning and Partnerships**

Kramer and Miller (2010) discussed engaging students as partners in the assessment process. As higher education practitioners seek to improve student learning and development, students should be involved in giving feedback but also in discussing and planning assessment. Assessments concerning learning work best when students are intentionally included as partners (Maki, 2010); although, this is difficult to accomplish. Kramer and Miller (2010) explored what might be involved in putting students first in the learning and assessment processes. The authors pointed out that it is important to assess what makes a difference in engaging students and whether or not data have been used to make improvements to student learning and development. Professionals must consider if their campus supports a culture of student success. It is key to ask if student experiences are aligned with institutional claims and values.

Kinzie (2010) stated that information concerning student engagement data is necessary for improving student learning. An institution with a commitment to students as stakeholders will also focus on assessments that collect information on students and can be used for improvement of student learning and experiences. This requires consideration of the whole student, in and out of the classroom. Hence, considering students as partners in student affairs assessment is crucial.

## **Knowledge and Efforts Integrated Across Disciplines**

Kezar (2013) proposed that the implementation of assessment programs is best facilitated through involving various stakeholders across the campus in initiatives such as planning groups, assessment teams, and distributing assessment findings. The support of university administrators is crucial and leads to progress, but if there is limited support from campus partners, efforts can fall short (Blimling, 2013; Banta, Suskie, & Walvoord, 2015). For example, faculty members may resist an assessment project if they sense that it pries into their area of instruction or the task



of measuring learning (Blimling, 2013). Bresciani (2011) commented that as student affairs professionals become involved in assessment, they will need to connect their work to overall institutional goals; this will involve collaboration with faculty and other partners.

### **Emphasis on SLOs and Outcomes Assessment**

Bresciani (2011) asserted that student affairs practitioners, especially new professionals, will be curious about the organizational structure of the institutions in which they work.

Outcomes-based assessment is a legitimate process through which to engage organizational curiosity and seek answers. Outcomes assessment is a respectful way to conduct inquiry and search for ways to improve student learning and development.

Blimling (2013) acknowledged that, in student affairs, not all assessment efforts will focus on student learning outcomes, or even student satisfaction. Many times, in student services, it is appropriate to measure various outcomes dealing with a variety of issues related to student affairs programs. Information is often collected and used to improve the quality of programs provided for students. Assessment of such programmatic outcomes can be formative or summative. Banta and Palomba (2015) discuss that many view formative assessment as aimed at improvement, a way of “forming” and modifying programs; summative assessment is often seen as a means of accountability and used to make judgments about programs.

Schuh et al. (2016) noted that program or initiative effectiveness is an important part of defining assessment. It is crucial to assess the extent to which a program achieved its goals or outcomes. This can be measurement of a broad program, an intervention, or a learning experience; programmatic goal attainment is often related to student learning on some level.

## **Higher Expectations to Demonstrate Positive Outcomes**

Student affairs assessment leaders may find that information is, at times, being tracked or collected without being analyzed or put to any real use. Blimling (2013) commented that collection of information is very important, but effective assessment also implies using that information to make changes and improvements. In fact, many accrediting agencies are now requiring evidence that assessment is part of a process used to employ findings to measurably improve program or learning outcomes and identify areas for further study (Blimling, 2013).

**Professional Development Needed.** As Banta et al. (2015) noted, in order to adopt a culture of cyclical outcomes assessment, staff will need to foster a greater understanding of the assessment cycle and how to carry out its steps thereby resisting the trend of assessment occurring only for practitioners to collect data without putting it to use. The authors noted that data should be used to improve practice, which can be challenging when employees need support and training to use and interpret data.

Such difficulties, however, will not be an excuse for practitioners to avoid the assessment cycle. Schuh et al. (2016) noted that assessment is now an expectation, not a fad. Practitioners in student affairs divisions must motivate each other to conduct assessment as well as use and share findings. A level of accountability is expected among practitioners to ensure assessment activities are in place. For example, when a program review occurs or an accreditation renewal approaches, professionals in student affairs will have high expectations of each other. These expectations and peer accountability help reinforce the importance of measuring success and using findings for improvement in an ongoing manner (Schuh et al., 2016).

## **Agreement on the Call for Documented Student Learning**

Oftentimes, limited commitment to assessment in student affairs could stem from a reluctance to accept responsibility for student learning (Elkins, 2015). Despite much discussion on how to best assess student learning within curricular and co-curricular programs, there tends to be prevailing agreement on the fact that learning should be measured and documented (Maki, 2010; Maki, 2017; Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011; Starcke & DeLoach, 2012). With the push for faculty/staff personal development in higher education comes greater expectations for teaching, research, and service, as well as a pressure to demonstrate positive student learning outcomes (Groccia, 2010). In the mid-2000s, higher education experienced an increased call for documented student learning and evidence of a return on financial investment (Henning, 2016). There was agreement that improvement was needed in these areas but questions of how to approach such change lingered.

*Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling & Dungy, 2004) emphasized a comprehensive and systematic process of evaluation of student learning in a broad sense. This type of assessment can lead institutions in setting priorities for the types of programming that influence student learning. Furthermore, faculty and student affairs practitioners should work together to define certain student learning outcomes for the institution. The authors continued to discuss training and developing student affairs professionals in the area of assessment, as many staff members have not previously been given the opportunity to gain a knowledge base for these types of skills. Student affairs divisions have a unique responsibility to become learning communities for transformative educational experiences; institutions must ensure that professionals in co-curricular settings are fully prepared for all that their roles encompass, including assessment and evaluation (Keeling & Dungy, 2004).

## **Student Learning Outcomes**

Shefman (2016) observed that the focus of outcomes assessment may have temporarily shifted away from SLOs in recent decades to make room for measuring persistence and access; however, the emphasis on SLOs is returning to student affairs assessment. In an informal poll issued to members of Student Affairs Assessment Leaders, Shefman (2016) determined that 77.5% of respondents were using direct measures to assess learning outcomes in their divisions of student affairs.

**Assessing Program Goals versus SLOs.** Higher education and student affairs professionals are generally in compliance with the call to make assessment a part of their work; however, they may continue to question the value of assessment and how to use it in meaningful ways (Elkins, 2015; Miller, 2012). Additionally, student affairs units are struggling to focus their assessment efforts on student learning; this is evidenced by a lack of scholarship shared on the results of student learning outcomes assessment in a variety of professional settings. While programmatic outcomes assessment is more frequently occurring with acceptance and commitment, many student affairs professionals are still stuck on questions of whether and how to assess student learning (Elkins, 2015).

Additionally, professionals engaged in assessment must learn to distinguish learning from other desired effects of the student experience (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). It may be appropriate for student affairs professionals in particular to measure multiple types of outcomes. However, institutional or divisional performance outputs, student behaviors, and student satisfaction should not be confused with direct measures of learning (Ewell & Cumming, 2017).

## **Direct Measures**

Shefman (2016) discussed a skill gap that exists among today's college graduates. While the millennial generation has experienced high levels of educational attainment, these students often demonstrate weak skills in certain skill sets in comparison to previous generational cohorts. The author noted that students are particularly weak in areas pertaining to learning outcomes of communication and problem solving, as measured in co-curricular settings. Shefman (2016) suggested that the implementation of direct measures to assess student skills can be useful in co-curricular environments to measure and tell the story of student success on a campus.

Additionally, the use of a direct measure can assist practitioners in working to narrow the gap between skills and education. Direct measures require that students perform or demonstrate their competence in a certain skill or ability. Direct measures are distinctly different from indirect measures, which often involve students reflecting on their own skills through self-report. As a benefit, direct measures are often readily available to student affairs educators, as these measures may involve observations of skills already being carried out (Eubanks, 2008; Shefman, 2016) such as leadership, communication, problem solving, and innovation. Student affairs professionals may choose to assess learning using direct measures in order to align evidence with accreditation requirements, better inform stakeholders of outcomes, and to foster greater confidence in the evidence that student learning and development has occurred (Shefman, 2016).

Eubanks (2008) proposed the following: "The complexity of measuring student learning forces the measurer to decide between authenticity and rigor" (p. 4). The author suggested that measuring student learning is complex, as the practitioner/educator is often seeking precise answers to complicated questions concerning the measurement of reasoning or skill. Those conducting assessment may choose to narrow what they measure in order to yield results that are

manageable and understandable, but in doing so, some of the complexity is lost (Eubanks, 2008). Keeling, Wall, Underhile, and Dungy (2008) also noted that ensuring rigor in assessment activity is a common concern; the authors stated that some degree of rigor in assessment is important in order to ensure that findings related to student learning and development are credible.

While it is recognized that direct measurement in assessment is a best practice, particularly for measures of learning, practitioners are still reluctant to choose these methods (Newhart, 2013). Even with many options at their disposal for data collection, student affairs professionals frequently choose surveys, a method most commonly used for indirect measurement. Even with the shortcomings and limitations of surveys, when it comes time for data collection, many practitioners think of surveys first. This is likely due to a perceived ease in process; researchers collect information on respondents' ideas, analyze the data, and apply findings to practices. Practitioners lose sight of the fact that many alternative measures both indirect (e.g. focus groups, interviews) and direct (e.g. rubrics, portfolios) are widely used and available (Newhart, 2013).

To conform to pressures to demonstrate public credibility and to meet accreditation standards, it seems that assessment must be rigorous in its process; however, this may not always be plausible in practical projects. Eubanks (2008) discussed that setting up artificial measures or tests, particularly for students, can lead to concerns of validity and motivation. Similar to Shefman (2016), he suggested measuring student work where it occurs: in their coursework, through portfolios, by observing performance, or evaluating other products that students exhibit (Eubanks, 2008). There are many of these real-time opportunities for direct measurement in the co-curricular experience.

## **Obtaining Buy-In**

Henning et al. (2008) stated that many internal and external stakeholders are invested in measures of success pertaining to higher education in the United States. The Department of Education, state boards, accreditors, parents, employers, and students are all asking for evidence of student achievement and learning (Henning et al., 2008). As assessment involves many stakeholders, it is important to note that assessment is very much about student learning, but also about integration (Henning, 2016). Knowledge in higher education should be integrated across disciplines and departments in higher education. Campus-wide assessment efforts will only be successful when assessment is interdisciplinary. This will be an important trend for student affairs assessment professionals to consider. Especially in a complex university, leaders cannot operate in silos; for co-curricular assessment to succeed, campus partners from many areas must be on board (Blimling, 2013). “There must be institutional buy-in at all levels to move forward with an institutional assessment plan” (Blimling, p. 12, 2013).

Miller (2012) compared coming to terms with assessment to the Kubler-Ross (1997) five stages of grief, moving from denial to acceptance. Student affairs professionals are successfully moving from denial to acceptance when it comes to the necessity of assessment in their work; however, their acceptance has still come with several shortcomings, including difficulty articulating student learning outcomes (SLOs), reluctance to make evidence-based decisions, and hesitance to share assessment findings (Elkins, 2015; Miller, 2012).

Erwin (1991) described accepting assessment in stages slightly different from the progression from denial to acceptance (Miller, 2012; Kubler-Ross, 1997). Erwin’s (1991) model similarly proposed that movement toward a culture of assessment occurred in five stages: discovery, questioning, resistance, participation, and commitment. Elkins (2015) commented on

Erwin's (1991) final stage of commitment to assessment work: "Student Affairs professionals recognize the value of assessment and actively strive to incorporate it into our daily work. Assessment, at this point, is valued and used to generate evidence to inform decisions" (Elkins, 2015, p. 42). In 2014, survey data collected from the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) listserv indicated that collectively, student affairs divisions were somewhere between resistance and participation along Erwin's (1991) stages (Elkins, 2015). Optimistically, from the same survey data, over half of the student affairs practitioner respondents placed their senior student affairs leadership at the commitment stage, and their unit heads in the participation stage. While, there were some weaker links (some divisions struggling to act collectively, certain departments lagging behind), looking at student affairs divisions in their entirety, overall, there was positive movement toward a commitment to assessment, as demonstrated by this survey (Elkins, 2015). The author indicated that when student affairs divisions are struggling to approach a commitment to and acceptance of assessment work, oftentimes these units are lacking in some area, such as time devoted to assessment, making assessment a priority, providing training and enhancing skills, or dedication to analyze data and use results.

### **Distrust of Assessment; Fear of Punitive Repercussions**

Why do some student affairs practitioners display such resistance to assessment, evaluation, accountability, and evidence? Perhaps many in the co-curricular realm of the university are afraid to find out the answers (Blimling, 2013). Student affairs divisions spend large amounts of money on new residence halls, recreation centers, and student unions; this leads to increased costs for students, parents, and other stakeholders. The important question is whether these costs increase the quality of education, sense of belonging, and level of engagement for students. Searching for answers to such questions is intimidating for those



professionals who are so immersed in this work (Blimling, 2013). Hesitance to assess student learning in particular may then stem from a fear that the results could portray certain individuals or units poorly. Additionally, there is a certain pride that can lead to professionals stalling on efforts that ask them to prove the effectiveness of their work (Elkins, 2015; Miller, 2012). However, outcomes-based assessment has the potential to use data to demonstrate why such endeavors are important (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2011).

Blimling (2013) pointed out that those working in co-curricular roles are not the only campus constituents who might resist the idea of student affairs professionals conducting of assessment projects. For example, some faculty members might be hesitant, wondering if it is any business of student affairs practitioners to measure student learning; this has historically been the job of academic affairs. Assessment professionals must be prepared to deal with resistance on many fronts.

It is important to note that fear can be a legitimate and healthy attitude, at times. Assessment leaders should learn to recognize when resistance is warranted. Blimling (2013) commented that sometimes, for higher education administrators, it is simply not worth the cost of collecting certain information. Due to laws in many states that makes certain data collected at public colleges a part of public record, administrators must consider the risk of assessing when information could be used in the media or in political situations to unfavorably portray the university. This can be a tough choice for an ambitious assessment professional; however, it is a reality that the cost of assessing could, at times, outweigh the benefit. This is why it is important to be open with campus partners; a transparent and collaborative assessment culture will allow professionals in charge of assessment to sense legitimate resistance from colleagues (Blimling, 2013).

Schuh et al. (2016) commented that conducting assessment and finding the truth can come with a certain amount of risk. However, they caution that it is also important to consider the implications of shirking responsibility to measure programs and collect data. Assessment should demonstrate accountability and lead to enrichment of programs. Emphasis placed on the importance of assessment within a division of student affairs will vary from institution to institution. If the demand for a data-driven climate has not occurred at a certain institution, there is no doubt that in the current culture of accountability, this push will be forthcoming. The risks of not conducting assessment may be too great (Schuh, 2016).

### **Time Commitment of Assessment Activities**

Student affairs staff members are faced with many bureaucratic demands and seemingly excessive reporting assignments (Blimling, 2013). Those employees who are tasked with managing programs or other professionals may be especially reluctant to add assessment responsibilities to their lengthy list of job duties. These staff members see assessment as time consuming without realizing the connection to their daily work.

Schuh et al. (2016) also emphasized that student affairs staff members may see assessment as an added assignment; many employees in co-curricular units have pressing responsibilities to students that simply cannot wait. They do not think of assessment as a central activity in their jobs, and therefore, ignore it. The thought that assessment is extra work contributes to the difficulty in obtaining buy-in and integrating assessment into the routine of a student affairs division. Assessment, to some student affairs practitioners, is simply someone else's agenda (Blimling, 2013). In the opinions of these skeptics, there is a lack of time and interest to carry out such projects. Perhaps, student affairs educators simply need help seeing the real incentive, their students.

“The student learning focused advisor and/or supervisor is someone who values student learning, values the documentation of student learning, and actually documents the learning that occurs within the scope of his or her responsibilities” (Bailey, 2012, p.130). Student affairs practitioners who see the big picture and grasp the implications of assessment for their students will realize that it is not advantageous to continue implementing programs without evidence that these initiatives have been and continue to be effective (Bailey, 2012).

### **Lack of Inclination or Perceived Value**

Assessment has been encouraged by external forces for decades, but today, institutional assessment leaders are informing their staff members of the many internal benefits of assessment endeavors (Bresciani, 2011). Assessment provides an opportunity for professionals within student affairs divisions to show what they value and work toward improvement of student learning and development through informed decisions. Blimling (2013) stated that co-curricular assessment demonstrates that student affairs work is meaningful and also aims to improve the educational experiences of students. Robust student affairs assessment answers questions of accountability, works to improve programs, and aims to build a culture of evidence, or an environment in which student affairs professionals use evidence to demonstrate that their programs and services are effectively contributing to the missions of their institutions (Culp & Dungy, 2012).

