**Association for the Assessment
of Learning in Higher Education**

AALHE

PROMOTING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

INTERSECTION

A journal at the intersection of assessment and learning

Fall 2019

Contents

President's Letter

By Jane Marie Souza

Welcome to fall 2019. This time of year brings wonderful things such as the prospect of a fabulous new academic year and of course a new edition of AALHE's publication, Intersection: a journal at the intersection of assessment and learning. The new editor-in-chief, Kathleen Gorski, and her editorial team have worked diligently to bring you these articles. I hope you find them meaningful and useful to you in your assessment work. We are grateful to all the contributing authors who take the time to share their expertise with AALHE colleagues.

Those of you who write about assessment in higher education might find yourself needing to define assessment for your audiences. No doubt you consult the literature and reference Banta, Suskie, NILOA, Walvoord, accreditors, and many reputable publications. While these are all excellent sources, here at AALHE we thought it would be appropriate to have authors citing a foundational definition of assessment that was drafted and approved by the organization's membership. Toward that end, past-president Jeremy Penn and I led a working group during 2018-2019 to draft a foundational statement that defines assessment in its broadest sense. The group consisted of AALHE members from fourteen institutions from various locations and with diverse missions (membership listing appears on next page).

In phase I, we researched the literature and worked to distill the information into a basic statement that would serve as launching pad for the larger goal of producing more specific definitions. During the upcoming phase II, Jeremy Penn will lead a group to produce statements on topics such as equity in assessment, research in assessment, evaluation v. assessment, roles of qualitative and quantitative data, etc...

On October 1st AALHE opened a survey to ask members to vote on accepting the foundational statement as approved by the Board and shown in the text box. Please do not interpret this an end in itself. Rather, it is just a beginning. First, we want to capture the field in its broadest sense, then work with members to refine definitions. We hope you will approve this foundational statement and consider joining us as we begin phase II of our project. Note, the survey will stay open into November to give you time to respond.

Thank you as always for your active involvement in AALHE. Of course, it was wonderful to see so many of you (a record 450+) at the 2019 conference in St. Paul. And I certainly hope you will join us in New Orleans in 2020 to help us celebrate our 10th annual conference June 8-11. However, please remember we are working all year long to bring you publications, podcasts, webinars, and many opportunities to engage with your assessment colleagues. Please visit our committee web page at https://www.aalhe.org/page/CommitteeInfo *and learn how you can share your energy and expertise to help us continue to grow and improve.*

Thank you.

AALHE Foundational Statement #1: What is assessment in Higher Education?

Assessment is the process of collecting and analyzing information to determine if progress is being made toward a desired end. While this broad definition is applicable to a range of goals and organizational contexts, AALHE focuses on the assessment of student learning and institutional effectiveness within the context of higher education.

Student learning outcomes assessment is a process in which one identifies what students should be able to do by the end of an educational unit and determines the degree to which these goals are met. It requires consideration of how information systematically gathered on student performance can be used to improve the teaching/learning process.

Institutional effectiveness assessment focuses on the extent to which an institution is making progress towards its mission and vision. When engaged in this process, the information collected can be used to inform action taken for improvement.

The aim of student learning assessment and institutional effectiveness assessment is the ongoing enhancement of quality. AALHE supports these efforts in quality improvement by promoting assessment not just "of learning" but more importantly "for learning."

Foundational Statement Working Group 2018-2019

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Note from The Editor-In-Chief
By Kathleen Gorski

Welcome to the 2019 Fall edition of AALHE's quarterly publication. Several months ago, we asked you for articles to present our readers with examples of successful strategies for increasing equity in assessment, including, but not limited to, implementing culturally responsive assessment practices, means for increasing cultural competence in assessment, and strategies for discussing equity in assessment with campus assessment partners/stakeholders.

We received so many good submissions that we plan to continue our equity conversation in the Spring 2020 edition to lead up to our June 2020 conference which also has an equity theme.

This edition emphasizes the importance of equity and cultural consciousness in higher education and why it matters. Our authors illustrate the importance of employing an equity mindset and critically examining our data narratives. Strategies for taking a closer look at equity in authentic assessment, general education, and feminist evaluation are also shared.

In addition, we have a new entry in our ongoing *Conversations with Accreditors* series, this time featuring Dr. Barbara Gellman-Danley, President of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and Chair of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC). Joining her in the conversation are her HLC collogues Andrew Lootens-White, Vice President and Chief Operating Officer and Eric Martin, Vice President and Chief of Staff. Dr. Gellman-Danley and her colleagues were interviewed by Jane Marie Souza and Steven Hawks.

We would like to thank all our authors in this edition. Their work continues to inform and inspire. We hope you will consider submitting an article for a future edition to contribute to scholarship in the assessment of student learning. Please visit https://www.aalhe.org/page/Intersection for dates and guidelines.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in the articles in this publication reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education.

Numbers May Not Lie, But They Can Hide: Critically Examining Our "Number" Narratives

By Ann M. Gansemer-Topf, Jodi Wilson and Mary Kirk

Abstract: Colleges and universities are required to produce a significant amount of quantitative data. These data are used to make critical decisions regarding accreditation, institutional quality, and effectiveness. These seemingly unbiased numbers form an institutional narrative that may mask other issues, overlook groups of students while privileging others, and ignore bias. Socially just assessment requires a critical examination of the processes we use to collect quantitative data and the interpretation of this data. In this article, we offer examples of ways in which quantitative data may hide information and highlight critical questions to consider when collecting or interpreting data. Specifically, we ask you to consider "Who the numbers represent," "Have we explored multiple identities of students?" and "How should we interpret benchmarks." Our goal is to enhance our assessment work by adopting an equity-minded approach that challenges the misconception of numbers as "objective." Higher education's reliance on quantitative data is not likely to diminish. By asking critical questions about the numbers and the processes by which they are determined, we can continue to develop and sustain equitable and socially just higher education institutions.

Increased pressure for accountability in higher education has required colleges and universities to produce large amounts of quantitative data related to institutional processes and performance. Typical metrics include enrollment numbers, persistence and graduation rates, student-faculty ratios, and faculty and staff demographics. This type of institutional reporting has been critiqued as epistemologically limited and supporting a neoliberal agenda focused on a privileged minority that ignores under-represented and minoritized students, faculty, and staff (Gergen & Dixon-Romàn; 2014; Phelps-Ward, Kenney, & Howard, 2015; Wall, Hursch, & Rogers, 2014). We agree with this critique – quantitative data is limiting and often ignores critical differences and stories among our diverse student communities. Yet, this type of assessment data is so ingrained in the functioning of colleges and universities that it is not likely to go away quickly or easily. Federal and state governments, colleges and universities, and accreditation agencies require this type of data and heavily rely on this data to make judgments about institutional quality and effectiveness.

Despite its prevalence and the value placed on these metrics, those of us working in higher education may know little about how this data is compiled and how it should be interpreted. If these types of data and reporting continue to be used to measure student learning and college and university quality, it is critical that we understand what these numbers represent, or in many cases, do not represent. In this article, we provide approaches for critically examining these seemingly "neutral" and "unbiased" numbers. By posing questions, we hope students, faculty, staff, and administrators concerned about equity and social justice, can become more aware of and challenge our data collection processes, and the interpretations and policies we make based on these data.

Who Does This Number Represent?
Institutions produce a significant amount of numbers: frequencies, averages, and percentages. Often, we do not consider who these numbers represent. For example, first-year retention rates and graduation rates are commonly reported institutional statistics. Publications such as US News and World Report often report institutional averages. These rates are based on first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students; these numbers only represent students whose first collegiate experience was at that institution. Institutions increasingly are focusing recruitment on transfer students, but the retention and graduation rates for this population of students are not captured.

We also must be cautious in using an institution's average retention and graduation rate as the single metric of quality as this number masks the differences among student populations. Significant degree attainment gaps between White students and African-American and Latinx students continue to exist. (NCES, 2019). Other demographics such as socioeconomic status, first-generation status, military-connected status, and distance from home also influence the likelihood of graduating (Kezar, Walpole, & Perna, 2014; Mayhew, Bowman, Rockenbach, Siefert, & Wolniak, 2016; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Therefore, to understand if institutions support the success of all students, it is important to examine similarities and differences in graduation and retention rates for different populations of students.

In addition to institutional data, higher education leaders have access to a significant amount of national data. The US Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics administers several national surveys and supports publicly available data tools to view the data. One can access data from these national surveys to examine trends or patterns in college student demographics, experiences, and outcomes. Similar to institutionally generated data, this data is often reported in averages, percentages, and medians. When using these tools, it is critical to understand how the data are presented,

To illustrate, review the data in Table 1 and Table 2. Both of these tables provide data on the total amount of financial aid provided to students in different income groups (i.e., lowest, middle, and highest percentile). In Table 1, 42.7% of the lowest-income students are receiving the most amount of total aid ($10,400 or more) and that this percentage is higher than for middle- and upper-income students. The table illustrates that for low-income individuals, if they receive aid, they are most likely to receive over $10,000 in aid. If an institution is focused on providing aid to those with most financial need, this table could be interpreted that this goal is being met.

Table 2 provides a comparison of the three income groups. In this table, 25.4% of students in the lowest percentile group receive the most amount of aid ($10,400 or more); the most significant percentage of this aid is awarded to the middle-income group. This table tells a different story. If we compare all income groups, we find that for all students who receive an award over $10,000, over 50% are in the middle-income group. This table might suggest that the highest aid awards are given to middle- rather than low-income students. Although both of these tables are correct, the organization of the tables shows two different statistics that tell different stories regarding the relationship between financial aid and income.

Have We Explored Students' Multiple Identities?
Categorizing is an essential aspect of institutional reporting. We categorize employees based on function, course loads based on departments, students by demographics. These activities are done to fulfill mandatory reporting requests, accreditation requirements, and for budgeting purposes. Categorizing can meet institutions' accountability requirements but ignore the multiple identities, realities, and categories of the processes and people they are trying to describe. In the example above, for instance, institutions may provide graduation rates by race/ethnicity, gender, academic ability, and income, but they rarely provide information that acknowledges all of these factors.

