

# The Assessment Profession in Higher Education: Addressing the Varied Professional Development Needs of Practitioners

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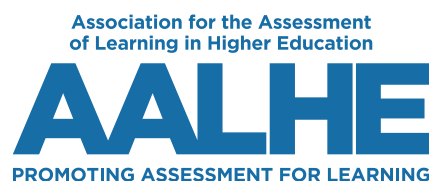
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# Foreword/Charge to the White Paper Authors

The Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education's (AALHE) primary mission is to provide resources to support assessment practitioners' professional development. To do that well, AALHE needs to understand the role of assessment practitioners in higher education, their responsibilities, what they know currently, and what they want to know moving forward. In 2017, AALHE recognized that the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), University of Kentucky Assessment Office, and Watermark (formerly Taskstream) had conducted surveys to gather relevant information on assessment practitioners' roles, responsibilities, knowledge, and perceptions. However, those organizations did not examine their respective survey findings together or with an eye toward professional development. This project attempts to do that.

While AALHE will use the findings in this white paper to guide internal decision-making and enhance educational opportunities for assessment practitioners, we share these findings so that others may better understand the current status of assessment and take action as it fits their needs. Working together, those of us interested in learning outcomes assessment can improve students' educational experiences and learning achievement in U.S. higher education.

— **Monica Stitt-Bergh, AALHE President**

## Executive Summary

In 2017, AALHE created a working group of assessment professionals to develop a white paper focusing on:

- practitioners' as well as administrators' perceptions of assessment
- the roles/positions of the individuals in higher education whose primary job relates to learning outcomes assessment
- assessment activities on campuses and the level of assessment on campus, and
- higher education assessment practitioners' professional development needs.

This white paper focuses primarily on analyzing data from two national surveys on assessment in higher education: The University of Kentucky (UKY) survey (Combs & Rose, 2015) and the Watermark (2016) survey. The main tenets of this white paper are summarized below. Additional detail regarding the sources of data, the limitations of the survey data, and the methodologies used are appended for reference.

### 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 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 due to accreditors and funders, as well as the moral obligation of doing assessment. For the theme of implementation concerns, faculty were concerned with how assessment processes were designed and carried out at their institutions.

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

- enjoyment of the methodological aspects of assessment
- enjoyment of the collaborative aspects of assessment, and
- appreciation for the impact or utility of assessment data for informing decision-making.

As examples of these three themes, respondents mentioned enjoying assessment data analysis and interpretation of results, working with faculty on assessment, and that well-designed assessment initiatives can have a positive impact on education.

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

- issues with the methodological aspects of assessment
- issues with the need to persuade and teach others about assessment, and
- questions about the value of assessment itself.

As examples, assessment professionals mentioned disliking the tediousness of data collection, data management, and data analysis the most. Some also identified difficulties convincing stakeholders about the value of assessment and how to properly conduct assessment work. Lastly, respondents cited the lack of time and issues within the field of assessment generally as contributing factors to their questions about the value of their assessment work.

### **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 and activities that are typically performed by higher education assessment professionals. Our analysis of this data indicated that there were five common roles that assessment professionals identify with. These roles are:

- assessment/method expert
- narrator/translator
- facilitator/guide and political navigator
- change agent, and
- project manager

Analysis of the Watermark [2016] survey results indicated alignment with Jankowski and Slotnick's [2015] original five roles [e.g., assessment/method expert, narrator/translator, facilitator/guide, political navigator, and visionary/believer]. Based on data from the Watermark survey, we combined two roles from Jankowski and Slotnick's original framework [facilitator/guide and political navigator] into one role as our data suggested that these roles might be two sides of the same coin. We also narrowed the visionary/believer role into a more concrete roll and called it "change agent". Lastly, we describe a role not previously discussed in Jankowski and Slotnick labeled "project manager".

The assessment/method expert is focused on assessment practices and collecting/analyzing both quantitative and qualitative assessment data. As a narrator/translator the assessment professional is tasked with finding meaning within the data and communicating results. Data from the Watermark [2016] survey suggested that the facilitator/guide and political navigator role is focused on mentoring and assisting others with assessment. The change agent role captures the active participation of assessment professionals in planning, advocating for,

and implementing changes based on assessment results. The project manager role captures the logistical/coordination aspects of assessment work.

Reviewing both the UKY and Watermark survey data revealed that very few of those in the assessment profession worked exclusively on assessment. Only about one-quarter (26%) of respondents to the UKY survey spent 100% of their time on assessment, and Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) assessment was the most common assessment activity performed (Combs & Rose, 2015). Participants in the Watermark survey reported being highly involved in program-level assessment, and only one-third of participants were involved with institution-level assessment (Watermark, 2016).

### **Professional Development Needs of Assessment Professionals**

The final part of our analysis looks at the professional development needs that the respondents discussed in the two surveys and compares them with the professional development needs discussed in previous surveys/studies. An overwhelming percentage (78%) of UKY survey respondents stated that they participated in professional development related to assessment, with the majority indicating conferences, webinars, and journals as their most preferred delivery methods.

The UKY survey also asked which topics practitioners would like to see offered as professional development. There were six major themes that emerged: staffing and resources, best practices in assessment, learning outcomes and co-curricular assessment, assessment tools, collaboration, and using data for change and/or strategic planning. Individuals were particularly interested in finding out how other institutions structure their assessment roles, how their time and resources are spent on assessment, as well as how others successfully overcome unique or common challenges. Respondents also discussed the need for professional development on best practices regarding both quantitative and qualitative data analysis and interpretation.

Participants for the Watermark (2016) survey were asked to rate their interest in nine different professional development topics. The two highest rated topics were (1) data analysis and interpretation and (2) documenting assessment results and reporting.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

As the assessment profession continues to evolve, so does the need for a flexible and effective approach to professional development in the field. The challenge comes from providing support and professional development for assessment practitioners who have a variety of different needs based on their unique roles within their institution.

To further assessment initiatives in higher education, several recommendations follow from this review:

- The roles and competencies of assessment practitioners should be further explored and defined.
- The field should leverage professional association resources to support the advancement of practitioners' assessment work in their institutions and to facilitate a shift in perceptions regarding the value of assessment in higher education.
- Collaborative sharing across institutions and assessment personnel should be examined as a viable method for supporting the work of assessment practitioners.
- Professional associations, individual institutions, and/or consortia should offer professional development opportunities in a wide variety of assessment-related topics to meet the varied needs of practitioners. These offerings should include a variety of delivery methods as noted in this review.



## Introduction

The Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) was formed in 2009 as an organization of practitioners interested in using effective assessment practices to document and improve student learning. To participate in this project, AALHE issued a call for volunteers. From more than two dozen who applied, a handful of assessment professionals representing a diverse range of experience and knowledge were selected for this working group. Watermark and the University of Kentucky's Assessment Office offered access to their survey data, and other survey results were already publicly available (e.g., NILOA reports) [Appendix 1]. Using these surveys<sup>1</sup> as the primary sources of information, the AALHE working group investigated the following:

- practitioner and administrator perceptions of assessment
- the roles/positions of the people in higher education whose primary job relates to learning outcomes assessment
- assessment activities on campus and the level of assessment on campus, and
- professional development needs of assessment practitioners in higher education.

While studies of student learning in college date back to the 1960s, Peter Ewell (2002) proposed the First National Conference on Assessment in Higher Education in 1985 as the official birth of the assessment movement. The conference was characterized by “conflicting political and intellectual traditions that have been with the field ever since,” namely improvement and accountability (Ewell, 2002, p.7). Ewell described assessment as an established community of practice resembling an academic discipline, with a body of scholarship, a well-recognized conference circuit, and increasing specializations. He noted that these attributes not only shaped but also limited the impact of assessment on instruction and campus culture. As practitioners increasingly identified with the assessment profession, the potential for the assessment process to become isolated from everyday lives of faculty and administrators also increased. Most campus assessment activities were largely designed for program evaluation

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<sup>1</sup> The samples of all of the surveys included in this project tended to favor large public universities with graduate-level degree offerings, and the organizations that conducted the surveys were aware of this and did not proclaim their samples were representative of institutions in the U.S. Except where explicitly noted in this paper, readers should bear in mind that findings presented are illustrative of the predominant institutional types and least likely to describe the state of assessment at two-year colleges and for-profit institutions.

and continued to be additional, rather than integral, to teaching and learning, Ewell concluded that while assessment practitioners had developed sophisticated tools and an effective semi-professional infrastructure to support their work, few faculty members routinely practiced assessment. “Although firmly established in the mainstream by the year 2000, assessment as a movement is still striving for the cultural shift its original proponents had hoped for” [pp. 16-17].

Questions still linger about the assessment profession. How has the assessment movement evolved? Has assessment become fully integrated into collegiate teaching and learning? Do the conflicting traditions of improvement and accountability still persist? By examining practitioners’ perceptions of assessment on college and university campuses and the roles and activities associated with assessment work, this paper attempts to shed light on these questions, where possible, and identify areas where more targeted investigation is warranted. Additionally, the paper seeks to describe the scope of professional development opportunities that will advance assessment as a profession.

