# Exploring Barriers to Equity-Centered Assessment in Higher Education

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Montenegro and Jankowski's (2017) *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* ignited the conversation in higher education regarding the intersection of equity and assessment although this topic has existed in the evaluation literature beginning with work of Reid Jackson in the 1930s. Current literature is growing to include concepts of critical theory (Heiser et al., 2017), a continuum of assessment philosophies (Lundquist & Henning, 2020), equity embedded in assessment practice (Lundquist & Heiser, 2021; Henning, Baker, et al., 2022; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, Yngve & Brewer, 2022), and a frameworks for equity-minded and equity-centered assessment (Heiser et al., 2023; Lundquist & Henning, 2021). This occasional paper report expands upon the ongoing dialogue by focusing specifically on the challenges that assessment professionals experience when attempting to integrate equity into assessment practice. For the purposes of this report, the authors define equity-centered assessment as an activity that,

> …validates and attends to students' identities and cultural backgrounds, considers how systemic bias and discrimination can affect learning and the student experience, exposes policies and procedures that promote bias and discrimination, and helps educational practice be more inclusive and equitable. (Lundquist & Heiser, 2021, para. 4)

It is important to note that equity-centered assessment includes two components: assurance that assessment practice is implemented in an equitable way, and advancement of equity through assessment (Lundquist & Henning, 2021, McArthur, 2022).

A research team of seven people from different institutions and organizations came together to explore the question: to what extent are professionals in the field of assessment in higher education engaged in the practice of equity-centered assessment? In July 2021, the research team launched the first survey of equity-centered practices in assessment with the support of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment, the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education, ACPA–College Student Educators International, the Assessment Institute, the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and Student Affairs Assessment Leaders. While the overarching findings (Henning, Lundquist, et al., 2022) from the study have been publicly shared, two open-ended questions had not yet been fully examined. Overall, 568 people responded to the anonymous survey. The survey respondents represented those working in academic affairs (61%) and student affairs (27%) and were staff members (54%), faculty members (23%) senior administrators (20%), and 7% self-identified as "other" which included graduate students and people who chose not to identify their role. This report focuses on 429 open-ended survey responses to the question, "What obstacles or challenges do you face in engaging in equity-centered assessment work?"

## Themes for Barriers to Equity-Centered Assessment

Six members of the research team independently read through all 429 comments, co-created a defined set of themes, and independently assigned codes to each response regarding challenges faculty and staff experienced when implementing equity-centered assessment. Discrepancies were reviewed and

discussed until consensus was reached. A qualitative review of the findings revealed the following seven themes: knowledge, awareness, and understanding; access to necessary data; capacity; reluctance to culture of assessment; performative commitment to inclusion, diversity, and equity; political and legislative climate; and fear. This report defines and describes each theme in detail, providing examples of direct quotes from respondents highlighting the depth and breadth of each theme.

## Knowledge, Awareness, and Understanding

Knowledge, awareness, and understanding of equity-centered assessment emerged as a primary theme when naming challenges associated with conducting equity-centered assessment work. In reflecting on the challenges, respondents posed questions such as what equity-centered assessment is, how it is connected to existing assessment practices, and what resources are available for learning how to conduct it properly. Respondents shared the need for training, educational resources, examples, access to content experts, challenges to anticipate, and access to a community to engage in this work. Some examples of responses include:

> "…I find that I'm having to teach folx how to assess and add a layer to make sure it is equity-centered. This is difficult when staff are still learning about all things justice, equity, diversity, inclusion."

> "Every[one] already thinks they are doing it, because assessment is 'objective,' right? Data is 'neutral,' right? To reframe assessment as 'equity-centered' is an act of political propaganda, right? That is to say, apart from the overall challenge of changing institutional culture tied directly to assessment practices, there is the specific challenge of empirical/positivist methodology that resists self-awareness of values and privileges."

> "Lack of training as to what equity-centered is and how to apply it to assessment work."

> "Some resistance on campus to Critical Race Theory."

> "While I press each project to be equity-centered, the work with some staff members takes more time. They do not understand how equity should center their assessment (or their work); they believe we should be 'color blind' in our services and programs. Taking the time to explain the importance of equity-centered assessment takes time away from other projects…It might also liberate some time for us to participate in additional professional development to continue to build our knowledge and skills in this area."

