



On the Importance of Culturally Responsive Assessment

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Montenegro & Jankowski's (2017) work, *Equity and Assessment: Moving towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* addresses concerns regarding the need for culturally responsive assessment policies and practices within our nation's colleges and universities. Their rationale for culturally responsive assessment, conceptualizations students, culture and assessment, along with suggestions for facilitating culturally responsive assessment, focuses on policies and practices that serve to strengthen support of historically marginalized students. In particular, their critical acknowledgement about why the move towards culturally relevant assessment is necessary considers why assessment approaches are not inclusive of diverse learners. Their work underscores the importance of engaging in assessment that is culturally responsive and effective. Moving towards culturally responsive assessment is important for our colleges and universities but also serves to support our national positionality as global leaders in educating our students. Furthermore, an investment in culturally responsive assessment supports the growth of our nation's colleges and universities away from historic legacies that served to exclude underrepresented student populations.

There are several areas where this work makes an important contribution to examining the current state of assessment policies and practices. First, considering the consequences related to assessment approaches that are not considerate of diverse learners is critical for recognizing how current systems of assessment are not aligned with student growth and participation trends. An exploration of consequences provides opportunity for potentially identifying what's missing from an institution's current assessment activities. Second, recognition of misaligned assessment practices can facilitate deeper examination of an institution's commitment to serve student populations that have been historically underrepresented. In citing scholarship focused on culturally relevant pedagogies and practices (Ladson-Billings 1995a and 1995b; Hurtado and Halualani, 2014), Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) assert that "culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies sought to outline ways in which teachers could address unique learning needs of diverse student populations" (p. 5). Furthermore, their work highlights several examples of research where culturally relevant issues are emphasized and connected to concepts of assessment.

Third, by drawing connections between culturally relevant/responsive scholarship and assessment to discuss the consequences of assessment practices that aren't aligned with diverse learners, the paper raises critical questions.

For example, consider the following: “So, if we also know that students from different cultures who have similar education backgrounds respond and perform significantly different, why would we design assessments, execute them, and then make changes based on assessment results without considering the cultural relevance of the assessment effort and analyze how the assessment might affect all students/benefit certain population(s) and hinder others? Why would we not include students in the assessment process to improve our approaches?” (p. 14-15) Such questions facilitate deeper consideration about why culturally responsive assessment is needed and should be valued as a core practice within our colleges and universities.

One institutional example where students’ culture is embraced in the curriculum and assessment is the College of Menominee Nation (CMN) in Wisconsin. As a tribal college CMN’s commitment to valuing culture is beyond responsive, it’s foundational to every aspect of the student experience. CMN’s mission is promulgated through principles of American Indian culture and tradition and is integral to student learning and success. For instance, every CMN student enrolls in a sustainable development course and takes a course in American Indian history of language. Therefore, assessment of student learning values American Indian tradition and culture. Conrad and Gasman’s (2015) work illuminates a variety of ways colleges and universities embrace cultural responsiveness in their institutional policies and practices.

Future work on culturally responsive assessment within our colleges and universities should consider what continues to be missing and misaligned regarding the acknowledgement and implementation of policies and practices that support diverse learners. This includes further examination about the value and role of institutional assessment efforts that have historically served marginalized students (i.e., Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Predominantly Black Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, Alaskan Native and Native Hawaiian, and, Native American-Serving Nontribal Institutions.) These institutions offer significant examples of embracing culture as a core practice of assessment. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) note, “There is a need for assessments that allow students to demonstrate their learning in various ways while also being transparent about the learning that is taking place, help students reflect on their learning experiences, and allow students to actively participate in the learning and assessment process” (p. 12). Additional research on assessment should consider the ways current institutional assessment efforts center culturally responsive activities and/or serve to marginalize them. In order for students to demonstrate their learning in ways that are meaningful to them, and in ways that allow them to draw from their learning experiences, our institutions must grapple with the realities of culturally responsive assessment. This involves acknowledging the need for institutions to invest in and implement culturally-focused assessment strategies.

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References

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