## Perceptions of Assessment

In order to examine practitioners' views and experiences with assessment work, responses to open-ended questions included in the Watermark (2016) survey were qualitatively analyzed (see Appendix 2). This analysis demonstrates that the historic traditions of accountability and improvement do persist. The accountability and improvement themes were most evident in respondents' descriptions of the importance of assessment within their institution. The nuances of these perceptions can be better understood by exploring what respondents enjoy the most and what they enjoy the least about assessment.

### Importance of Assessment at Your Institution

The Watermark (2016) survey asked participants to rate how important assessment was to their institution and included an open-ended "why or why not" follow-up question. Analysis of the open-ended responses identified three primary themes: improvement, accountability, and implementation concerns. There were several themes and subthemes associated with each primary theme.

**Improvement.** Over half of all responses referenced improvement either directly or indirectly; these responses came from both faculty and assessment professionals.

#### **Importance of Assessment: Improvement**

*"Assessment helps us see where we have been, and where we want to go. It requires us to examine our purpose and intent, and if we want to do it well, we must be honest with ourselves about how we are doing."*

— **Associate Professor & Assessment Liaison**

*"How can we know what we do well and not so well without assessment? Assessment should guide our efforts to improve our outcomes."*

— **Assessment Coordinator**

*“Assessment helps institutions in a variety of ways, such as determining if they're really doing the best they can be doing, if they are appropriately preparing their students for a profession, and if they are meeting the benchmarks and goals they have set for themselves.”*

— **Dept Chair & Associate Professor**

A common subtheme of improvement explicitly referenced student learning. This was often, but not exclusively, articulated by faculty.

#### **Importance of Assessment: Improving Student Learning Outcomes**

*“Measuring whether the student is learning the material presented in the course is critical in nursing. The rubrics I developed measure clinical skills. I found that very helpful in providing objective feedback for my students. Hopefully the student learns from the rubric a clear expectation of how to perform the skill.”*

— **Associate Professor**

*“Assessment is necessary to determine if students are learning what we are teaching. This is critical to understanding whether we have succeeded.”*

— **Coordinator, Library Instruction & Assessment**

*“The purpose of an educational institution is to impart learning. Gathering evidence about the learning taking place and using that evidence to continually improve learning is the central point.”*

— **Director, IRP & Academic Assessment**

A related subtheme was the way in which assessment facilitated conversations, which was most often articulated by faculty and academic leadership.

### **Importance of Assessment: Promoting Dialogue**

*“There are so many legitimate but varying opinions on how to teach, what is going well and where improvement needs to occur. Assessments helps provide a common point of conversation.”*

**— Assistant Dean**

*“Assessment can open lines of communication and offer opportunities for change based on information and not change just for change's sake.”*

**— Associate Dean**

*“I'm seeing it support a much more robust conversation about teaching and learning — especially about the intentions and strategies of general education and its relation to the majors. We've gotten much more articulate and specific about why we do what we do and the way we do it, and this in turn is helpful for identifying areas where change is a good idea.”*

**— Associate Professor**

Other subthemes of improvement related to using assessment data for decision-making and the benefits of using data over purely anecdotal evidence or beliefs. These themes were expressed by faculty, academic leadership, and assessment professionals.

### **Importance of Assessment: Evidence vs. Opinions**

*"I want to know what my institution does well, and what it does poorly...and I want the hard data not the gut instincts. Sometimes the gut instincts are spot on, other times we have a different opinion of our institutions than the data bears out. That is why it's important."*

— **Chief Academic Officer/Vice President of Academic Affairs**

*"Without sound assessment practices, we are only operating on "guess-work" and convenience seekers who "like things the way they are."*

— **Associate Adjunct Professor**

*"Data driven decision making is extremely important. Having a chain of evidence clearly linked when making decisions is crucial to making the best decisions we can, thus fulfilling our mission and best serving our audiences."*

— **Academic Assessment**

**Accountability.** The next most common theme that emerged from the responses related to the importance of assessment for accountability to accreditors, funders, and other stakeholders. While many of these responses were straightforward, others related accountability requirements with broader improvement-oriented purposes.

## **Importance of Assessment: Accountability**

*“From a practical standpoint, it's important because of accreditation needs, but, more importantly, our decisions and direction should be guided by the assessment work being conducted.”*

**— Assistant Provost**

*“Beyond accreditation, it is the primary measure that we should use to know if we are doing our job as an educational institution. Are we teaching our students?”*

**— Director, Authentic Assessment**

*“Increasingly educational institutions are being asked to justify their need for funding and in some cases even existence. Without a compelling show of data it can be difficult to “prove” the benefits of a given institution's services.”*

**— Librarian**

*“Assessment is a critical part of the accreditation process as well as an important process in determining programs to fund especially in austere times.”*

**— Technology Implementation Manager**

A variation on external accountability emerged, which might be characterized as assessment as a moral obligation. This subtheme was articulated by respondents in a broad range of positions.

**Importance of Assessment:  
Fulfilling a Moral Obligation to Students and Stakeholders**

*“We hold a duty of responsibility to those who entrust us with their future, as well as to companies who would employ them, to provide them with skills and abilities they can rely on throughout their life.”*

**— Assistant Director, Assessment & Analysis**

*“Students pay a lot of money to go to school. We not only need to do our best to teach them, but we must find ways to make sure we're teaching them well and learning what we identified as important.”*

**— Associate Professor**

*“For me, it's about professional integrity and holding ourselves accountable to each other and ourselves.”*

**— Director, Academic Assessment**

Another variation on the accountability theme described assessment as a means to remain competitive in the higher education marketplace. Again, the responses illustrating this sub-theme came from a diversity of position types.



**Importance of Assessment:  
Proving Value in a Competitive Marketplace**

*“Assessment allows institutions to tell their story. It provides us a way to justify what we are doing is important to students, the community, and the state at-large. It allows us to show that we are making a difference.”*

— **Director, Assessment**

*“Assessment helps to legitimize the field of higher education, especially as trends more [sic] toward an outcomes-based and focused standard.”*

— **Program Manager**

*“More and more granting agencies and government programs demand numerically-expressed assessment. I don't think it actually has a meaningful effect on institutional success.”*

— **Professor**

**Implementation Concerns.** The final theme that emerged from the Watermark (2016) survey responses was less common than improvement or accountability but struck a deep chord for its proponents. Almost exclusively expressed by faculty, this theme addressed misgivings about how assessment processes were designed and implemented at their institutions.

## **Importance of Assessment: Concerns about Implementation and Value**

*"We have fallen into the trap of allowing assessments that are easy to grade [i.e., numbers driven] to overrule our understanding that some understandings are more complex than quantitative assessments can allow. I understand the need for rubrics but most rubrics are so general that they offer little information that instructors can use for improving their instruction."*

**— Associate Professor**

*"It's needed, but it is not the purpose of higher education. That purpose is being eclipsed by "Assessment Madness."*

**— Professor**

*"I think assessment is vital to an institution. We need to articulate our goals and figure out ways to discover if we are meeting those goals or not. Unfortunately, my institution sees assessment as externally-motivated and as mere "jumping through hoops" which makes it frustrating. Most of us are not at all motivated to do institutional assessment since we have no vision, leadership, or guidance in this area on my campus."*

**— Associate Professor**

*"I see very few changes being done because of assessment. If assessment doesn't lead to change, how is it important?"*

**— Associate Professor**

*"Useful, well-designed assessments can guide an institution in worthwhile directions, but gathering numbers for the sake of just gathering numbers is a waste of valuable faculty time that ought to be spent teaching, working with students, or doing research."*

**— Professor**

## What Assessment Professionals Like the Most and the Least about Assessment

The analysis of results revealed three overlapping themes in what respondents like most about assessment:

1. enjoyment of the methodological aspects of assessment, including 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, including working with faculty in every aspect of assessment work and, in particular, in the discussion and interpretation of findings, and
3. appreciation for the impact or the utility of assessment for informing decision-making, validating instructional efforts, and fostering continuous improvement at the institutional, program, and course levels.

Within each of these major themes, there is a variety of sub-themes and nuances, which shows significant diversity in how respondents relate to assessment and what they value about assessment work.

**Methodological Aspects of Assessment.** Among respondents who liked the methodological aspects of assessment, the dominant theme was enjoying the analysis and interpretation of results. While some respondents emphasized the actual work of analyzing, “dissecting,” and manipulating data using quantitative methods, others focused on distilling meaning, drawing conclusions, and “telling a story” based on the data.