The challenges outlined above demonstrate a need for a better understanding of what equity-centered assessment is and how this construct should inform the work of assessment. Several respondents indicated that while there was an interest in integrating equitable practices in their assessment work, they faced resistance in doing so effectively. Respondents also expressed concerns that conducting equity-centered assessment would require more time and training, which might mean shifting their focus away from other responsibilities. These observations indicate an opportunity for assessment professionals to solidify a clear definition of equity-centered assessment and connect this work more clearly to how institutions can advance inclusion, equity, and diversity in their institutional goals.

## Accessing Necessary Information and Data

Another significant challenge to conducting equity-centered assessment work regards accessing necessary information and data. Survey respondents discussed limited access to larger institutional data sets, student demographic data, and permissions from institutional research offices to use the data as a means to advocate for equity and inclusion efforts. Departments working in silos not sharing data contribute to this access challenge because there is a lack of communication between offices to coordinate access to student information and demographic data. Second, survey respondents indicated that their institutions did not collect data that would help them better determine the inequities that exist within their organizations. This lack of information is a barrier to campus leaders who are charged with creating and implementing initiatives that advance equity and inclusion efforts. Third, different

departments had varying metrics for measuring success in supporting their constituents that may not be aligned throughout campus. Below are a few direct quotes from respondents regarding data access and limitations.

> "The data I have access to doesn't include information that relates to equity."

> "[Lack of] Time and human resources to systematically assess equity-centered assessment work. That an inconsistency on an annual basis leads to data that is not usable to assess departmental success "

> "Metrics desired by upper level administrators may not be consistent with my/our approaches to assessment."

Comments suggested that better communication and collaboration among offices that gather student data and upper-level administration can enhance access to information and foster alignment between departments for institutional student success metrics. Given that this data is often sensitive in nature, it is critical that institutional leaders work with assessment professionals to create processes and data management protocols that can adequately protect this information. This not only means creating secure databases, but also providing greater transparency to stakeholders (e.g., students, staff, and faculty) regarding how student data is collected and used before it is gathered. Further, clear processes for data collection and access should also include mechanisms for communicating the data to pertinent stakeholders, and provide opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to actively participate in the process of analyzing and generating recommendations based on the data. Creating a common understanding of available data on campus allows practitioners, faculty, and administrators to begin speaking the same language and to develop common success metrics for equity and inclusion.

### Lack of Capacity

Lack of capacity emerged as another challenge to conducting equity-centered assessment work. Put simply, time, energy, staff, budget, and competing priorities impede assessment professionals' capacity to engage in equity-centered assessment work.

> "Faculty time and energy which has been further tapped by the pandemic, and which has exacerbated inequities among the faculty. Our faculty are open to implementing more equity-centered assessment, but it has been a challenge getting assessment done at all."

> "Lack of staff resources (time to engage more deeply in equity-centered assessment due to the volume of other assessment demands) - thus, we have had to make strategic decisions of when/which projects/which year to take a deeper dive into our data."

> "There are so many assessment projects in progress that the institution needs to establish what is a priority so constituents understand the emphasis."

> "Too many priorities, too many job responsibilities, no dedicated FTE focused specifically on managing assessment. Desperately need a full-time director."

The combined impacts of the pandemic, a lack of resources needed to carry out projects, and the need for clearer direction on priorities from institutional leaders continue to be barriers for assessment professionals wanting to implement equity-centered practices in their work. Without attention to resources from campus leaders and a commitment to supporting assessment in general, these practices cannot be prioritized effectively.

### Reluctance to a Culture of Assessment

Institutional reluctance to a culture of assessment presented another challenge to conducting equity-centered assessment. For some respondents, there was a lack of support or understanding of assessment as a valuable practice. Equity was described as an additional complexity to the assessment practice. On campuses where faculty or staff are already averse to doing assessment, the idea of equity-centered assessment may seem like an extra obstacle or may create additional barriers to getting assessment done:

"… [there is] pushback from staff who view the centering of equity as \*more\* time taken up by assessment work which is already viewed as another task (not a tool) by many"

"Assessment at the HBCU where I work is non-existent. A lot of the hesitancy is on the part of the faculty who are concerned about being 'graded' based on unfair practices. For non-academic units, the fear is based in a lack of understanding."

