



NILOA Perspectives

The Assessment Profession in Higher Education: A Snapshot of Perceptions, Roles, and Activities

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Tensions between improvement and accountability have characterized the assessment profession from its origins in the 1980s through the present day (Ewell 2009). Recent public criticisms (e.g., Eubanks 2017; Gilbert 2018; Worthen 2018) have inspired passionate advocacy for the learning improvement mission, yet accountability, particularly accreditation, continues to be an important driver of assessment activity at many institutions. These tensions are not just reflected in academic debates, but they shape the daily experiences of learning outcomes assessment professionals. How can we as a profession support new and experienced assessment professionals to be good stewards of assessment? What resources do institutions and assessment professionals need to have available in order to do “good” assessment?

To better understand the working lives of assessment professionals, we examined their perceptions, roles, and activities, with an eye toward identifying professional development needs. Our work, originally commissioned by the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, was primarily based on two national surveys of assessment professionals around the country conducted on behalf of the University of Kentucky (UKY) (Combs and Rose, 2015) (N = 377) and Watermark (2016) (N = 1,074). It is our hope that these results will aid in continuing the conversation regarding what an assessment professional looks like and what competencies and professional development they need in order to be effective at their job.

Perceptions of Assessment

The Watermark (2016) survey included items related to assessment professionals’ views of the importance of assessment at their institution. Three themes emerged in the responses regarding the importance of assessment: improvement, accountability, and implementation concerns. Many respon-

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dents mentioned the importance of assessment in improving student learning and facilitating conversations among faculty and staff. When discussing accountability, assessment professionals talked about the need for assessment to satisfy the expectations of accreditors and funders, as well as the moral obligation of doing assessment. The final theme that emerged, implementation concerns, was expressed exclusively by faculty and focused on issues regarding how institutions designed and carried out their assessment.

Respondents of the Watermark (2016) survey were also asked what they liked and disliked most about assessment. Three overarching themes regarding what assessment professionals liked the most about assessment were revealed:

1. Enjoyment of the methodological aspects of assessment (e.g.,

designing assessment processes and tools, collecting and compiling assessment data, and analyzing and making meaning out of assessment data);

2. Enjoyment of the collaborative aspects of assessment (e.g., working with faculty in every aspect of assessment and, in particular, in the

discussion and interpretation of findings); and

3. Appreciation for the impact or the utility of assessment (e.g., informing decision-making, validating instructional efforts, and fostering continuous improvement at the institutional, program, and course levels) (Ariovich, Bral, Gregg, Gulliford, and Morrow, 2018).

When asked what they liked least about assessment, participant responses mirrored their responses to what they reported liking the most:

1. Issues with the methodological aspects of assessment (e.g., some respondents just don’t like performing methodological work and have reservations about the soundness of assessment design and implementation);
2. Issues with the need to persuade and teach others about assessment

(e.g., some respondents don't like convincing others to do assessment and express frustration with what is perceived as lack of engagement and understanding of assessment among faculty and administrators); and

3. Questions about the value of assessment itself (e.g., practical reasons, such as lack of resources to do it well and concerns about their assessment efforts not leading to any practical gains). Respondents also raised broader conceptual questions about the limitations of assessment as a discipline for gaining knowledge and finding solutions to improve teaching and learning (Arivovich et al., 2018).

Higher Education Assessment Professionals' Roles and Activities

Additional analysis of the participants' responses to what they liked most and least about assessment assisted us in clarifying the roles that are typically performed by higher education assessment professionals. By analyzing participants' comments in iterative dialogue with previous research, we were able to distinguish five common roles with which assessment professionals identify. These roles are:

1. Assessment/method expert
2. Narrator/translator
3. Facilitator/guide and political navigator
4. Change agent
5. Project manager

Analysis of the Watermark (2016) survey results loosely aligned with Jankowski and Slotnick's (2015) original five roles (assessment/method expert, narrator/translator, facilitator/guide, political navigator, and visionary/believer). The assessment method expert role matched closely with the role originally described by Jankowski and Slotnick (2015), which focuses on assessment practices and collecting/an-

alyzing both quantitative and qualitative assessment data. Similarly aligned, the narrator/translator is tasked with finding meaning with the data and communicating results. Respondents who enjoyed this role described assessment as "storytelling" or "puzzle solving."

