



Strategies for Change: Equity in Assessment Practices

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Carole L. Huston
University of San Diego

In the last few years, the call for greater diversity and equity in our assessment practices is gaining momentum (Chaplin, 2021; Heiser, Prince, & Levy, 2017; Henning & Lundquist, 2018; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, 2017; Vacarro & Newman, 2016). Substantive changes are often difficult to effect unless we are aware of specific ways in which they can occur. Two avenues are described here: disaggregating data in non-traditional ways and building diverse assessment methods and teams. Both approaches require greater examination of in-house procedures for collecting and analyzing information from students who are underrepresented and represent a much broader range of characteristics and experiences than are typically considered in assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, 2017; Check & Ballard, 2014; Hurtado & Halualani, 2014). Without examining systematically marginalized groups, institutions cannot begin to ensure that all of their students' needs are being met.

Disaggregating and Interrogating the Data in Inclusive Ways

Many of us collect routine local and national surveys to provide insights about perceptions like how engaged our students feel, how likely they are to return to campus in the following year, and how they perceive climate issues on campus. Traditional approaches to survey data usually provide general mean and standard deviation statistics to gauge the overall group responses on an array of survey items and indicators; rarely do these include grouping survey responses by specific characteristics, such as race and ethnicity, first generation status, or other smaller-sized underrepresented group categories. Consider the following illustration: The first-year (FY) class on retention survey indicates on a five-point scale that the majority are “likely” or “highly likely” to return the following year ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.12$). In the comments section, they cite small classes, location, and faculty connection as major draws. For this analysis, the institution decides to disaggregate by race and ethnicity even though some groups have very small numbers. African American students constitute just 4% of 1,000 incoming FY students. Their retention survey scores for the same items show they are “unlikely” or “highly unlikely” to return the next year ($M = 1.72$, $SD = .71$).

In their comments, they cite lack of diversity, climate misrepresentation in marketing materials, and the lack of financial support as major drawbacks. If just the general FY student mean and standard deviation scores are calculated and discussed, the reversal remains hidden. Becoming aware means that the institution can become culturally responsive to the diverse needs of this group of students (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017).

To assume all levels and forms of disaggregation are equally useful can also lead to errors in interpretation and subsequent marginalization of student groups (Roberts, 2019). As Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) noted, “Simply examining disaggregated data without examining if the assessment process is equitable will lead to continued inequities. Meaningful disaggregation involves deeper analyses by specific student characteristics, alongside the intersection between and among them” (p. 11). Typically, if one group is to be compared statistically with another, the standard procedure is to do a test of mean comparisons presuming that the two groups are of adequate size. As indicated in the earlier example, some student groups divided into categories of race and ethnicity are often too small to be considered separately in statistical analyses. Attempts to use broader categories in data disaggregation, such as underrepresented (URMs) and non-underrepresented groups, can still miss critical information. At predominantly white institutions (PWIs), numbers of African American and Native American students often fall below statistically acceptable comparison levels which means they are routinely marginalized if not considered separately.

Consider another hypothetical case where a PWI examines NSSE data from their seniors to questions about the campus climate. Suppose that the initial analysis showed the majority of responses were “very much” and “quite a bit” to items about diversity in coursework, about institutional commitment to diversity and inclusivity, and about providing a supportive climate. Disaggregating by URM and non-URM categories shows a slightly smaller majority of the responses fall in the “very much” and “quite a bit” categories and the difference between the two is not significant. However, suppose the analysis is continued at a more granular level by distinguishing race and ethnicity. Because comparison tests are not possible, the team decides to look at frequencies and proportions of students compared to the total number of students within that same grouping category. Results show that white and Hispanic students have responded with a similar pattern; that is, about 70% of white students and about 65% of Hispanic students are responding at the higher end of the scale. The pattern for African American and Native American students is uniquely distinct. Knowing that only 29% of all African American students and 32% of all Native American students responded “very much” and “quite a bit” is crucially important to know even if the relative numbers are small. When they are not considered separately, their perspectives are lost. This practice “inherently marginalizes specific populations because they are silenced from analyses, even though much can be learned from the experiences of the students behind the small ‘n’ “ (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, p. 8). Although these are more labor-intensive approaches, socially just assessment methods require a deeper dive in disaggregating data in order to understand and address the needs of all students.

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Building Diverse Methods and Teams to Conduct Assessments

The second approach to change in assessment recognizes the necessity of diversity in assessment methods and teams. It is often very difficult to discern where biases may blind researchers to problems built into the assessment process. Brooks-Immel and Murray (2021) argue that educators must move not just to a point of awareness as a static endpoint but to an “engaged anti-racism practice which means interrogating our methods as well as our data” (p. 225). Assessment of student learning often relies on a single approach or a single method, but students’ perceptions are reflective of their diverse experiences and are unlikely to be reflected equally in this single approach (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Consider the following hypothetical example: A university wishes to evaluate where students are scoring on the *VALUE Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Value Rubric*. Students are asked to respond to a story prompt involving an African-American first-generation female student who was considering leaving college during her first year. One of the rubric criteria for skills is *empathy*. The highest level of the rubric entails differentiating multiple worldviews in ways that “recognize the feelings of another cultural group.” The lower two levels are based on the respondent’s preference for one’s own worldview. When student responses are scored, the institutional team discovers that on average, the essays from the African-American first-generation students in the pool were more likely to be scored at the two lower levels of the rubric. The team investigates further conducting focus groups about the survey responses. The African-American first-generation students indicated they felt a strong personal identification with the character in the story prompt which is expressive of their own worldviews. The implicit biases embedded in this assessment made it impossible to capture the unique and differing construction processes of “identity” and “othering” for all students. Implicit biases mean a failure to consider how the results would be impacted by the assessment method itself.

In the name of validity concerns, assessors will likely commit what Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) call the *three musketeers fallacy*, or the “idea that in order to make a measure equally valid for everyone, everyone completes the same measure—all for one and one for all—as a means to ensure fairness instead of using different measures for different groups” (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 6). Instead, it makes much more sense to consider what methods are best used for students with differing experiences, perceptions and abilities if the goal is accurate representation of what they know and what they have learned. Methods that reflect inherent biases are also much less likely to be detected by assessment teams unless they include diverse faculty and staff. As Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) indicate, “It is unrealistic and counterproductive for assessment professionals to think they are approaching their work from an impartial stance or to assume that students being assessed also operate from an impartial stance” (p. 14). Assessor biases, they point out, can increase harm to students by labeling them as underachievers, which “can lead to unintentionally reinforcing negative assumptions about certain student groups” (p. 14). As insurance against implicit biases, assessment teams should be comprised of diverse faculty and staff who will, from the beginning, ask a richer, fuller set of questions about

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student learning. They will be equipped to critically explore and interpret more fully the diversity of answers they receive from their students. Moreover, faculty and administrators who occupy positions of privilege need to undergo training that encourages ongoing critical self-awareness of those positions and the impact that they have.

In order to move toward more diverse and socially just assessments, it will become increasingly important to change our traditional practices. Disaggregating and analyzing data in nontraditional ways can yield essential information unseen at broader levels. By diversifying assessment teams, it is far more likely that hidden biases will emerge and then changes in methods will better capture a more inclusive range of our students' perceptions.

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