

An Empirical Study of Cultures of Assessment in Higher Education

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Higher education campus leaders face a complex state of affairs regarding the documentation of evidence of student learning. There is no shortage of technical guidance for conducting assessment (e.g. Allen, 2006; Bresciani, 2007; Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Lui, 2011; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2009; Walvood & Anderson, 2010), and a great deal of energy and resources are expended gathering, analyzing, interpreting, disseminating, and using data generated through this methodological advice. Yet, the advancement of assessment methods has outpaced explorations of assessment's philosophy and discourses of how assessment and campus cultures are changed have been slow to emerge. In essence, the art and science of assessment are divided and, as Snow (1959) cautions, "when those two senses have grown apart, then no society is going to be able to think with wisdom" (p. 29). As higher education places greater emphasis on empirical data from standardized learning, research regarding why assessment is conducted, how it is leveraged for change, and the ramifications of assessment's purposes must be elevated to a more meaningful level. To this end a new instrument—The Survey of Assessment Culture[©]—was developed to explore factors and strategies influencing the cultivation of cultures of assessment. The Survey supports research and dialogue into cultures of assessment and how assessment emerges as an accepted institutional way of existence. This article reviews the methodological approaches used in the study, shares basic descriptive statistics, and concludes by discussing various implications for the study of assessment cultures and for administrative practice in higher education and educational administration preparation programs.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH GOALS

Popularly theorized by noted assessment scholar, Trudy Banta (2002), a culture of assessment refers to the deeply embedded values and beliefs collectively held by members of an institution influencing assessment practices on their campus (Banta & Associates, 2002; Banta, Lund, Black, Oblander, 1996). A culture of assessment is the primary and often unexplored system undergirding assessment practice on a campus. It is the system of thought and action reinforcing what "good" conduct of assessment looks like on a campus. Extending the concept of a culture of assessment further, Maki's (2010) *Principles of an Inclusive Commitment* offer a structure of institutional partnerships, which, when operating efficiently, indicate a commitment to assessment of student learning. Maki (2010, p. 9) writes:

An inclusive commitment to assessment of student learning is established when it is (1) meaningfully anchored in the educational values of an institution—articulated in a principles-of-commitment statement; (2) intentionally designed to foster interrelated positions of inquiry about the efficacy of education practices among educators, students, and the institution itself as a learning organization; and (3) woven into roles and responsibilities across an institution from the chief executive officer through senior administrators, faculty leaders, faculty, staff, and students. (p. 3)

Drawing from Maki's work, a culture of assessment is defined (in this research endeavor) as the *overarching ethos that is both an artifact of the way in which assessment is done and simultaneously a factor influencing and augmenting assessment practice*.

Guided by this scholarship, the Survey explores six constructs: a) Shared Institutional Commitment, b) Clear Conceptual Framework for Assessment, c) A Cross Institutional Responsibility, d) Transparency of Findings, e) Connection to Change-Making Processes, and f) Recognition of Leadership or Involvement in Assessment. The research goals for this long-range study include the exploration of factors supporting or impeding institutional capacities to develop, maintain, or augment a culture of assessment on their campus. In support of this goal, this study offers a description of the responses to various practices and tactics used by assessment practitioners across the United States.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The *Survey of Assessment Culture* is a twenty-one item, electronic survey that collects forty-six data points divided into five parts: a) Identifying respondent's role/ Chief Assessment Officer, b) Purpose for assessment, c) Assessment Culture Scales, d) Support, resistance, or indifference rankings, and e) Consent to follow up studies/contact. In 2011, the Survey was administered to a representative sample of U.S. institutional research and assessment directors to determine the usefulness and consistency of questions and generate information for instrument improvement. In general, the instrument was well developed and required minimal revision. For example, internal consistency measures (Cronbach's alpha) for the Assessment Culture Scale items were 0.922, well above the generally-accepted 0.7 threshold.

Sampling Method and Administration

Prior research has relied on samples of convenience to explore assessment practices. This study relies on publically-available resources to construct a stratified, representative sample of the U.S. directors of institutional research and assessment. A listing of *undergraduate, degree-granting*, regionally-accredited institutions was downloaded from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education website¹ and was stratified according to institutional full-time enrollment size, accreditation region, and Carnegie Basic Classification. This stratified listing of institutions was placed in a sampling matrix according to the type of degrees awarded (primarily associates vs. primarily bachelors), regional accreditation region, and size of full-time enrollment [Small (under 1,999), Medium (2001 to 4,999), Large (5000 to 9,999), and Very Large (Over 10,000)]. This resulted in a listing of 2,617 institutions; a

¹ <http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/>

population similar to those surveyed by Kuh and Ikenberry (2009). Institutions were sampled at the most refined level of stratification and were over-sampled by a factor of three to ensure the best possible dispersion of a representative number of respondents at and across each level of stratification.