**What do you enjoy the most about assessment?  
Data Analysis & Interpretation**

*"I enjoy seeing trends in student learning. I also like disaggregating data into subgroups to determine if all students meet learning goals at the same level."*

**— Assistant Professor**

*"I love developing models to determine student engagement and achievement and then analyzing those models with data."*

**— Doctoral Candidate**

*"Finding a story within the numbers."*

**— Assistant VP, Student and Faculty Development**

Another methodological aspect enjoyed by respondents—but cited less frequently than data analysis—was the design of assessment processes and tools. Respondents enjoyed the challenge of building the right tools to provide reliable and valid measures of student learning in specific contexts. Furthermore, some respondents pointed to the “puzzle” of creating a comprehensive assessment system that provides accurate information about the quality of courses, programs, and the institution as a whole.

**What do you enjoy the most about assessment?  
Designing Assessment Systems**

*"I like designing assessments because it is interesting to see if one can actually create something to measure something [like learning] that isn't readily observed."*

**— Associate Professor**

*"Making all the pieces fit into a cohesive Unit assessment system, planning and identifying supporting evidence for accreditation and compliance."*

**— Chair, Program Review, Assessment and Technology**

Finally, there is a small portion of Watermark (2016) survey respondents who found enjoyment in the tasks of gathering and compiling data. These respondents reported experiencing satisfaction from knowing that data collection has been completed as intended in the assessment plan.

**What do you enjoy the most about assessment?  
Gathering & Compiling Data**

*"I enjoy gathering and seeing all the student data that is accumulated annually. It is the fruit of a year's worth of labor and the program chair are [sic] always ecstatic to receive the data."*

— **Assessment Analyst**

*"I enjoy the collection, organization, and analyzing of data."*

— **Coordinator of Assessment and Accreditation**

**Collaborative Aspects of Assessment.** For respondents who liked the collaborative aspects of assessment the most, the prevailing theme was working with faculty. While some respondents valued collaboration and dialogue in every facet of assessment work, others focused primarily on the activities related to sharing and discussing assessment results. For the latter, the most exciting component of assessment work was the opportunity for the exchange of ideas and the collective inquiry that can be fostered by the discussion of assessment results.

### **What do you enjoy the most about assessment? Working with Faculty**

*“Providing faculty and administrators with support (e.g. data processing/ analysis, assignment design suggestions, event coordination) and encouraging collaborative discussion to drive continuous improvement of process, instruction and student learning.”*

**— Instructional Design and Assessment Specialist**

*“I love dialoguing with faculty about the assessment data they are collecting and how they can use the information they collect to continuously improve student learning.”*

**— Associate Director, Global Learning**

**Impact and Utility of Assessment.** Often overlapping with the other two major themes, many Watermark survey respondents declared that what they valued most about assessment may not be assessment work per se, but the benefits that well-designed and implemented assessment can bring to education. Such benefits included external and internal validation of instruction, actual gains in student learning and effectiveness, and accurate and meaningful evidence in support of decision-making.

A prevailing theme among respondents was the value of assessment for answering questions about student learning and institutional effectiveness such as:

- Is the institution or the program making progress towards achieving established goals and objectives?
- What is working and what can be improved at the institutional, program, or course level?
- Has an intervention or change in the curriculum or in pedagogy worked as intended?
- Are students learning what they are expected to learn according to institutional, program, and course learning outcomes?
- Are instructors teaching in effective ways for students to meet institutional, program, and learning objectives?

The potential of assessment for answering these questions makes it a valuable tool—in the view of respondents—for helping decision-makers. Some respondents stated that what they enjoyed the most about assessment was its contribution to evidence-based decisions about curriculum and instruction.

**What do you enjoy the most about assessment?  
Supporting Evidence-Based Decision-Making**

*“It allows you to chart progress; understand strengths and weaknesses; provides guidance for decision making.”*

**— Vice Provost and Dean**

*“I have always enjoyed [sic] that assessment is an evidence-based practice that follows standardized methodologies to have a meaningful impact on pedagogical improvements.”*

**— Assistant Director of Planning, Research, and Assessment**

When reflecting on what they enjoyed the most about assessment, some respondents emphasized the opportunity to actively participate in planning and implementing changes leading to improvements. By contrast, other respondents highlighted a more indirect role. Rather than actively implementing changes themselves, they enjoyed the chance of providing others with meaningful findings and witnessing how others implemented changes to support positive impacts on teaching and learning.

**What do you enjoy the most about assessment?  
Supporting Meaningful Improvements**

*"I enjoy the opportunity to see programs develop assessment plans that produce useful information, and to see that they are making changes with the information. This is rewarding because I know, ultimately, students are benefiting from these efforts."*

**— Asst. Vice Provost, Academic Program Review and Assessment**

*"I enjoy seeing faculty discuss results and come up with improvements to the program curriculum and pedagogy."*

**— Assessment Analyst**

A smaller portion of Watermark survey respondents associated the utility of assessment with the need for validation. In this view, assessment was valued as a source of evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of an individual instructor, an entire program, or the institution as a whole. What these respondents enjoyed most about assessment was the power of results to validate or legitimate individual or collective efforts.

**What do you enjoy the most about assessment?  
Validation of Efforts**

*"It provides the ability to validate claims regarding the quality of student work through appropriate instruments and processes."*

**— Associate Provost**

*"The opportunity to 'prove' that we are doing important work and contributing to student growth/abilities."*

**— Professor/Director, General Education**



Each of the three main categories that aligned with what respondents enjoyed the most about assessment had a mirror image that captured what respondents enjoyed the least about their work. When respondents described what they enjoyed the most, they emphasized what, in their view, made assessment interesting, compelling, and worth the effort. When respondents identified what they enjoyed the least, they highlighted what they perceived as tedious, flawed, and a waste of time in their assessment work. In both cases, though, their perceptions revolved around the three same dimensions of assessment: assessment as a methodological approach, assessment as a practice that requires engaging with others, and the value of assessment as an institutional endeavor. Similar to the grouping of perceptions about what they enjoyed the most, respondents' perceptions about what they enjoyed the least about assessment can be grouped into three broad, overlapping categories:

1. Issues with the methodological aspects of assessment. These included both personal preferences—some respondents just don't like performing methodological work—and reservations about the soundness of assessment design and implementation.
2. Issues with the need to persuade and teach others about assessment. These included both personal preferences—some respondents just don't like convincing others to do assessment—and expressions of frustration with what is perceived as lack of engagement and understanding of assessment among faculty and administrators.
3. Questions about the value of assessment itself. These questions included, on the one hand, practical reasons, such as lack of resources to do it well, and the view that it takes “too much time for too little gain.” On the other hand, respondents raised broader conceptual questions about the limitations of assessment as a discipline for gaining knowledge and finding solutions to improve teaching and learning.

Continued efforts by practitioners to expand perceptions about the value of assessment to include a focus on serving students and supporting continual improvement of teaching and learning at their institutions would likely have a positive effect on the profession as a whole.

**Issues with the Methodological Aspects of Assessment.** As a matter of apparent personal preferences, a significant portion of respondents simply disliked the methodological aspects of assessment work. These respondents cited data collection, data management, and data analysis among the assessment activities that they enjoyed the least. To a lesser degree, these respondents also mentioned assessment design, rating, and coding among the assessment tasks that they would prefer to avoid. A common sub-theme running across respondents' comments is the description of assessment work as "tedious," "cumbersome," and "bureaucratic," involving complex logistics and burdensome paperwork.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
Tedious Processes**

*"It can be tedious to collect the volume of data needed."*

— **Licensure Coordinator**

*"Sometimes assessment feels cumbersome, especially if we're starting from scratch or analyzing large data sets."*

— **Career Development Manager**

*"The documentation and amount of logistics required in collecting assessment information"*

— **Director of Institutional Assessment**

However, respondents' negative views about the methodological aspects of assessment go beyond finding this type of work less than satisfying. For some respondents, the things they enjoyed the least about assessment had to do with what they perceived as an absence of data integrity, poor assessment design, and flawed data analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, some respondents questioned the qualifications and preparation of assessment professionals, which in their view seriously undermined the validity and reliability of assessment results.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
Challenges with Validity and Reliability**

*“Dealing with ignorant and naive assessment boosters. I’m constantly amazed at how far folks with very little fundamental understanding of measurement, data analysis, organizations, and teaching get in this field.”*

— **Professor and Director**

*“The scope of assessment activities and the limited number of qualified individuals to conduct high quality [i.e., reliable and valid] assessments means decisions often have to be made on what will be done and what we don’t have the manpower or time to do.”*

— **Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Research, and Compliance**

**Issues with the Need to Persuade and Teach Others about Assessment.** For some respondents, the least rewarding aspects of assessment work were having to persuade others to collaborate to do assessment, striving to convince different audiences of the value of assessment, and explaining to others how to conduct assessment work.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
“Selling” Assessment**

*“Selling assessment is the hardest part of my job.”*

— **Assistant Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment**

*“Convincing other stakeholders involved in data gathering of the value of investing both time and money into the process.”*

— **Director, Learning Center**

Some respondents expressed frustration with widespread misconceptions and lack of interest related to assessment.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
Getting Stakeholder Buy-in**