This categorization can result in oversimplifying our knowledge of students and their success. For example, an institution may find that females are more likely to graduate than males but if they do not collect data on gender identity, an institution's ability to support students who do not fit within the dichotomous "male/female" categorization will be limited. As mentioned earlier, White students are more likely to graduate than racially minoritized students; yet other identities such as hometown, sexual orientation, and academic preparation will influence their likelihood of success. A social justice approach does not ignore categories but uses these categories as a way to ask additional questions. This approach also requires institutional stakeholders to recognize the multiple identities of students. A student may fall into categories of Black or White, male or female, in-state or out-of-state, but as a student, they are "and" – Black and female and out-of-state. These multiple identities shape one's collegiate experience; higher education leaders have a responsibility to examine and explore how their institutions embrace and support these identities.

How Should We Interpret Benchmarks?

Benchmarks provide a reference point for which other items are compared. This approach is widely used to help institutions view their performance in relation to their peers or can also be used within institutions to compare departments or people. Social justice advocates should question if these comparisons are equitable and fair. For example, course evaluations often provide instructors feedback about their course but also can compare their performance with colleagues at the institution. Research has consistently found that women and faculty of color tend to be rated more critically than their White male colleagues yet this is not acknowledged in establishing benchmarks (Bavishi, Madera, & Hebl, 2010; Borin, 2017; MacNeil, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015; Littleford, Ong, Tseng, & Milikin, 2010; Mitchell & Martin, 2018).

The student-to-faculty ratio is also used to compare institutions with the idea that a smaller number represents a richer learning experience. However, these student-to-faculty ratios can be misleading. At a small, liberal arts college, small class sizes may occur throughout a students' four years, and the majority of faculty have teaching responsibilities. At a large institution, students may enroll in introductory courses that include several hundred students. Faculty members may have appointments that do not include teaching, or they may not teach undergraduates. The student-to-faculty ratio is computed similarly, but the connection with faculty and classroom experience may differ greatly at these two types of institutions. Additionally, at some institutions, the student-to-faculty ratio may vary significantly by major and class level. Design and music majors, for example, may require smaller, more intimate studio and performance space that allows much more interaction with faculty. Introductory coursework often is delivered in larger lecture halls where the student-to-faculty ratio may be 200/1. The size of the course can also influence performance metrics for faculty. One poor course evaluation in a section with 10 students will have more impact on the overall scores than a few poor course evaluations in a classroom of 200.

Students and their families should be encouraged to ask questions about the lived experiences of students in their classes and majors and not rely solely on a number. Although these metrics are used for comparison purposes, socially just practices require assessment professionals to interrogate if these comparisons are legitimate and useful. In working with students and their families and making performance decisions based on metrics such as course evaluations, it is important to understand how bias may be present in these "objectively assumed" benchmarks

Critical Questions

Engaging in socially just assessment practices requires asking critical questions about the numbers that describe our institutional narratives. Some of these critical questions include:

1. Who did these numbers represent? Percentages and averages are based on a specific population of students. When analyzing or interpreting data, it is important to consider: Which students are included in this population? Which students are not included in this population? When reporting data, it is critical to identify the populations that were included.

2. How do multiple identities of students influence their experience, and how does our institution support the multiple identities of students? Answering these questions requires a more in-depth analysis of data that does not compartmentalize students by demographic characteristics but considers their various identities. Most institutional reporting requires this compartmentalization: data are reported by gender, by race/ethnicity, by first generation status, etc. Within our institutions, we must engage in a more complex analysis and consider the multiple identities of students. How are our student populations changing? To be efficient, institutions produce similar data in similar ways each year. In the past decade, institutions have seen an influx of military-affiliated students and the countries of origin for our international students may have changed. We need to ensure that we are collecting and analyzing data that reflects our current student population.

3. "Why?" Numbers can tell us "what," but they can't tell us "why." In reviewing your data, use the numbers to identify potential patterns or problems that can be investigated using qualitative

approaches. Although numbers can mask nuances, they can be valuable in highlighting areas of concern. For example, if the retention rates of women in STEM drop significantly between the second and third year, a focus group or interviews with students can uncover why this is occurring.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities and their stakeholders produce and rely on a significant amount of quantitative assessment data. These data hold significant power. They are used as proxies for institutional quality, provided as evidence in accreditation, integrated into performance reviews, used to create or discontinue programs, and make budget decisions. Because they are an intrinsic part of our institutions' narratives and decision making, it is essential to understand what they represent. Yes, the numbers tell a story, but they also mask other stories. By asking critical questions about the numbers and the processes by which they are determined, we can continue to develop and sustain equitable and socially just higher education institutions.

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Table 1. Total Financial Aid by Income Group

National Center for Education Statistics PowerStats

Total aid 2003-04 by Income percentile rank for all students 2003-04, for Carnegie: Basic classification 2003-04 (Research (very high research activity),Research (high research activity),Doctoral/Research Universities,Master's (larger programs),Master's (medium programs),Master's (smaller programs),Baccalaureate Colleges-Arts & Sciences,Baccalaureate Colleges-Diverse Fields,Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges).

Total aid 2003-04 by Income percentile rank for all students 2003-04, for Carnegie: Basic classification 2003-04 (Research (very high research activity),Research (high research activity),Doctoral/Research Universities,Master's (larger programs),Master's (medium programs),Master's (smaller programs),Baccalaureate Colleges-Arts & Sciences,Baccalaureate Colleges-Diverse Fields,Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges).						
	0 (%)	$1-2,399 (%)	$2,400-4,999 (%)	$5,000-10,399 (%)	$10,400 or more (%)	Total
Estimates						
Total	19.2	10.2	16.0	23.1	31.6	100%
Income percentile rank for all students 2003-04						
Lowest 25 percent	8.9	7.0	13.4	28.1	42.7	100%
Middle 50 percent	16.2	10.4	16.8	24.7	32.0	100%
Highest 25 percent	30.5	12.1	16.3	17.3	23.9	100%

The names of the variables used in this table are: PCTALL, CC2005B and TOTAID.

The weight variable used in this table is WTB000.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09).

Computation by NCES PowerStats on 10/19/2019.

Table 2. Income Group by Total Financial Aid

National Center for Education Statistics PowerStats

Income percentile rank for all students 2003-04 by Total aid 2003-04, for Carnegie: Basic classification 2003-04 (Research (very high research activity),Research (high research activity),Doctoral/Research Universities,Master's (larger programs),Master's (medium programs),Master's (smaller programs),Baccalaureate Colleges-Arts & Sciences,Baccalaureate Colleges-Diverse Fields,Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges).

Income percentile rank for all students 2003-04 by Total aid 2003-04, for Carnegie: Basic classification 2003-04 (Research (very high research activity),Research (high research activity),Doctoral/Research Universities,Master's (larger programs),Master's (medium programs),Master's (smaller programs),Baccalaureate Colleges-Arts & Sciences,Baccalaureate Colleges-Diverse Fields,Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges).			
	Lowest 25 percent (%)	Middle 50 percent (%)	Highest 25 percent (%)	Total
Estimates			
Total	18.8	50.8	30.4	100%
Total aid 2003-04			
0	8.7	42.8	48.5	100%
$1-2,399	12.8	51.4	35.9	100%
$2,400-4,999	15.7	53.3	31.0	100%
$5,000-10,399	22.9	54.3	22.8	100%
$10,400 or more	25.4	51.5	23.0	100%

The names of the variables used in this table are: PCTALL, CC2005B and TOTAID.

The weight variable used in this table is WTB000.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up (BPS:04/09).

Computation by NCES PowerStats on 10/19/2019.

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An Argument for Employing an Equity Mindset in Higher Education Assessment

By Jeff Roberts

Abstract: Higher education institutions are becoming increasingly diverse environments in terms of student enrollment, with greater numbers of minority, first-generation, and economically disadvantaged students enrolling than ever before. However, new student populations bring new challenges as institutional leaders grapple with questions surrounding the equity of student access, of student learning, and ultimately of student achievement in higher education. Understanding how underlying social capital factors differ across these diverse populations, and how differences in both social capital access and levels can potentially impact student success, will be key for institutional leaders seeking to employ equity-minded assessments and interventions. Equity-minded assessments are powerful tools institutional leaders can use to help identify equity gaps in student access, learning, and success. Something as simple as disaggregating student learning data by factors like student race, gender, and first-generation status can reveal where equity gaps may exist for different student groups and to what level. However, implementing equity-minded assessments is only the first step as an equity mindset must also be employed when developing educational interventions. Such interventions require an intentional design, marketing, and implementation that takes into account the complex natures of unique student populations and helps address their specific needs. If not, then even the best intentioned of interventions will not succeed in closing an institution's equity gaps.

As increasing numbers of minority, first-generation, and economically disadvantaged students enter higher education, institutions struggle to address questions surrounding the equity of student access to higher education, of student learning, and of student achievement. Assessment is a tool institutional leaders can use to identify equity gaps in student learning and success, particularly when assessments are designed and implemented with an equity mindset. However, implementing equity-minded assessments is only half of the equation for addressing persistent equity issues in higher education. Institutional leaders must also employ an equity mindset when developing actions and interventions for student improvement. To accomplish this, institutional leaders must understand the underlying social capital factors impacting diverse student populations and potentially influencing student success. Gathering necessary data through equity-minded assessments is a vital first step; however, these data must also be used to design appropriate responses targeting an institution's unique equity goals. If institutional leaders fail to employ an equity mindset when designing educational interventions, then they may find it difficult to address their specific equity goals, even if they see general student improvement.

Social Capital Theory and Student Achievement
Students' learning and success in higher education are not directly caused by their race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or first-generation status. Rather, these characteristics represent proxies for something more nuanced and complex: elements of students' social capital which can potentially influence their educational success. An important first step for employing an equity mindset in higher education assessment is to understand what social capital is and how it can influence student success.

In broad, social capital theorists argue that the backgrounds, settings, and experiences of different groups of people can affect their access to resources and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2002). Elements of social capital can include economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986); social knowledge, formal/informal information channels, social norms, and family behaviors and actions (Coleman, 1988); and resources available to people through their social networks (Lin, 2002). These elements of social capital can take the form of bridging and bonding activities or resources (Putnam, 2000). Bridging forms of social capital are inward-looking, homogenizing, and intra-group activities and actions. Bonding forms of social capital are external-looking, diversifying and inter-

group activities and actions (Putnam, 2000). Putnam noted, "bonding and bridging are not "either-or" categories into which social networks can be neatly divided, but "more or less" dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital" (Putnam, 2000, 23).