A total of 1,026 institutions were randomly sampled for invitation to participate in the Survey. The Higher Education Directory^{©®} was utilized to identify the contact information for directors of institutional research and assessment at sampled institutions. Although the Higher Education Directory is a voluntary listing of contact information, 77.2% or 792 email addresses for contacts were obtained using this resource. The remaining institutional contacts underwent status checks using institutional websites and public search engines² to identify Chief Assessment Officers; the individuals for whom assessment is their primary responsibility. One hundred and seventy Chief Assessment Officers were identified using this method. The remaining 64 participants did not have an entry in the Higher Education Directory and web searches did not yield contact information. In these cases, the Provost of the institution was invited to participate in the survey and his/her contact information was gathered using the Higher Education Directory. [Once the 1,026 survey respondents were invited to participate in the Survey, a total of 109 emails were returned as either inaccurate or no longer active. It can be assumed a total of 917 participants were adequately invited to participate in the survey]. A complete overview of methodology and limitations can be found at <http://www.shsu.edu/assessmentculture/>

RESULTS

Of the 917 invited participants, 316 responded to the survey and completed at least three-quarters of the survey, providing a 34.5% response rate. This response suggests the potential for *cautious generalizing to the national level* and could be strengthened with greater response in future administrations. Instances of overrepresentation within the strata were not noted.

Institutional Role

The *Survey of Assessment Culture*'s first section collects data on the roles respondents hold on their campus. Participants were asked to respond to the question: "Does your institution employ a Chief Academic Officer?" The survey defines the role of a Chief Assessment Officer as "an individual for whom assessment is their sole responsibility on their campus" and asks participants to indicate if they, another individual, many individuals, or no individuals on their campus fulfill this role. Nearly a third of respondents (31.0% or 98 participants) indicated they were the Chief Assessment Officer for their campus while over half (54.3% or 172 participants) indicated their campus delivers assessment through many practitioners. Participants could describe their role on campus as a Chief Assessment Officer (31.0% or 98 participants), identify another colleague as the Chief Assessment Officer (10.1% or 32 participants), indicate their campus employs many individuals to lead assessment (54.3% or 172 participants), indicate no one at their institution holds that role (4.4% or 14 participants), or that they were unsure if anyone held such a position (0.6% or 2 participants).

² Search terms: assessment; institutional research, evaluation, institutional effectiveness.

Institutional Resources

Maki (2010) suggests one of the most important roles an institution can have in place is to formally task an individual or individuals with the responsibility of meeting with faculty when questions about assessment arise. To this end, the Survey asks participants if they are the person formally tasked with meeting with faculty to support this need. Two hundred and thirteen participants (67.4%) indicated they were the primary person with whom faculty should meet to seek assistance in assessment activities. In contrast, 76 participants (24.1%) indicated they were not the primary person tasked with this responsibility, 20 participants (6.3%) indicated no one held this responsibility on their campus, and 7 participants (2.2%) indicated they were not sure if anyone on their campus held this responsibility.

Purpose of Assessment

Assessment can be done for a variety of reasons and the intent with which it is done gives assessment practice a perspective driving its practice in both apparent and hidden ways. To explore this phenomenon, the Survey asks participants to complete a sentence describing the reason assessment is done on their campus: [“_____ is the primary reason assessment is done on our campus.”]. Respondents had to complete the sentence using only one of the following randomly-ordered selections derived from Maki’s (2010) purposes for assessment: Access to financial resources, Accountability, Accreditation, Compliance with governmental mandates, Improving student learning, or Tradition. Subsequent open-ended questions asked participants to share additional reasons assessment is done on their campus and expound upon their reasoning for answering this question as they did. Table 1 offers frequency and percentage statistics for this question.

Table 1
Reason Assessment Done

Reason	Count	Percentage
Improving student learning	151	49.0
Accreditation	125	40.6
Accountability	26	8.4
Compliance with government mandates	3	1.2
Tradition	2	0.8
Total	307	100

Support, Resistance, and Indifference to Assessment

Respondents were asked to rank a variety of campus leaders regarding their supportiveness, resistance, or indifference/unawareness to assessment. A seven-point Likert-type scale was developed ranging from “Highly Resistant” (1) to “Highly Supportive” (7). Respondents could also indicate if they perceived specific campus leaders to be “Indifferent/Unaware of assessment” (0) and if they held the position being ranked. In the case of the latter, participants’ responses on their own performance are not included in these results. Indifferent or unaware rankings were assigned a value of 0, reflecting the qualitative nature of this label.

Table 2 depicts data as percentages of respondents that are the most supportive, resistant, or indifferent to assessment. Responses are collapsed down across rankings to “Supportive” “Resistant,” and “Unaware/Indifferent” categories. The campus president, provost, and student affairs/services staff command the greatest percentage of “Supportive” rankings (91.6%, 90.6%, and 88.5%, respectively). Faculty and faculty/academic senate leadership are the only groups to obtain relatively large percentages of rankings in the “Resistant” categories (22.9% and 17.4%, respectively), though even these percentages can be considered minimal.