Based on themes from the Watermark survey, two roles from Jankowski and Slotnick's (2015) original framework (facilitator/guide and political navigator) were combined into one role, as the data suggested these roles might be opposite sides of the same coin. Generally, responses describing positive, uplifting interactions aligned with the facilitator/guide role, while descriptions of less fulfilling interactions aligned with the political navigator role. For example:

[I most enjoy] when working with faculty and we find a useful data source that helps them understand an obstacle to learning and they are able to make adjustments and improve the situation. [I least enjoy] countering myths and resistance to a process that could be helpful but is seen as a threat. (Assessment Coordinator)

I most enjoy the conversations that happen when people are working on assessment together. I least enjoy seeing people who are frustrated with or negative about the assessment process, who don't see how assessment can be helpful to them in achieving their goals. (Assessment Liaison)

We also narrowed the visionary/believer role into a more concrete role and called it "change agent." The change agent role captures the active participation of assessment professionals in planning, advocating for initiatives that can have a positive impact on education, and implementing changes based on assessment results.

I both like and dislike being an agent of organizational change. The only times I feel frustrated about assessment are when I have to manage people who are stubbornly negative about the work. People who don't love systems thinking

and the intellectual challenge don't tend to love assessment work. (Director of Assessment & Institutional Research)

Lastly, the data suggested a role not previously discussed in Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) that we labeled "project manager." The project manager role captures the logistical/coordination aspects of assessment work. With a few exceptions, this role was most evident among the assessment activities that respondents (both assessment professionals and faculty) liked least about their work. Terms such as "tedious," "cumbersome," or "time consuming" characterized these responses, along with frustrations with data-collection infrastructure or software applications.

Challenges and Professional Development Opportunities

Recognizing the variety and complexity of roles performed by assessment professionals helps illuminate the challenges they experience, as well as their professional development needs. Further insight into these topics can be gleaned from the UKY survey (Combs and Rose, 2015). The survey asked respondents for the biggest challenge they faced in their positions. Respondents could choose more than one challenge from a list of provided options. Over half selected "Lack of time to get everything done." Nearly one in three identified "Structural barriers (administrative silos, policies, obstructionist individuals/offices, etc.)," and nearly one in four cited "Lack of culture or support for assessment on campus and/or in community."

More than three-quarters of the UKY survey respondents stated that they participated in professional development related to assessment, primarily through conferences, webinars, and journals. Six major themes emerged as professional development topics that the respondents would like to see: staffing and resources, best practices in assessment, learning
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outcomes and co-curricular assessment, assessment tools, collaboration, and using data for change and/or strategic planning. As these themes demonstrate, the professional development needs of assessment practitioners go far beyond content expertise. Assessment professionals are in need of holistic preparation and training in order to bring down barriers and silos and change institutional culture in a context of scarce time and resources.

Recommendations for Institutional Leadership and Assessment Professionals

How can this analysis assist institutional leadership in attracting, retaining, and advancing talent to support assessment excellence? To do their best work, assessment professionals need institutional support for their work in the form of adequate budgets, trained personnel, policies that encourage meaningful use of data, and reward structures that promote faculty engagement. Assessment professionals deserve a seat at the table and have the capacity to influence positive organizational change. While nearly everyone in the higher education enterprise finds themselves engaged in “project management” at some point, this role may be the least professionally satisfying part of assessment professionals’ work. If they begin to feel that it is occupying the majority of their time and efforts, they may contemplate other professional opportunities where they can engage in more rewarding assessment activities.

Assessment professionals are required to wear many hats. In order to be effective at their job, they need to be skilled at a variety of competencies, such as methodology, management, and communication. Assessment professionals need opportunities for meaningful professional development and networking

with colleagues who understand the tensions and challenges associated with the multiple roles they must balance. Institutional leaders should promote and encourage active participation in national and regional assessment-related associations. To leverage scarce resources, smaller institutions might explore collaborative sharing of assessment personnel and/or data systems. Such collaboration would help to minimize the time spent on assessment logistics and maximize the potential for assessment professionals to make meaningful contributions to their institutions. ■

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