At the macro-level, Putnam (2000) concluded that higher levels of social capital were related, in general, to better societal outcomes (e.g., lives of children are better, schools are better, population health is better). Additionally, Martin (2015) noted the lack of access to social capital potentially "creates and reproduces inequalities in access to institutional resources" (Martin, 2015, p. 1171) for students who are members of disadvantaged groups. In turn, these inequities can affect student learning and success in a higher education setting. The life experiences and resources of an economically advantaged White student with a family history of college graduation will probably be different from those of a Black or Hispanic, first-generation student who is struggling to pay for college. Hero (2007) argued that traditional approaches to social capital research gloss over these kinds of differences, particularly when it comes to race, and that greater social capital does not necessarily lead to greater racial equity. Hero noted that areas with high levels of social capital "tend to be racially homogeneous (white), whereas states with high racial/ethnic diversity tend to have low levels of social capital" and speculated whether there was a correlation or connection between social capital and racial diversity, or if the observed inverse relationship was a coincidence (2007, 4). It could be that the relationship observed by Hero (2007) between higher levels of social capital and lower levels of racial equity was real, but that it was because traditional elements of social capital favor advantaged social groups and populations. In a higher education setting, these advantaged groups would be non-minority, non-first-generation, and financially secure students who are potentially benefiting from existing social networks, information sources, and resources that disadvantaged populations have difficulty in accessing and using.

Being from an advantaged group does not guarantee success, nor does being from a disadvantaged group guarantee failure. However, institutional leaders must recognize that differences in social capital can result in pervasive inequities between student groups that potentially influence students' access to education, learning, and success, particularly if those elements of social capital have traditionally favored those advantaged students. Not only must institutional leaders keep these factors in mind when developing student assessments, but they must also design interventions for improvement in ways that recognize social capital differences and effectively reach those students who need assistance the most.

Incorporating Equity into Your Institutional Assessment Processes
It has become increasingly commonplace for institutions to regularly track student success metrics like enrollment, persistence, retention, and graduation rates. Such data are regularly gathered by institutional research offices and are reported by institutions to state boards of higher education and to the U.S Department of Education through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Regular assessment of learning outcomes is also becoming increasingly common. In a 2015 Association of American Colleges and Universities survey of chief academic officers, 70% of the responding institutions reported tracking achievement data for learning outcomes (Hart Research Associates, 2015). However, only 31% of institutions reported setting equity goals by student race/ethnicity, 24% by student socioeconomic status, and 14% by student first-generation status (Hart Research Associates, 2015). Even more troubling, when these institutions were asked whether they actually analyzed their data by these factors, only 16% reported doing so by race/ethnicity, 9% by student socio-economic status, and 6% by student first-generation status (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Given the availability of so much student data, institutional success in establishing equity goals, gathering necessary information, and analyzing student results is less a matter of institutional ability and more a matter of institutional will. Such efforts need not be complex. Simply disaggregating student access, learning, and success data by factors like race, gender, socio-economic status, and first-generation status is valuable. These variables, which most institutions already capture, can serve as proxies for social capital factors. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) argued that "disaggregating the data allows researchers, administrators, and practitioners to see themes that they

otherwise would have missed and could inform changes that would positively impact students' education" (pp. 13-14). Sam Houston State University has employed this approach for examining student enrollment, retention, and graduation data, and has taken the further step of reporting these data on a publicly available student achievement website (SHSU, 2019).

Analyzing student learning data can prove trickery for institutions. Student grade point averages, course passage rates, and individual course grades may be available within institutional data systems; however, student performance on individual learning outcomes may not be systematically collected. With prior planning institutions can gather these data as well. At Sam Houston State University, all student artifacts collected for general education learning outcomes assessment are linked to the student's unique identification number. Student scores and performances on a variety of assessments related to critical thinking, written communication, and teamwork can then be merged with the multitude of student variables (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, first-generation status, Pell eligibility) included within the Universities data management system, providing robust datasets for data disaggregation and more complex statistical analysis.

The importance of understanding differences in student learning and success by student group membership cannot be understated. Across the country, colleges and universities seek to increase the enrollments of minority and underserved students, increase the success of at-risk and underperforming students, and promote the learning of all students. However, institutional leaders will find it difficult to improve student performance by only looking at aggregated student data. Data disaggregation is a necessary step for institutions to identify their biggest problem areas, help devise appropriate interventions, and determine whether institutional efforts were successful in improving student performance and meeting institutional equity goals.

A State-Wide Case Study in Not Improving Student Equity
Gathering data through equity-minded assessments represents only half of the metaphorical battle to improve student learning and success. Institutions must also incorporate equity into their interventions in order to see meaningful improvement in student outcomes. Efforts by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to close state-wide equity gaps in student enrollment and graduation serve as case study of how the best intended equity efforts can still meet with limited success. In 2000, the THECB implemented a 15-year state-wide strategic plan designed, in part, to improve identified equity gaps in Black and Hispanic student enrollment and graduation rates (THECB, 2016).

What were the results of 15 years of efforts to improve the enrollment and graduation rates for minority students? In terms of enrollment, some gains were observed. From 2000 to 2015, the percentage of Black Texas students enrolled at public institutions did increase approximately 3%, the percentage of Hispanic students enrolled increased by approximately 11%, and the percentage of White students enrolled decreased approximately 18% (THECB, 2016). When placed within the context of state-wide demographic shifts that took place within Texas over the same timeframe, these gains are less impressive. From 2000 to 2015, the proportion of the state's White population declined by approximately 10% and the state's Hispanic population increased by approximately 8% (Texas Demographic Center, 2017a, 2017b). Regardless of whether it was through the efforts of the THECB, through the efforts of colleges and universities within Texas, through natural demographic shifts to the state's population, or (most likely) through some combination of all these factors, by 2015 the percentages of students enrolled in higher education in Texas did more closely resemble the demographics of the state's population. However, Hispanic student enrollment still lagged behind statewide Hispanic population levels by approximately 5%.

When it came to 6-year graduation rates for students who were both first and full-time, the THECB observed less success. These graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students did increase during this period. The 6-year graduation rates for Black students increasing approximately 2.5%, from 38.5% for the Fall 1999 cohort (See Appendix B, THECB, 2006, p. 19) to 41% for the Fall 2009 cohort (THECB, 2016), and increasing approximately 7.7%

for Hispanic students, from 43.4% for the fall 1999 cohort (See Appendix B, THECB, 2006, p. 19) to 51.1% for the fall 2009 cohort (THECB, 2016). Unfortunately, these rates for Black and Hispanic students still trailed those of White students who experienced similar increases. For the 2009 cohort, the 6-year graduation rates for Whites was 67.7% (THECB, 2016), an increase of approximately 5% from the fall 1999 cohort who had a 6-year graduation rate of 62.9% (See Appendix B, THECB, 2006, p. 19).

So, what possible outcomes can be drawn from these data? The increases in student graduation rates state-wide were an important, and positive, result and should be rightfully applauded. State-wide, more students of all groups were successfully graduating. However, despite these positive results, state-wide efforts clearly failed to address the persistent achievement gap between White and minority students and therefore failed to accomplish the state's equity goals for student success. Whatever interventions were implemented at the state and institutional levels did provide some assistance to students, in broad, but did not adequately address the social inequities for the specific student groups that needed the most help. Even worse, while the 6-year graduation rate gap persisted between White and Hispanic students, the gap between White and Black students actually increased from 2000 to 2015.

Conclusion

Why did efforts to close equity gaps not succeed for Texas from 2000 to 2015? Probably for the very same reasons similar efforts may not succeed at your own local campuses. Assessment data can help identify problems in the equity of student access, learning, and success, but an equity mindset must also be employed when designing interventions for improvement. Broadly designed interventions may not reach or help those students at your institution who need the most assistance. Depending on which student groups are being targeted, equity-focused interventions may look very different from one another and from interventions designed to promote general student improvement or success. Equity-focused interventions require an intentional design, marketing, and implementation that accounts for the complex natures of unique student populations and helps address their specific needs. Ultimately, it is important to remember that student improvement does not happen by chance. Those interested in tackling equity issues at their institutions must ensure they are intentionally incorporating an equity mindset throughout all phases of their assessment and improvement processes in order to see success.

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Equity in "Authentic" Assessments: A Closer Look at Defining and Assessing Learning Outcomes in Competency- Based Education

By Mary Tkatchov

Abstract: The effort to achieve equitable assessment practices in competency-based higher education, and even in traditional higher education models that utilize backward design, must begin with the development of culturally informed learning outcomes. Biases in learning outcomes will limit authenticity and equity of assessments that are designed to measure student proficiency in those outcomes. The development of learning outcomes must be an inclusive process if competency-based higher education institutions want to achieve authenticity in assessment and "real-world" outcomes for diverse student populations.

Competency-based education (CBE) is regarded as a path to a more equitable school system due to its focus on proficiency rather than time spent in the classroom. CBE's flexibility and focus on personalized learning make it a hopeful option for addressing the disparity in the quality of education between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged populations (Priest, Rudenstine, Weisstein, & Gerwin, 2012; Sturgis & Casey, 2018). The philosophy is that CBE can help to alleviate this disparity by allowing students the time and supports they need to learn rather than forcing them, as in the traditional school system, to keep pace with and learn in the same way as others who are perhaps more or less academically or socioeconomically advantaged students.

Within the CBE model in higher education is an effort to develop "authentic" performance assessments so that graduates can leave higher education and enter the workforce prepared for the professional demands they will face. Grant Wiggins, a widely recognized authority on authentic assessment and co-author of *Understanding by Design*, defines authentic assessment as "performances and product requirements that are faithful to real-world demands, opportunities, and constraints" (Wiggins, 2006, para. 5). Competency-based higher education institutions are especially focused on authentic assessment, since authentic assessment is supposed to indicate a level of competence to potential employers while giving students a preview of what to expect in the real world and ideally in preparation for solving real-world problems.