Table 2
Aggregated Support, Resistance, or Indifference/Unawareness to Assessment

Group	% Supportive	% Resistant	% Indiff./Unaware
Board of Trustee Members	69.5	0.0	30.5
President	91.6	2.2	6.2
Provost	90.6	4.2	5.2
Faculty	75.8	22.9	1.3
Student Affairs Administrators	88.5	5.8	5.8
Faculty Senate Leaders	78.9	17.0	4.0
Fundraising/Devel. Officers	53.4	3.7	42.9
Alumni groups	29.0	1.4	69.5
Academic Advisors	73.2	7.3	19.6
Student Government Leaders	49.3	1.4	49.3
Overall	70.1	6.7	23.1

DISCUSSION

These descriptive findings hold promise for future explorations and dialogue. First, the fact that over half of participants indicated their institution delivered assessment through many leaders suggests the need to take into account this multi-leader form of administration. America’s approach to assessment is largely by a *distributed model*. While this offers opportunities to explore connections to dialogical and participatory theories it also challenges traditional leadership theories. Seemingly, only a third of participants possess the formal authority of being a Chief Assessment Officer. Half of the respondents possess a different, less formal form of authority; one requiring unique skills of negotiation, finesse, and the ability to balance shared responsibilities and academic governance. This is not to say Chief Assessment Officers or do not require similar skills. Indeed, their role also requires them to negotiate more frequently than they mandate. Nonetheless, this finding suggests the need to further explore theories of leadership, organization, and administration that take into account the shared nature of assessment and the unique contexts of being one leader among many.

Data regarding the reason assessment is done on a campus also offer opportunities for further dialogue. Almost half (49.0%) of the respondents indicate improvement of student learning is the reason assessment is done. For some, this could be a point worth celebrating as it supports the general logic and noble intentions outlined in assessment scholarship. For

others, the fact that less than half of the respondents indicated improvement of student learning as the primary reason assessment is done may not be “enough.” For every respondent focusing on student learning, there is another whose attention is turned to “accountability” or “accreditation” (40.6% and 8.4%, respectively for a total of 48.9%) as the primary reason assessment is done.

Assessment leaders should strive to maintain appropriate focus on student learning while responding to the pragmatic, day-to-day pressures of assessment, accountability, and accreditation efforts. Wolff (2005) advocated the explanation of accreditation as “a bulwark for quality in an environment where institutions are buffeted by state priorities to increase institutional access, improve graduation rates, and operate with less financial support” (p. 78). Educational administrators must be prepared and capable of underscoring that accreditation exists to support student learning. In an increasingly complex relationship between institutions and governing bodies, faculty, and administrators, campus leadership must refine and reiterate messages about the importance of student learning in institutional operations and accreditation.

The findings pertaining to those constituents who are most supportive, resistant, or indifferent to assessment may aid campus leaders in support the advancement of assessment messages and practices. Empowering supportive campus leaders to engage indifferent or unaware campus leaders may prove beneficial. Partnerships between supportive and resistant or indifferent groups may also be useful in educating more campus leaders about the benefits and processes of assessment. Furthermore, traditional narratives espouse high levels of faculty resistance to assessment (Driscoll, de Noriega, & Ramaley, 2006) or illustrate the notion of academic gamesmanship (Astin & Antonio [*sic*], 2012) faculty employ to diminish assessment’s prominence or refute its purpose. Findings from the current study reveal a more positive belief in faculty than may be traditionally assumed. Although assessment administrators perceive faculty and academic senate leaders as more resistant than other groups, faculty and academic senate leaders could hardly be described as “highly resistant” to assessment based upon these data. Faculty members have daily contact with students and are vital collaborators in an effective culture of assessment focused on improving student learning. These data generally support the notion that faculty members are as supportive of assessment and educational administrators must work to deliver these positive findings throughout their campus constituencies. Doing so may resolve many traditional barriers to faculty participation and advocacy for assessment in higher education.

Lastly, these findings may be of importance to faculty in graduate level educational administration programs. Graduate students preparing entry into higher education administration must carry with them the ability to engage in respectful generative dialogue about meaningful aspects of teaching, learning, quality, and higher education administration (Fuller, 2012). Administrators can do much to gain legitimacy in the eyes of professors and staff if they can construct reasonable plans for improvement using sound empirical evidence, a skill often honed in graduate school. The data provide insights into the contexts for which graduate students must be prepared as future educational leaders.

CONCLUSION

Scholars and researchers exploring the art and science of assessment may find these results useful in outlining plans for future research or crafting theories about assessment cultures and

practices. However, the true significance of these data may be in their relevance to the scholarship on assessment and the new questions they pose about assessment cultures. Readers may see any number of interesting findings in the data and further research using the *Survey of Assessment Culture* is necessary and has already begun. If these data offer insights or intriguing possibilities for future research, they have made a meaningful contribution to this complex line of emerging scholarship.

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