Students play a crucial role in obtaining buy-in for an assessment office, even if sometimes indirectly. The main focus of a student affairs educator is on the student. Blimling (2013) commented that some staff members may be willing to get involved with assessment efforts when they see how results can directly benefit students and specific student programming.

Students are certainly not foreign to the assessment process. As a naturally occurring part of the academic setting, students are asked to understand what they should learn, identify ways in which they need help in learning, and measure their progress (Henning et al., 2008). This is similar to the assessment cycle that leaders encourage staff members to employ.

### **Attitudes about Assessment**

Eubanks and Royal (2011) stated the importance of exploring higher education assessment professionals' perceptions of what defines quality assessment practice. The authors discussed a study conducted in 2010 surveying a nationally representative sample of 2,000 higher education assessment professionals. The survey contained items pertaining to perceptions of quality assessment, particularly regarding methodology. Respondents placed items along a psychometric ruler to identify which statements they found easiest or most difficult to endorse. Most respondents agreed that quality assessment should be evidence based, methodologically sound, detailed in analysis and reporting, and properly aligned between outcomes and measures. On the other hand, survey participants seemed less concerned with quality of data or replicability of results. They also indicated sometimes choosing assessment methods out of convenience and resisting more methodologically complicated assessment techniques. If these expressed values result in other campus constituents, namely faculty, perceiving higher education assessment professionals as lacking in rigor, resistance toward assessment activities may occur. While some of these expressed attitudes are simply a result of coming to assessment from the practitioner side of the institution, it is still important to note that a divide could occur (Eubanks and Royal, 2011).

**Attitudes toward Assessment are Improving.** Banta et al. (2015) predicted positive outcomes for student affairs assessment in the future. The authors noted a recognizable trend of

professionals coming to terms with assessment realities in recent decades; this occurrence was compared to moving from denial to acceptance (Banta et al., 2015; Kubler-Ross, 1997; Miller, 2012). Over the past several years, there has perhaps been more acceptance of assessment in student affairs divisions, as opposed to fear (Banta et al., 2015). Practitioners are beginning to acknowledge that assessment is essential; they are working to strengthen assessment efforts. The authors commented that instead of asking **why** they must conduct assessment, many student affairs professionals are now asking **how** they may conduct better assessment (Banta et al., 2015).

According to data from a 2007 ACPA and NASPA survey compared to membership in the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) professional organization in 2013, the number of professionals whose titles fit the description of a student affairs assessment leader or who devoted at least 50% of their time to assessment increased from 77 individuals to 233 individuals in this six-year timeframe (Elkins, 2015; Elling & Bentrim, 2013). In January 2018, SAAL was comprised of over 1,000 members ([studentaffairsassessment.org](http://studentaffairsassessment.org)); however, membership criteria had expanded to include not just those dedicated to leading assessment, but an array of professionals with an interest or involvement in student affairs assessment ([studentaffairsassessment.org/join](http://studentaffairsassessment.org/join)). Still, these numbers indicated an increased interest in assessment among student affairs professionals as well as more widespread involvement in assessment activities and assessment committee membership.

### **An Assessment Disposition**

How can administrators and practitioners work toward improving attitudes and buy-in related to assessment activity? The survey used in the present study was a slightly modified version of a survey developed for a dissertation entitled *Assessment Disposition: Qualities and*

*Strategies for Development in Student-Affairs Professionals* (Thoennes, 2017). The author sought to answer research questions pertaining to the defining qualities of student affairs professionals who demonstrate an assessment disposition as well as how these professionals can develop such a disposition. Thoennes (2017) defined disposition as follows, “the attitudes, beliefs, and values that precipitate habits of behavior or action; synonyms for disposition include the term mindset” (p. 11). The author noted the exploration of an assessment disposition as a widely un-studied area in student affairs. To explore this concept, she employed the Delphi method to begin discussion of an assessment disposition among several experts in the field. As an important step in this method, Thoennes (2017) conducted in-depth interviews (interview protocol developed based on a thorough literature review) with four student affairs assessment experts; this interview data was analyzed for themes and used to develop the constructs for the survey instrument for the study.

From the initial interviews with assessment experts, Thoennes (2017) analyzed data to explore perceptions regarding the nature of an assessment disposition and ways to develop such a disposition. Through qualitative analyses, three themes or constructs regarding *Qualities of an Assessment Disposition* emerged. To describe *Qualities of an Assessment Disposition*, the interviewees answered questions concerning the values, beliefs, and attitudes that would be present in a student affairs professional who demonstrated an assessment disposition. **Personal and Professional Qualities** emerged as a theme; this entails the basic qualities that student affairs professionals can possess in order to promote integration of assessment. These qualities may include curiosity, a drive for self-improvement, and a collaborative nature. Another theme emerged regarding **Perceptions about Assessment**; this involves the purpose and value that a professional associates with assessment, which affect the desire to participate in assessment

activities. Professionals exhibiting this theme will believe that assessment is important and that improvements can be made and goals can be achieved through assessment. These individuals will be more likely to engage in student affairs assessment, as they believe that learning occurs in and out of the classroom. Another theme related to *Qualities of an Assessment Disposition* is **Approach to Assessment**. Professionals demonstrating this type of approach will have a positive attitude about assessment. These individuals believe that assessment is essential to their job duties, and likely possess an intrinsic motivation to conduct assessment. At least, they will note what assessment can contribute to their programs and act accordingly. Student affairs professionals with the correct approach to assessment should also feel confident that assessment is something they can do, despite any risks of reflecting on the quality of their programs (Thoennes, 2017).

Findings from these interviews went beyond just the qualities associated with someone who possesses an assessment disposition and also revealed five important themes/constructs related to the *Development of an Assessment Disposition*. Several interview questions focused on how a student affairs professional could develop such a disposition toward assessment work. One emerging theme involves **Engagement**. Student affairs professionals develop an assessment disposition through actually engaging in assessment work. Professionals who are developing such a disposition will not solely be focused on conducting assessment for external forces, but will primarily want to engage in endeavors that are meaningful and valuable to their work. Another important theme contributing to the *Development of an Assessment Disposition* is **Work Environment**. If professionals are to possess an assessment disposition, it will be necessary that the institution and division support assessment practices and expect that assessment be a part of regular processes. This should be evident in meetings, reports, planning, incentives, etc. When

professionals observe this focus on the integration of assessment into their work, they should follow suit and develop a more positive disposition toward assessment. The work environment should provide an opportunity for professionals to excel in assessment, rather than viewing these activities as an “add-on” (Thoennes, 2017).

**Success with Assessment** is another important theme related to developing a positive disposition toward assessment work. Interviewees stated that when professionals in student affairs experience success with their assessment work, this can lead to a feeling of victory and satisfaction, which creates momentum and the desire to conduct further assessment within their work. For some, being rewarded for such successes or for improvements made to their programs can be an important incentive contributing to the *Development of an Assessment Disposition*. Also notable is the theme of **Training and Development** and its impact on cultivating a disposition toward assessment activity. Developing one’s assessment knowledge and skills should increase positive values toward assessment as well as motivate assessment activity. The development of knowledge and skills in assessment can be formal education or any training activity that is available to professionals; such endeavors are more effective when supervisors support these professional development efforts. Training should be appropriate for various levels of assessment experience and should be built upon by access to follow-up support with assessment work. Finally, the theme of **Student Learning** emerged as related to the *Development of an Assessment Disposition*. A student affairs practitioner’s care for student learning seemed closely related to the development of a disposition toward assessment. Student affairs professionals should wish to gain information about how their students learn, especially if student learning is an established priority in their work (Thoennes, 2017).



## **Professional Development Practices**

As established, in the mid-2000s, there was a call for increased documentation of student learning and evidence of a return on the financial investment in higher education (Henning, 2016). Around this same time, there was also a push for more professional development in higher education (Groccia, 2010). How does this increased need for assessment and the greater drive for professional improvement correlate? Henning et al. (2008) commented that the focus on professional development, assessment, and the scholarship of student learning began on the academic side of the campus, but now stretches to the co-curricular areas as well. Henning (2016) suggested that assessment could stand alone as its own type of scholarship; there is a need for greater scholarship and professionalized standards within higher education. “How can professional educators articulate student learning outcomes, assess those outcomes, and use the results to further inform attention to student learning if they lack the knowledge and skills with which to do so” (Henning et al., p. 12, 2008).

Groccia (2010) commented that in today’s evolving higher education culture, support for professionals will be necessary to build capacity in order to make certain changes. Faculty and staff need opportunities to develop skills in inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and problem solving. The recent decline in the public’s trust of the value of higher education means that there is a greater need for accountability and evidence of impact (Bresciani, 2011; Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016; Henning et al., 2008; Shavelson et al., 2007). Highly trained faculty and staff who perform quality work will be essential. Professional development in assessment should focus on valid and reliable measurement, building a culture of assessment, understanding the impact of programs and activities, and outcome attainment (Groccia, 2010).

### **More Staff Involvement in Assessment**

Assessment leaders on a campus will need to identify who will be conducting certain assessment tasks (Maki, 2002). Maki supported an inter-disciplinary approach to assessment. He commented on the trend of cross-disciplinary teams with campus partners who work together; these assessment teams can be made of administrative practitioners, faculty, alumni, and other stakeholders (Maki, 2002). Kinzie et al. (2014) stated that assessment should be ongoing and involve multiple constituents. There has been a trend of providing more resources and involving faculty and staff members in a variety of assessment activities: faculty and staff retreats, websites with easily accessible resources, assessment committees, and discussion of findings with practical applications for staff members (Kinzie et al., 2014).

### **Student Affairs Educators Need Support to Make Change**

Professional development of staff members and training to encourage more robust assessment is certainly a campus-wide endeavor; however, work must also be done within specific units or areas of campus. Student affairs assessment leaders will need to collaborate, of course, but they will also be required to work on a more individualized basis with student affairs staff (Henning, 2015). It is not realistic to think that the person coordinating co-curricular assessment efforts can do it all. In order to promote robust assessment, this professional will need to work with assessment teams or working groups, build capacity among department point persons, and promote assessment activity with all practitioners in their division (Henning, 2015). Henning (2016) suggested that higher education student affairs practitioners must devote time to assessment and planning through activities such as staff development and training. He discussed building a scholarship of student affairs assessment and the need in student affairs for a formal assessment curriculum and training model (Henning, 2016). Banta et al. (2015) commented on

the progress made toward such an initiative. In recent years, there has been a great increase in the number of conferences, workshops, webinars, consultants visiting campuses, graduate courses available, assessment software programs, and several other initiatives/training opportunities related to assessment. Additionally, if staff members are to feel encouraged to take part in assessment and place value in these activities, it may be useful to include assessment responsibilities in job descriptions as well as performance evaluations as a routine practice (Henning, 2015). It is important for student affairs professionals to know that engaging in assessment is a core part of their job responsibilities, not just an add-on.

### **A Formal Curriculum and Training Model is Needed**

Henning (2016) emphasized that higher education professionals must devote time to assessment and planning; one way to do so is staff development and training. Focusing on the co-curricular aspects of learning, he discussed building a scholarship of student affairs assessment. “A scholarship of student affairs assessment would benefit from a curriculum and training model” (Henning, 2016, p. 16).

Beyond simply faculty versus staff, there are many sub-groups on a campus that can benefit from training in assessment related activities. Bresciani (2011) discussed a specific need for new professionals to learn about the organizational culture within which they will work. She suggested that outcomes-based assessment is a sound way to do this, allowing for inquiry inside a sustainable process.

### **Upper Leadership Aware of the Need for Professional Development**

Unfortunately, professionals on a campus do not frequently get the chance to work together to develop the necessary expertise in assessment. Surveys conducted by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) indicated that provosts are aware of this

issue. There is an acknowledged need for practitioners to learn more about assessment (Bresciani, 2012; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Keeling et al., 2008); Schuh et al., 2016). In fact, higher education assessment in general must be shifted from a compliance-based activity to one that can better shape the learning environment. It is important to involve the right stakeholders and create occasions for people to come together to discuss the questions and evidence that they consider meaningful when it comes to assessment (Kuh et al., 2015).

### **Evidence that Staff Knowledge of Assessment May be Improving**

In 2006, at the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, 56 percent of those registered indicated that their institutions had just begun to talk about assessment or were early in implementation; by 2014, this statistic was down to 31 percent (Banta et al., 2015). This trend could partially be due to increased resources and professional development regarding assessment. The authors cited noticing a trend of more conferences, campus workshops, webinars, visiting consultants, graduate courses, and vendors offering assessment technology. However, there is still a great need in faculty and staff development in the area of higher education assessment, especially in encouraging practitioners to “close the loop” and use data for improvement (Banta et al., 2015). Employees need training on how to make data meaningful, creating assessment plans for the future.

### **Professional Standards and Best Practices**

It is important to note that accepted professional standards exist in higher education assessment. Many professional associations have posted principles of good assessment practice (ACPA & NASPA, 2015; ACPA, 2006; Council for Advancement of Standards, 2015; Rhodes, 2009). In considering institutions that tend to conduct assessment well, one can observe certain best practices for robust assessment: faculty/staff members taking ownership of assessment,

including assessment in routine institutional practices, and establishing leadership that supports assessment and related professional development endeavors (Kinzie, et al., 2014).

Henning (2016) stated that much work toward developing published professional standards has been accomplished through professional organizations. There is a call for practitioners and assessment leaders to review such competencies and implement a curriculum to train faculty and staff accordingly. Standards can be a solid framework for including assessment in the professional development of current and future faculty and staff; training based on acknowledged standards can be an effective way to “professionalize assessment work” (Henning et al., 2008, p.17).

### **Established Principles of Good Assessment**

Established professional standards speak to faculty, student affairs educators, and even students with a focus on the common goal of learning (Henning et al., 2008). Examples of such standards include the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS standards), the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education rubrics (AACU VALUE rubrics), the ACPA Assessment Skills and Knowledge Standards (ASK standards), and the NASPA/ACPA Professional Competencies.

The CAS Professional Standards were published to promote competence in student services programming (CAS, 2015). Schuh et al. (2016) pointed out that assessment activities are indicated as a requirement throughout the CAS standards for all functional areas. An institution’s student affairs division is not in compliance with these standards unless there is a clear presence of a robust assessment program. Schuh et al. (2016) stated that some institutions require program review; student affairs assessment leaders may be tasked with choosing a process by which to

conduct such review. The Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) provides an approach, which is a trusted and accepted standard in higher education student services for self-assessment and program review. The CAS process relies on broad input and supporting evidence to offer a straightforward process to obtain valuable input from a variety of stakeholders. The CAS model allows professionals to rate the extent to which their area is meeting certain standards, identify areas of need, and close the loop by developing a plan to assess such needs. As CAS provides standards for a variety of functional areas, this tool can be a continuous and purposeful way for an assessment leader and department leaders to review programs, including the co-curricular assessment office itself (Schuh et al., 2016).

Henning et al. (2008) stated that although academic affairs was historically tasked with measures of student learning, student affairs units make an important impact on these measures as well. Based on a belief in the impact of student affairs work on the educational experience and a desire to identify professional development needs in assessment, the ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation developed the ASK Standards (ACPA, 2006). This set of standards is comprised of principles of assessment practices necessary to address pressing accountability issues. The ASK Standards can serve as a resource to help professionals in academic affairs and student affairs refine certain skills and improve their work in assessment (Henning et al., 2008). Student affairs departments can refer to the standards to explore strengths and weaknesses using the ASK Standards needs assessment tool. It is important to professionalize assessment work among all in student affairs, as well as other areas of campus. This is done by focusing on the tasks that professionals should learn in order to conduct assessment and use findings for improvement.

Maki (2017) discussed the merits of the AACU VALUE rubrics (Rhodes, 2009), another trusted tool in higher education assessment. The VALUE rubrics serve as tools for assessing student work in order to evaluate how well students are achieving certain learning outcomes that employers and higher education practitioners have deemed essential ([www.aacu.org/value](http://www.aacu.org/value)). Maki (2017) described how the rubrics express criteria for each of these learning outcomes, with descriptors of increasing levels of attainment. The rubrics were intended to encourage rich discussion about student learning and SLOs, rather than use for grading. Through implementation of the VALUE rubrics across multiple institutions, higher education practitioners can discuss evidence of learning on a national level through common terms (Maki, 2017; Rhodes, 2009).

