

# Strengths-based Assessment Practice: Constructing Our Professional Identities through Reflection

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Gina B. Polychronopoulos  
Emilie Clucas Leaderman

*"I started doing assessment duties for the sociology department, and somehow I ended up doing it for the whole school!"*

*"I studied educational psychology, so it kind of made sense for me."*

*"I hadn't even considered a career in assessment, until my mentor talked me into it! She thought it was a perfect fit for me because I enjoy program evaluation and helping people work toward their goals."*

**...How did *you* get into assessment work?**

The path to the assessment profession can be non-linear and varied. In a recent study, Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) confirm the range of professional and disciplinary backgrounds that exist in the assessment field. While the majority of practitioners identify with the education and social science fields (44% and 30%, respectively), we know little about the other disciplines that we represent, including Arts and Humanities, Business, Natural Sciences, and Theology (Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Yet, from a quick glance of this year's AALHE conference program titles, the benefits of this rich composition to the assessment profession are apparent.

Given the notably diverse professional backgrounds of assessment practitioners, we wonder: *what are the implications of this diversity? How might our backgrounds inform the ways we individually and collectively approach assessment work?*

## **Constructing Our Professional Identity**

Assessment professionals wear multiple hats at their institutions; the strengths they bring to their work may be as unique as the individuals themselves. Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) establish a five-role framework for assessment professionals to reflect upon, as they work toward enhancing a meaningful assessment culture at their institution. They assert that learning from our differences can inform decisions around professional development, resources, and staffing needs. These roles, particularly (1) narrator/translator, (2) facilitator/guide, (3) visionary/believer, and (4) political navigator (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015) demonstrate the openness to change that is necessary for our work. Ariovich and colleagues further support and refine these roles, while underscoring the need for flexible professional development to address distinct aspects of our professional identities (Ariovich, Bral, Gregg, Gulliford, & Morrow, 2018). These studies support defining professional identity as assessment practitioners in higher education.

Nicholas & Slotnick (2018) shed light onto our disciplinary backgrounds, the nature of assessment work, and our motivations; they suggest that understanding our collective competencies is essential to further develop the assessment profession. We agree that understanding our backgrounds is a vital component of defining our professional identity;

# Viewpoint

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however, we are interested in exploring not only the collective implications of disciplinary diversity, but also acknowledging and honoring our individuality as assessment practitioners. *What is unique about our identities? What strengths do we have as individuals with different career trajectories? And, how do we employ those strengths intentionally in our assessment practices?*

### **Employing Reflexivity and Strengths-based Practice**

As leaders at our institutions, assessment practitioners need the opportunity to reflect upon their professional backgrounds and tell their own stories. When working with faculty and staff, we often highlight what is going well, in an effort to build upon strengths and systemic supports in the process. Sayegh (2013) notes the importance of encouraging faculty members to practice reflexivity, emphasizing the strengths of what is happening in their programs, and prompting them to become more intentional in their practices. We have a professional responsibility to model the same competencies that we are asking faculty and staff to develop. Exploring the unique and shared strengths that we use to support effective practice is imperative to advance the assessment field at large. In doing so, we can learn about the multiple mindsets that comprise our professional community, making the processes that guide our work accessible.

### **An Example of Strengths-based Assessment Practice: RARE Model**

During a time when there has been significant criticism of the assessment field, we connected around our common background as counseling professionals. We noticed similarities in our responses to faculty skepticism, as well as our approach to promoting a positive assessment culture on campus. Our collegial discussion evolved into discovering shared perspectives about the practices we use in assessment.

As we considered significant aspects of our professional backgrounds, including skills/techniques and theoretical underpinnings, we identified discipline-specific strengths that support our practices and frame our professional identities in assessment. Our discussions guided us in constructing the **RARE Model**, a strengths-based framework which outlines strategies we use to build collaborative, inclusive, and participatory relationships with faculty and staff (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). Developing the RARE Model approach was our direct response to the need to “more clearly outline the different philosophies for ourselves” and “bring a philosophical lens to our scholarship and work” (Jankowski, 2017). Engaging in this reflective process has promoted intentionality in our practices and further refined our understanding and individualized definitions of professional identity. Telling our stories through self-analysis has the potential for making our work more transparent to others, as well as clarifying our own sense of purpose as assessment professionals.

### **Final Thoughts**

In thinking about our profession within the context of higher education institutions of the future, we propose reframing our identities toward grassroots leadership and shifting away from our underlying association with accountability. It is crucial that we understand our origins and confidently articulate our strengths. We believe that embracing our disciplinary diversity, reflecting on our individual strengths, and constructing meaningful professional identities are important steps toward advancing assessment to the next level of institutional leadership.

We invite you to reflect on your professional identities further, and let us know: *What do you bring to higher education assessment?* We developed a few **exercises** (see Appendix) that may help assessment practitioners to reflect upon their individual strengths and articulate their perspectives on professional identity.

The RARE Model is a strengths-based framework which outlines strategies to build collaborative, inclusive, and participatory relationships with faculty and staff.

## References

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### My Assessment Journey

On the following timeline, **list important milestones** in your educational and/or professional background which led you toward your current position in higher education assessment.

Examples might include a particular degree program, job or internship, graduate assistantship, research project, grant program, etc.