*“My biggest frustrations are with assessment creators who don't understand how to build a good assessment, don't appreciate the information that can be derived from a well-constructed assessment and don't care to learn.”*

**— Sr. Manager**

*“The component of my assessment work that is least enjoyable is working with faculty who approach assessment as a meaningless task and simply something they have to do for accreditation.”*

**— Assessment Specialist**

**Questions about the Value of Assessment Itself.** When asked what they enjoyed the least about assessment, some respondents raised concerns about the value of assessment itself. In some cases, these concerns were centered on practical or contextual reasons such as lack of resources or lack of time, which needed to be addressed before assessment could fulfill its intention of improving student learning.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
Time Constraints**

*“What I least enjoy about assessment is the lack of time given to use of assessment results [and thus people see assessment as useless because the results are not used].”*

**— Associate Specialist**

*“It is time-consuming and we don't have enough personnel to do it well all the time — can only focus on one goal each year.”*

**— Department Head**

While some respondents thought that more time or resources would be needed to realize the benefits of assessment, others subscribed to an alternative view. From this point of view, too much time and resources were already being spent on assessment without visible results.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
Lack of Impact**

*“Assessment consumes resources and it has never told me anything that I didn't already know.”*

**— Professor of Physics**

*“Assessment often turns into an additional layer of work that reveals only what one already knows about a program.”*

**— Director of Teaching and Learning**

In other cases, respondents' critical views of assessment went further and struck directly at the purpose and nature of assessment as a discipline. Some respondents expressed discomfort with what they saw as the prevalence of assessment done to satisfy external expectations.

They perceived assessment as a discipline heavily subject to external pressures shaping design, format, and timelines. Others claimed that much assessment work was completed without a clear end in sight other than measurement itself.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
Measuring to Measure**

*“When it is divorced from what is actually happening on the ground, producing numbers that don't help us really deal with reality. Numbers that only seem to be important to some external audience because they are numbers.”*

— **Associate Vice Provost for Academic Excellence**

*“Assessment for its own sake; imposition of methods inappropriate to my field.”*

— **Professor**

*“Accountability measures are the bane of my existence; we are often asked to produce data which allows for institution-to-institution comparisons on meaningless, silly things.”*

— **Assistant Dean**

For some respondents, the main assumptions behind assessment as a discipline aimed at producing evidence-based conclusions were flawed. These respondents questioned the very idea of measuring learning through a summative, quantitative, or standardized approach.

**What do you enjoy the least about assessment?  
Measuring the Immeasurable**

*“I least enjoy the pressure to quantify things that can't be quantified — the most important elements of any education — or the way assessment puts at the forefront things that can be measured as more important than things that cannot.”*

— **Professor**

# Higher Education Assessment Professionals' Roles and Activities

## Roles Identified in Watermark Survey

Additional qualitative analysis of the Watermark survey (2016) respondents' perceptions of what they liked most and least about assessment helps to clarify the roles and activities performed by assessment professionals. While little research exists that explicitly addresses this topic (see, for example, Livingston & Zerulik, 2013) Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) examined the roles and responsibilities of assessment practitioners through one-on-one interviews with prominent assessment scholars/practitioners and by analyzing advertised job descriptions posted online. The current analysis enriches their model in two specific ways: 1) by including perspectives from entry-level and mid-career assessment practitioners and 2) by extending the model to the lived realities of these practitioners.

Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) proposed a conceptual framework of five essential roles for assessment practitioners: assessment/method expert, narrator/translator, facilitator/guide, political navigator, and visionary/believer. Although these five conceptualizations of the essential roles of assessment practitioners are presented as separate categories, the researchers note that they are very much connected and related to one another, even though some may take precedence over others at different points in time. Thus, a “balancing act” between the roles is often required of assessment practitioners (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015). Analysis of the Watermark (2016) survey narrative responses largely confirmed the Jankowski and Slotnick role definitions, but also pointed to ways the model might be streamlined in some places and expanded in others.

**Assessment/Method Expert.** Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) described the tasks associated with this role as including assessment practices, qualitative and/or quantitative methodologies, and collecting and analyzing data. Most of the concrete tasks described by Watermark (2016) survey respondents fell into this category. Activities mentioned included data cleaning, data analysis, test development, writing/developing rubrics, curriculum mapping, statistics, coding, reliability and validity issues, authentic assessments, determining the best indicators, designing scoring protocols, and qualitative analysis.

### **Assessment/Method Expert Role**

*“Thinking of creative ways — trying to get away from just surveys — to better understand what my students are learning.”*

— **Director of Student Leadership**

*“I enjoy learning more about alignment of content to rubrics, and diversifying assessments to include student engagement at every level.”*

— **Director of Education**

*“Assessments can be created in many formats. Portfolios and projects are great alternatives for students who fear testing. Additionally, assessments are a great tool for improving my teaching strategies.”*

— **Instructor**

**Narrator/Translator.** In the Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) framework, the narrator/translator role included engaging faculty, reporting and communicating assessment results, and professional development training. The Watermark (2016) survey responses suggest a slightly broader conception of this role, encompassing both finding meaning within the data and communicating results. Respondents described not only report writing and presenting data in visually-appealing or reader-friendly formats, but also providing a “big picture” perspective to institutional colleagues. The latter group of job activities fell into two broad themes, the first of which may be described as support for evidence-based decision-making.



**Narrator/Translator Role:  
Evidence-Based Decision-Making**

*“Answering questions it is designed to address; being able to communicate to others how we are doing using data to support our assertions.”*

— **Professor**

*“Developing data into useful information that others can use to close the loop.”*

— **Associate Dean for Institutional Effectiveness**

*“Sharing findings with people who haven't had data to make decisions before.”*

— **Project Specialist**

The second broad theme describes assessment as puzzle-solving, often employing language that literally defines the narrator role as storytelling.

**Narrator/Translator Role:  
Storytelling**

*“Solving puzzles, finding patterns, committing to continuous improvement.”*

— **Field Experience Coordinator**

*“I like the opportunity to take a question, look at data/information and see what it tells me and what it doesn't tell me — it seems like answering a question always raises more questions, which keeps the work interesting.”*

— **Director of Institutional Research**

*“I enjoy the ability to tell a comprehensive story through data, collaborate across campus, and build capacity through organizational change.”*

— **Executive Director of Assessment**

*“I enjoy using the raw data to prepare graphics/visualizations to tell meaningful stories that provide a barometer for learning.”*

— **Assessment Director**

**Facilitator/Guide and Political Navigator.** Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) defined the facilitator/guide role as helping and mentoring others, assisting people to undertake assessment, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The political navigator role was characterized by strong interpersonal skills, understanding of institutional culture, working alongside a variety of stakeholders, and framing sensitive results. Building on Jankowski and Slotnick's assertion that the assessment roles were often interconnected, Watermark survey responses suggested that the facilitator/guide and political navigator roles might be two sides of the same coin, rather than separate entities. Generally, when survey respondents described positive and uplifting interactions, they used language that matched the facilitator role, but when their interactions were negative or frustrating, they used language that corresponded to the navigator role. Facilitators described working with others (usually faculty) in positive, constructive ways.

**Facilitator/Guide and Political Navigator Role:  
Positive Faculty Relationships**

*“Talking with faculty and staff about their goals and helping them think through ways to measure progress toward those goals.”*

— **Associate Director**

*“Helping others to define operational outcomes so they can measure their work and understand the value of knowing how they perform so they we can strive for continuous improvement.”*

— **Director for Institutional Research and Planning**

*“Assisting faculty and staff to figure out ways to measure and improve student learning and processes. e.g., the creative problem-solving process.”*

— **Dean, Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment**

As discussed above, the navigator role appeared to be the mirror image to the facilitator role. This role was often associated with managing accreditation or with lack of commitment from institutional leadership, and characterized by terms such as resistance, buy-in, and frustration.

### **Facilitator/Guide and Political Navigator Role: Challenging Faculty Relationships**

*“Dealing with persistent obstructionists.”*

— **Director of Assessment and Planning**

*“Convincing faculty of the utility of assessment.”*

— **Assistant Dean for Academic Assessment**

*“Reporting to external agencies (regional and disciplinary accreditation bodies, Board of Education, etc.), especially when metrics are externally mandated and not directly relevant to the quality of education.”*

— **Director, Teaching, Learning, and Assessment**

In some cases, the facilitator/navigator duality was reflected in a single individual's responses to the most- and least-liked items.

### **Facilitator/Guide and Political Navigator Role: Likes & Dislikes**

*“I most enjoy the opportunity to work with faculty across the curriculum. I least enjoy faculty resistance to assessment, treating it as a needless drain on their time.”*

**— Vice Provost**

*“[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.”*

**— Associate Professor & Assessment Liaison**

**Change Agent.** The Jankowski and Slotnick [2015] study portrayed the visionary/believer role as creating a sustainable culture of assessment, championing the improvement of student learning, and promoting the value and meaning of assessment. While a reader might detect echoes of the visionary/believer role in some of the Watermark [2016] survey responses, there were few concrete activities described in these responses that explicitly aligned with this role. By contrast, a slightly narrower, but more concrete role emerged from the Watermark survey respondents, characterized here as change agent.