The professional organizations ACPA- College Student Educators International and NASPA- Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education developed and maintain a collaborative set of competencies and accompanying rubrics for multiple student affairs functional areas, including Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Henning (2015) discussed the functionality of the competencies for building capacity among student affairs staff. It is important that student affairs assessment leaders collaborate with professionals throughout their organizations to carry out meaningful assessment work. To involve staff in assessment, they will need certain skills and Henning (2015) recommended that the ACPA/NASPA competency for Assessment, Evaluation, and Research would be a great starting point for training staff; this document, and its rubric, could be used as a framework when developing appropriate professional development and training.

Kinzie et al. (2014) discussed the use of other acknowledged standards, such as the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) Principles of Good Practice for Assessing

Student Learning, as well as accounts of assessment best practices published by the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA). The authors also suggested that assessment activities conducted by an institution align with accepted standards for effective assessments. Additionally, they state that assessment works best when there is a focus on student learning and the values embedded in the institutional vision and mission. Drawing from published standards and trusted accounts, the authors determined that institutions with robust assessment display such behaviors as involving faculty in assessment efforts, sharing findings with internal and external stakeholders, incorporating assessment into everyday institutional practices, hiring administrative leaders who believe in assessment, and supporting professional development for practitioners.

### **Supportive Leadership as a Best Practice**

Fuller et al., (2015) conducted a Delphi study to obtain consensus from assessment leaders concerning their perceptions on theories of assessment. The assessment leader participants stressed that a culture of assessment needs administrative support in order to develop and thrive. Buy-in is essential for a culture of assessment to exist, especially from upper-level administrators.

Leaders and staff members throughout the organizational structure of a higher education institution, and particularly a student affairs division, know that assessment is necessary for accreditation. For student affairs assessment to be effective at an institution, it is certainly important to have the support and buy-in of the senior student affairs officer. Additionally, senior student affairs officers have the authority to require that assessment be conducted for both external and internal purposes; departments and staff will generally comply, whether willingly or not (Blimling, 2013). Kezar (2013) noted the importance of longevity in leadership in



establishing assessment programs; high turnover can lead to stalled progress in implementing assessment practices. Leadership activity is an important predictor of how a campus will engage in quality assessment.

It may, at times, be necessary to persuade university presidents and other senior administrators that large-scale assessment projects are prudent (Blimling, 2013). Schuh et al. (2016) commented that the role of senior leadership is key to developing assessment on a campus. Central campus leadership has the power to advance assessment efforts that will further student learning. Banta, Suskie, and Walvoord (2015) commented that due partially to increased pressure to demonstrate accountability, university administrators have a responsibility to see that their institutions are appropriately collecting and sharing evidence of effectiveness. Administrators should also communicate a desire to use evidence and findings for improvement.

Additionally, it is an established best practice to hire a professional whose primary responsibility within student affairs is assessment (Blimling, 2013). Part of this person's role will be to collaborate with other areas of the university, particularly academic affairs, to further assess initiatives. Professional standards and best practices are used to build capacity and also to measure success. If an institution's student affairs division has taken the step to hire someone whose primary responsibility is assessment, this is a move in the right direction as far as appropriate operational standards for co-curricular assessment (Blimling, 2013). The student affairs assessment leader should coordinate collaborative efforts with academic assessment to make assessment practices more robust across campus.

In order to transform assessment from a movement to a culture, changes will have to occur to fundamental practices of teaching and learning as well as transformation from a top-

down style of leadership to a culture that fully embodies the best principles of learning at all levels (Ewell, 2002).

### **Building a Culture of Evidence**

Henning (2015) noted that one of the most important responsibilities of a student affairs assessment leader is fostering a culture of evidence. Kezar (2013) discussed that organizational culture involves the values and beliefs of a group. Establishing a culture of evidence around assessment activities is a common outcome, but why is institutional culture of such importance? The author noted that some scholars would focus on the ability to shift values as more important than policy and leadership concerns. Others would focus on what type of culture might foster outcomes assessment and student learning (Kezar, 2013). Culp and Dungy (2012) suggested that evolving the culture in student affairs toward an evidence-driven environment will require many changes from leaders and staff members, particularly as to how data is collected and used. The authors noted that many challenges and opportunities arise when developing a culture of evidence, and certain conditions are needed to work toward such a culture: inherent value in the culture and history of campus, respect for others, desire for innovation, emphasis on assessment efforts, support of senior leadership, expectations concerning assessment as a requirement, focus on improvement, and a collaborative work environment (Culp & Dungy, 2012). The authors also cite a robust rubric for *Measuring a Culture of Evidence* (Spurlock & Feder, 2012) that a division of student affairs might use to interpret where its culture resides on a spectrum of criteria ranging from a culture of good intentions to a culture of evidence. The rubric measures several dimensions that comprise an assessment culture: intentionality, perspective, critical links, initiatives and directions, and planning processes (Spurlock & Feder, 2012).

If student affairs leaders wish to speed up the pace of achieving a culture of evidence, in which assessment is widely accepted and practitioners are committed, the process may be threefold: making assessment routine, documenting and measuring student outcomes, and showing evidence that student affairs work is essential to student success (Elkins, 2015). Keeling et al. (2008) suggested a process of nurturing change when attempting to evolve an institution or division's assessment practices. The authors proposed that attitude and behavior changes would be key components of a shift in culture. It is important for leaders to consider the characteristics of professionals who comprise one's cultural setting and how individuals with these characteristics might respond to change. A focus on attitudinal and behavioral change can help an assessment leader to know what to provide as far as information, skill development, communication, and reinforcement (Keeling et al., 2008).

Guetterman and Mitchell (2016) stated that a vague understanding of what constitutes a culture of evidence leads to misinterpretations of how to conduct effective assessment work. The authors explored the impact of assessment and how data is used through a study at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which engaged instructors in conversations about the implementation and measurement of student learning outcomes. Additionally, instructors completed a survey concerning assessment attitudes, knowledge, and characteristics. Several findings emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of this study. The use of working teams to present assessment results was identified as a best practice. Another best practice was attitudinal in nature; it was found to be advantageous for professionals and educators to consider assessment evidence in a broad sense, rather than just for accreditation or reporting. This allowed for open minds when considering multiple possibilities for uses of evidence. The study also found that professional development and leadership practices across an institution can affect perceptions of

whether the organization supports assessment. Learning from peers and multi-level leadership encourage engagement in assessment. The findings suggested that faculty members in the study observed a shift toward an intrinsic rather than extrinsic value of assessment work (Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016). “Shifting the culture involves broadening the potential influence of assessment beyond satisfying accreditation needs” (Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016, p. 55).

Schuh et al. (2016) established that culture, in the context of higher education, generally refers to the patterns and assumptions that an institution has incorporated to cope with a variety of issues, external and internal. These patterns have worked well enough that they are considered effective, and new members of the culture are taught to think this way as well. Culture can include common language, symbols, rituals, norms, and the behavior of faculty, staff, and students. A culture of evidence, in a sense, is the extent to which evidence influences behavior at an institution. An institution or division that adopts a culture of evidence would react to a concern by considering the data that would be needed to make a decision about the given problem (Schuh et al., 2016).

A student affairs division with a culture of evidence would demonstrate that assessment projects are a routine part of the work of the unit. Any new initiative would automatically include an assessment component. New employees would be immediately introduced to the ideas of accountability and information for improvement. It is important to note why it is crucial that divisions of student affairs adopt cultures of assessment. Co-curricular professionals must be able to demonstrate how their programs contribute to student learning and the student experience (Schuh et al., 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In higher education culture in recent years, new research in the area of assessment has been constantly added to the knowledge base in the field. Assessment professionals want to learn from this new knowledge and contribute to it as well. This is an exciting and rewarding time to work in higher education assessment (Banta et al., 2015). Much will go into building a culture of evidence within a student affairs division. Obtaining buy-in, motivating assessors, reducing resistance, building capacity, meeting the demands of stakeholders, complying with accreditors and administration, and educating practitioners on the assessment process will be just a few of the pressing challenges and will not be achieved without strategy. Henning and Roberts (2016) recommended certain strategies for fostering a culture of evidence: placing value in campus history, respecting campus partners, taking risks, being innovative, and supporting assessment efforts with appropriate resources. It is important to create a strong foundation when building a culture of assessment. This foundation should be focused on mission, goals, outcomes, and organizational culture.

It is important to continually bear in mind the overriding purpose of assessment: to provide information that will enable faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals to increase student learning by making changes in policies, curricula, and other institutional programs, and how these are actualized through pedagogy and student experience. (Ewell & Cumming, 2017)

Co-curricular assessment leaders should emphasize accountability and improvement, as well as embed authentic assessment within the work of the student affairs division (Henning & Roberts, 2016). It is crucial to be collaborative and transparent, recruiting support for assessment efforts from across the division and the campus. Assessment professionals must work to develop

the skills and knowledge of the many practitioners who will contribute to the culture of assessment. Student affairs educators place the highest emphasis on improving the student experience and promoting student learning. A robust assessment program will help student programming to become increasingly more effective in fostering learning and development. Maki (20017) outlined several principles to guide the implementation of real-time assessment activity within an institution or division. The author noted the importance of internal motivation, involved stakeholders, collaboration, continuous reporting and discussion of results, student-driven practices, and an institutional value of assessment. These trends and practices will only occur when student affairs educators routinely integrate assessment into their work and place value in fostering a robust assessment culture.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Introduction**

Assessment in higher education has been encouraged by external forces for some time. However, this does not imply that faculty and staff members are assessing intentionally to measure what is meaningful or that assessment is being used to inform decisions (Blaich & Wise, 2011). Particularly, in divisions of student affairs, as co-curricular work becomes increasingly complex, professionals in these units are more often pressed to examine their roles and to ask questions of their programs, processes, and services (Culp, 2012). Despite the present need to strive for stronger assessment cultures, issues affecting buy-in and the value that practitioners place on assessment may hinder the growth of robust and intentional assessment (Blimling, 2013; Elkins, 2015; Miller, 2012). Naturally, assessment is occurring on campuses (Bresciani, 2011), but it is not always organized or connected to accountability (Ewell & Cumming, 2017).

Higher education institutions are complex entities that may be better understood by educators and administrators through applying a range of lenses and theoretical perspectives to view and learn about their organizations (Manning, 2013). Faculty and staff should wish to learn and inquire about the organizational cultures in which they work (Bresciani, 2011); outcomes-based assessment is a sustainable way for this learning to occur, as it provides for inquiry within a structured process that allows professionals to connect their work to the overall learning goals of their institutions (Bresciani, 2011; Jonson, Guetterman, & Thompson, 2014; Kuh et al., 2015). In the three decades since the call for student affairs divisions to take a leadership role in

assessment on campuses (Erwin, 1991; Upcraft and Schuh, 1996), co-curricular assessment has grown from a mandate or rising trend to an expectation that all practitioners should foster a culture of evidence in which staff are disposed to place value in assessment activity (Banta et al., 2015; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Thoennes, 2017).

As today's higher education culture is rapidly evolving (Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Keeling et al., 2008; Maki, 2017), faculty and staff will need support to make important changes. There is a need for opportunity to gain abilities and understanding in areas of inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and problem solving (Groccia, 2010). A recent decline in the public's trust of the quality and value of higher education has led to a greater need for accountability and evidence of the value-added and impact of the college experience (Bresciani, 2011; Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016; Henning et al., 2008; Shavelson, 2007). Highly trained faculty and staff will be a necessity. As for professional development in the area of assessment, training should focus on strategies for valid and reliable measurement, establishing a culture of assessment, demonstrating the impact of programs and activities, and efforts that lead to outcome attainment (Groccia, 2010). Current literature suggests that practitioners and leaders are coming to terms with assessment realities and working to strengthen assessment efforts (Banta et al., 2015; Miller, 2012).

When considering the impact of employing faculty and staff who are well-versed in assessment best practices, it is important to ask the following question: "How can professional educators articulate Student Learning Outcomes, assess those outcomes, and use the results to further inform attention to student learning if they lack the knowledge and skills with which to do so?" (Henning, Mitchell, & Maki, 2008). Additionally, it is essential to note that higher



education practitioners will not be committed to building a culture of assessment if they are not convinced of its value (Blimling, 2013).

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

This study explored perceptions of effective assessment, as identified by higher education assessment leaders and staff in student affairs units. It is an established best practice to conduct training and provide professional development related to higher education assessment. However, the existence of this standard does not imply that assessment is effectively integrated by staff or that staff members are disposed to value assessment activity. There are demonstrated needs for the development of competency in the area of assessment, for greater communication among campus partners about assessment activities, and for promotion of a general understanding of the institutional expectations for effective assessment practices. In order to work toward building such a culture of evidence (Culp & Dungy, 2012), student affairs professionals must be able to articulate their commitments to assessment and express its value to their work.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of effective assessment among student affairs professionals, including how these perceptions compared among several demographic factors. This study explored perceptions of how student affairs staff effectively integrate assessment into their practice and what it entails for these professionals to develop a disposition toward assessment activities. The concepts were measured through survey items corresponding to several constructs. Responses in each construct were compared against demographic variables, perceived levels of assessment competence, and perceived levels of assessment training.

## **Research Questions**

- 1) Do perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs differ by a student affairs practitioner's professional role?
- 2) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's reported level of assessment training and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs?
- 3) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's perceived level of assessment competence and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs?

## **Research Design**

This comparative and correlational study focused on exploring attitudes toward building assessment capacity and general perceptions of assessment among higher education student affairs professionals. Particularly, this study aimed to identify traits and behaviors associated with Student Affairs professionals who effectively integrate assessment into their practice and associated with student affairs professionals who display an assessment disposition. This survey sought to compare these perceptions to demographic variables as well as perceived levels of assessment competence and assessment training among surveyed student affairs assessment leaders and staff from various student affairs functional areas. Student affairs webpages on university websites were used to collect publically available staff email addresses for survey distribution.

## **Population and Sample**

The population included in this study was comprised of student affairs staff and assessment leaders at Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Level VI institutions. Among SACSCOC Level VI schools, the researcher excluded private institutions and medical school/health sciences campuses. The resulting

population was comprised of 74 public, SACSCOC Level VI institutions. Publicly available email addresses were collected from staff directory and contact pages on the websites of the respective institutions. The researcher collected email addresses for staff from all student affairs departments, as available, as well as email addresses for the assessment leader(s) for these student affairs divisions. Some exclusions/exceptions applied to the collection of email addresses. The researcher did not collect email addresses for campus police or for medical and counseling staff who do not serve in administrative roles. Additionally, in some cases, email addresses for a subset of a school's staff were not made public by department webpages or main university directories and could not be added to the contact list for distribution. Also, in the case of very robust assessment offices, some staff members were excluded who did not appear to lead assessment efforts but would not necessarily fit the demographic of general student affairs staff, due to a potential bias toward an assessment disposition. All email addresses were stored in Microsoft Excel for tracking and organization. Each of the 74 schools was represented in the survey distribution with a sample of collected email addresses. A total of 10,139 surveys were distributed to potential staff respondents; 85 total surveys were distributed to potential leader respondents. Separate survey projects were created for staff versus leaders, to allow for the potential of comparison of anonymized responses between the two groups. It is important to note that while theoretically the data are nested, as student affairs divisions operate within institutions, no data were collected to tie response sets to a particular institutions. The researcher in the present study decided from the onset of the project not to compare institutions as to avoid unintentionally compromising participant anonymity (particularly that of assessment leaders), as well as to promote comfort among respondents.

## **Instrumentation and Methods**

A survey combining demographic and Likert scale items was determined to be the best approach to polling a large group of Student Affairs professionals about the research questions. The survey instrument for this study was a revised version of the instrument created for a dissertation entitled *Assessment Disposition: Qualities and Strategies for Development in Student-Affairs Professionals* (Thoennes, 2017). The original instrument was created using the Delphi method; experts in student affairs assessment were interviewed to gather rich data and create a survey tool. Several rounds of the original survey were distributed to a panel of experts in order to continue developing the instrument and organize constructs. Reliability and validity statistics were not reported in the original study.

With permission from the original researcher, the present study sought to use the existing instrument (Thoennes, 2017) to address the specific research purposes and population of the present project. In order to refine the instrument to fit these parameters as well as to contribute to establishing the validity of the instrument, the researcher of the present study undertook the following psychometric and instrument refinement procedures.