"Not having any of the things I listed as resources in the previous question - partnership between my DEI office and assessment professionals; a stronger culture of assessment in general; and a purpose-driven framework for our internal assessment activities."

"…though we talk about 'a culture of assessment,' that is a far way from being realized--not for lack of human and/or financial capital, but because it is not a priority for most senior administrators and faculty."

"… getting folks to submit any assessment is a struggle; shifting to an equity-centered mindset for some would just increase the barrier to their participation."

Furthermore, respondents noted a misunderstanding of how assessment could and should be used to enhance programs and services. These misunderstandings continue to be a barrier to professionals who are working to create a culture of improvement. By supporting assessment efforts across the institution, institutional leadership can identify how to best support their diverse students, staff, and faculty. Moreover, greater collaboration between assessment professionals and DEI offices is needed to facilitate more dialogue around how assessment can help to inform, enhance, and improve diversity and inclusion efforts on campuses. The comments in this theme showed that while higher education has invested in assessment positions for over a decade, creating cultures of assessment is slow progress and, in such context, equity-centered assessment is a significant challenge.

### *Performative Commitment to Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity*

Several respondents noted a lack of commitment to inclusion, diversity, and equity at their institutions, which creates a challenge to practicing equity-centered assessment. Practitioners face a lack of buy-in, pushback on why equity and inclusion should be central to assessment work, and in some cases, outright hostility or backlash from campus community members related to engaging in diversity work. Embedded in this theme were comments related to buy-in, leadership, and action. Respondents noted administrator and faculty lack of investment in the assessment process which made general assessment challenging and made equity-centered assessment feel additionally challenging. A lack of priority given to assessment and inclusion work was also noted. While organizational commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as assessment are made, they are performative and in name only. Comments below support this theme.

"My college claims DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] as a strategic priority but fails in terms of their true commitment as evidenced by action. For example, they decided to create a DEI director position but it is part-time. There have not been any substantive policy improvements despite very specific recommendations from the college DEI counsel and its advisory group. In short they are long on talk (especially buzz-words) but short on actions that could make a real difference for our students."

"Challenging the mindsets of those who feel that it is the learners [sic] responsibility to learn how to be a better student; that dis-aggregated data showing inequities in learning is a reflection of a serious need in our community for US to do things differently." (The sentiment here is that the achievement gaps between different student populations have to do with the students themselves rather than inequities that exist within the higher education system. This deficit mindset creates barrier to professionals who recognize the systemic inequities and want to address them).

"It [equity-centered assessment] would require a real up-ending of our current assessment practices, including linking assessment data to individual student data, which we have never done. I would anticipate a lot of resistance to that, as well as to dealing with issues of anti-racism, decolonization, etc."

"It's [equity-centered assessment] not seen as a priority. We have been doing assessment the same way for years without consideration of the harm caused by bias, cultural insensitivities etc. that are part of the assessment process."

"Buy-in and capacity to conduct the work. It's hard enough to energize faculty and staff around assessment, let alone ECA [equity-centered assessment]."

"At the moment, I feel like a sole voice (more like a squeaky wheel) that recognizes the existence of inequities that need addressing through analysis of the data but I am struggling to get my colleagues to actively work to address the things I observe in the data. For example, we provide pretty comprehensive datasets from our CIS [computer information system] and other sources for program reviews and I oversee that process. In many instances, I identify loss of diversity in our student populations in each program from entry to graduation but I have yet to find an effective way to have the programs (or, more meaningfully, the college) acknowledge and actively address this phenomenon through new ways of operating, implementation of new practices, active work to change mindsets and the culture. As an office of one, I need to find a group to help raise awareness to a level that results in action."

As indicated by the responses above, there is a need for increased education around the value of inclusion and diversity for enhancing learning and work environments. The comments also suggest that a shift from performative efforts to advance inclusion to a more holistic, integrative approach that supports a culture of assessment and accountability would also be necessary for positive change. An additional observation is the sense of isolation that comes with being the "sole voice" that recognizes the need for change, but often is unable to persuade others to make that change happen. This phenomenon highlights the importance of both providing adequate resources to assessment professionals who are advocating for equity-centered practices and involving these professionals in conversations around policies that directly impact diverse populations. Often, discussions of leveraging data to advance equity focus on the positive outcomes that occur at the intersection of assessment and equity. The comments in this theme articulate the drawbacks of this intersection.