The change agent role captures the active participation of some assessment professionals in planning, advocating for, and implementing changes based on assessment results. While the narrator, facilitator, and political navigator roles focus on the assessment professional as an advisor, the change agent is not only a provider but an end-user of assessment findings. Change agents described activities that contributed to improvement, with an emphasis on using data to inform decisions. Common phrases included responding to identified

weaknesses; designing change; reflection; redesign; using results; making a difference; and closing the loop. In some cases, survey respondents actually used the term “change agent.”

### **Change Agent Role**

*“Getting usable results that can be used as change agents within the institution.”*

— **Associate Dean**

*“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 the system's thinking and the intellectual challenge don't tend to love assessment work.”*

— **Director of Assessment & Institutional Research**

**Project Manager.** The Watermark (2016) survey responses revealed one additional role that was not explicitly identified or described by Jankowski and Slotnick (2015). The project manager role captures the logistical/coordination aspects of assessment work (e.g., making sure that assessment cycles are followed, compiling and sharing data, and ensuring follow-through with improvement plans). It is the administrative work of announcing deadlines, sending reminders, compiling and storing documentation, and often managing the software platforms that institutions use for assessment management. Activities mentioned included: designing data-gathering techniques; collecting, storing or managing data; running reports, data entry; coding; enforcing deadlines; managing scoring processes; working with software; organizing and archiving data; follow-ups/reminders; and designing protocols.

## **Project Manager Role**

*“Managing data and cleaning data if it's incomplete.”*

— **Director, Assessment, Accreditation & Licensure**

*“The indexing and coding of assessments.”*

— **Professor**

*“Constant follow-up reminding faculty to enter their data.”*

— **Accreditation Assessment Coordinator**

*“Managing the process of determining what instructors volunteer to be involved and then coordinating the selection of materials based on eligible students.”*

— **Administrator, Academic & Student Affairs**

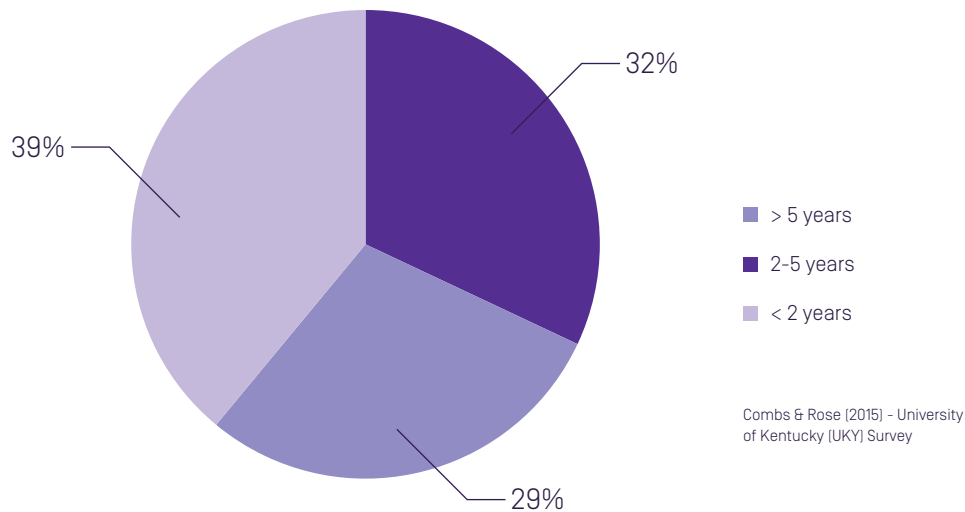
## **Assessment Staff and Organizational Structure**

As the preceding section demonstrates, the roles performed by assessment professionals are rarely static. Rather, they adapt and respond to existing organizational structures. A thorough understanding of assessment staff and organizational structures is limited by the methodologies of the available studies to date [see Appendix 3]. Many published studies (e.g., IHE and NILOA) have reflected the viewpoints of provosts/chief academic officers. The two surveys examined for this paper (Combs & Rose, 2015; Watermark, 2016) attempted to reach a wider range of assessment practitioners.

The respondents to the surveys in the current review provide some insight into the types of assessment staff working in higher education. Almost three-quarters of the UKY survey respondents held the highest level of responsibility for assessment at their institution: 52% were titled Executive Director or Director and another 12% were titled Assistant or Associate Vice President or Provost (Combs & Rose, 2015). By contrast, only six percent of the Watermark (2016) respondent pool had Provost or Vice President titles, another 30% were Deans or Directors, and about 14% had titles such as Analyst, Coordinator, Manager, or Specialist. A key feature of the Watermark survey pool was that about 43% of respondents were faculty members, including eight percent who served as department chairs or heads. Only about one

quarter of the Watermark respondents listed Assessment, Accreditation, Effectiveness or Institutional Research in their job titles.

Figure 1. Length of Time in Current Position



About one third of the UKY survey respondents had been in their current position for 2-5 years, 29% more than five years, and 39% fewer than two years. Only 6% of respondents had fewer than two years of total experience in assessment and 41% had more than ten years of assessment experience. Less than half (46%) said that they felt “Very Secure or Secure” in their positions, and nearly a third (31%) felt “Insecure or Very Insecure” (Combs & Rose, 2015).

Organizationally, 51% of the UKY respondent institutions had a single, centralized assessment office or unit, 10% centralized assessment in two offices or units, and another 13% centralized assessment efforts in an office that did not have “assessment” in its name. The overwhelming majority (78%) of assessment offices reported to a provost, academic vice president, or similarly titled office (Combs & Rose, 2015).

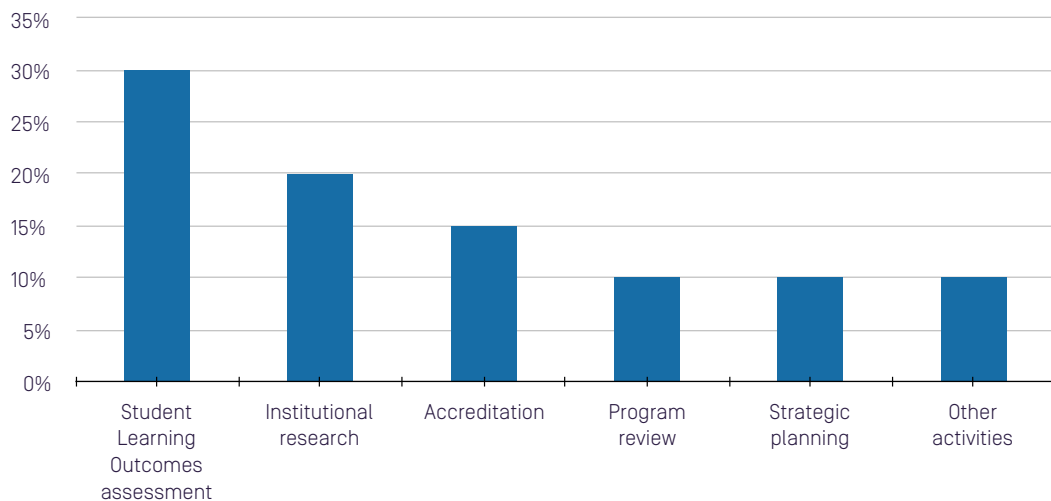
In contrast, the National Community College Council for Research and Planning (NCCCRP) found that assessment was most likely to be part of an Institutional Research (IR) office, often with only one or two full-time staff members (Nunley, Bers, & Manning, 2011). Exactly half of the institutional researchers surveyed indicated that they were responsible for coordinating assessment, 67% coordinated program or unit review, 65% worked on an accreditation self-

study, and 63% served on an institutional effectiveness (IE) or assessment committee. While a majority of respondents had graduate training in qualitative and quantitative research methodology, only 39% had graduate coursework in assessment and only 36% in program evaluation.

### Assessment Activities and Tasks

The surveys reviewed for this study did not quantify the number of practitioners engaged in specific assessment tasks, but they did speak to the relative time that assessment professionals devote to some assessment activities. The UKY survey respondents were fairly evenly divided in the proportion of their work that was dedicated to assessment. Just more than one quarter (26%) spent 100% of their time on assessment; 22% each spent 75-99% and 50-74% on assessment; 21% spent 25-49% on assessment, and only 9% spent less than 25% of their time on assessment. Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) assessment was the most common assessment activity performed, with a median time spent of 30%, ranging to a high of 100%. Institutional research claimed a median 20% of respondents' time, followed by accreditation at 15%. Median percentages for program review, strategic planning, and other activities were each 10% (Combs & Rose, 2015).

Figure 2. Most Common Assessment Activities Performed



Combs & Rose (2015) - University of Kentucky (UKY) Survey



The preeminence of SLO assessment within the range of assessment activities performed by assessment professionals is confirmed by Watermark (2016) survey respondents. When asked, “In a sentence, what does the term “assessment” mean to you?,” typical responses were aligned with the following.