First, the instrument and constructs were reviewed by the researcher and several colleagues and mentors. Minor changes to wording were implemented, as well as the omission of one original survey construct (pertaining to student learning), as these items were placed within other constructs. A panel of five experts in student affairs assessment then reviewed the instrument. This panel was comprised of individuals separate from those who reviewed and advised the development of the original instrument (Thoennes, 2017). The panel members were also outside of the population being surveyed in the present study. The experts provided input on wording, item omission, item addition, and construct placement for the draft of the survey

instrument. Suggestions were consolidated and considered, and minor changes were made, including those described in the following examples: changed the phrase *self-improvement* to *continuous improvement*; revised the statement *open to assessment* to *committed to conducting assessment*; moved the statements *value their roles as educators* and *interested in learning about the student affairs profession* from the Perceptions construct to the Qualities construct; omitted an item pertaining to *simple assessment techniques* in favor of an item pertaining to assessment best *practices*. These and other modifications resulted in the finalized items and construct placement for this iteration of this survey.

Finally, the researcher consulted several student affairs staff members on possible wording of the Likert scale, particularly whether the scale for the present study should measure importance or agreement. The staff members consulted expressed a consensus that agreement would be the best scale to help respondents easily understand the prompt. Demographic questions that would best aid in data analysis for the current study were created and edited by the researcher and several colleagues/mentors.

Once a draft of the present survey was solidified, two instruments (one for staff and one for leaders) were created in Qualtrics. Likert scale items on the survey were presented to potential respondents within the pre-set constructs, with a construct description provided before each set of questions (Dillman, 2014). The instruments were the same, with the exception of two additional demographic questions for leaders. Contact lists were uploaded in Qualtrics and mailings were scheduled. Responses were anonymized in order to protect respondents.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher collected responses using Auburn University's Qualtrics platform. Data collection was divided into six initial mailings with three subsequent reminders for each mailing,

over a period of approximately four work weeks. The staff email addresses were randomized and separated into five separate mailing groups, and the leader email addresses were all included in the same, a sixth mailing group. Mailing groups were contacted at different dates/times, in order to reduce survey fatigue and frustration at any one institution. Each group received a total of four invitations (one initial mailing and three reminders); there was approximately one week between invitations for each group. After factoring in bounces and undeliverable email addresses a total of 9,786 staff email invitations and 81 leader invitations were delivered using the mailing feature within Qualtrics, with the researcher's email address used as the "from" and "reply to" addresses. To protect respondents, the researcher used the "anonymize responses" feature within Qualtrics. This allowed for the use of an individual link so that reminders could be sent only to non-completers and non-respondents. However, Qualtrics retained no record of any identifying information (email address, IP address, etc.) tied to anonymized responses. Respondents were given the option to opt out from the email invitation. Respondents could exit the survey anytime, as well as return to the survey at a later time, if they desired. A protocol outlining the study as well as all survey documents was approved by the Auburn University Institutional Review Board before data collection took place [Appendix B].

### **Data Analysis**

Upon completion of survey collection, data were exported to IBM SPSS Version 24 for analysis. Data was comprised of demographic questions, questions allowing for self-report on assessment training and competency, and questions from seven constructs pertaining to effective integration of assessment and the value of assessment. As the original study (Thoennes, 2017) focused on the development of the survey instrument, the present study sought to expand on this

work by employing the current survey data for examination of research questions that were exploratory in nature.

To address Research Question One, participants were asked to select from a multiple-choice list and choose all job titles that applied to their work. Respondents could also choose to type an open-ended response, in lieu of or in addition to the other selections. Responses indicating a job title were organized into roles (Assessment Leader, Upper-Level Leadership, Director, Assistant/Associate Director, Coordinator, Administrative Support, Other) and coded into one variable for initial analysis. The independent variable of role was compared to responses from each of the seven constructs/dependent variables (Personal and Professional Qualities, Perceptions of Assessment, Approach to Assessment, Engagement with Assessment, Work Environment, Success with Assessment, and Training) using a One-Way MANOVA. Post-hoc analyses were performed to further uncover differences among the roles.

To address Research Question Two, participants were asked to rate their perceived level of assessment training or professional development, through five avenues (Attending conferences; Opportunities through professional organizations; Opportunities offered through their student affairs divisions; Opportunities offered through their institutions- outside of student affairs; Content within academic coursework). The overall perceived level of training was used to compute bivariate correlations comparing training level to responses from each of the seven constructs. As all bivariate correlations revealed statistical significance, linear regression analyses were performed to identify which types of training opportunities yielded significant results pertaining to perceptions of assessment.

To address Research Question Three, participants were asked to rate their perceived level of competence in their abilities to conduct assessment in their roles, within five areas of

competency (Ability to describe terms and concepts associated with assessment; Knowledge of the values, ethics, and politics involved in sustaining a culture of assessment; Capacity in assessment design; Ability to implement appropriate methodology, data collection, and data analysis procedures; Capacity in interpreting, reporting, and using results). The overall perceived level of competence was used to compute bivariate correlations comparing competence level to responses from each of the seven constructs. As all bivariate correlations revealed statistical significance, linear regression analyses were performed to identify which areas of competency yielded significant results pertaining to perceptions of assessment.

### **Limitations**

There were several advantages of using an online survey format through the Qualtrics mailing tool. This format was convenient for distribution and for sending reminders. Participants could easily access the survey from the invitation email through a link. Respondents could begin the survey and finish at a later time, provided the same device was used. Replies to the invitation email came directly to the researcher's inbox, allowing for prompt attention to any concerns.

There were also several limitations of the data collection format. The researcher encountered a low response rate, just under 10%, for the staff members surveyed. The researcher found this response rate to be acceptable, given that most of the population (SACS Level IV student affairs professionals) were invited to participate, rather than a sample of the population. Additionally, the low response rate was likely marginally affected by the high number of out-of-office emails, as data collection occurred during summer. Perhaps sending personalized invitations, rather than using the Qualtrics mailing system, would have increased response rates. However, this approach was not plausible with such a large group of potential respondents receiving the invitation to participate. The researcher conducted an a priori power analysis using



G\*Power Version 3.1.9.2 to determine the minimum sample size needed to reject the null for the statistical tests in this study. Assuming a small effect size and a 5% confidence interval, the software suggested a sample size of 308 for a one-way Manova and a sample size of 652 for multiple regression. Despite a low response rate, the survey yielded a sufficient number of response sets considered suitable for analysis (n=953).

The researcher also encountered limitations pertaining to the necessary Qualtrics settings for this study and the features of the mailing system. The researcher selected an option to collect anonymized responses, in order to protect participants. However, the removal of any link to participants meant that the researcher did not have the ability to view or control the contact list once the survey was sent. If a potential respondent asked to be removed from the study and from future invitations, this could not be performed by the researcher nor by Qualtrics support staff. In these cases, invited participants were instructed to unsubscribe by following a link from their survey invitations.

Additionally, the researcher encountered a limitation pertaining to the invitation link. The links were meant to be specific to one email invitation. However, if an invited respondent did not take the survey and forwarded the invitation to someone else, the link was still valid. This was problematic only when certain invited participants offered to forward the email to colleagues who may not have been appropriate participants for the study. The researcher intervened by declining offers for the survey to be shared; a note was also added to future reminders asking respondents not to forward the email invitation to others.

Finally, it is important to note that this study may have been limited by researcher's handling of the nested data structure as well as by the exploratory nature of the analyses. Student affairs units are nested within institutions; assessment leaders and staff from various institutions

were surveyed, but the data was not collected in a way that allowed response sets and institutions to be linked. This was intentional to protect anonymity; however, as a result, exploring the nested nature of this data (differences by institution) was not possible. Additionally, as the present project sought to build on a study that primarily focused on instrument development (Thoennes, 2017), an exploratory approach to analyses was deemed to be appropriate. The current work was based on the original study; no particular theoretical model guided the present research.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design and data analysis procedures employed to answer the three proposed research questions. The participants consisted of student affairs staff members and assessment leaders from the 74 institutions defined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges as being Level VI (granting four or more doctoral degrees), as of January 2018. The adapted survey instrument measuring constructs pertaining to perceptions of assessment was used in conjunction with demographic information concerning job title, assessment training, and assessment competency to explore the research questions. The following chapter provides details on the results of the analysis.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

#### **Introduction**

While assessment in higher education has been encouraged by external forces for some time, this does not imply that faculty and staff members are assessing intentionally to measure what is meaningful or that assessment is being used to inform decisions (Blaich & Wise, 2011). Particularly, in divisions of student affairs, as co-curricular work becomes increasingly complex, professionals in these units are more often pressed to examine their roles and to ask questions of their programs, processes, and services (Culp, 2012). Despite the present need to strive for stronger assessment cultures, issues affecting buy-in and the value that practitioners place in assessment may hinder the growth of robust and intentional assessment (Blimling, 2013; Elkins, 2015; Miller, 2012). Naturally, assessment is occurring on campuses (Bresciani, 2011), but it is not always organized or connected to accountability (Ewell & Cumming, 2017).

Higher education institutions are complex entities that may be better understood by educators and administrators through applying a range of lenses and theoretical perspectives to view and learn about their organizations (Manning, 2013). Faculty and staff should wish to learn and inquire about the organizational cultures in which they work (Bresciani, 2011); outcomes-based assessment is a sustainable way for this learning to occur, as it provides for inquiry within a structured process that allows professionals to connect their work to the overall learning goals of their institutions (Bresciani, 2011; Jonson, Guetterman, & Thompson, 2014; Kuh et al., 2015).

In the three decades since the call for student affairs divisions to take a leadership role in assessment on campuses (Erwin, 1991; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), co-curricular assessment has grown from a mandate or rising trend to an expectation that all practitioners should work to foster a culture of evidence in which staff are disposed to place value in assessment activity (Banta, Suskie, & Walvoord, 2015; Culp & Dungy, 2012; Thoennes, 2017).

As today's higher education culture is rapidly evolving (Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Keeling et al., 2008; Maki, 2017), faculty and staff will need support to make important changes. There is a need for opportunity to gain abilities and understanding in areas of inquiry and analysis, critical thinking, quantitative skills, and problem solving (Groccia, 2010). A recent decline in the public's trust of the quality and value of higher education has led to a greater need for accountability and evidence of the value-added and impact of the college experience (Bresciani, 2011; Elkins, 2015; Ewell, 2002; Ewell & Cumming, 2017; Guetterman & Mitchell, 2016; Henning et al., 2008; Shavelson, Schneider, & Shulman, 2007). Highly trained faculty and staff will be a necessity. As for professional development in the area of assessment, training should focus on strategies for valid and reliable measurement, establishing a culture of assessment, demonstrating the impact of programs and activities, and efforts that lead to outcome attainment (Groccia, 2010). Current literature suggests that practitioners and leaders are coming to terms with assessment realities and working to strengthen assessment efforts (Banta et al., 2015; Miller, 2012).

When considering the impact of employing faculty and staff who are well-versed in assessment best practices, it is important to ask the following question: "How can professional educators articulate Student Learning Outcomes, assess those outcomes, and use the results to further inform attention to student learning if they lack the knowledge and skills with which to

do so?” (Henning, Mitchell, & Maki, 2008). Additionally, it is essential to note that higher education practitioners will not be committed to building a culture of assessment if they are not convinced of its value (Blimling, 2013).

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

This study explored perceptions of effective assessment, as identified by higher education assessment leaders and staff in student affairs units. It is an established best practice to conduct training and provide professional development related to higher education assessment. However, the existence of this standard does not imply that assessment is effectively integrated by staff or that staff members are disposed to value assessment activity. There are demonstrated needs for the development of competency in the area of assessment, for greater communication among campus partners about assessment activities, and for promotion of a general understanding of the institutional expectations for effective assessment practices. In order to work toward building such a culture of evidence (Culp & Dungy, 2012), student affairs professionals must be able to articulate their commitments to assessment and express its value to their work.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of effective assessment among student affairs professionals, including how these perceptions compared among several demographic factors. This study explored perceptions of how student affairs staff effectively integrate assessment into their practice and what it entails for these professionals to develop a disposition toward assessment activities. The concepts were measured through survey items corresponding to several constructs. Responses in each construct were compared against the demographic variables of professional role, perceived level of assessment competence, and perceived level of assessment training.

## Research Questions

- 1) Do perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs differ by a student affairs practitioner's professional role?
- 2) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's reported level of assessment training and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs?
- 3) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's perceived level of assessment competence and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs?

## Instrument

A Likert scale survey was determined to be the best approach to polling a large group of student affairs professionals about the research questions. The survey instrument for this study was a revised version of the instrument created for a dissertation entitled *Assessment Disposition: Qualities and Strategies for Development in Student Affairs Professionals* (Thoennes, 2017). The original study explored student affairs assessment leaders' perceptions of what qualities are present when student affairs professionals possess an assessment disposition and how such a disposition is developed. Consequently, the instrument was found to be closely in line with the aims of the present study to explore relationships between several dependent variables (role, training level, and competence) and student affairs staff members' perceptions of effective assessment. Demographic questions that would best aid in data analysis for the current study were incorporated at the beginning of the survey. The remainder of the survey was comprised of Likert scale items presented to potential respondents within pre-set constructs, with a construct description before each set of questions (Dillman, 2014).

For the constructs of Personal and Professional Qualities, Perceptions about Assessment, and Approach to Assessment, respondents were asked to indicate agreement with whether the

survey items were characteristic of “student affairs professionals who effectively integrate assessment into their practice.” For the constructs of Engagement, Work Environment, Success with Assessment, and Training and Development, respondents were asked to indicate agreement with whether the survey items were characteristic of “student affairs professionals who are likely to develop an assessment disposition.”

Two instruments (one for student affairs staff and one for student affairs assessment leaders) were created in Qualtrics. The instruments were the same, with the exception of two additional demographic questions for leaders. The survey was administered through Auburn University’s Qualtrics platform.

### **Population and Sample**

The population included in this study was comprised of student affairs staff and assessment leaders at Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Level VI institutions. Among SACSCOC Level VI schools, the researcher excluded private institutions and medical school/health sciences campuses. The resulting population was comprised of 74 public, SACSCOC Level VI institutions. To protect participant anonymity, responses were collected in aggregate across the institutions; no results can be broken down by school. With very few exclusions, the researcher collected all publicly available email addresses for the study’s population of student affairs staff members and assessment leaders at these institutions. A total of 10,139 surveys were distributed to potential staff respondents; 85 total surveys were distributed to potential leader respondents.

### **Participant Demographics**

Survey results yielded 953 useable sets of responses. Based on analysis of demographic questions, the 953 respondents were comprised of the following student affairs roles: Assessment

Leader (n=24), Upper-Level Leadership (n=69), Director (n=186), Assistant/Associate Director (n=305), Coordinator (n=259), Administrative Support (n=43), and Other (n=67). Additional demographic factors considered in this study pertain to perceived level of competence and perceived level of training in assessment.

Respondents rated their perceived level of assessment training (Table 4.1) on a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1=very low to 5=very high) for five avenues through which they might have received training: Attending conferences; Opportunities through professional organizations (workshops, webinars, etc.); Opportunities offered through their student affairs divisions; Opportunities offered through their institutions (outside of student affairs); and Content within academic coursework. Respondents provided these ratings in response to the following prompt: *Please rate your level of assessment training/assessment-related professional development, through each of the following avenues.* The average perceived level of training across respondents (n=953) and across all five avenues was 2.79, or slightly below moderate.

Table 4.1

*Perceived Level of Training by Avenue*

Training Avenue	$\bar{X}$	SD
Opportunities through your Student Affairs Division	2.98	1.151
Opportunities through Professional Organizations	2.92	1.063
Content within Academic Coursework	2.79	1.214
Attending Conferences	2.76	1.104
Opportunities at your Institution (Outside of SA)	2.50	1.084
Overall	2.79	.765



Respondents rated their perceived level of assessment competence (Table 4.2) on the same five-point Likert scale for five areas of assessment skill: Ability to describe terms and concepts associated with assessment; Knowledge of the values, ethics, and politics involved in sustaining a culture of assessment; Capacity in assessment design (e.g. outcome creation, addressing research questions); Ability to implement appropriate methodology, data collection, and data analysis procedures; and Capacity in interpreting, reporting, and using results. The skill/competency areas were derived from the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Rubric for Assessment, Evaluation, and Research. Respondents provided these ratings in response to the following prompt: *Please rate your perceived level of competence in your ability to conduct assessment within your current role, in each of the following areas.* The average perceived level of competence across respondents (n=953) and across all five skill areas was 3.36, or slightly above moderate.

Table 4.2

*Perceived Level of Competence by Area of Skill*

Competency Area	$\bar{X}$	SD
Knowledge of Values, Ethics, and Politics	3.50	.925
Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results	3.47	.908
Ability to Describe Terms and Concepts	3.44	.892
Capacity in Assessment Design	3.22	.960
Ability to Implement Method, Collect Data, and Analyze Data	3.18	1.019
Overall	3.36	.814

Other demographic questions were included on the survey and may be used for analysis in future study but did not pertain to the research questions for the present project.