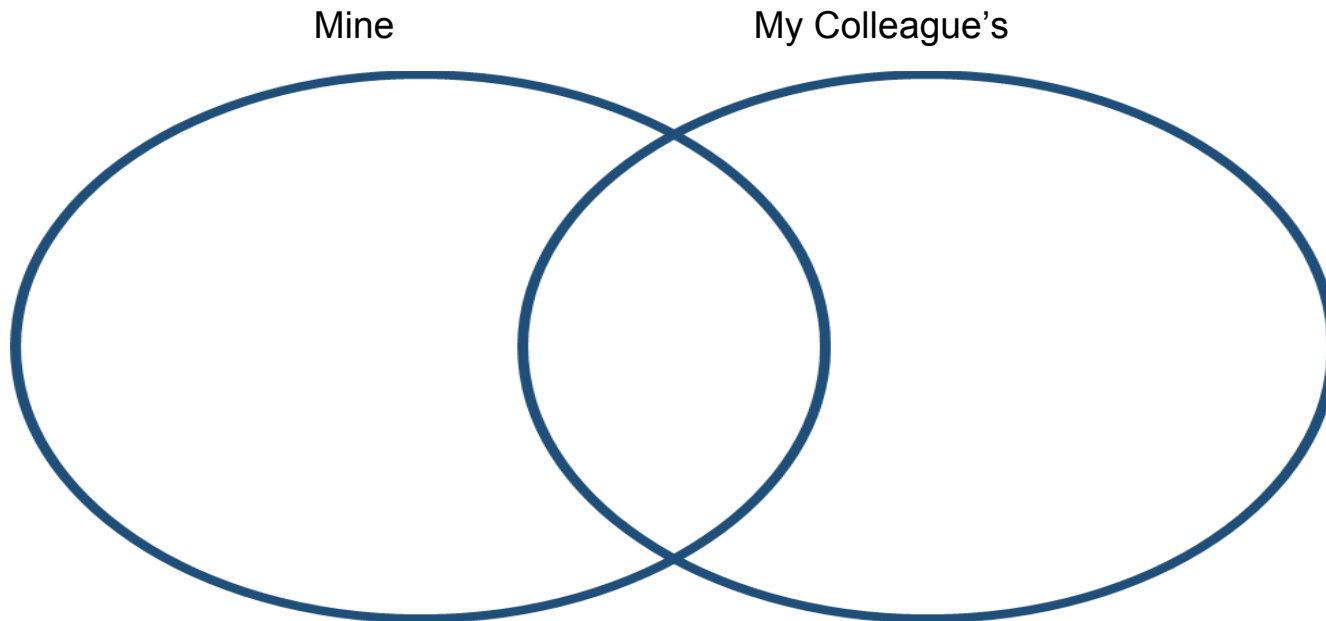
## Pair & Share: My Professional Background

List various **skills, knowledge, and/or training** from your specific professional background:

*Ex: data analysis*

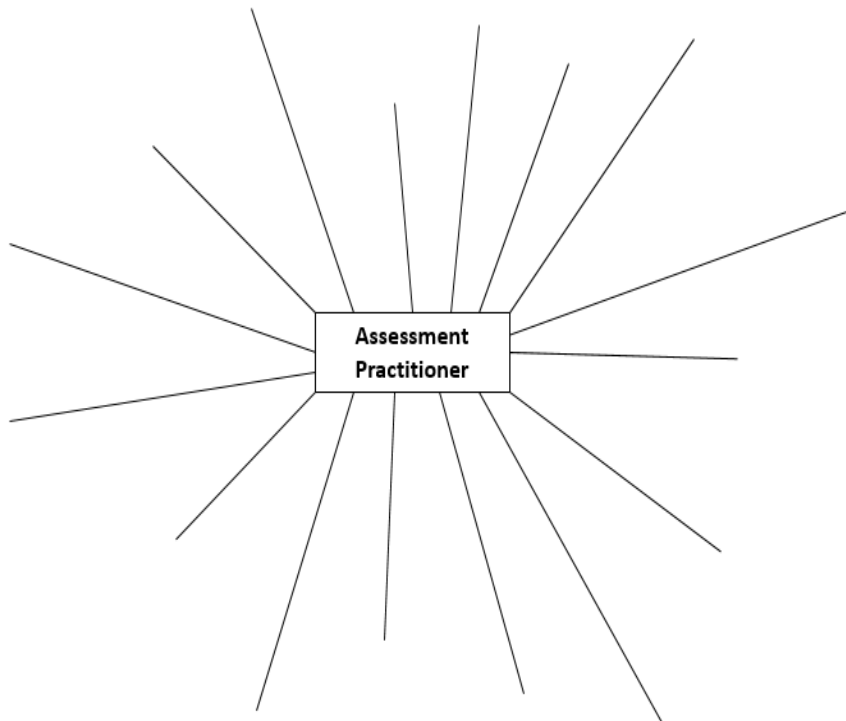
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Next, **compare your list** with your colleague's list, and complete the Venn diagram below:



## Professional Identity in Assessment

Complete the starburst below with **words or phrases** that you associate with an assessment practitioner in higher education. Feel free to add more lines, as you see fit.



How do I define what an assessment practitioner does (i.e., professional identity)?

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How are my skills (worksheet #2) most helpful in the day-to-day work that I do?

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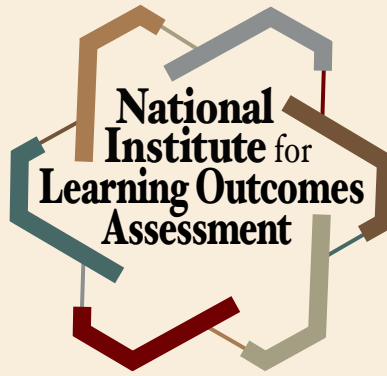
How do I view my unique strengths or skills fitting into the professional identity of assessment practitioners?

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