**"In a sentence, what does the term "assessment" mean to you?"**

*"The evaluation of student learning outcomes is of utmost importance in higher education in these times."*

— **Chairperson**

*"How best to identify and measure student learning outcomes in a meaningful way."*

— **Vice President for Advancement**

*"Assessment means collecting information about student learning outcomes in order to continuously monitor and improve our courses, programs, and institution."*

— **Professor**

Assessment professionals were asked to deploy their expertise at different institutional levels and within different campus sectors. The Watermark (2016) survey included the question, “To what extent are you involved with assessment at the following levels: institution, department, program, and course?” The majority of survey respondents were highly involved in program-level assessment, followed by department- and course-level assessment. Only one out of three were highly involved with institution-level assessment, and more than one out of five were not involved with assessment at the institution level at all. Table 1 presents the percentage of Watermark (2016) survey respondents who said they were highly, somewhat, or not involved at each level.

Table 1: To what extent are you involved with assessment at the following levels?

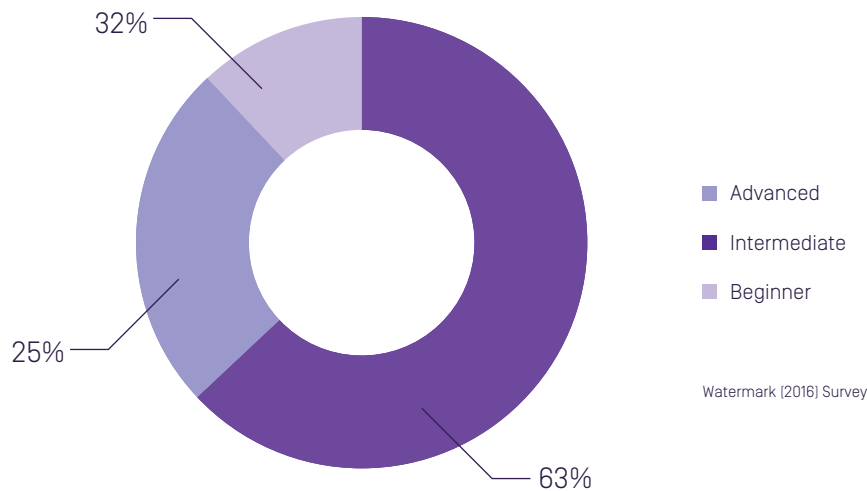
	Level of Involvement with Assessment			
	Institution	Department	Program	Course
Highly involved	33.1%	58.4%	67.7%	59.3%
Somewhat involved	45.7%	35.6%	28.2%	29.1%
Not involved	21.2%	6.1%	4.1%	11.6%

Watermark (2016) Survey

The UKY survey asked respondents about the broad campus sectors in which their positions had responsibility. The most common response to this question was undergraduate education [79%], followed by graduate education [58%], student affairs [49%], engagement [37%], libraries [33%], and diversity [27%]. About 20% of respondents said they had responsibilities in other campus sectors, which commonly included accreditation and/or assessment of administrative units, and less often faculty development and/or course evaluations (Combs & Rose, 2015).

Assessment professional responsibilities may be at the course, program, department, or institutional level of assessment and may have responsibilities that span across the entire spectrum of higher education.

Figure 3. How would you rate your institution's level of "maturity" when it comes to assessment?



### Institutionalization of Assessment

In the Watermark (2016) survey, respondents were asked, "How would you rate your institution's level of "maturity" when it comes to assessment?" "Maturity" was not defined in the survey, nor were the three levels (beginner, intermediate or advanced) from which respondents selected their ratings. The majority of respondents (63%) placed their institution at the "intermediate" level. One quarter of respondents said their institution was "advanced" and 12% rated their institution as a "beginner." Respondents from the private for-profit sector were significantly ( $p < .05$ ,  $N = 1074$ ) more likely than those from either the private not-for-profit or public sectors to rate their institutions "advanced."

In a survey of chief academic officers (CAOs) conducted by Gallup on behalf of *Inside Higher Education* in the fall of 2016 (Jaschik & Lederman, 2017), respondents were asked to agree or disagree with statements that might be considered operational components of assessment maturity. Slightly over half (51%) of the CAOs strongly agreed or agreed that the growth of assessment systems has improved the quality of teaching and learning at their institutions. Similarly, 48% strongly disagreed or disagreed that assessment is more about keeping accreditors and politicians happy than it is about teaching and learning. A higher percentage (59%) expressed agreement that their institution regularly makes changes in the curriculum, teaching practices or student services based on assessment findings, yet 71% said that

their institution makes effective use of student outcomes data. This supports a shift from assessment for accreditation to assessment to improve teaching and learning.

To look at what is behind the expansion and success of assessment, it is helpful to revisit the survey reports published by NILOA in 2009, 2011, 2014, and 2015. The 2009 and 2014 reports were based on surveys of senior-level administrators (chief academic officers in 2009 and provosts or their designees in 2014). The comparison of results shows both continuity and evolution in the factors identified by respondents as the main assessment drivers. As in 2009, the primary assessment drivers in 2014 were regional and program accreditation followed by institutional improvement. Furthermore, the relative weight given to each of these factors remained fairly consistent over time. However, the weight given to other factors clearly changed from 2009 to 2014, with an increase in the importance given to internal drivers such as faculty or staff interest, and a decrease in the influence of some of the external forces like national calls for accountability.

The NILOA reports also provided some insight into variations in perceptions between different constituencies and across different institutions. For example, the 2011 report, which focused on department and program heads, showed some contrasts with the views of the senior-level administrators presented in 2009 and 2014. Unlike senior administrators, department and program heads gave preeminence to faculty's desire to improve their programs over accreditation as the primary driver for assessment. The 2014 and 2015 reports, in turn, showed differences across institutions. Based on the 2014 report, compared to independent institutions, public and for-profit institutions experienced greater pressures from state mandates and other external forces to conduct assessment. According to the 2015 report, such external forces had also a stronger influence on minority-serving institutions compared to predominantly white institutions.

Further insights into the greatest enhancers of assessment work, as perceived by those who were directly responsible for assessment at their institutions, can be gleaned from the UKY survey (Coombs & Rose, 2015). Respondents identified administrative support, support from leadership, technology, faculty engagement, and their colleagues as the factors that contributed the most to the successful completion of assessment work. Respondents were also asked "What is the BIGGEST challenge you face in your position?" Table 2 presents the percentage of respondents who selected the provided answer options (respondents could choose more than one).

Table 2: What is the BIGGEST challenge you face in your position?

Challenge	Percentage
Lack of time to get everything done	55%
Structural barriers (administrative silos, policies, obstructionist individuals/offices, etc.)	30%
Lack of culture or support for assessment on campus and/or in community	23%
Lack of financial resources or financial security (e.g., budget cuts)	15%
Lack of personal power to convince others	12%
Institution has other priorities	11%
Weak administrative support	9%
Lack of skills, knowledge and/or specialized training for the job	2%

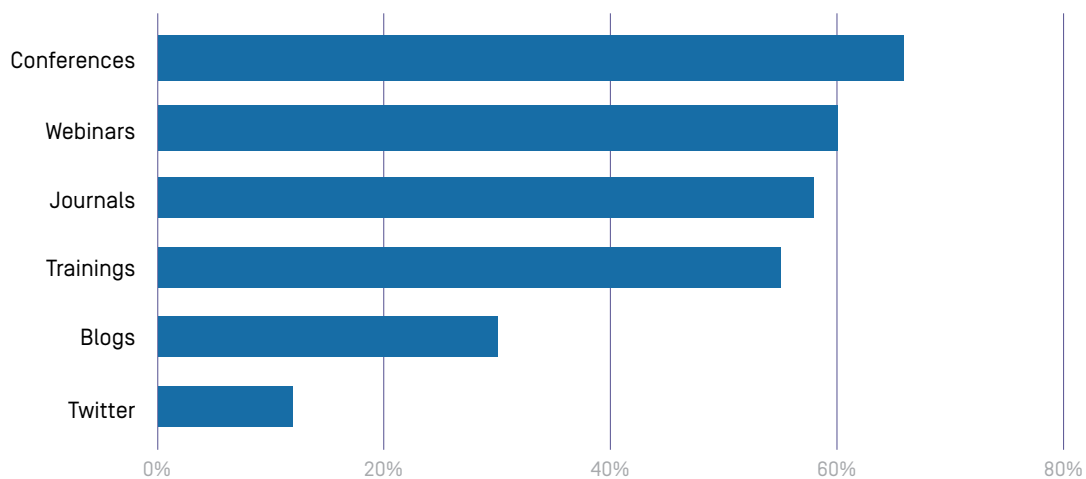
Combs & Rose (2015) – University of Kentucky (UKY) Survey

## Professional Development Needs of Assessment Professionals

The perceptions noted in this review — and countless previously published studies and surveys — show that assessment professionals need professional development to advance assessment efforts. For example, the NILOA 2010-11 survey found that increased support for faculty in the form of stipends, release time, and professional development would help advance assessment at the program level (Ewell, Paulson, & Kinzie, 2011). In addition, Baum reported on a variety of studies that concluded that mid-level student affairs professionals commonly “perceive themselves as lacking the necessary skills and competencies to perform assessment work” (Baum, 2015, p.158). However, the varied responsibilities found in higher education assessment roles present a challenge in determining the foci of professional development needed to advance assessment efforts across higher education.