## Preparing Data for Analysis

Responses were collected in Qualtrics, and survey data was downloaded in an SPSS file format. The researcher took several steps to prepare data for analysis in SPSS 24. Response sets were removed that were indicated by Qualtrics as less than 100% complete. Variables not relevant for analysis were removed from the file. The response sets from the Leader survey were added to the file for the Staff survey. A variable for an ID number was added in order to identify each case.

It was necessary to clean the role variables for analysis. This demographic item was presented on the survey as a check-all-that-apply question with a write-in option. As a result, the file contained multiple variables for the Role question, indicating whether or not a respondent had identified with each option and/or chosen to write-in an “Other” response. The researcher sorted through “Other” responses, and if a response fit with one of the provided choices, the response was grouped with that role instead. For example, a common student affairs role is “Advisor,” which was written-in by several respondents. The title was unique from the default choices, but the nature of the role itself is comparable to “Coordinator.” It was appropriate to group these and any other Coordinator-level positions together. Write-in responses for Administrative Support positions were prevalent and, therefore, moved to their own role variable. For analysis purposes, the roles of Vice President, Assistant/Associate Vice President, and write-ins for Dean or Associate Dean were combined into a new variable for “Upper-Level Leadership.” Additional write-in responses that were not in line with any of the provided role categories remained as “Other.” Responses from the assessment leader survey were given the role of “Assessment Leader.” Finally, a combined “Role” variable was created and coded as follows: 1=Assessment Leader, 2=Upper-Level Leadership, 3=Director, 4=Assistant/Associate

Director, 5=Coordinator, 6=Administrative Support, and 7=Other. If a respondent indicated two roles, the role corresponding with the lowest coded number was used for analysis.

To further prepare the data, a missing value analysis was performed in SPSS. The researcher excluded cases that were missing 12% or more of the Likert responses (an equivalent of missing responses for at least one construct). Interestingly, these cases were reported by Qualtrics as 100% complete, as the respondent had the ability to click through each page of the survey and “submit” without answering questions; however, they were omitted during the data preparation phase with the same rationale as cases originally deemed incomplete by Qualtrics.

Respondents who indicated “graduate assistant” as their role also became excluded cases, as the researcher did not intend to include part-time graduate student employees in the survey distributions. A filter variable was created in SPSS to exclude these specified cases before analyses were run. After exclusions were made, 953 cases were considered for analysis. Additionally, the researcher addressed the issue of missing values in the Likert-scale items within the constructs (dependent variables) in response sets that were not excluded. Missing values in the Likert items were replaced with series means. While mean imputation is not the recommended choice of modern scholars for handling missing data, the process was readily available and carefully conducted through SPSS. Given the negligible proportion of data missing in these survey items (between .0% and .5%), the researcher had little concern that this method would bias estimates or reduce variance among analyses of the present data.

Several other steps were taken to prepare the data for analyses. The five training variables and five competency variables in the demographics section of the survey were computed into one average variable for training and one average variable for competency in order to initially explore global correlations between these traits and the constructs. The researcher also created

mean dependent variables, averaging each of the seven constructs, to be used in analyses as appropriate.

### **Analysis**

The researcher conducted appropriate statistical tests in SPSS 24 to address the three research questions. Before exploring the results of the analyses pertaining to each research question, it is pertinent to discuss the results of procedures used to explore construct validity and reliability. As the original study (Thoennes, 2017) focused on the use of the Delphi method to create and pilot the instrument, the present study aimed to contribute to the further development of the instrument by discussing analyses of the factors or constructs measured in the study.

#### **Reliability Statistics/Cronbach's Alpha**

Cronbach's alpha is a statistical test often used to measure internal consistency estimates of reliability; in order for a survey instrument to be reliable, the items on an instrument should be consistent, and items measuring the same content should be highly correlated (Ross & Shannon, 2011). The researcher in the present study computed Cronbach's alpha in SPSS 24 as a measure of reliability in order to contribute to the psychometric process of refining and supporting the instrument. Cronbach's alpha values range from 0 to 1; a value approaching 1 indicates acceptable internal consistency reliability (Huck, 2012; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009).

The researcher calculated Cronbach's alpha for each of the seven constructs in the survey. Each construct had a high alpha coefficient, indicating strong internal consistency. The alpha coefficients for the survey constructs ranged from .889 to .948 (Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

*Internal Consistency Reliability for Constructs and Question Sets*

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Personal and Professional Qualities	.949
Perceptions about Assessment	.948
Approach to Assessment	.952
Engagement in Assessment	.928
Work Environment	.940
Success with Assessment	.889
Training and Development	.892
Question Set	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived Level of Assessment Training	.712
Perceived Level of Assessment Competence	.916

**Research Question One**

Research question one addressed the following: Do perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs differ by a student affairs practitioner's professional role? The survey data revealed that the 953 respondents were comprised of the following student affairs roles: assessment leader (n=24), upper level leadership (n=69), director (n=186), assistant/associate director (n=305), coordinator (n=259), administrative support (n=43), and other (n=67). Roles were coded and combined into one variable for initial analysis: 1=Assessment Leader; 2=Upper-level Leadership; 3=Director; 4=Assistant/Associate Director; 5=Coordinator; 6=Administrative Support; and 7=Other.

In order to answer research question one, the researcher conducted a one-way Manova in SPSS. The independent variable of "role" was compared to respondents' views of what constitutes effective integration of assessment and development of an assessment disposition within each of the following constructs/dependent variables: Personal and Professional Qualities, General Perceptions about Assessment, Approach to Assessment, Engagement in Assessment; Work Environment; Success with Assessment; and Training/Development.

A Wilks' Lambda value of .894,  $p < .001$  suggested departure from the null hypothesis in the multivariate analysis (Huck, 2012) and served as a first step in consideration of the alternate hypothesis that a student affairs professional's role contributes significantly to the variance within each of the survey constructs. Further, tests of between-subjects effects revealed statistically significant relationships between a practitioner's role and each of the seven constructs.

As statistical significance (with a small effect size) was found between role and perceptions of effective assessment within each of the seven constructs, multiple comparison post-hoc analyses, using Fisher's Least Significant Difference Test (LSD), were conducted to explore more specifically where differences existed among the roles and their impact on the constructs.

Table 4.4 shows which roles indicated higher levels of agreement, based on the results of the multivariate analysis, for the survey items for each construct on a scale of 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. In all constructs, Assessment Leaders were more likely than most other roles to agree that the survey items contribute to effective assessment and an assessment disposition. In all constructs, respondents assigned a role of Other were less likely to agree, compared to most other roles. For the specific constructs of Success and Training, respondents with an Administrative Support role were less likely to agree compared to most other roles. There were no statistical differences found, for any construct, within comparisons among Upper-Level Leadership, Director, Assistant/Associate Director, and Coordinator.

Table 4.4

*Effects of Role on Survey Constructs*

Role	1 Assessment Leaders		2 Upper Level Leaders		3 Directors		4 Asst./Assoc. Directors		5 Coordinators		6 Admin. Support		7 Other		Total		F Test	Post-hoc (LSD)
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
Qualities	4.353	.405	4.063	.500	4.044	.552	4.022	.540	4.043	.544	4.131	.618	3.794	.853	4.032	.573	3.518**	1>2,3,4,5,7 7<1-6
Perceptions	4.596	.430	4.287	.498	4.262	.500	4.195	.572	4.184	.555	4.186	.556	3.927	.694	4.203	.562	5.454***	1>2-7 7<1-6
Approach	4.279	.473	3.900	.603	3.831	.614	3.827	.600	3.864	.589	3.917	.635	3.712	.697	3.851	.610	2.875**	1>2-7
Engagement	4.410	.553	4.188	.482	4.112	.519	4.107	.540	4.143	.553	4.080	.574	3.976	.654	4.121	.548	2.228*	1>3,4,5,6,7 7<1,2,5
Work Environment	4.448	.449	4.222	.501	4.148	.506	4.163	.499	4.159	.491	4.115	.602	3.978	.674	4.155	.519	2.863**	1>3,4,5,6,7 7<1,2,3,4,5
Success	4.307	.516	4.173	.532	4.177	.514	4.213	.549	4.226	.562	3.922	.652	3.967	.784	4.179	.573	3.714***	6<1,2,3,4,5 7<1,2,3,4,5
Training	4.192	.597	4.123	.569	4.070	.539	4.029	.561	4.115	.532	3.876	.646	3.871	.769	4.053	.575	2.861**	6<1,2,3,5 7<1,2,3,4,5

Note. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

Wilks' Lambda = .894\*\*\*

## Research Question Two

Research question two addressed the following: What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's reported level of assessment training and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs? 938 respondents indicated an overall mean score of 2.79, indicating their perceived level of training on a Likert scale ranging from 1=very low to 5=very high. Respondents were asked to rank their perceived level of training within the following five avenues: Attending conferences; Opportunities through professional organizations (workshops, webinars, etc.); Opportunities offered through your student affairs division; Opportunities offered at your institution (outside of student affairs); and Content within academic courses. The independent variable of perceived level of training was compared with respondents' views of what constitutes effective integration of assessment/an assessment disposition within the following constructs/dependent variables: Personal and Professional Qualities, General Perceptions about Assessment, Approach to Assessment, Engagement in Assessment; Work Environment (Assessment Culture); and Success with Assessment.

In order to answer research question two, upon considering the strong internal consistency among the survey items pertaining to perceived level of training, the researcher first conducted bivariate correlations in SPSS 24 between the overall training scores and each construct in order to determine if reported level of training, globally, had an effect on perceptions of effective assessment. The results of each bivariate correlation analysis revealed that there was a positive correlation between perceived level of training and each of the seven constructs. Each correlation was significant at the  $p < .001$  level, with a small effect size (Table 4.5).

To further analyze the global relationship between perceived levels of all avenues of training and each of the seven constructs, the researcher conducted multiple regression using the



Enter method (Table 4.5). Each of the seven full regression models revealed an F value significant at the  $p < .001$  level. Next, a final predictive model was identified for each of the seven constructs using backward regression; non-significant F Change values in the final models (Table 4.5) indicated that the removed variables were not contributing statistically significantly to the regression equation and did not need to be retained in the final model.

Table 4.5

*Effects of Training on Constructs: Correlations and Overall Regression*

Constructs	Overall Correlation (r)	Full Model		Final Model		Change/Difference	
		R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change
1- Qualities	.229***	.056	11.069***	.054	2.496***	-.001	1.371
2- Perceptions	.192***	.050	9.890***	.049	11.978***	-.002	1.510
3- Approach	.160***	.026	4.997***	.024	7.737***	-.002	1.662
4- Engagement	.153***	.032	6.171***	.029	13.888***	-.001	.666
5- Work Environment	.149***	.027	5.126***	.025	2.496***	-.001	1.057
6- Success	.124***	.028	5.446***	.028	6.758***	.000	.222
7- Training	.127***	.023	4.478***	.022	10.714***	.000	.412

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

As noted, significance was found between the training variables and each of the seven constructs. The researcher followed-up by conducting multiple regression using the Backward method, in order to determine which avenues of training were the best predictors of how respondents perceived effective integration of assessment/the development of an assessment disposition within each survey construct. The predictors in each final regression model yielded Tolerance values greater than .2 and VIF values less than 4 (Hair et al., 2010), indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern in the models and that the predictors contributed uniquely to

the variance in the respective constructs. The final/restricted model for each construct is explored, as follows.

For the construct of Personal and Professional Qualities, the predictors in the final model were Professional Organizations and Student Affairs (Table 4.6). The model,  $F(2,935)=2.496$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.6

*Effects of Perceived Training Level on Personal and Professional Qualities: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.056 <sup>a</sup>	.558			
Attending Conferences			.162***	.030	.040
Professional Organizations			.200***	.082	.118 <sup>†</sup>
Student Affairs			.179***	.098	.114**
Institution (Outside SA)			.140***	.012	.014
Academic Coursework			.097**	.033	.035
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.054 <sup>b</sup>	.558			
Professional Organizations			.200***	.146	.156***
Student Affairs			.179***	.117	.124***

Note. <sup>†</sup> $p<.10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>  $F(5,932)=11.069$

<sup>b</sup>  $F(2, 935)=26.496$

For the construct of Perceptions, the predictors in the final model were Professional Organizations, Student Affairs, Institution (Outside SA), and Academic Coursework (Table 4.7).

The model,  $F(4, 933)=11.978$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.05$  level or better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that three of the predictors correlated positively to the dependent variable. The training avenue predictor of Institution (Outside SA) correlated negatively with the dependent variable.

Table 4.7

*Effects of Perceived Training Level on Perceptions: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.050 <sup>a</sup>	.549			
Attending Conferences			.148***	.039	.053
Professional Organizations			.165***	.069	.098*
Student Affairs			.153***	.115	.134***
Institution (Outside SA)			.052 <sup>†</sup>	-.073	-.088*
Academic Coursework			.126***	.079	.083*
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.049 <sup>b</sup>	.549			
Professional Organizations			.165***	.116	.132***
Student Affairs			.153***	.116	.135***
Institution (Outside SA)			.052 <sup>†</sup>	-.072	-.088*
Academic Coursework			.126***	.084	.087**

Note. <sup>†</sup> $p<.10$ . \* $p<.05$ . \*\* $p<.01$ . \*\*\* $p<.001$ .

<sup>a</sup>  $F(5,932)=9.890$ \*\*\*

<sup>b</sup>  $F(4, 933)=11.978$ \*\*\*

For the construct of Approach, the predictors in the final model were Attending Conferences, Student Affairs, and Academic Coursework (Table 4.8). The model,  $F(3,934)=7.37$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for the predictor Attending Conferences was significant at the  $p<.01$  level. The t-tests for the predictors of Student Affairs

and Academic Coursework do not show statistical significance; however, the final regression model for Approach was statistically significant with these predictors present. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.8

*Effects of Perceived Training Level on Approach: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.026 <sup>a</sup>	.605			
Attending Conferences			.131***	.048	.066
Professional Organizations			.133***	.038	.055
Student Affairs			.094**	.036	.042
Institution (Outside SA)			.088**	.011	.013
Academic Coursework			.095**	.052	.055
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.024 <sup>b</sup>	.605			
Attending Conferences			.131***	.095	.101**
Student Affairs			.094**	.055	.057 <sup>†</sup>
Academic Coursework			.095**	.058	.060 <sup>†</sup>

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,932)=4.997\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(3, 934)=7.737\*\*\*

For the construct of Engagement, the predictors in the final model were Professional Organizations and Academic Coursework (Table 4.9). The model,  $F(2, 935)=13.888$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.05$  level or better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.9

*Effects of Perceived Training Level on Engagement: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.032 <sup>a</sup>	.543			
Attending Conferences			.131***	.032	.044
Professional Organizations			.150***	.074	.106*
Student Affairs			.083**	.037	.044
Institution (Outside SA)			.048 <sup>†</sup>	-.040	-.048
Academic Coursework			.115***	.076	.080*
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.029 <sup>b</sup>	.543			
Professional Organizations			.150***	.125	.129*
Academic Coursework			.115***	.079	.082**

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p<.05. \*\*p<.01. \*\*\*p<.001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5, 932)=6.171\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(2, 935)=13.888\*\*\*

For the construct of Work Environment, the predictors in the final model were Attending Conferences, Student Affairs, and Academic Coursework (Table 4.10). The model,  $F(3,934)=2.496$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.05$  level or better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.10

*Effects of Perceived Training Level on Work Environment: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.027 <sup>a</sup>	.516			
Attending Conferences			.125***	.047	.063
Professional Organizations			.125***	.039	.055
Student Affairs			.102***	.061	.071 <sup>†</sup>
Institution (Outside SA)			.058*	-.028	-.033
Academic Coursework			.101**	.063	.066 <sup>†</sup>
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.025 <sup>b</sup>	.516			
Attending Conferences			.125***	.086	.091**
Student Affairs			.102***	.064	.067*
Academic Coursework			.101**	.065	.067*

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,932)=5.12\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(3, 934)=7.949\*\*\*

For the construct of Success, the predictors in the final model were Attending Conferences, Student Affairs, Institution (Outside SA), and Academic Coursework (Table 4.11). The model,  $F(4, 933)=6.758$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for the predictors of Attending Conferences, Student Affairs, and Academic Coursework were significant at the  $p<.05$  level or better. The t-test for the predictor of Institution (Outside SA) did not show statistical significance; however, the final regression model for Success was statistically significant with this predictor present. The Beta values in the final model indicated that three of the predictors correlated positively to the dependent variable. The training avenue predictor of Institution (Outside SA) correlated negatively with the dependent variable.