In competency-based education, course design follows backward design as outlined in *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Backward design (see Figure 1) begins with defining what students should be able to *do* as a result of learning (learning outcomes) and then defining the evidence of mastery of these outcomes (the assessments) before selecting the learning activities and resources that will be incorporated into a course (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).
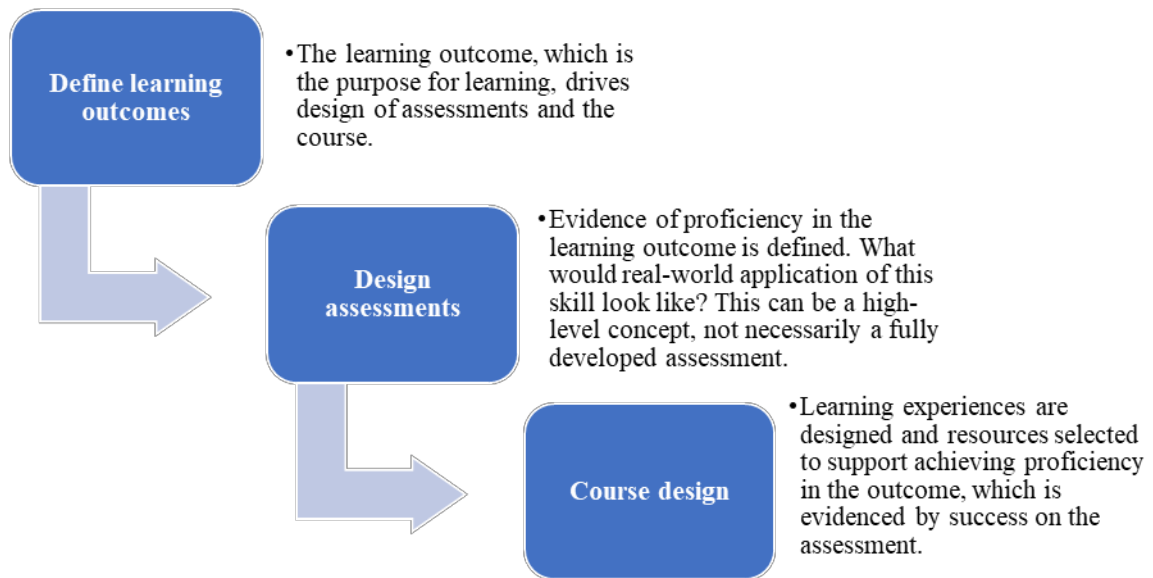
Figure 1: Three Steps of Backward Design

If competency-based higher education institutions want to make education more equitable for diverse learners, from learning opportunities to assessment methods, careful attention must be given to the ways in which learning outcomes are defined. The learning outcomes themselves may be the products of biased practices, and anything that follows—assessments that serve as evidence of proficiency in the outcomes and instructional strategies that serve to prepare students for the assessments—will reinforce the inherent bias in the learning outcomes. Learning outcomes in higher education courses are often determined by a few individuals who make choices about what is meaningful and authentic to real-world experience. When higher education institutions want to adopt more equitable assessment practices, the decision-makers in course design must first ask these questions:

- Who is defining what is meaningful and authentic?
- Whose experience is serving as the model for the learning outcomes?
- Whose experience is being left out of the process?

Consider the following scenario as it demonstrates how equity issues present themselves from the inception of course development:

> CBE University is developing a Master of Education in School Leadership program for school principal licensure. Within this program will be a School Finance course that has yet to be designed and developed. A committee is established to design the School Finance course, starting with determining learning outcomes (competencies). On this committee are a handful of faculty and industry subject-matter experts (SMEs) who have been K-12 school principals. The committee must answer these questions when determining the learning outcomes: "What must a competent K-12 principal know about school finance?" and "What must a competent K-12 principal be able to do with that knowledge on the job?" The answers to these questions will also inform assessment design and course content.

> One of the more dominant faculty SMEs worked in suburban middle schools that served students from predominantly affluent households. According to this SME, a K-12 principal will have little discretion over the money that comes in to the school, only how that money is spent, so the outcomes of the School Finance course should be confined to the graduate's ability to budget and appropriately spend funding provided to the school from the district. It is this faculty SME's strong opinion that fundraising activities should not be considered high-priority for principal education because those activities have minimal relevance to the job and they would be handled by other stakeholders, such as the parent teacher organization; they do not significantly affect the principal.

However, two other faculty and industry SMEs on the committee had had vastly different professional experiences working for different types of schools, such as charter schools and Title I schools that received federal funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) for serving a large population of socioeconomically disadvantaged students. In these SMEs' experience, a principal's ability to locate additional funding to compensate for gaps in the school's budget is essential for separating the mediocre administrator from the advocate who explores every possible avenue for meeting students' needs and providing students with the highest quality education. To these SMEs, the ability to locate grants and community partnerships for fundraising and to build capacity among team members to obtain grant funding and build community partnerships were extremely important competencies that would significantly improve not only the professional competence of the program's graduates, but also the experiences of the students and staff that these graduates would lead in K-12 schools.

The first participant who had only worked in suburban communities had more professional clout than the other participants and was not persuaded by their input. This participant was insistent that fundraising and partnerships should not play a significant role in the curriculum and assessments, and the other participants quietly gave up.

This scenario shows how equity or inequity in competency-based higher education starts with choices about what is worth learning and whose voices are included in the decision-making process. Although some competencies might be objective, such as the ability of healthcare workers to accurately measure a patient's blood pressure, many "real-world" competencies and problems to solve will vary by the cultural context, as demonstrated in the above scenario. Socioeconomics played a substantial role in professional experience of the experts on the program design committee. Which expert's opinion will take precedence in the final outcomes of this program and why? How many other perspectives were left out of this conversation?

Intentional inclusion of diverse perspectives and underrepresented groups in the determination of learning outcomes is essential for reducing inequity in curriculum and assessments (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Subject-matter experts from diverse backgrounds should be invited to the discussion and given equal voice in the process. In addition, input from other community stakeholders who are not technically subject-matter experts, but who can provide different cultural perspectives about the communities who will be affected by the quality of the program, can shape how authenticity is defined for the learning outcomes, assessment expectations, and learning experience (Ward, Semken, & Libarkin, 2014).

The way we define "real-world" competencies and evidence of competency must be an inclusive process or assessments and courses will reflect and reinforce assumptions that do not represent the experience of all students. On a practical level, how can we assess skills in a way that honors the background and experience of the individuals being assessed but also produces valid and reliable results? How do we prepare students for success and hold them to high academic standards without prioritizing one form of experience over other, equally valid experiences? The correctness or authenticity of many learning outcomes in higher education will depend on the context in which knowledge and skills are applied, and curriculum and assessments must reflect this reality.

By intentionally seeking and implementing input from a diverse group of stakeholders in all aspects of course development, starting with the outcomes and including the assessment expectations and rubric criteria, CBE institutions can provide more opportunities for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills in ways that are authentic to their own life experience or to the communities they will serve as professionals. Performance assessments (e.g., projects, research papers, tasks) allow students "to make choices about the way they present evidence of their learning" (Banta, Palomba, & Kinzie, 2015, p. 96), and they should have open-ended expectations to allow for a range of "correct" responses.

The flexibility and open-endedness of performance assessments do not automatically reduce assessment bias unless there is an effort to make them culturally informed through collaboration with diverse communities in the assessment design (Ward, Semken, & Libarkin, 2014). When cultural diversity is anticipated in the "authenticity" of performance assessment instructions and grading rubric criteria, students can bring culture and community into the assessment in a way that improves the authenticity of responses without being penalized. The wording of grading rubrics reinforces the open-ended nature of the assessment for culturally authentic performances. For example, rubric criteria for the "competent" level of a performance assessment might read, "The_____is supported with industry-accepted professional practices and is justified for the context," to anticipate diverse responses. Using culturally informed, open-ended performance assessments does not mean that the students can provide any answer and be correct or deemed competent in professional competencies. The students must justify their application of professional practices and standards covered in course content, but the course content must be thoughtfully selected during development to support diverse applications of industry-accepted practices.

If competency-based institutions truly want to achieve authentic learning and assessments that measure competence in "real-world" professional competencies as they would be applied on the job, course development practices need to move beyond simply having a handful of resident or external experts determine learning outcomes and evidence that the outcomes have been achieved. Protocols need to be in place to ensure that diverse stakeholders provide input that is then implemented to allow students to apply their learning in a way that is most realistic for the communities that they come from or that they intend to serve.

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Cultural Consciousness in Data-Driven Efforts: Why it Matters and How to Do It

By David Scott Tharp

Abstract: Data-driven activities, which include assessment, evaluation, and research, are used to improve the student experience including minoritized student communities. Our ability to successfully collect information, analyze data, and act upon findings are enhanced when educators develop cultural consciousness both personally and as a lens to guide our inquiry processes. This article critiques assumptions about objectivity in data-driven practices, describes a process to cultivate cultural consciousness, and illuminates how an intentional awareness of our positionality strengthens our commitment to inclusion and equity in our work.

Data-driven activities, such as assessment, evaluation, and research, all involve the systematic collection of information used to inform action. Assessment data informs educational curricula and programs. Evaluation data informs the allocation of resources to maximize impact. Research data informs our understanding of phenomena. Within the context of higher education, data-driven activities are used to better serve our students.

Educators (both staff and faculty) conducting data-driven efforts sometimes hesitate to take action based upon their findings. Reasons often vary and include methodological considerations and our ability to (mis)use the data we collect (Eubanks, 2017). However, sometimes these reasons are linked to how well we generate data from minoritized students. Specifically, practitioners may believe their findings do not represent the student population of interest because minoritized groups are numerically underrepresented. Other times, educators may review their findings and realize students provided information based on a different understanding of the questions asked of them. In my professional experience, these concerns are often expressed *after* data has been collected, analyzed, and interpreted. If educators are committed to ensuring minoritized students' voices are represented in our data, the onus is upon us to both grow as professionals and infuse cultural consciousness throughout our inquiry process.

Before educators can commit to a project of cultural consciousness, it is imperative to address a common myth about the nature of data-driven work. Because data-driven activities draw upon research methodologies, it is possible to believe the educational assessment, evaluation, and research are—and ought to be—objective (Eisner, 1992). Those who espouse this stance would likely adhere to a positivist view of the world in which universal truth exists and we must prevent ourselves from interfering with the innately knowable world before us (Bredo & Feinberg, 1982). While there is a logical appeal to this approach, all data-driven activities require educators to make value-based choices (i.e., What should be studied? What constructs are most relevant to my inquiry? Who could provide the best information?) based upon our subjective interpretation and what we believe matters in the course of answering our questions.