The UKY survey (2015) included inquiries related to professional development. As stated above, the respondents were assessment professionals working in higher education. Nearly 79% (n=291) indicated that they participated in professional development activities related to assessment and/or institutional effectiveness. Figure 1 presents the professional development delivery preferences of respondents. The most preferred delivery method was professional conferences 66% (n=245) and the least preferred method of professional development was Twitter (12%, n=44).

Figure 1. Preferred Method of a Professional Development Delivery



Combs & Rose (2015) - University of Kentucky (UKY) Survey

Hoffman (2015) also sought to identify assessment professionals' most and least helpful methods for professional learning related to assessment. Assessment-specific conferences, job shadowing, and assessment-related graduate courses were rated the highest as preferred professional learning methods, while teleconferences and training videos were rated the lowest. Both studies identified a preference for professional development through assessment-focused conferences.

An established competency framework for assessment professionals could be used to establish industry standards that would inform a variety of initiatives in the field, including the development of responsive and relevant professional development programs.

UKY survey (2015) respondents were asked to provide open-ended comments on activities or topics they would like to see offered to assessment and/or institutional effectiveness personnel. Sixty-four respondents provided comments (17% of respondents). Qualitative analyses were conducted to identify themes. Six major professional development topic areas emerged from the analyses:

- staffing and resources
- best practices in assessment
- learning outcomes and co-curricular assessment
- assessment tools
- collaboration, and
- using data for change and/or strategic planning

**Staffing and Resources.** The most commonly noted topic area focused on staffing and resources available to conduct assessment work. Respondents requested professional development on items such as “how other assessment offices are structurally positioned within their institutions,” “increasing staff opportunities and faculty opportunities in academic assessment,” and career development resources. Comments also included topics related to a lack of resources for assessment work such as “managing a one-person office” and “how to build a case for additional budget dollars.” Both the Watermark (2016) survey and UKY survey

[2015] suggested that assessment professionals struggled with having enough resources and time to get everything done and implementing the necessary assessment activities with limited budgetary support. Assessment professionals also stated that there were many structural barriers in place that made conducting assessment activities a challenge, including a lack of assessment culture or support for assessment on their campus or in their community.

**Best Practices in Assessment.** Responses supporting this theme included both practical information on what works in assessment practices across institutions as well as “research on what constitutes effective and meaningful practice in assessment.” Comments addressed the need for professional development in the areas of quantitative and qualitative data analysis and interpretation—assessment professionals mentioned being less proficient in these areas than in other areas of their assessment work. Knowledge in using a variety of software tools to conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses, choosing the most appropriate analysis technique, linking assessment questions to varied methodologies, and interpreting these analyses were additional areas that supported a need for professional development in assessment best practice.

**Collaboration.** Another theme closely related to best practices in assessment that emerged in the qualitative data was collaboration. Respondents requested “more sharing of techniques and tips between institutions” and “opportunities for people to share good [assessment] practices.” Suggestions demonstrated a strong desire from assessment professionals to learn from colleagues and other institutions, including how to “successfully overcome unique or common challenges” related to assessment efforts. One respondent suggested a very practical and hands-on strategy for collaboration that included developing “assessment institutes in which participants work on real case studies from participating institutions [to] come up with collectively-derived solutions.” Respondents also discussed the importance of partnering with other stakeholders in their institution when conducting assessment activities, including faculty, graduate students, and other assessment professionals.

**Learning Outcomes and Co-curricular Assessment.** Professional development needs were also cited broadly in the areas of “student learning outcomes,” “co-curricular assessment,” “direct measures of outcomes assessment,” and “quality program review.” Specific identified interests spanned a variety of higher education areas including student affairs, general education, program evaluation, and academics as a whole.



**Assessment Tools.** Responses to this theme included requests for professional development in a variety of tools to assess student learning from “adapting and writing rubrics” (including norming/reliability issues) to e-portfolios and task-based assessments. This theme also included tools used for assessment work at the institutional level, such as developing “criteria used to select an assessment management system,” “online assessment reporting tools,” “low cost technology to harness reporting capabilities and data collection activities,” and tools related to “business intelligence and proper display of data.”

**Use of Data for Change.** The final theme that emerged from the UKY survey (2015) was related to the use of assessment data. As one respondent asked, “Now [that] we have the data...how do we enable change?” Several qualitative comments indicated a need for professional development to assist assessment personnel in creating a culture of assessment within the organization and/or help with implementing a “shift from trying to build an assessment culture to building a learning improvement culture” in their institution. Respondents noted a need for support in incorporating assessment efforts into strategic planning, including “how to better connect assessment with change management strategies” and “techniques to facilitate change.”

Topics addressed in professional development offerings must include both concrete assessment tasks such as conducting data collection and analysis activities and more complex assessment work such as creating assessment cultures and facilitating change in higher education organizations.

Support for these themes has been found in other studies. The Watermark (2016) survey presented nine topics to gauge client interest in professional development related to assessment. These included rubric design, data analysis and interpretation, scoring and calibration/norming, developing or selecting assessment assignments, assessment terminology, documenting assessment results and reports, the benefits of assessment, inter-rater reliability, and curriculum mapping. Participants were asked to rate each topic on a scale from 1 (not at all interested) to 5 (very interested). Respondents (N=1074) expressed

the highest interest for professional development in the areas of data analysis and interpretation ( $M=3.63$ ,  $SD=1.26$ ) and in documenting assessment results and reporting ( $M=3.55$ ,  $SD=1.23$ ). Respondents appeared to favor professional development topics that were practical in nature and/or those that would help them advance the use of assessment data in their institutions. These results should be interpreted with caution due to the limited nature of the topic choices included in the survey, since options were pre-selected and not inclusive of the topics related to the work of assessment professionals.

Hoffman's (2015) findings from a survey of 280 assessment professionals also provided support for the themes identified in the current analysis. In that survey, respondents identified quantitative and qualitative data analysis and interpretation skills among the areas they are less proficient in — which aligns with the University of Kentucky's qualitative analysis theme related to best practices in assessment. Hoffman's participants indicated a need for development in areas such as using software to perform analysis of qualitative data; establishing standards of rigor, trustworthiness, and authenticity using qualitative methods; analyzing and interpreting quantitative data using the appropriate statistical techniques; and using software to perform analysis of quantitative measures. These mirror many of the comments that supported the best-practices-in-assessment theme identified in the current analysis.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper attempts to clarify the roles, challenges, and professional development needs of assessment practitioners in higher education. Building on past and new research, it affirms the findings that the roles of assessment professionals are varied yet interconnected. Assessment professional responsibilities may be at the course, program, department, or institutional level of assessment, and many have responsibilities that span across the entire spectrum of higher education. The activities they engage in include concrete tasks such as collecting data and conducting data analyses to more abstract assessment work such as engaging and supporting faculty, creating a culture of assessment, and using assessment data to facilitate change in their organization. It is evident from the review of assessment role research that although there are commonalities in the types of work assessment professionals engage in, there is not a standardized set of tasks or responsibilities that make up an assessment professional's role within higher education.

The investigation of the perceptions of assessment practitioners regarding their roles and responsibilities involved analyzing what assessment professionals liked the most and least about their work. Interestingly, we found significant variation in the preferences of assessment professionals — the same tasks that some disliked were the ones that were most favored by others. These conflicting perceptions illustrate the challenges related to supporting assessment practitioners in the field and providing professional growth opportunities to meet the needs of practitioners with varied perceptions and needs.

As the assessment profession continues to evolve, so does the need for a flexible and effective approach to professional development in the field. The challenge is providing support and professional development for assessment practitioners who have varied needs based on their unique assessment role in their institution. However, the analyses identified some commonalities among the areas of need. The themes that emerged in this review were related to staffing and resources, best practices in assessment, learning outcomes and co-curricular assessment, assessment tools, collaboration with others, and using data for change and/or strategic planning. We have seen from the responses of both surveys that while there are some commonalities in areas of need among assessment professionals from various institutions, a wide variety of professional development topics and delivery methods should be made

available to address institutions' varying goals for assessment and the barriers and struggles that their assessment professionals face within and outside of the institution.

There are several recommendations for further explorations and assessment initiatives that follow from this review. First, as a profession, there is a need to further explore and define the roles and competencies of assessment practitioners. Although some of this investigation has been conducted, further study is needed to define core competencies across a wide population of assessment practitioners. An established competency framework for assessment professionals could be used to establish industry standards that would inform a variety of initiatives in the field, including the development of responsive and relevant professional development programs.