Table 4.11

*Effects of Perceived Training Level on Success: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.028 <sup>a</sup>	.570			
Attending Conferences			.103**	.045	.061
Professional Organizations			.090**	.015	.022
Student Affairs			.098**	.080	.094*
Institution (Outside SA)			.020	-.062	-.075 <sup>†</sup>
Academic Coursework			.122***	.097	.102**
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.028 <sup>b</sup>	.569			
Attending Conferences			.103**	.068	.074*
Student Affairs			.098**	.083	.096*
Institution (Outside SA)			.020	-.060	-.071 <sup>†</sup>
Academic Coursework			.122***	.099	.103**

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,932)=5.446\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(4, 933)=6.758\*\*\*

For the construct of Training and Development, the predictors in the final model were Attending Conferences and Academic Coursework (Table 4.12). The model,  $F(2, 935)=10.714$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.05$  level or better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.12

*Effects of Perceived Training Level on Training and Development: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.023 <sup>a</sup>	.572			
Attending Conferences			.126***	.069	.093*
Professional Organizations			.103**	.015	.021
Student Affairs			.062*	.026	.030
Institution (Outside SA)			.041	-.023	-.028
Academic Coursework			.109***	.078	.081*
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.022 <sup>b</sup>	.571			
Attending Conferences			.126***	.103	.106**
Academic Coursework			.109***	.080	.083*

Note. †p<.10. \*p<.05. \*\*p<.01. \*\*\*p<.001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,932)=4.478\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(2, 935)=10.714\*\*\*

Beyond discussing which predictors most often appeared in the final regression models for each construct, when considering the effects of perceived training level on responses, it is also notable to explore which dependent variables (training avenues) contributed the most to the variance in Likert responses for each construct (discussed below). The squared semi-partial or "part" correlation indicates the unique contribution of an independent variable to the variance in the dependent variable.

For the construct of Personal and Professional Qualities related to assessment, the training avenue of Professional Organizations yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .021,



meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for 2.1% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Perceptions about assessment, the training avenues of Professional Organizations and Student Affairs each yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .013, meaning that these dependent variables, apart from the other, uniquely accounted for 1.3% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Approach to assessment, the training avenue of Attending Conferences yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .009, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for .9% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Engagement in assessment, the training avenue of Professional Organizations yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .016, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for 1.6% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Work Environment (assessment culture), the training avenue of Attending Conferences yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .007, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for .7% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Success with Assessment, the training avenue of Academic Coursework yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .010, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for 1.0% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Training and Development in assessment, the training avenue of Attending Conferences yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .011, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for 1.1% of the variance among responses in this construct.

Table 4.13 illustrates which training predictors were retained in the restricted model for each of the seven constructs.

Table 4.13

*Beta Values: Training Variables Retained in Final Model for Each Construct*

Constructs (DV)	1-Qualities	2-Perceptions	3-Approach	4-Engagement	5-Work Environment	6-Success	7-Training
Attending Conferences			.101**		.091**	.074*	.106**
Professional Organizations	.156***	.132***		.129***			
Student Affairs Division	.124***	.135***	.057 <sup>†</sup>		.067*	.096*	
Outside of SA		-.088*				-.071 <sup>†</sup>	
Academic Coursework		.087**	.060 <sup>†</sup>	.082*	.067*	.103**	.083*

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.1.0. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

### Research Question Three

Research question three addressed the following: What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner’s perceived level of assessment competence and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs? 953 respondents indicated an overall mean score of 3.36, indicating their perceived level of competence on a Likert scale ranging from 1=very low to 5=very high. Respondents were asked to rank their perceived level of competence within the following five skill areas: Ability to describe terms and concepts associated with assessment; Knowledge of the values, ethics, and politics involved in sustaining a culture of assessment; Capacity in assessment design (outcome creation, addressing research questions, etc.); Ability to implement appropriate methodology, data collection, and data analysis procedures; and Capacity in interpreting, reporting, and using results. The variable of perceived level of competence was compared with respondents’ views of what constitutes effective integration of assessment/an assessment disposition within the following constructs: Personal and Professional Qualities,

General Perceptions about Assessment, Approach to Assessment, Engagement in Assessment; Work Environment (Assessment Culture); and Success with Assessment.

In order to answer research question three, upon considering the strong internal consistency among the survey items pertaining to perceived level of competence, the researcher first conducted bivariate correlations in SPSS 24 between the overall competence scores and each construct in order to determine if reported level of competence, globally, had an effect on perceptions of effective assessment. The results of each bivariate correlation analysis revealed that there was a positive correlation between perceived level of competence and each of the seven constructs. Each correlation was significant at the  $p < .001$  level, with a small effect size (Table 4.14).

To further analyze the global relationship between perceived levels of all areas of competence and each of the seven constructs, the researcher conducted multiple regression using the Enter method (Table 4.14). Each of the seven full regression models revealed an F value significant at the  $p < .001$  level. Next, a final predictive model was identified for each of the seven constructs using backward regression; non-significant F Change values in the final models (Table 4.14) indicated that the removed variables were not contributing statistically significantly to the regression equation and did not need to be retained in the final model.

Table 4.14

*Effects of Competence on Constructs: Correlations and Overall Regression*

Constructs	Overall Correlation (r)	Full Model		Final Model		Change/Difference	
		R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup>	F	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change
1- Qualities	.240***	.062	12.424***	.059	29.882***	-.002	2.395
2- Perceptions	.256***	.076	15.498***	.070	35.812***	-.001	1.417
3- Approach	.229***	.055	11.102***	.055	18.359***	.000	.273
4- Engagement	.197***	.045	8.886***	.043	21.118***	-.001	.986
5- Work Environment	.195***	.041	8.099***	.040	19.631***	-.001	.976
6- Success	.187***	.039	7.721***	.036	35.614***	-.003	2.489
7- Training	.163***	.029	5.594***	.027	13.410***	-.001	.843

Note. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

As noted, significance was found between the competence variables and each of the seven constructs. The researcher followed-up by conducting multiple regression using the Backward method, in order to determine which skill areas pertaining to assessment competence were the best predictors of how respondents perceive effective integration of assessment/the development of an assessment disposition within each survey construct. The predictors in each final regression model yielded Tolerance values greater than .2 and VIF values less than 4 (Hair et al., 2010), indicating that multicollinearity was not a concern in the models and that the predictors contributed uniquely to the variance in the respective constructs. The final/restricted model for each construct is explored, as follows.

For the construct of Personal and Professional Qualities, the predictors in the final model were Terms & Concepts and Results (Table 4.15). The model,  $F(2, 950)=29.882$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.01$  level or

better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.15

*Effects of Perceived Competence on Personal and Professional Qualities: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.062 <sup>a</sup>	.557			
Terms and Concepts			.219***	.048	.083
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.207***	.048	.071
Assessment Design			.194***	.002	.003
Implement, Collect, and Analyze			.193***	-.002	-.003
Results			.227***	.077	.127*
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.059 <sup>b</sup>	.557			
Terms and Concepts			.219***	.089	.121**
Results			.227***	.105	.144**

Note. †p<.10. \*p<.05. \*\*p<.01. \*\*\*p<.001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,947)=12.424\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(2, 950)=29.882\*\*\*

For the construct of Perceptions, the predictors in the final model were Values, Ethics, & Politics and Results (Table 4.16). The model,  $F(2, 950)=35.812$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.01$  level or better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.16

*Effects of Perceived Competence on Perceptions: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.076 <sup>a</sup>	.542			
Terms and Concepts			.232***	.039	.068
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.224***	.052	.077 <sup>†</sup>
Assessment Design			.221***	.042	.077
Implement, Collect, and Analyze			.186***	-.053	-.097 <sup>†</sup>
Results			.249***	.106	.175**
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.070 <sup>b</sup>	.543			
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.224***	.090	.114**
Results			.249***	.142	.180***

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,947)=15.498\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(2, 950)=35.812\*\*\*

For the construct of Approach, the predictors in the final model were Values, Ethics, & Politics, Assessment Design, and Results (Table 4.17). The model,  $F(3, 949)=18.359$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for the predictor of Results was significant at the  $p<.05$  level. The t-tests for the predictors of Values, Ethics, & Politics and Assessment Design did not show statistical significance; however, the final regression model for Approach was statistically significant with these predictors present. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.17

*Effects of Perceived Competence on Approach: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			R	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.055 <sup>a</sup>	.594			
Terms and Concepts			.197***	.016	.027
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.197***	.050	.074
Assessment Design			.205***	.046	.084
Implement, Collect, and Analyze			.181***	-.018	-.032
Results			.212***	.069	.114*
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.055 <sup>b</sup>	.594			
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.197***	.060	.081 <sup>†</sup>
Assessment Design			.205***	.053	.079 <sup>†</sup>
Results			.212***	.074	.108*

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,947)=11.102\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(3, 949)=18.359\*\*\*

For the construct of Engagement, the predictors in the final model were Terms & Concepts and Results (Table 4.18). The model,  $F(2, 950)=21.118$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.05$  level or better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlate positively.

Table 4.18

*Effects of Perceived Competence on Engagement: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate	r	Semi-partial	Beta
Training					
<b>Full Model</b>	.045 <sup>a</sup>	.537			
Terms and Concepts			.195***	.065	.111*
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.171***	.032	.047
Assessment Design			.166***	.019	.035
Implement, Collect, and Analyze			.142***	-.035	-.064
Results			.182***	.062	.102 <sup>†</sup>
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.043 <sup>b</sup>	.537			
Terms and Concepts			.195***	.098	.133**
Results			.182***	.067	.091*

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,947)=8.886\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(2, 950)=21.118\*\*\*

For the construct of Work Environment, the predictors in the final model were Values, Ethics, & Politics and Results (Table 4.19). The model,  $F(2, 950)=19.631$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for each predictor was significant at the  $p<.01$  level or better. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.



Table 4.19

*Effects of Perceived Competence on Work Environment: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.041 <sup>a</sup>	.510		.013	.022
Terms and Concepts			.168***	.060	.089 <sup>†</sup>
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.179***	.028	.051
Assessment Design			.168***	-.014	-.025
Implement, Collect, and Analyze			.152***	.057	.094 <sup>†</sup>
Results			.179***		
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.040 <sup>b</sup>	.509			
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.179***	.087	.110**
Results			.179***	.088	.111**

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,947)=8.099\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(2, 950)=19.631\*\*\*

For the construct of Success, the predictor in the final model was Results (Table 4.20). The model,  $F(1, 951)=35.614$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for the predictor was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. The Beta value for the predictor in the final model indicated that the predictor and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.20

*Effects of Perceived Competence on Success: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.039 <sup>a</sup>	.564			
Terms and Concepts			.158***	.011	.019
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.156***	.034	.050
Assessment Design			.156***	.016	.030
Implement, Collect, and Analyze			.150***	-.013	-.023
Results			.190***	.087	.143**
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.036 <sup>b</sup>	.563			
Results			.190***	.190	.190***

Note. †p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,947)=7.721\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(1, 951)=35.614\*\*\*

For the construct of Training and Development, the predictors in the final model were Terms & Concepts and Results (Table 4.21). The model,  $F(2, 950)=13.410$  was significant at the  $p<.001$  level. Additionally, the t-test for the predictor of Results was significant at the  $p<.05$  level. The t-tests for the predictor of Terms and Concepts did not show statistical significance; however, the final regression model for Approach was statistically significant with this predictor present. The Beta values in the final model indicated that the predictors and dependent variable correlated positively.

Table 4.21

*Effects of Perceived Competence on Training and Development: Backward Regression*

	R <sup>2</sup>	S.E Estimate			
Training			r	Semi-partial	Beta
<b>Full Model</b>	.029 <sup>a</sup>	.568			
Terms and Concepts			.150***	.033	.057
Values, Ethics, and Politics			.139***	.028	.041
Assessment Design			.138***	.017	.031
Implement, Collect, and Analyze			.125***	-.016	-.029
Results			.153***	.054	.090 <sup>†</sup>
<b>Restricted Model</b>	.027 <sup>b</sup>	.567			
Terms and Concepts			.150***	.063	.085 <sup>†</sup>
Results			.153***	.070	.095*

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.10. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> F(5,947)=5.594\*\*\*

<sup>b</sup> F(2, 950)=13.410\*\*\*

Beyond discussing which predictors most often appeared in the final regression models for each construct, when considering the effects of perceived competence on responses, it is also notable to explore which dependent variables (skill/competence areas) contributed the most to the variance in Likert responses for each construct (discussed below). The squared semi-partial or "part" correlation indicates the unique contribution of an independent variable to the variance in the dependent variable.

For the construct of Personal and Professional Qualities related to assessment, the competency area of Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results yielded a squared

semi-partial correlation of .011, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for 1.1% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Perceptions about assessment, the competency area of Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .020, meaning that this dependent variables uniquely accounted for 2.0% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Approach to assessment, the competency area of Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .005, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for .5% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Engagement in assessment, the competency area of Terms and Concepts yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .010, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for 1.0% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Work Environment (assessment culture), the competency area of Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results as well as the competency area of Values, Ethics, and Politics each yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .008, meaning that these dependent variables each uniquely accounted for .8% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Success with Assessment, the competency area of Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .036, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for 3.6% of the variance among responses in this construct.

For the construct of Training and Development in assessment, the competency area of Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results yielded a squared semi-partial correlation of .005, meaning that this dependent variable uniquely accounted for .5% of the variance among responses in this construct.

Table 4.22 illustrates which competence predictors were retained in the restricted model for each of the seven constructs.

Table 4.22

*Beta Values: Competence Variables Retained in Final Models for Each Construct*

Constructs (DV)	1-Qualities	2-Perceptions	3-Approach	4-Engagement	5-Work Environment	6-Success	7-Training
Terms and Concepts	.121**			.133**			.085 <sup>†</sup>
Values, Ethics, and Politics		.114**	.081 <sup>†</sup>		.110**		
Assessment Design			.079 <sup>†</sup>				
Implement, Collect, and Analyze Results	.144***	.180***	.108*	.091*	.111**	.190***	.095*

Note. <sup>†</sup>p<.1.0. \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

### Summary

The survey administration for the current study yielded 953 usable response sets. Respondents consisted of student affairs professionals serving in the following roles: Assessment Leader, Upper-Level Leadership, Director, Assistant/Associate Director, Coordinator, Administrative Support, and Other. Responses on the Likert scale items varied significantly by role for each of the seven constructs pertaining to effective integration of assessment and the development of an assessment disposition. Notably, assessment leaders generally indicated higher agreement that the Likert items contributed to the assessment culture in student affairs, compared to other roles. Administrative support staff and roles categorized as “other” generally

indicated lower agreement with these items. Upper-Level Leaders, Directors, Assistant/Associate Directors, and Coordinators did not vary significantly in their level of agreement with the Likert items.

Agreement with the Likert items also varied significantly by respondent's perceptions of level of training. Within many constructs, respondents having received training opportunities within student affairs divisions and/or training through academic coursework were indicators that respondents would express higher levels of agreement that survey items contributed to effective assessment.

Additionally, agreement with the Likert items varied significantly by respondents' perceptions of level of competence in assessment. Among the skill areas studied, Capacity in Interpreting, Reporting, and Using Results was the most prominent indicator that respondents would express higher levels of agreement that the survey items contributed to effective assessment.

Overall, statistically significant differences were found within each of the three research questions. The data suggested that the independent variables of professional role, level of assessment training, and level of assessment competence contributed significantly to the extent to which respondents agreed that attitudes and behaviors thought to be best practices of an assessment culture would contribute to effective integration of assessment/the development of an assessment disposition within student affairs.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

This study explored student affairs professionals and their views of what constitutes effective integration of assessment and assessment disposition, as influenced by several demographic factors (professional role, perceived training level, and perceived competence). Chapter 1 consisted of an introduction, statement of the research problem, purpose of the study, research questions, a description of the significance of the study, and definitions of terms.

Chapter 2 provided a review of pertinent literature. The literature review emphasized the historical significance of assessment in higher education and student affairs; the roots of professional development and professional standards in higher education assessment; the increased demand for accountability and evidence of value-added at institutions of higher learning; and issues that challenge assessment growth within an institution (e.g. lack of alignment, obtaining buy-in, fostering collaboration, the challenge of measuring student learning, and fear of punitive consequences).

The methods and research design of this study were outlined in Chapter 3. This chapter included details concerning research design, population and sample, instrument/method, data collection, and analysis. The researcher conducted analyses aimed at addressing the following research question: 1) Do perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs differ by a student affairs practitioner's professional role?; 2) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's reported level of assessment training and perceptions of effective assessment in

student affairs?; and 3) What is the relationship between a student affairs practitioner's perceived level of assessment competence and perceptions of effective assessment in student affairs?