Consider the topic of campus climate. Measurement of campus climate includes a wide range of constructs. Data collected on campus climate surveys can include perceptions of safety and experiences of sexual violence (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016), experiences of discrimination across multiple social identities (Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium, 2018), perceptions of campus diversity programming (National Institute for Transformation & Equity, 2017), and all of the above (Higher Education Research Institute, 2019). The variability in what campus climate entails and how it is measured contradicts the notion of an objective methodology to understand, measure, and interpret this topic. *We* make choices in the design, implementation, analysis, and interpretation stages of inquiry. Since choice is involved, we must first consider the ways we bring our social identities and related experiences into these choices.

The first step towards embedding cultural consciousness into data-driven activities is to develop cultural consciousness as a person. The literature on cultural and social justice competence development identifies a range of areas where individuals ought to develop knowledge, awareness, and skills (Goodman, 2013; Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2019; Rhodes, 2010; Sue, 2001; Tharp, 2015). An earlier piece by Pope and Reynolds (1997, p. 271) identified 32 specific areas of knowledge, awareness, and skill growth specific to student affairs practitioners, which are also applicable to data practitioners. Some paraphrased and enhanced items from their original list worth considering include:

- Knowledge about different social identity groups, their experiences in society, and how they intersect with one another;
- Knowledge about how cultural differences influence verbal and non-verbal communication;
- A willingness to examine one's own social identities and values, including how they influence your view of the world and assumptions about reality;
- A belief that other ways of knowing and being in the world are equally valuable to one's own; and,
- An ability to apply knowledge of social and cultural differences to one's work.

A review of these five items reveal how knowledge, awareness, and skills work together to enhance our practice. Knowledge of social identities and cultural differences heightens our awareness of their influence in our lives. A combination of knowledge and awareness supports our ability apply our understanding to our work. The ability to apply cultural consciousness in our work in turn helps us collect and interpret data that can further inform our understanding of diverse student communities.

When starting (or continuing) the process of enhancing our own cultural consciousness, two things are critical to remember. First, cultural consciousness is an on-going process. Similar to an assessment cycle that never ends because there is always more to do to improve student learning, a commitment to cultural consciousness also never ends as we too always have room for growth and development. Second, it is important to avoid feeling paralyzed by the journey towards more culturally consciousness ways of thinking and doing by giving yourself permission to start with one area of development and evolve from there. Once again, similar to cycles of inquiry, we must give ourselves permission to begin somewhere, even if it is a small step forward.

Developing cultural consciousness not only benefits ourselves but also influences our positionality. Our positionality, or the way we relate to the context of our inquiry, influences all aspects of data-driven work (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014), especially our methodological choices. As stated in the fifth bullet above, cultural consciousness influences our how we engage in data collection, analysis, interpretation, and utilization of our research. Cultural consciousness supports us in challenging assumptions and examining our choices guided by our (lack of) knowledge, awareness, and skills throughout the process. The following questions illuminate how cultural consciousness is critical from start to finish:

- What assumptions do we have about our topic of inquiry and the population (and sub-populations) we are exploring?
- How do our assumptions about the homogeneity of students (e.g., "all students") influence our sampling approach to ensure underrepresented voices are adequately present?
- How might our unexamined biases influence when and with whom we incentivize students to provide us with data? Do we invest equally in all topics and student communities, including minoritized students and the topics they value most?
- How does our choice of data collection methods take into account the experiences of minoritized students or communication habits of different social identity groups?
- How does the language used in your data collection instruments reflect the realities of minoritized students?

- How do your social identities and related experiences influence the way you interpret students' responses, including how you decide what is valid versus an outlier?
- How do your values and assumptions about student communities influence where you decide to take action using the findings?

One can imagine how these questions can influence an exploration into campus climate. The assumptions practitioners have about what campus climate entails and the experiences of students will shape the broader inquiry and types of information collected. Additionally, assumptions about how similar "all students" are will determine if a random sample is sufficient or if oversampling specific student groups would be necessary. Our assumptions about the gravity of concerns students face may influence the choice to distribute a survey versus conducting interviews where students are matched to interviewers based on their gender, race, or ethnicity. Relatedly, any assumptions about this topic and biases about these students may influence if we deem high-value incentives (e.g., an iPad or $100 gift card) as worthwhile for the given research project.

Furthermore, the assumptions we have about what counts as harassment and discrimination may not be the same as how students think about these same terms. For example, does harassment and discrimination include experiences that are implicit, explicit, or both, and who gets to decide? If findings reveal that a relatively small percentage of the entire student body experiences harassment and discrimination, we may decide that's abnormal and an individual problem versus a campus concern. Relatedly, if low response rates were a concern at the start of the project, perhaps qualitative data should have been collected to ensure minoritized students' voices were still valued through qualitative analysis. Lastly, our choices about the threshold to take action are impacted as they are influenced by our positionality and assumptions.

Without knowledge about ourselves and others, awareness of how our identities influence our approach, and the ability to adapt our process to be inclusive, we may be imposing the barriers that prevent us from collecting and using the data we desire. The purpose of collecting data is to increase our knowledge about our students and use that knowledge to make informed decisions to enhance our work. However, that data is only as good as our efforts to ensure we collect the right data in the right ways from the right people. If we are committed to a project of inclusion and equity, then it must start with ourselves and the way we participate in data-driven activities that are culturally conscious and support equity in our educational enhancements.

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Increasing Equity in General Education Using Self-Relevant Writing

By Karen Singer-Freeman and Linda Bastone

Abstract: We report evidence that a self-relevant writing curriculum can support student wellness, engagement, and cultural inclusiveness. We revised a general education class (*Child* Development) to include culturally responsive assessments and instructional practices and created self-relevant writing assignments with high utility value. In exit surveys, over 75% of students reported feeling that assignments enhanced learning, provided an accurate assessment of learning, encouraged reflection, and should be used in future classes. Responses to self-relevant writing assignments demonstrated awareness of the assignments' personal relevance and were rich with references to students' lived experiences. We found no evidence of equity gaps in self-relevant writing. Early retention data comparing participation in *Child Development* with participation in another large general education class (*Introduction to Psychology)* revealed that participation in *Child Development* may increase retention. Although preliminary, these findings may indicate that participation in a single deeply engaging class can have a broad impact on students' experience in college. The modified curriculum described here can serve as a model for other general education classes. Importantly, a self-relevant writing curriculum can be successfully adopted in both small and relatively large classes.

Too often general education classes default to didactic lectures paired with multiple-choice assessments. These pedagogical approaches lack cultural relevance and may disproportionately harm students from historically underrepresented groups by revealing false achievement gaps (differences in performance rather than competence). We propose that self-relevant writing is uniquely situated to act as a conduit for the acquisition and assessment of general education learning outcomes by encouraging integration across cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal domains, as well as increasing students' investment in the production of written content (Singer-Freeman & Bastone, 2018; Singer-Freeman & Bastone, in press). We report evidence that a self-relevant writing curriculum can support student wellness, engagement, and cultural inclusiveness. We believe the modified curriculum described here can serve as a model for other general education classes. Importantly, a self-relevant writing curriculum can be successfully adopted in both small and relatively large classes.

The curricular modifications were implemented in Child Development, a lower-level psychology course that satisfies a social sciences general education requirement. Child Development seats between 60 and 100 students when taught in person and 35 students when taught online. Approximately one-third of enrolled students are from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, one-third are first-generation college students, one-third are commuters, and one-fifth are transfer students. Over 70% of students fall into one of these groups and one-third of the class falls into two to four groups. The results reported here are drawn from four semesters of the course offered between 2015 and 2018. The course learning outcomes are informed by AAC&U Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) learning outcomes: written communication; inquiry and analysis; quantitative literacy; critical thinking; intercultural knowledge and competence; integrative learning; and applied learning. We revised Child Development with the goals of increasing equity, writing, and retention of concepts, and supporting student wellness. To meet these goals, we used culturally responsive assessments and instructional practices and incorporated self-relevant assignments with high utility value.

Providing students with opportunities to relate course content to their lives can be an effective way to ensure that assignment content is inclusive and engaging (Singer-Freeman & Bastone, 2018; Singer-Freeman & Bastone, in press). We encourage students to engage with class material in two types of assignments: chapter reflections and self-relevant writing. In chapter reflections, students select information from the textbook and explain why it is personally relevant. In weekly self-relevant writing assignments, students summarize content, apply the content autobiographically, consider ways the content informs their future plans, and prioritize information they wish to remember. Some assignments encourage students to include childhood images or letters to the future self, and in some semesters assignments were completed as part of ePortfolio practice. Four assignments include brief psychological interventions (sense of belonging, mindset, values affirmation, and grit) in which students are provided with different ways to view pivotal experiences that support resilient responses to future challenges (Walton, 2014). In addition to feedback via rubrics, the instructor provides students with supportive comments about each assignment. To build a sense of community, the instructor shares common themes during class. Often students view writing as a task to be completed rather than as a means of communicating with others; however, authentic writing requires an authentic audience. Bass (2017) describes "social pedagogy" as activities in which students engage in intellectual tasks that center around sharing knowledge with an audience of individuals who are valued. To increase the social pedagogy and students' sense of having an authentic audience, the instructor encourages students to share assignments with family members, and in semesters when assignments were not included in ePortfolios, curates work into an attractive document returned to the student at the end of the semester. Initially, we removed all testing from the class. However, students reported that low-stakes quizzes would help them maintain focus during lectures. Weekly open-book quizzes were included for this purpose. Multiple-choice quiz questions were designed to have simple sentence structure and to use vocabulary that would be equally familiar to all students. The same questions were used in the online and in-person versions of the class.

We support equity using culturally responsive pedagogy (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). We set high standards while providing clear instructions and feedback that conveys confidence in students' ability to meet the standards. For example, we use five similar learning outcomes in every rubric. Rubrics provide students with an understanding of what they must do to succeed and increase grading equity by helping evaluators apply standards uniformly. The consistency of rubrics used across assignments also scaffolds improved performance over time. In addition, autobiographical writing provides students with opportunities to increase the instructor's understanding of their life experiences. As the instructor reads about students' lives, they increase their cultural awareness. As the instructor shares what they have learned from student writing with the class, students from the groups being represented are further empowered. When students experience acceptance and respect for their perspectives and cultures, they are well-positioned to produce their best work. The impact of autobiographical assignments is increased when the instructor shares examples from student writing with the class.

To determine whether the course fulfilled our desired objectives, we collected information about students' experiences. In exit surveys, over 75% of students reported feeling that assignments enhanced learning, provided an accurate assessment of learning, encouraged reflection, and should be used in future classes. Many students reported that self-relevant writing assignments encouraged conceptual integration. Although there were no length requirements, students produced a substantial body of writing. In the in-person class students produced an average of 592 words each week, and in the online class students produced an average of 712 words each week. Responses to self-relevant writing assignments and chapter reflections show an awareness of the assignments' personal relevance and were rich with references to students' lived experiences.