To advance assessment initiatives in higher education, the field should leverage professional association resources to support the advancement of practitioners' assessment work in their institutions and to facilitate a shift in the perceptions regarding the value of assessment in higher education. This includes using collective resources and voices to connect assessment to teaching and learning and counteract the commonly-held view that assessment is mainly for accreditation and compliance. As noted in this review, a focus on assessment as a means for accountability leads practitioners and others in higher education to believe that the work is "bureaucratic" and "cumbersome," which takes away from their work with, and on behalf of, students. Continued efforts by practitioners to expand perceptions about the value of assessment to include a focus on serving students and supporting continual improvement of teaching and learning at their institutions would likely have a positive effect on the profession as a whole. Professional associations must support and disseminate research that establishes clear connections between assessment and improved teaching and learning in higher education.

As noted throughout this review, practitioners had varying perceptions about what they liked and disliked about their assessment work. As suggested by some respondents, collaborative sharing across institutions and assessment personnel could be a viable method for supporting assessment practitioners with diverse needs and competencies. Professional associations, individual institutions, and/or consortiums should offer professional development on a wide variety of assessment-related topics. These offerings should comprise both formal and informal initiatives and include a variety of delivery methods, as noted in this review.

For example, conferences were found to be a preferred method of delivering professional development in this review, but these could be expanded to include live streaming, recordings, or other ways of accessing the professional development sessions for those not able to attend in person. Informally, professional associations could expand their networking and sharing opportunities to advance a culture of collaboration and sharing across the profession.

An unbiased needs assessment to determine specific professional development needs of assessment practitioners would help organizations create training opportunities that are practical and engaging. This investigation should include broad, unbiased mechanisms where assessment professionals can provide in-depth and meaningful feedback on their professional development needs. Topics addressed in professional development offerings must include both concrete assessment tasks such as conducting data collection and analysis activities and more complex assessment work such as creating assessment cultures and facilitating change in higher education organizations. The use of micro-credentialing could help motivate and engage assessment professionals in advanced training opportunities.

There is a renewed need to support assessment professionals in the daily implementation of assessment initiatives as well as help them change the conditions that drive assessment in their institutions.

This review illustrates the need for continued efforts to support assessment initiatives in higher education. There is a renewed need to support professionals in the daily implementation of assessment initiatives as well as help them change the conditions that drive assessment in their institutions. These assessment efforts should allow for accountability while simultaneously advancing a focus on improving teaching and learning in higher education.

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## Appendix 1: Description of Sources of Data and Summarized Survey Data

Listed in the Tables below are the various sources of raw data (that we analyzed) and summarized data (from others published reports/articles) that informed this report.

Table 3: Description of Raw Data Sources Used in White Paper

Name of Data Source	Description of Raw Data Source
Watermark (2016) Survey	Watermark led this project to obtain survey data on assessment and accreditation from those in the Higher education community. The purpose of the survey was to collect data to gain additional insights into assessment and accreditation efforts at colleges and universities across the country. Approximately 50,000 individuals (contact information obtained from Watermark’s marketing database and Education Dive subscribers) were solicited in the summer of 2016 to participate in this anonymous survey. A total of 1074 respondents who were employed full time completed the surveys, and most participants were engaged in some assessment activities. Fifty-three percent of respondents were Watermark technology users.
Combs & Rose (2015) - University of Kentucky (UKY) Survey	This survey of Institutional Effectiveness professionals examined the influence of demographic factors, external activities, and perceptions related to job security, perceived barriers, and job satisfaction. There were 377 respondents (44% response rate). The majority of respondents indicated they were performing at the director level or above.

Table 4: Description of Summarized Sources Used in White Paper

Name of Source	Description of Referenced Data
<p>Association of American Colleges &amp; Universities (AAC&amp;U) [2016]</p>	<p>This 2016 report summarized key findings from a national survey among chief academic officers at AAC&amp;U member institutions and explored trends in learning outcomes and approaches to assessing them. It found that many in higher education were moving away from standardized tests and placing an increased focus on rubrics applied to student work samples as better evidence of students' achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes.</p>
<p>Ewell, Paulson, &amp; Kinzie (2011) and Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, &amp; Kinzie (2014) - National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) National Survey of Chief Academic Officers (2010-2011 and 2013-2014 Datasets)</p>	<p>The NILOA Survey was sent to acting senior academic officers at every accredited two- and four-year college and university in the United States. Gauging what students know and accomplish as a result of their college education is an essential, challenging responsibility of virtually every chief academic officer in the country. NIOLA administered the National Survey of Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) to gather information about how CAOs executed this responsibility. The online survey asked senior officers to share basic information about undergraduate assessment practices on their campus.</p>
<p>Jaschik &amp; Lederman (2017) - Inside Higher Ed</p>	<p>The Inside Higher Ed's sixth annual Survey of College and University Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) collected data on how CAOs address challenges facing higher education. The survey contained 13 questions. One question on the survey pertained to assessment: <i>What impact have assessment efforts had on teaching and learning outcomes?</i></p>

Hoffman (2015) Survey	The purpose of this survey was to collect data about assessment competencies from new (1-5 years of experience) student affairs professionals. Survey questions were created based on the ACPA-College Student Educators International's (ACPA) 2006 Assessment Skills and Knowledge Standards (ASK). There were 280 respondents (26% response rate) who completed the survey. Specifically, the researcher asked about new student affairs professionals' perceptions of the importance of assessment, proficiency in conducting assessment, and the delivery methods most helpful to learn assessment skills.
Jankowski & Slotnick (2015)	This project consisted of one-on-one individual interviews with assessment experts as well as a thorough review of the literature and recent job postings in the assessment field. This information informed the development of a framework of five essential roles for assessment practitioners.

## Appendix 2: Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed with the data from the Watermark (2016) and University of Kentucky (2015) surveys. Descriptive statistics (e.g. frequencies, crosstabs, means) and tests of statistical significance were conducted on the quantitative data. Qualitative research software programs were used to perform the qualitative analysis.

Open-ended questions in the Watermark and University of Kentucky surveys were analyzed through an iterative process. Following an initial review, responses were coded into major themes. After this initial coding, all individual responses within each theme were reviewed for consistency and recoded as needed. Recoding led to redefining the meaning of existing themes, merging of some themes, splitting of other themes into separate categories, and creation of new themes. The themes were then used to inform the reporting of the findings.

## Appendix 3: Limitations of Survey Samples

The samples of all of the surveys included in this investigation tended to favor large public universities with graduate-level degree offerings. The tables below compare our survey samples with national norms as reported by the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) [U.S. Department of Education, 2015].

**Table 5: Comparison of Survey Samples with National Averages:  
Institutional Highest Degree-Granting Level**

	<b>UKY</b>	<b>Watermark</b>	<b>NCES [2015]</b>
Associate	12.7%	12.0%	<b>34.6%</b>
Baccalaureate	34.2%	N/A	<b>20.5%</b>
Master's	22.3%	N/A	<b>16.2%</b>
Doctorate	28.9%	N/A	<b>7.2%</b>
Special Focus	1.7%	3.2%	<b>21.6%</b>

**Table 6: Comparison of Survey Samples with National Averages:  
Institutional Control**

	<b>UKY</b>	<b>Watermark</b>	<b>NCES [2015-16]</b>
Public	56.5%	54.8%	<b>35.4%</b>
Private not-for-profit	41.6%	39.6%	<b>37.1%</b>
Private for-profit	1.9%	5.3%	<b>27.5%</b>

Table 7: Comparison of Survey Samples with National Averages:  
Institutional Size – Student Enrollment

	<b>UKY</b>	<b>Watermark</b>	<b>NCES 2015</b>
Under 1,000	6.1%	6.0%	<b>44.1%</b>
1,000 - 2,499	17.6%	19.2%	<b>19.0%</b>
2,500 - 4,999	15.2%	35.3%	<b>13.7%</b>
5,000 - 9,999	14.4%	36.5%	<b>11.0%</b>
10,000 and up	46.8%	3.0%	<b>12.3%</b>

## About AALHE

Founded in 2009, the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education is a non-profit professional association for assessment practitioners at colleges, universities, and higher education support organizations. It serves the needs of those in higher education for whom assessment is a tool to help them understand learning and develop processes for improving it. AALHE provides resources and a forum to support assessment practitioners' professional development and the research, documentation, open discussion of issues, strategies, policies, and processes associated with the use of assessment to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness in fostering student success. For more information and to become a member, visit [www.aalhe.org](http://www.aalhe.org).

## About Watermark™

Watermark's mission is to put better data into the hands of administrators, educators, and learners everywhere in order to empower them to connect information and gain insights into learning which will drive meaningful improvements. Through its innovative educational intelligence platform, Watermark supports institutions in developing an intentional approach to learning and development based on data they can trust. For more information, visit [www.watermarkinsights.com](http://www.watermarkinsights.com).



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