Chapter 4 discussed the results of the study and analyses. The researcher presented demographics, descriptives/frequencies, and statistical findings for the study. Each research question was addressed, with supporting data and significant findings highlighted.

Chapter 5 provides a conclusion of the study. This chapter describes a summary, further interpretation of findings, implications, and recommendations.

### **Discussion of Results**

The analyses addressing each research question revealed significant results to prompt discussion and interpretation. Within each research question, the independent variable being studied significantly contributed to variance in the dependent variables (survey constructs). Among the student affairs professionals surveyed, perceptions of effective integration of assessment and development of an assessment disposition varied with professional role, perceived level of training, and perceived level of competence.

#### **Research Question One**

Research question one addressed to what extent respondents indicated agreement with the Likert survey items, compared by role. The Likert items included statements pertaining to actions or ideals that should lead to effective integration of assessment/the development of an assessment disposition within a student affairs culture. For many of the constructs, student affairs Assessment Leaders expressed a higher level of agreement in the survey statements when compared to other roles. Additionally, student affairs staff in roles categorized as Other or in Administrative Support roles often expressed lower levels of agreement with the survey



statements. There were no statistical differences among levels of agreement for the roles of Upper Level Leadership, Director, Assistant/Associate Director, or Coordinator.

It is to be expected that Assessment Leaders, compared to other student affairs professionals, would more highly value items/statements that were derived from established best practices for promoting an assessment culture; the survey results support this claim.

Respondents classified as having a role of Other are those who wrote-in job titles that did not fit with the traditional student affairs roles in the provided answer choices (e.g. write-ins for information technology, stage manager, accountant etc.). As these staff members are not in typical student affairs roles, it seems reasonable that they would not value the same indicators of an assessment culture or an assessment disposition.

Respondents in Administrative Support roles may have expressed less agreement on the constructs of Success and Training because of a lack of exposure in these areas. Perhaps Administrative Support staff receive less professional development in assessment and have less opportunities to participate in assessment; therefore, these survey items would not resonate as values.

The lack of variance among Upper-Level Leadership, Directors, Assistant/Associate Directors, and Coordinators could be due to similar exposure to literature and best practices in higher education, student affairs, and assessment. These professionals are not leading the assessment charge in their divisions. However, most have graduate degrees in higher education or a related field and likely participate in many of the same professional organizations, committees, and professional development opportunities. One would expect like-minded perceptions of what constitutes effective assessment among professionals in such roles.

## **Research Question Two**

Research question two addressed the extent to which a student affairs professional's perceived level of training in assessment might affect perceptions of effective integration of assessment/development of assessment disposition as expressed through the Likert items in the survey constructs. A strongest backward regression model was computed for each construct. In reviewing the final regression models, it is interesting to see which training avenues were included more frequently. Attending conferences was a predictor in four of the models. Professional organizations was a predictor in three of the models. Student affairs opportunities was a predictor in five of the models. Institutional opportunities outside of student affairs was a predictor in two of the models, interestingly with a negative correlation. Content within academic coursework was a predictor in six of the models.

It is interesting that student affairs opportunities and academic coursework are the most frequently occurring training avenue predictors of the dependent variables/survey constructs. This supports a benefit of staff assessment training/professional development offered through student affairs assessment offices; in this study, professionals who perceived that they were well-trained through their student affairs division expressed higher levels of agreement with values shown to promote effective assessment. Similarly, respondents who indicated a perception of being well-trained in assessment through academic coursework also expressed high levels of agreement with values that promote an assessment culture. This could suggest a benefit to hiring appropriately educated professionals to serve as student affairs educators, as well as offering tuition support to student affairs practitioners wishing to pursue such education. Furthermore, given the impact of training through both student affairs opportunities and academic coursework, collaboration between institutions' higher education graduate programs and divisions of student

affairs could lead to course offerings designed to provide students with practical student affairs assessment experience.

All correlations among the predictors (training avenues) for each construct are below .7, indicating that they are not too highly correlated. All of the predictors in each of the final models had tolerance values greater than .2 and variance inflation factor (VIF) values less than 4 (Hair et al., 2010), indicating that the predictors are unique and there is not an issue with multicollinearity in these models.

Interpretation of the highest semi-partial (“part”) correlation for each construct’s regression model provides valuable insight. When considering the effects of level of training on perceptions of effective integration of assessment/development of an assessment disposition, it is notable that for six of the seven constructs, a respondent’s level of training through either professional organizations or attending conferences was the greatest unique predictor of variance in the Likert responses. For these six constructs (Qualities, Perceptions, Approach, Engagement, Work Environment, and Training and Development) respondents who indicated higher levels of training through professional organizations or attending conferences were more likely to indicate agreement with the survey items. This could support the importance of membership in professional organizations and the importance of professional development through conference attendance. It seems that involvement with these opportunities contributed to a more positive perception of effective assessment in student affairs.

Interestingly, for the construct of Success, the greatest unique predictor of variance was training through academic coursework. Respondents who indicated higher levels of training through coursework were more likely to agree with the survey items in this construct, indicating a positive view of Success with assessment work. Perhaps, the nature of experiencing Success

with assessment is well-facilitated by more specialized or intensive training, such as that found in academic programs, likely graduate work in higher education or a related field. These findings may also suggest the importance of encouraging appropriate educational attainment among student affairs professionals.

### **Research Question Three**

Research question three addressed the extent to which a student affairs professional's perceived level of competence in assessment might affect perceptions of effective integration of assessment/development of assessment disposition as expressed through the Likert items in the survey constructs. A strongest backward regression model was computed for each construct. In reviewing the final regression models, it is interesting to see which of the skill areas comprising competence were included more frequently. Ability to describe terms and concepts was a predictor in three of the models. Knowledge of values, ethics, and politics was a predictor in three of the models. Neither capacity in assessment design nor ability to implement method, collect data, and analyze data were predictors in a strongest backward regression model for any construct. Capacity in interpreting, reporting, and using results was a predictor in six of the models.

It is notable that capacity in interpreting, reporting and using results is the most frequently occurring competency area predictor for the dependent variables/survey constructs. In this study, professionals who perceived that they were very competent in interpreting, reporting, and using results expressed a higher level of agreement with values shown to promote effective assessment. Perhaps, as this assessment skill area could be considered more advanced than the others presented on the survey, it was a more powerful predictor. That is, student affairs professionals who are highly competent in interpretation, reporting, and using results would likely also have knowledge of assessment terms and concepts; values, ethics, and politics;

assessment design; and methods, data collection, and analysis. However, it is of interest that the competence areas of ability to describe terms and concepts and knowledge of values, ethics, and politics each appear in three of the final regression models for the constructs. Respondents who indicated higher levels of skill in these competency areas also expressed higher levels of agreement with the Likert items. Perhaps these more basic assessment skills are sometimes enough to influence perceptions of an assessment culture. These findings support the notion that training and professional development aimed at increasing assessment competency, at a range of skill levels, is useful in influencing staff attitudes toward assessment and the development of an assessment culture in student affairs.

All correlations among the predictors (training avenues) for each construct are below .7, indicating that they are not too highly correlated. All of the predictors in each of the final models had tolerance values greater than .2 and variance inflation factor (VIF) values less than 4 (Hair et al., 2010), indicating that the predictors are unique and there was not an issue with multicollinearity in these models.

Interpretation of the highest semi-partial (“part”) correlation for each construct’s regression model provides valuable insight. When considering the effects of level of assessment competence on perceptions of effective integration of assessment/development of an assessment disposition, it is notable that for six of the seven constructs, a respondent’s level of competence in interpreting, reporting, and using results was the greatest unique predictor of variance in the Likert responses. For these six constructs (Qualities, Perceptions, Approach, Work Environment, Success, and Training & Development) respondents who indicated higher levels of perceived competence in interpreting, reporting, and using results were more likely to indicate agreement with the survey items. Perhaps when a student affairs professional holds a high level of

confidence in ability to carry out the final and perhaps most complex steps of the assessment cycle, skill development in other areas of assessment has occurred as well. A high perception of one's competence to work with assessment results contributed to a more positive perception of effective assessment in student affairs.

It is also insightful that the competence area of values, ethics, and politics was a close second in its unique contribution to variance in the construct of Work Environment. It certainly seems that navigating a student affairs work environment and its assessment culture would require some degree of skill in deciphering the accepted politics of the organization, as well as the values and ethics related to assessment work. It is logical that a higher level of perceived competence in values, ethics, and politics would indicate agreement with the survey items related to Work Environment. This suggests the importance of making sure student affairs professionals understand and have discussions pertaining to division values and division/assessment common language.

Interestingly, for the construct of Engagement, the greatest unique predictor of variance was competence in one's ability to describe terms and concepts associated with assessment. Respondents who indicated higher levels of competence with terms and concepts were more likely to agree with the survey items in this construct, indicating a positive view of Engagement in assessment work. Perhaps, in order to value Engagement in assessment as a contributor to developing an assessment disposition, a professional only needs skill in the basic concepts underlying student affairs assessment. This finding supports a need to teach assessment basics to all levels of staff.

## Implications

There are certainly inferences to be made from the variance in the construct items, particularly pertaining to the three research questions of the present study, as noted above. Additionally, there is valuable insight to be gained from reviewing agreement among respondents. The statements below are those with the highest mean score(s) from each construct. These statements have mean scores ranging from 4.18 to 4.37; at least 85% of respondents indicated agreement with each of these statements (through a Likert response of “agree” or “strongly agree”):

Student affairs professionals who effectively integrate assessment into their practice value continuous improvement; believe assessment can help with decision making; believe student affairs work impacts student learning; and want to do a good job with assessment. Student affairs professionals are likely to develop an assessment disposition when they engage in assessment work that is valuable to them; when they see that assessment results are used for improvement; when they see how assessment can impact their ability to obtain resources; and when their supervisors support opportunities for assessment training.

There are several implications of these largely agreed upon statements. One can gather that these student affairs professionals hoped to integrate assessment in a way that benefits their work and its purpose, while maintaining a disposition in line with the belief that assessment should add value. Respondents in the current study agreed on the importance of evidence-based decisions that continuously feed back into programs; they expressed worth in using assessment to make the right decisions for their programs and students. They agreed that student learning should be a focus for student affairs educators, and thus indicated the importance of doing assessment well. Respondents suggested that they will buy-in to assessment work that measures

what they value, drives improvement, and justifies needs. They agreed that assessment professional development opportunities are effective when supported by student affairs leaders.

### **Limitations**

The researcher noted several limitations that could have affected survey administration and findings. For one, the survey instrument is somewhat lengthy compared to many student affairs surveys. The survey was originally developed for student affairs assessment leaders (Thoennes, 2017) who could be more willing to invest such a time commitment, compared to other student affairs staff. This leads to the question of whether or not staff who chose to respond to this survey administration were simply more invested in assessment in general. This could potentially inflate agreement with the survey items.

Another limitation involves the use of publicly available email addresses. Some institutions' websites contained more organized contact pages than others. In some cases, the researcher had difficulty finding contact information for all departments or all levels of staff at certain institutions. Would underlying factors related to maintenance of a more robust website lead to the contribution of participants who would tend to value assessment? It is possible that schools and departments with more robust webpages/contact pages could be more likely to have developed assessment cultures.

The researcher acknowledges that low response rate is typically a limitation. The response rate for staff respondents for this study was approximately 10%. In many cases this response rate would be considered less than ideal; however, it is important to note that this project was essentially a population study, based on the fact that the researcher made every attempt to collect email addresses for all professionals in the population being studied. Despite



the response rate, the usable response sets comprised a good sample and acceptable number of responses.

Another potential limitation was the timing of survey administration. The researcher of the present study administered the survey during the summer 2018 semester. During data collection, the researcher received several out-of-office replies, indicating that a staff member was on leave or in some cases, working away from the office. Summer semesters are often a good time for some student affairs professionals to plan vacations, while others are incredibly busy with the demands of orientation programs that occur primarily in the summer. This could be a limitation considering that a summer survey administration timeline may have affected who responded, by department.

An additional possible limitation was the use of series means to replace missing values within sets of responses ( $n=953$ ) to Likert scale items representing the seven constructs; the researcher chose this method, as the percentage of cases with missing values for each item ranged from .0% to .5%. Baraldi & Enders (2009) concluded that mean substitution is not a good choice for replacing missing values, but acknowledged that this technique is still quite common, even in recent studies. The authors recommended that scholars abandon this outdated choice in favor of newer methods such as maximum likelihood and multiple imputation, as these approaches require less strict assumptions and provide more sophisticated approaches to dealing with missing data.

While mean imputation is not the recommended choice of modern scholars for handling missing data, it is unlikely that analyses in the present study were biased, as the proportion of missing values was extremely small (Dong and Peng, 2013). Schafer (1999) stated that when there is a small proportion of missing values, single imputation methods (e.g. mean imputation)

may be reasonable; he noted that when the rate of missing information is less than 5%, the effect is relatively inconsequential and that single imputation may result in fairly accurate analyses. Similarly, Bennet (2001) concluded that analyses were not likely to be biased if less than 10% of the data were missing. Several authors noted that at missing rates of 5-10% or lower, various methods for replacing missing data performed similarly and analyses containing these imputed data produced results consistent with those from original values (Cheema, 2014; Dong & Peng, 2013). The researcher maintains confidence in the analyses in the present study; however, given the potential pitfalls of traditional data imputation techniques- such as biased estimates, attenuated correlations, and reduced variance (Baraldi & Enders, 2009), in subsequent iterations of the present survey research, consideration and study of modern principles for addressing missing data is recommended.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

The findings of this study are noteworthy because they contribute to the literature on building a culture of assessment in higher education, particularly in divisions of student affairs. There is a need for research on factors that contribute to staff buy-in and placing value in assessment work. While this study explored the factors of role, perceived training level, and perceived competence level, there is much room for building on the research and findings in the present study, using this or a similar instrument.

### **Recommendations for Future Survey Administrations**

The original study (Thoennes, 2017) focused on assessment leaders in student affairs divisions at institutions across the United States. The current study explored perceptions of leaders and staff at doctoral degree granting institutions in the Southeast (per accreditor), within select independent variables.

The current researcher recommends several approaches for expanding on this study. It would be valuable to apply this instrument and/or similar research questions to other populations of student affairs professionals (e.g. other regions, bachelor's degree-granting institutions, community colleges, private institutions, small institutions, or a specific departmental area across institutions).

Another valuable idea for further study would involve tailoring a similar instrument to a population outside of student affairs, such as academic assessment or institutional research. This would allow for measuring what is valued by higher education professionals within the larger content area of assessment/institutional research/institutional effectiveness. Ultimately, comparisons could be made as to how assessment related endeavors are perceived across various areas of the campus.

Additionally, the researcher recommends replicating the study but analyzing other demographic factors as independent variables (e.g. gender, age, degree attainment, institutional size). The current study revealed statistically significant variance within all research questions. It would be valuable to frame research questions around other demographic information from the survey to determine what other factors may contribute to variance in effective integration of assessment and development of an assessment disposition in student affairs.

### **Recommendations for Institutions and Student Affairs Divisions**

Based on the findings of the current study pertaining to professional role, perceived level of training, and perceived level of competence, as well as general considerations, the researcher provides several recommendations for practitioners to consider. Findings concerning variance in perceptions of assessment, based on professional role, show a need to explore why some staff members differ in their values. Student affairs upper-level administrators and assessment leaders should seek strategies for increased buy-in and understanding of the role of assessment in staff's

daily work. This understanding could be facilitated by adopting a common language of terms and concepts; regular communication about assessment efforts and expectations; and greater collaboration among assessment leaders, professional staff, and divisional leadership. Additionally, it is a best practice to offer training opportunities on assessment topics that are inclusive of all roles within student affairs.

The findings related to perceived level of training in the area of assessment suggest that student affairs professionals with higher levels of training may have more positive values pertaining to assessment. When considering training options that would bolster assessment skill within a student affairs division, divisional and assessment leaders should consider capitalizing on training avenues shown to be most effective. In this study, training opportunities through academic coursework or training through a student affairs division showed the greatest impact on how professionals value assessment. Student affairs leaders should advocate for appropriate tuition benefits to encourage employees to pursue degree attainment that would increase assessment skill as well as other desirable competencies. Also, student affairs assessment leaders should collaborate with their division leadership and working teams to develop and implement in-house training curriculums that provide all staff with an opportunity to learn about assessment in a lower stakes environment. It could also be useful for leadership to consider the training avenue from the present study that was least effective among student affairs staff in promoting the integration of assessment and the development of an assessment disposition (i.e. institutional training opportunities outside of student affairs). Training opportunities at the respondents' institutions but outside of student affairs yielded negative correlations with perceptions of student affairs assessment. Perhaps this is indication that student affairs educators should consider their relationship with academic affairs counterparts. If there is a divide between these

two areas on campus that is clouding staff perceptions of the effectiveness of their work, efforts should be made to increase collaboration across campus- among student affairs administrators, academic affairs administrators, and faculty.