We were also interested in exploring students' responses to different forms of assessment. We found no evidence of an achievement gap in self-relevant writing: Black and Hispanic students received similar grades to White and Asian students. An equitable pattern of grading was observed both when grading was completed by the instructor and when undergraduate teaching assistants assisted the instructor. To determine whether multiple-choice tests

might reveal evidence of an achievement gap, we examined students' performance on the low-stakes open-book quizzes. We found that Hispanic and Black students in the in-person class received significantly lower quiz grades (77%) than White and Asian students (86%). Interestingly, there was not a significant difference between the quiz grades in the online class (Black and Hispanic average = 84%, White and Asian average = 88%). We hypothesize that the online setting may create a more positive environment for Hispanic and Black students because their own and others' race and ethnicity are less salient in this setting than in an in-person class.

Finally, we were interested in whether completion of the brief psychological interventions influenced students. When asked on an exit survey to list the five most important things they learned, many students mentioned learning about grit and developing a growth mindset. Other similar brief psychological interventions involving sense of belonging, mindset, and values affirmation have been found to increase retention (Walton, 2014). Early retention data comparing participation in *Child Development* with participation in another large general education class (*Introduction to Psychology)* revealed that participation in *Child Development* may increase retention. Whereas 80% of Liberal Arts students enrolled in *Child Development* in 2015 are in good academic standing or have graduated, only 70% of Liberal Arts students enrolled in *Introduction to Psychology* are in good academic standing or have graduated. Examining only first-year students, we also found evidence of improved retention. For Liberal Arts students who began their studies in Fall 2015, the college retention rate as of Spring 2018 is 58%. First-year students who completed *Introduction to Psychology* in Fall 2015 have a similar retention rate of 61%. However, first-year students who completed *Child Development* in Fall 2015 have a retention rate of 69%. Although preliminary, these findings may indicate that participation in a single deeply engaging class can have a broad impact on students' experience in college.

Based on our findings we have begun to hypothesize about ways in which different forms of assessment might evoke false achievement gaps. Multiple-choice test questions frequently have complicated sentence structure and vocabulary, causing poor alignment with the content being assessed. In contrast, the use of scaffolded assignments and open-ended questions that encourage students to express learning in their own words increases assignment clarity and grading equity (Singer-Freeman & Bastone, in press). We hypothesize that assessments in which students demonstrate learning in their own words vary along two dimensions that influence cultural relevance: inclusive content and utility value. When students demonstrate learning by applying content to an example, it is critical that the example and assignment structure be equally familiar to all students (inclusive). The presence of unfamiliar content can create confusion or feelings of exclusion. Students must also perceive their efforts to have value beyond credit in a class (utility value). When assignments are high in utility value, achievement gaps are eliminated (Harackiewicz, Canning, Tibbetts, Priniski, & Hyde, 2015; Singer-Freeman, Hobbs, & Robinson, 2019). We have proposed a theoretical matrix of culturally relevant assessment that makes predictions about the extent to which different forms of assessment might evoke false achievement gaps (Singer-Freeman, et al., 2019). Self-relevant writing and ePortfolio practice are high in both inclusive content and utility value, supporting the accurate assessment of competence in all students. Disciplinary writing has high utility value because it will support professional development but may lack inclusive content if the stylistic rules are more familiar to some students than to others. Inclusive projects frequently lack utility value because their primary purpose is assessment. Thus, both sorts of assignments should present moderate risk of false achievement gaps. Tests and formal essays are low in both inclusive content and utility value, creating a high risk of false achievement gaps like those reported here. Interestingly, context also matters, as indicated by our finding that an achievement gap was present in response to a traditional test setting and not in response to testing that was completed as part of an online class. See Singer-Freeman, et al. (2019) for further exploration of this model.

Self-relevant writing is a useful tool that can encourage students to integrate course material with personal experiences in the context of a large social science general education class. We believe it also has the potential to help even the playing field for students historically underrepresented in higher education because it is high in utility

value and inclusive content. The writing assignments described in this paper can serve as a model for other general education classes (see Singer-Freeman and Bastone, 2016, for a complete set of assignments and rubrics). We conclude with the following recommendations for others who wish to incorporate high-utility-value self-relevant writing assignments in large general education courses.

1. Provide opportunities to write in different genres for authentic audiences. Infuse assignments with self-relevant activities to increase utility value.

2. Curate self-relevant writing into a document that is formatted attractively or in an ePortfolio. Encourage students to save and share their work with others who are important to them.

3. Create an inclusive community. Share examples from student writing that reflect the diversity of experiences.

4. Provide proactive instructions and convey confidence in students' ability. Provide individual feedback that details weaknesses and expresses confidence in students' ability to improve.

5. Practice culturally relevant assessment. Use inclusive content, explain the utility of the assignments to students, and disaggregate assignment outcomes to reveal and address false achievement gaps.

Thoughtfully designed general education curricula can support student success and cultural inclusiveness while providing students with rich opportunities to engage in self-relevant writing. The over-reliance on testing in general education courses may limit integrative learning and disproportionately harm students from historically underrepresented groups. We believe that providing students with meaningful opportunities to engage in self-relevant writing may fundamentally alter their experience in college and lead to more authentic learning.

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Feminist Evaluation: A Theoretical Framework for Culturally Responsive Higher Education Assessment

By Jana M. Hanson

Abstract: Historically, researchers and policy-makers have engaged in conversations surrounding diversity and equity issues in testing, measurement, and assessment. Until recently, there has been limited conversation within the higher education community on standards related to fairness or equity issues in assessment. Part of the challenge within higher education assessment are limited frameworks to help guide culturally responsive assessment. This article summarizes core concepts and theories from feminist pedagogy and feminist evaluation that would enhance assessment practices in higher education. Using this concepts and theories, I conclude by proposing a framework and examples for practitioners to incorporate into higher education assessment.

Introduction

Traditional assessment of student learning in higher education has primarily focused on how to write student learning outcomes, assessment methods, and using results (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Suskie, 2018; Walvoord, 2010). In general, academic programs and institutions create one-size-fits-all assessment plans. These plans get implemented and the data is aggregated at the program or institutional level. However, these one-size-fits-all plans and summaries neglect to account for varying student backgrounds and experiences. In contrast, feminist evaluation and feminist pedagogy provide theoretical frameworks to help higher education assessment incorporate culturally responsive and equitable practices. This article will discuss issues and challenges surrounding inclusive assessment practices. A brief overview of feminist evaluation and pedagogy is provided followed by suggestions on how to use these theories to provide a framework that assessment professionals can apply to assessment processes.

Motivation for Culturally Responsive Assessment

Historically, there have been questions surrounding diversity and equity issues in testing, measurement, and assessment. The majority of these questions have occurred in relation to testing companies and standardized evaluation. Researchers have conducted numerous studies on equity and bias issues ranging from item development; administration and scoring; and use or interpretation of results. One response to these studies has been the creation of standards by professional organizations. For example, the American Education Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) jointly produced the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing*. Within the *Standards (*American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014), fairness in testing is addressed prominently in Standard 3.2, which emphasizes tests that "measure the intended construct and minimizing the potential for tests being affected by construct-irrelevant such as linguistic, communicative, cognitive, cultural, physical, or other characteristics." Likewise, Standard 3.3 states "those responsible for test development should include relevant subgroups in validity, reliability/precision, and other preliminary studies used when constructing the test." Finally, Standard 13.6 identifies the need to report group differences and make meaningful interpretation of those differences. These standards outline expectations for test developers to ensure fairness and group differences in the design and development of evaluation methods.

Until recently, there has been limited conversation within the higher education community on standards related to fairness or equity issues in assessment. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) argued for higher education to consider culturally responsive assessment and defined it as "…assessment that is mindful of the student populations the institution serves, using language that is appropriate for all students when developing learning outcomes, acknowledging students' differences in the planning phases of an assessment effort, developing and/or using

assessment tools that are appropriate for different students, and being intentional in using assessment results to improve learning for all students" (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 10). The authors' state "in terms of assessing student learning, the field has been largely quiet when it comes to issues of equity…" and "…little urgency has been given to ensure that students are provided with just and equitable means to demonstrate their learning" (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 5). In addition, Montenegro and Jankowski point out that "assessment, if not done with equity in mind, privileges and validates certain types of learning and evidence of learning over others, can hinder the validation of multiple means of demonstration, and can reinforce within students the false notion that they do not belong in higher education" (p. 5). Similarly, Levy and Heiser (2018, March), in response to the Culturally Responsive Assessment article, pointed out that positionality (i.e., influence of identity related to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability) and agency (i.e., capacity to act independently) have a "compounded impact on assessment works because respondents, practitioners, and other stakeholders all make decisions grounded in their sense of self" (p.1). In other words, assessment professionals are guided by lived experiences, identities, and sense of culture. The article calls for more involvement, especially from students, in the assessment process, as additional perspectives will ideally reduce assumptions and biases. Levy & Heiser (2018, March) also encouraged reflection as part of the assessment to consider potential limitations and biases in the process.

While these are important considerations for higher education assessment professionals, there are currently limited frameworks to help guide culturally responsive assessment. As described below, I summarize core concepts and theories from feminist pedagogy and feminist evaluation that would enhance assessment practices in higher education.

Feminist Pedagogy and Evaluation
In response to calls for more inclusive and equitable assessment processes, the lens or framework that assessment professionals might incorporate into assessment conversations is one centered on students, relationships, and inclusivity at the institutional and program-level. As assessment professionals consider an updated paradigm of assessment that brings together other theoretical frameworks, I argue that feminist pedagogy and feminist evaluation be incorporated in the assessment process.

The premise for considering feminist pedagogy and evaluation is that the assessment process is not neutral; decisions are made that are guided by individual experiences and lenses. Sedlacek (1994) wrote that most measures were not designed for nontraditional/underserved populations, nor do single measures of learning meant to ensure fairness lead to equally valid assessments. Academic programs and faculty assess what they think is most important for students to learn. In addition, the assessment methods are usually designed without considering assumptions and biases. Finally, the results are often reviewed at an aggregate level where group differences are not considered; therefore, decisions and interventions often do not consider targeted approaches based on group differences.