The findings of the current study concerning perceived competency level imply that professional development in assessment affects how professionals value assessment and to what extent they are willing to integrate assessment into their work. Assessment leaders should focus professional development efforts on areas where skills are weaker. In the present study the skill area pertaining to the ability to implement a method, collect data, and analyze data had the lowest mean for perceived competence. These are crucial points of the assessment cycle; it would benefit any student affairs division to provide opportunities for professionals to increase these specific skills. It is also important for student affairs and assessment leadership to focus on what staff are doing well. The highest mean score for a skill area in the current study was knowledge of values, ethics, and politics. If staff members are confident in their good sense of the ideals and politics that come into play with assessment efforts, these topics could be used to encourage robust discussions that would promote interest in skill development in other assessment techniques. All steps of the assessment cycle are necessary for a robust assessment culture within a division of student affairs. Efforts should be taken to build practitioner capacity at each step of the cycle. From understanding the terms and concepts that will aid in setting goals to ultimately using results for improvement, student affairs leaders should work to ensure that each step is covered by competent and empowered professionals.

In general, the findings from this study indicate some broad actions that student affairs administrators, assessment leaders, and practitioners can apply to their work. The items and constructs on the Likert portion of the survey have been vetted through experts in student affairs

assessment. These statements are thought to represent best practices and ideal traits for student affairs practitioners who successfully integrate assessment into their work and possess an assessment disposition. The sets of statements for the survey constructs are agreed upon ideals and behaviors that should foster the development of a culture of evidence in student affairs. Leadership should certainly promote these ideas. Additionally, however, it is necessary to strive for agreement among levels of staff. The present researcher explored where disagreement existed among respondents in the current study. It is certainly normal for some disagreement to exist related to the value of assessment and what constitutes effective assessment practices. If these disagreements persist or become prevalent, student affairs leaders and assessment leaders should look for a “why.” It is important to listen to practitioners to find out what they value, where they disagree, and what promotes collaboration on assessment efforts. The current study sought to contribute to the literature and knowledge surrounding perceptions of student affairs assessment. There are many opportunities for future researchers to explore this topic within a range of settings, populations, and variables to better understand assessment cultures in student affairs divisions and across higher education institutions.

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## **Appendix A: Participant Information Letter**

Add this approval information in sentence form to your electronic information letter!



The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this Document for use from 11/01/2017 to 10/31/2020 Protocol # 17-432 EX 1711

AUBURN UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

INFORMATION LETTER  
for a Research Study entitled

"Leader and Staff Perceptions of Assessment and Related Professional Development in Divisions of Student Affairs"

You are invited to participate in a research study that will explore attitudes toward building assessment capacity and general perceptions of assessment in Student Affairs.

The study is being conducted by Emily Wilkins, doctoral candidate in the Administration of Higher Education program at Auburn University, under the direction of Dr. James E. Groccia, Professor in the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology at Auburn University. You are invited to participate because you are either a leader in Student Affairs Assessment or a professional in Student Affairs who may be tasked with assessment responsibilities.

**What will be involved if you participate?** Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate in this research study, you will be asked to answer a few demographic items. You will also be asked to rate your level of agreement with statements concerning your perceptions of assessment in student affairs. Your total time commitment will be approximately 15-20 minutes.

**Are there any risks or discomforts?** The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. To further minimize these risks, all responses will be analyzed in aggregate for student assessment leaders versus student affairs professional staff.

**If you change your mind about participating,** you can withdraw at any time by closing your browser window. Once you've submitted anonymous data, it cannot be withdrawn since it will be unidentifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University or the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology.

**Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous.** We will protect your privacy and the data you provide by presenting only aggregated data. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a dissertation, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting.

**If you have questions about this study,** please contact Emily Wilkins at (334) 844-1321 or [emily.wilkins@auburn.edu](mailto:emily.wilkins@auburn.edu).

**If you have questions about your rights as a research participant,** you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at [IRBadmin@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBadmin@auburn.edu) or [IRBChair@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBChair@auburn.edu).

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, PLEASE CLICK THE SURVEY LINK BELOW. YOU MAY PRINT A COPY OF THIS LETTER TO KEEP.

*Emily B. Wilkin*

10-05-2017

Investigator

Date

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from to . Protocol #

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460; Fax: 334-844-3072

w w w . a u b u r n . e d u

## **Appendix B: IRB Approval**

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD for RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS  
REQUEST FOR EXEMPT CATEGORY RESEARCH**

For Information or help completing this form, contact: **THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE**, 115 Ramsay Hall  
Phone: 334-844-5966 e-mail: IRBAdmin@auburn.edu Web Address: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/index.htm>

**Revised 2/1/2014** Submit completed form to [IRBsubmit@auburn.edu](mailto:IRBsubmit@auburn.edu) or 115 Ramsay Hall, Auburn University 36849.

Form must be populated using Adobe Acrobat / Pro 9 or greater standalone program (do not fill out in browser). Hand written forms will not be accepted.

*Project activities may not begin until you have received approval from the Auburn University IRB.*

**1. PROJECT PERSONNEL & TRAINING**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR (PI):**

Name Emily B. Wilkins, M.A. Title Graduate Student Dept./School Educational FLT  
Address 255 Heisman Drive, Suite 3231 AU Email emily.wilkins@auburn.edu  
Phone 334-844-1321 Dept. Head Sherida Downer

**FACULTY ADVISOR (if applicable):**

Name James E. Groccia, Ed.D. Title Professor Dept./School Educational FLT  
Address 4036 Haley Center  
Phone (334) 844-3060 AU Email groccje@auburn.edu

**KEY PERSONNEL:** List Key Personnel (other than PI and FA). Additional personnel may be listed in an attachment.

Name	Title	Institution	Responsibilities
<u>David Shannon, Ph.D.</u>	<u>Professor</u>	<u>Auburn University</u>	<u>Data Analysis</u>
<u>Abbygail Langham, Ph.D.</u>	<u>SA Assess. Dir.</u>	<u>Auburn University</u>	<u>Project Development</u>

**KEY PERSONNEL TRAINING:** Have all Key Personnel completed CITI Human Research Training (including elective modules related to this research) within the last 3 years?  YES  NO

**TRAINING CERTIFICATES:** Please attach CITI completion certificates for all Key Personnel.

**2. PROJECT INFORMATION**

Title: Leader and Staff Perceptions of Assessment and Related Professional Development in Divisions of Student Affairs

Source of Funding:  Investigator  Internal  External

List External Agency & Grant Number: n/a

List any contractors, sub-contractors, or other entities associate with this project.  
n/a

List any other IRBs associated with this project (including those involved with reviewing, deferring, or determinations).  
n/a

FOR ORC OFFICE USE ONLY			
DATE RECEIVED IN ORC:	_____	by _____	APPROVAL
DATE OF IRB REVIEW:	_____	by _____	APPROVAL
DATE OF ORC REVIEW:	_____	by _____	INTERVAL
DATE OF APPROVAL:	_____	by _____	
COMMENTS:			

**The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this Document for use from**  
11/01/2017 to 10/31/2020  
Protocol # 17-432 EX 1711

## **Appendix C: Survey Instrument**

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

Please answer the following questions to provide demographic information and information about your professional experience.

Of the following, select ALL items that are included in your responsibilities:

- Lead student affairs assessment efforts
- Provide assessment training and development
- Oversee the accreditation process for student affairs
- Facilitate strategic planning
- Coordinate program review
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What percentage of your work currently involves working with student affairs professionals on assessment?

- Less than 25%
- 25-49%
- 50-74%
- 75-100%

\*\*\*\*\*Items above just for “leader” survey\*\*\*\*\*

Please rate your level of assessment training/assessment-related professional development, through each of the following avenues:

1= very low	2=low	3= moderate	4=high	5=very high
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- Attending Conferences
- Opportunities through Professional Organizations (workshops, webinars, etc.)
- Opportunities Offered through your Student Affairs Division
- Opportunities Offered at your Institution (Outside of Student Affairs)
- Content within Academic Coursework

Please rate your perceived level of competence in your ability to conduct assessment within your current role, in each of the following areas:

1= very low	2=low	3= moderate	4=high	5=very high
-------------	-------	-------------	--------	-------------

- Ability to describe terms and concepts associated with assessment
- Knowledge of the values, ethics, and politics involved in sustaining a culture of assessment
- Capacity in assessment design (outcome creation, addressing research questions, etc.)
- Ability to implement appropriate methodology, data collection, and data analysis procedures
- Capacity in interpreting, reporting, and using results

What is the size of your institution?

- Large (more than 10,000 students)
- Medium (3,000-9,999 students)
- Small (1,000-2,999 students)
- Very small (fewer than 1,000 students)

Please select ALL the titles and/or roles that apply to you:

- Chief Student Affairs Officer
- Assistant/Associate Vice President
- Director
- Assistant/Associate Director
- Coordinator
- Faculty/Adjunct Faculty Member
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate to whom you directly report:

- President/Chancellor
- Provost/Senior Academic Affairs Administrator
- Chief Student Affairs Officer
- Department Head/Director
- Assistant Director
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your highest level of education completed?

- Doctoral degree (e.g. Ph.D., Ed.D.)
- Professional degree (e.g. Pharm.D., J.D.)
- Master's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Associate's degree
- High School diploma
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you worked professionally in higher education?

- Please Specify # of Years \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you worked professionally in student affairs?

- Please Specify # of Years \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been in your current employment position?

- Please Specify # of Years \_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate your age range:

- 25 or less
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- Over 60



Please indicate your gender:

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to respond
- Self-Identify (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_

Please indicate your ethnicity:

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino
- Prefer not to respond

Please indicate ALL races that apply to you among the following:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Prefer not to respond

**Construct: Personal and Professional Qualities**

Statements in this category *relate to how student affairs professionals view themselves, their own work, and the work of other student affairs professionals.*

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following five-point Likert scale:

1= strongly disagree	2=disagree	3= no opinion or uncertain	4=agree	5=strongly agree
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**Student affairs professionals who effectively integrate assessment into their practice...**

Value feedback
Value continuous improvement
Believe their own talents can be developed
Are interested in working with others to enhance assessment abilities
Are inquisitive learners
Value the process of learning
Are intellectually curious
Value focusing on program strengths
Value focusing on program limitations
Value innovation
Are interested in building relationships to make assessment successful
Value collaboration
Value engagement in professional dialogues
Value working with others across the institution
Value organizational development
Value evidence-based decision making
Value their roles as educators
Are interested in learning about the student-affairs profession
Value reflective practice

**Construct: Perceptions about Assessment**

Statements in this category *center mostly on beliefs about what assessment is and its purpose and value.*

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following five-point Likert scale:

1= strongly disagree	2=disagree	3= no opinion or uncertain	4=agree	5=strongly agree
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**Student affairs professionals who effectively integrate assessment into their practice...**

Believe assessment is for more than accreditation
Believe the purpose of assessment is for improvement of programs and/or services
Believe assessment can help with decision making
Are interested in understanding the effectiveness of programs or services
Believe assessment helps tell the “story” of student affairs
Believe learning takes place in and out of the classroom
Believe assessment is a best practice of student affairs
Believe student affairs work impacts student learning
Are motivated to demonstrate the role student affairs plays in student learning
Believe assessment is useful for obtaining resources
Are interested in exploring the impact of interventions on student learning and development
Believe assessment is an avenue to enhance student learning
Believe assessment is an avenue to enhance student development
Believe assessment is critical to the success of student affairs
Believe assessment is critical to facilitating student success
Believe that assessment plays a role in helping students
Believe that assessment involves measuring multiple aspects of an experience

**Construct: Approach to Assessment**

Statements in this category relate to whether or not student affairs professionals *have a positive attitude toward assessment and want to do a good job with assessment.*

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following five-point Likert scale:

1= strongly disagree	2=disagree	3= no opinion or uncertain	4=agree	5=strongly agree
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**Student affairs professionals who effectively integrate assessment into their practice...**

Have a positive attitude toward assessment
Are committed to asking questions about the effectiveness of their work
Want to do a good job with assessment
Are willing to put resources toward assessment
Believe assessment is worth their time
See assessment as an integral part of their job responsibilities
Feel empowered to do assessment
Feel competent to do assessment
Believe in the importance of the assessment cycle
Believe assessment must be well thought-out
Believe assessment should not be unnecessarily complex
Are committed to conducting assessment regardless of the results
Want to learn more about assessment through doing assessment
Believe assessment results will not negatively impact them professionally
Are intrinsically motivated to do assessment
Do not take assessment results personally
Enjoy doing assessment
Believe that theory should be incorporated into assessment
Want to gather evidence to measure student learning outcomes
Believe that assessment should be implemented in accordance with best practices

**Construct: Engagement**

Statements in this category deal with *whether or not engagement in assessment at some level is likely to help in the development of an assessment disposition.*

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following five-point Likert scale:

1= strongly disagree	2=disagree	3= no opinion or uncertain	4=agree	5=strongly agree
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**Student affairs professionals are likely to develop an assessment disposition when...**

They engage in assessment work that is meaningful to them
They engage in assessment work that is valuable to them
They have mentors (such as supervisors, upper administrators...) who model an assessment disposition
They build relationships with others who have an assessment disposition
They see others using assessment meaningfully
They have opportunities to engage in assessment
Their assessment work involves more than just gathering data
They engage frequently in conversations about assessment
They are around others who have an assessment disposition
Assessment is embedded in their practice
They are involved in professional associations that foster a broader perspective about assessment
They participate in work groups focused on assessment

**Construct: Work Environment**

Statements in this category deal with *the importance of an assessment culture*.

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following five-point Likert scale:

1= strongly disagree	2=disagree	3= no opinion or uncertain	4=agree	5=strongly agree
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**Student affairs professionals are likely to develop an assessment disposition when...**

They see examples of assessment that demonstrate it is not unnecessarily complicated
They recognize they are already doing assessment, even if it's less formal
They can see concrete examples of assessment projects
Discussion about assessment is incorporated into meetings
They feel supported to engage in assessment
They are encouraged to engage in assessment
They are recognized for their assessment work
They have access to help with assessment
Their institutional infrastructure supports assessment practice
Assessment is not simply an "add-on" to their work responsibilities
Assessment is integrated into processes (e.g. annual reports, strategic planning...)
Assessment work is expected for more than accountability
They perceive a need to demonstrate the value of their work to others
Assessment responsibilities are part of their job descriptions
Assessment responsibilities are part of their performance reviews
They are expected to meet accreditation standards
Student learning is a priority in their work
They see that assessment results are used for improvement
The need for assessment is stated at their institution
Assessment is valued at their institution

**Construct: Success with Assessment**

The statements in this category address the idea that *experiencing success with assessment helps to develop an assessment disposition*.

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following five-point Likert scale:

1= strongly disagree	2=disagree	3= no opinion or uncertain	4=agree	5=strongly agree
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**Student affairs professionals are likely to develop an assessment disposition when...**

Assessment projects are clearly aligned with other parts of their work
They utilize assessment to demonstrate the value of their work
They see how assessment can impact their ability to obtain resources
They experience satisfaction from their assessment work
They experience small victories around assessment
Assessment work is fun for them
They observe improvement of student learning and development as a result of evidence-driven decisions
They are rewarded for conducting assessment projects

**Construct: Training and Development**

The statements in this category address the idea that when *student-affairs professionals have an opportunity to increase their knowledge and skills of assessment, it may be reasonable to believe that it is likely they will develop a stronger assessment disposition as well.*

Indicate your level of agreement with each statement using the following five-point Likert scale:

1= strongly disagree	2=disagree	3= no opinion or uncertain	4=agree	5=strongly agree
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**Student affairs professionals are likely to develop an assessment disposition when...**

Assessment training is part of their professional development
They can demonstrate assessment skills
Their supervisor supports opportunities for assessment training
Assessment training is congruent with their level of assessment experience
They have increased their assessment knowledge
They have developed the ability to implement assessment best practices
Assessment training was part of their formal education
They have training on how students learn