One solution to address potential biases and encourage more inclusive practices is to apply feminist theory within a higher education assessment framework. When it comes to evaluation and research, feminist theorists and practitioners "advise adoption of a feminist lens in apprehending the context of inquiry, one's role, and the data gathered; in selecting analytical strategies and articulating interpretations; and in crafting and acting upon findings" (Brisolara, Seigart, SenGupta, 2014, p. 33). Key components include world perspectives, multiple ways of knowing, and awareness. First, feminist theory encourages awareness and recognition of varying perspectives used to view the world. Instructors and students need to reflect on these perspectives in relation to teaching and learning. For example, there are many teaching practices and ways to learn information. It is important for both student and instructor to recognize how their experiences and perspectives may influence the teaching and learning process. In addition, the teaching, learning, and assessment process must recognize that knowledge is power. However, knowledge is also culturally, socially, and temporally contingent; that is, knowledge and skills that are important in one society may not have the same weight of importance in another society. Feminist theory also emphasizes awareness that bias and discrimination are systemic and structural. If assessors do not consider these biases, what we assess and how we assess may reinforce these biases. Finally, feminist evaluation theory also encourages the use of qualitative methods "as an important means of unearthing unexamined perspectives, complex dynamics,

and silenced voices" (p. 19). Where possible, utilizing a mixed methods approach is best in higher education assessment.

Feminist pedagogy applies these theoretical concepts to the teaching and learning process. According to Shrewsbury (1987), feminist pedagogy "is a theory about the teaching/learning process that guides our choice of classroom practices by providing criteria to evaluate specific educational strategies and techniques in terms of the desired course goals or outcomes" (p. 6). Shrewsbury emphasizes that feminist pedagogy focuses on interrelationships and a classroom built on the experiences of the participants. There are three central concepts of feminist pedagogy that Shrewsbury (1987) identified. First, empowerment is power as a creative community energy. Classroom strategies that are "enhancing the students' opportunities and abilities to develop their thinking about the goals and objectives they wish and need to accomplish individually and collectively and expand understanding of subject matter as students actively consider learning goals and sequences." Second, community awareness that the community of learners are all on different paths. Finally, leadership allows students participation in developing goals and objectives. Students learn how to evaluate actions and connection between objectives and achievement. They also learn to analyze problems and find alternatives. Using these concepts in higher education assessment emphasizes learner-centered assessment to address equity and cultural responsiveness in assessment. In addition, the assessment methods can be tailored to various learning preferences and provide more equitable demonstration of learning.

Ethnographic research by Maher & Tetreault (1992) also highlighted creating a feminist classroom. These components include 1) mastery, 2) voice, 3) authority, and 4) positionality. In a feminist classroom, "students seek mastery on their own terms and in concert with others" (p. 59). Student learn by the articulation of one's own sense of experiences and learning. Learning might occur through "personal awakening and new visions of the world" (Maher & Tetreault, 1992, p. 59). In addition, authority is not thought of as a hierarchical relationship where instructors serve as experts and interpreters of knowledge. A feminist classroom recognizes use of individual experiences and perceptions as a source of knowledge. Finally, positionality acknowledges that "validity of knowledge comes from an acknowledgment of the knower's specific position in any context" (p. 60). Positionality suggests that contextual and relational factors influence student learning.

This overview of feminist pedagogy and feminist classroom theories provide key concepts that must be considered in a framework to make the assessment process more equitable, inclusive, and adaptable. In general, the key components speak to the students' lived experiences, narratives, and understanding. These ideas, although focused on the classroom, can expand to program-level assessment as well. The next section connects ways in which these concepts apply to assessment practices to help facilitate equity and cultural responsiveness in higher education assessment.

Culturally Responsive Assessment Framework
Applying feminist pedagogy, feminist evaluation, and feminist classrooms theories to assessment processes encourages administrators, faculty, and staff to consider equity issues and cultural backgrounds at all stages of the teaching, learning, and assessment processes. In order for assessment to be culturally responsive, assessment processes need to be linked to the core concepts of feminist pedagogy, feminist evaluation, and feminist classrooms theories.
The main assessment strategies to incorporate these concepts include:

1. Empowerment – This would include assessment strategies that enhance faculty, staff, and student opportunities and abilities to think about and develop learning outcomes within a classroom, academic program, or experience. Instead of being one for all, these can be collective and individual outcomes.
2. Community - This would encourage the creation of assessment learning communities. These communities would offer faculty, staff, students, and administrators the opportunity to engage with one other and to share information or ideas on assessing student learning. Communities would acknowledge that each individual is on their own path to learning, and assessment processes would be flexible to accommodate this.

3. <u>Leadership</u> –Many take part in the formation of student learning outcomes and assessment methods. In addition, faculty, staff, students, and administrators take responsibility and work together to analyze and to solve assessment-related challenges. There is a special focus on getting students more invested and engaged, which contrasts with the limited opportunity for student involvement and leadership associated with more traditional assessment practices.
4. <u>Mastery</u> – This would entail creating more flexibility in the assessment process to allow students to seek mastery on their own terms and in ways that fit their experiences and frameworks. Rather than assessing "the right answer," learning is assessed as a developmental process and in collaboration with students and faculty.
5. <u>Voice</u> – This involves articulating and assessing one's own learning in a way that brings in a variety of perspectives. This also allows for providing students choices in how their learning is assessed.
6. <u>Authority</u> – Assessment processes facilitate but do not dictate learning outcomes. Instead, it is a much more fluid process that recognizes that learning occurs over time.

Conclusion

The goal of this article is to provide an expanded perspective on future directions for assessment. One-size-fits-all assessment plans, methods, and summary of results do not account for varying student characteristics and experiences. Recently, Heiser, Prince, and Levy (2017) called for Critical Theory as a framework for student affairs assessment. However, I do not think we need to limit these ideas to student affairs. Instead these ideas can be expanded across assessment practices. The inclusion of feminist evaluation and pedagogy concepts as a theoretical framework should be considered as strategies to create a more equitable, inclusive, and adaptable assessment process. In particular, higher education assessment plans and methods should incorporate a framework more inclusive of diverse students, situations, and experiences. To achieve this, assessment practitioners need to help faculty and staff see different ways of thinking about knowledge and assessing knowledge. We also need to allow for flexibility in program/course assessment without lowering quality.

Future work should expand on these ideas and I look forward to the conversation. Questions to consider: 1) What might assessment look like incorporating feminist evaluation and pedagogy?; 2) How do we allow for flexibility and yet have high standards of assessment?; 3) How do we create more student-centered, inclusive assessment? Could students create their own assessments?; 4) How do we efficiently and effectively tell the narrative of student learning?; 5) How do we work with administrators and accrediting bodies to be accommodating of multiple ways of assessment?; and 6) How do we provide professional development opportunities for assessment professionals to continue to explore these ideas?

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Conversations with Accreditors

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Introduction: The Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) has a history of engaging in conversations with leadership from accrediting agencies to promote understanding of their perspectives, goals, and processes with respect to their member institutions. The first interview with an accreditor appeared in the AALHE publication, *Intersection: a Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning,* in 2014. Since then, we have published interviews with accreditation leaders from every regional accrediting agency. We have also hosted panel sessions, *Conversations with Accreditors,* at our annual assessment conferences. The interview presented below continues that important dialog with Dr. Barbara Gellman-Danley, president of the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and Chair of the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions (C-RAC). Joining her in the conversation are her HLC colleagues Andrew Lootens-White, Vice President and Chief Operating Officer and Eric Martin, Vice President and Chief of Staff. This interview offers insight into the exchanges that take place among the regional accrediting bodies. We thank our guests for sharing their time and expertise as we explore accreditation-related topics of interest across the accrediting regions.

- *Jane Marie* Souza, PhD, Associate Provost, University of Rochester and President of AALHE
- *Steven Hawks*, MA, Director of Undergraduate Assessment, University of Minnesota, AALHE Board Member

JANE MARIE: We are a mobile society and this of course includes students as well as assessment personnel. As people move around the country and take on jobs in different accrediting regions, they have to learn new accreditation standards. Do the accreditors talk about coordinating standards to make them similar?

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: The accrediting agencies' standards of quality are not the same because these are membership organizations and no policies are passed without membership input. While there are conversations in C-RAC about clarifying definitions (e.g. Competency-based education), there is no movement at this time to make standards the same across the regionals. They are, however, all evidence-based. All of the standards and criteria are built to look at quality implementation. When HLC goes to a campus we see things that will show up in any of the regions, but perhaps with different wording. For example, we see if assessment is part of the DNA of an organization.

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: Because we are a membership organization and gather member input that is reflected in our Criteria for Accreditation, the expertise, insights and ideas of members who have been in HLC or perhaps came from other regions is reflected. Cross pollination occurs.

We as accreditors also meet with staff from different regional accrediting agencies every two years and share lessons learned. We discuss pain points, opportunities with a lot of sharing, through a multi-day program that includes invited experts as speakers. We take lessons learned and consider them for policy updates and practices, such as peer corps training.

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: C-RAC members (the seven presidents) meet and talk at least every other week and meet multiple times during the year. We spend lots of time talking about key issues, and may collaborate on joint statements.

One key issue is transfer of credit. Transfer came up during negotiated rulemaking. Representing C-RAC at negotiated rulemaking, we wanted to emphasize that transfer decisions are up to the institutions. Some states require transfer agreements, but transfer of credit is not up to the accreditors or the U.S. department of education; it is up to the institutions based on their own standards.

ERIC MARTIN: In terms of C-RAC**,** we also provide support to each other. HLC offers elective programming such as assessment workshops, and we realize that not every accreditation agency has that kind of mechanism. We are looking to collaborate with C-RAC members on certain topics and provide resources to more institutions.

JANE MARIE: My question is coming from the fact that some of our members have experienced difficulty in at least one of the accrediting regions due to highly prescriptive assessment requirements. I am pleased to know there are discussion about sharing "pain points" because there are pain points for some institutions.

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: One tenant in our strategic plan is student success, another is innovation. We received a $500,000 grant from Lumina Foundation to support our strategic plan goals. We bring in experts such as Natasha Jankowski from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) to work with us on student success. HLC doesn't work in isolation. HLC runs a conference for our membership each year that is well attended and get feedback on what is working and what is not. (4,000 people attended last year.)

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: We do a yearly analysis on what areas in the Criteria for Accreditation are flagging at institutions. We see where institutions are struggling and then we look at whether this is a trend in higher education institutions, where we need to adjust our peer corps training and where we need to adjust the language of the Criteria themselves. For example, we know that consistently for several years, assessment is the area where institutions are mostly frequently cited in our Criteria as having a concern. We take that information and incorporate that into our discussion of the Criteria with member institutions and make some adjustments to peer review training and other processes as needed.

JANE MARIE: I appreciate that there may be ironic situations such as an institution complaining of accreditors being too prescriptive, then asking for very detailed guidelines – almost asking for prescriptions.

STEVEN HAWKS: In your C-RAC peer group meetings do you discuss how peer reviewers are trained? Is there any commonality in the approach across the regionals?

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: Yes, it is a major topic when we get together. Our staff members maintain professional relationships with their peers across agencies. We share ideas that fold into our own training. We sometimes look for peer reviewers with expertise in very specific areas and we sometimes exchange peer reviewers on a limited basis with other agencies and in that way cross-pollinate across regions. We always cross-train those folks on appropriate criteria/standards for our particular region.

STEVEN HAWKS: Are there any specific training or things that you ask reviewers to look for when they are reviewing the assessment of student learning sections of the assurance argument?

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: We rely heavily on case studies in our training. We create real life circumstances for a fictitious institution for training reviewers to experience and react to at a multi-day training. We create fictitious places and scenarios for trainees to address. We modify the scenarios on a yearly basis. Peer reviewers experience real-life challenges rather than just reading about overly prescriptive things. They run through simulations to get experience in that way.

ERIC MARTIN: A team that has been out in the field doing their work also gives us feedback about how it went. We contact individuals who may have been too prescriptive so we can potentially re-calibrate expectations with them.

ERIC MARTIN: I want to make another point that in the past we asked that institutions demonstrate they are doing something related to assessment of student learning. Now we push for not only doing something with assessment of student learning findings, but connecting it to other processes, such as planning and budgeting. Assessment is not happening in isolation, but it is seen in other elements of the institution. We get feedback from those in the field about how this is working and that factors into future peer training.

JANE MARIE: Is there any opportunity to collaborate with AALHE for training peer reviewers in the area of assessment? We have a lot of experience within our membership. We are very open to working with accrediting bodies and finding opportunities for collaboration and serving as a resource as you do with NILOA.

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: This is good to know and now that we have gotten to know you, we will see if there are opportunities in the future.

ERIC MARTIN: Similarly, you are welcome to participate in any of the HLC's elective programming that I mentioned earlier (We do 20-25 events each year.) There are a lot of opportunities for you to see how this works, and how those facilitators engage with the institutional members.

JANE MARIE: Regarding expectations of Institutional-level assessment, we realize this will be highly individualized based on institutional mission, but are there any general expectations about institutional assessment? This is an area not clearly defined. Is there anything you would suggest we should be looking for in this area?

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: If you are looking at institutional assessment, you are really looking at how it connects to the institution as a whole. There is some debate at the federal level about our Criteria for Accreditation, should we be looking at governance? Should we be looking at finance? Yes, if, for example, the institution has issues between the trustees and the president, does that have an effect on student success, and what happens to them after they graduate? If you have financial problems, it may mean you have some real struggles within the institution and the findings from assessment of student learning will identify the pain points. Regarding other criteria focused on teaching and learning, you are looking at continuous learning towards improvement in all areas: enrollment offices, registrar's office, admissions office…everything. When our teams go out in the field, they need to look at how all of these areas work together, the institution as a whole.

JANE MARIE: I love that you said continuous improvement and learning is in all areas as a learning institution. An institution itself is a learning organization. The students are not learning if we're not learning.

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: HLC has two facets to its mission, one is ensuring quality in higher education and the other is about encouraging and expecting institutional improvement. That improvement is only going to happen with an institutional assessment about how they are doing and ways they can improve. One of the ways we expect that to be demonstrated is through an "Open Pathway" quality initiative. Institutions choose their own topics on areas identified for improvement; a lot of institutions focus on assessment of student learning. So, they have to do some assessment to determine their focus. That is an example that comes from the mission of the organization.

ERIC MARTIN: Recently, Barbara and I wrote a book chapter on institutional effectiveness for Terry U. O'Banion's ***13 Ideas That are Transforming the Community College World.*** Our chapter is on institutional effectiveness, and so we surveyed community colleges and the results are very interesting. We also looked at what other regional accreditors are looking at in terms of institutional effectiveness. We all have that language in our criteria and how institutions respond, predictably, varies widely. Some have this down and some create initiatives without having a real sense of how it all connects. So, they are in an evolutionary period.

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: We did this survey and the interesting thing is there was complete disagreement about what institutional effectiveness entails. Some would say how can we measure institutional effectiveness when, as a campus, we don't even know what we mean by that. The most interesting thing is from the qualitative responses we heard that an institution might have next to each other the president and the office of institutional effectiveness. The president would say we are doing an amazing job and the other office says we are all messed up and don't know what we are doing with assessment and institutional effectiveness.

JANE MARIE: Is it fair to say that you can't really disaggregate assessment of student learning from assessment of institutional effectiveness?

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: That is very true. It is what we do. Assessment has an academic definition and a business definition, but in our work, you can't look at quality assurance if you don't look at how they assess and grow on their own campuses.

JANE MARIE: With regard to the national dialogue about assessment, there is a perception among some folks that assessment is being done just for the sake of saying you did it, and that in some cases assessment is being done to justify the profession. Would you have any thoughts on how you respond to those comments?

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: Assessment is part of HLC's Criteria for Accreditation because we believe it is best on behalf of the students and the institutions of higher learning in this country. HLC is strongly committed to assessment.

JANE MARIE: So, you do not spend your time and energy in trying to satisfy distractors?

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: We are keenly aware of the national conversation on topics related to higher education. We listen in case we should respond, but in many cases, we do not believe that we need to.

JANE MARIE: I love that. I often get asked at my large University about how I deal with those real negative people, and I say that I don't. I work with those that are understanding and want to do assessment.

STEVEN HAWKS: As we (AALHE) are the association of learning in higher education, would you as President of HLC and Chair of C-RAC, have any guidance or suggestion for our conference or Board; anything that we should be paying attention to over the next several years?

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: We see a lot of assessment silos on campus. Even if you take only the academic side of the house, it {assessment} doesn't work if it isn't institutionalized as part of the DNA of the wider institution. It is the same at times for how institutions treat accreditation; sometimes there is a separate accreditation office, or an accreditation and assessment office. The institution may plan to just get ready for an accreditation visit a year ahead of time, and ramp up in assessment; that is not really doing assessment. Assessment is not just for accreditation reviews, but for the institutional reviews and for the learners. That is what we see the most: assessment not operationalized. Getting it into the DNA of an institution is important.

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: We make sure to stress the inclusion of the voices of peer reviewers. As a Commission, we have expectations that institutions are doing things that will lead them to success and improvement. The interface between that lies in the hands of the peer reviewers. They are the ones navigating those nuances and seeking out additional information when they are engaging with the institution. There are different variations of how assessment is happening, and I think that peer reviewers who are expert in that area would be able to share their experiences.

JANE MARIE: What we find on some campuses is that people are tapped to be the assessment person for their department, whether or not they have experience in assessment or not. Someone can be anointed X% of their time, and we hope that peer reviewers understand that type of scenario. I'm confident that peer reviewers across the country, across regions, have stories to tell and share and guidance to offer regarding how you deal with institutions that have a dedicated, full-time assessment person devoted to it compared to an institution where assessment is now 25% of a faculty person's responsibility. I love the idea of bringing together the peer reviewers at the conference.

ERIC MARTIN: To pick up on Barbara's DNA theme, I had that tap on my shoulder back in 1999 to "do assessment." It was seen as a box to be checked. To me, assessment is really about continuous improvement and continuous improvement is hard. It's ongoing, not episodic, as people often treat it. When it is sitting in the accreditation standards, as it does across all regional accreditors, there is this assumption at many institutions that we need to get this over with and get back to what we do. What is missed, however, is the real opportunity for lifting and improving the student experience and the institution overall. The more we can look at it this way, as an ongoing process that is going to ebb and flow… it's going to have high points and lows…, the more we can settle into making improvements over the long run. It's an ongoing effort rather than a finish-line to cross. It isn't going to get crossed; the work is continuous. Reframing the discussion along these lines begins to disrupt that prior way of thinking, and it will be more effective going forward.

JANE MARIE: Any opportunities for collaboration? AALHE is very interested in continuing a dialogue as we like to be actively involved. Could we present something at HLC, provide peer review training assistance, etc. Are there any opportunities for AALHE to collaborate with you? What advice would you give us on that?

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: It is always possible that we could invite you to speak, but given your interest I hope you will submit a proposal for our next conference (April 2020).

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: Our call for proposals should open in June 2019 for our 2020 annual conference; around 4,000 people attend each year. People affiliated with AALHE could submit a proposal, or series of proposals, explaining how they are connected to each other.

BARBARA GELLMAN-DANLEY: If you would like someone to present at AALHE, let us know. If I cannot, someone else from HLC could do it. We just have to know the dates.

ERIC MARTIN: Speaking at conferences across the higher education industry is a great entry point and allows us to keep these conversations going.

JANE MARIE: If there is any assistance that we can assist in peer review training, we would love that. I loved some of the things that you discussed and shared, and I would love for other people to hear that. The reason that I like it at our national conference is that it might inspire others to think collaboratively and think the way that you do. Not all accrediting bodies think the same way.

Two of our panelists this year, one from the state system of New York and Middles States, and talk about how they are collaborating to ensure that they are not stepping on each other's toes with expectations, like assessment. So, they're collaborating and not looking for duplicative efforts. I am sure that is helping elsewhere, but where it isn't, hearing that may inspire others to have similar conversations with their accrediting bodies.

ANDREW LOOTENS-WHITE: One area where we get a lot of questions from institutions involves case studies. What was the problem, and how did the institution come together to resolve it? What did it look like? What were the resources? What were the outcomes? AALHE may be in a good position to identify what some of those main topics could be and put together these case studies such that people from different types of institutions, different levels within the institution, could use the case studies as resources.

JANE MARIE: That is a great suggestion. We are a learning organization, and we want to learn from you. Thank you so much again for sharing your time and thoughts with us.

Save the date for **AALHE 2020** at the Sheraton in New Orleans. Registration opens January 1, 2020.

Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education

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