### Political and Legislative Climate

Political and legislative climates pose real challenges for respondents. Comments in this theme focused on political and legislative barriers; local, national, and state political opposition; and feeling 'not allowed' to do something because of local or state policies as suggested by the following responses.

"At a public institution in the south, our state legislators are obstacles and challenges. We must be careful not to offend them and risk our funding getting reduced or revoked. Doing so includes not using language that indicates we are doing anti-racist work. It's hard to do anti-racist work when you don't feel supported and fear retribution. I'm also not sure that my dean would support me using assessment data to point out inequities and then using that knowledge to seek social justice."

"There are political dynamics at my institution (R1[research 1], state flagship) such that anything related to DEI work is a tightrope walk if it could lead to bad PR [public relations]."

"The challenges that I can think of are both local and at the state level. In terms of the local barriers, introducing the approach and helping faculty not see it as an add-on is a big hurdle. At the state level, words like equity have become political lightning bolts."

Comments in this theme articulate a deep concern for repercussions at the state (e.g., funding) and institutional level (e.g., retribution). These issues create obstacles for assessment professionals wanting to identify and highlight inequities so that they may be addressed. Further compounding this barrier is the self-doubt and fear that assessment professionals experience when they have a heightened awareness of their own blind spots and a need for ongoing education on equitable assessment practice.

### Fear

Self-doubt and fear presented another challenge for assessment practitioners in doing equity-centered assessment. Engaging in personal and professional development, continuing to unearth individual

biases, and navigating one's own blind spots were described as a part of this theme. Respondents shared a fear of 'getting it wrong' or perpetuating harm in higher education. Power structures, surrounding and within the organization, were an overarching response regarding fear in doing equity-centered assessment. Several respondents discussed the impact of leadership and power in having discussion and action-oriented outcomes regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. A few direct quotes from the responses include:

> "It's hard to do anti-racist work when you don't feel supported and fear retribution."

> "Immediate supervisors' resistance and cynicism, they seem to feel threatened."

> "Leadership apprehension and fear to embrace change that would interrupt the power structure."

> "There is a lot of fear in EDI [equity, diversity, and inclusion]. It feels like everyone presents themselves as experts in EDI, but very few want to engage in discussions about how to decolonize practices and explore other modalities. A second challenge is funding for more participatory action research."

There is a long history of harm in higher education (Thelin, 2019). Amidst growing polarization in local and national climates, it is extraordinarily challenging to use the assessment process to address institutional performance gaps (Bensimon & Watson Spiva, 2022) or to investigate the systems and structures that perpetuate inequities. A personal fear of making matters worse or becoming a political target, and the theme of feeling afraid or doubting the ability to instigate genuine organizational change further compounds this challenge.

## Final Thoughts and Considerations for the Future of Equity-Centered Assessment

Reviewing the themes from the survey data allowed us to reflect upon them as a whole and provide the following observations:

1. Systems and structures are not set up at institutions for individual programs to know if they are fostering equitable outcomes for each of their students. Institutional metrics for success still focus on antiquated, lagging indicators such as retention and graduation rates that are based on the Carnegie Unit and not learning, neglecting student inclusion and belonging. Communities of practitioners, faculty, and students at each institution need to come together to determine the research-based evidence that are most important in their institutional context to understand success for ALL students and then collaborate to gain access to this information.

2. While quality, integrated data systems are necessary to advance equity, there should be a growing caution that in changing political climates and growing pressures, the same data used to close equity gaps, could be weaponized to automate inequity (Eubanks, 2018). Assessment ethics require practitioners to consider not only the current harm potentially caused by assessment practice to individuals but also the communities to which they belong as well as future harm that could be a result of equity-centered assessment approaches.

3. A focus on equity is perceived as adding equity work on top of assessment work, which can be overwhelming. In fact, the opposite is true. Equity-centered assessment can be leveraged as a tool for continuous improvement to more effectively advance the institution's stated mission which includes diversity, equity, and inclusion. The goal is to integrate equity approaches into assessment practice and then embed assessment into everyday practice to ensure neither equity nor assessment are add-ons to current role responsibilities.

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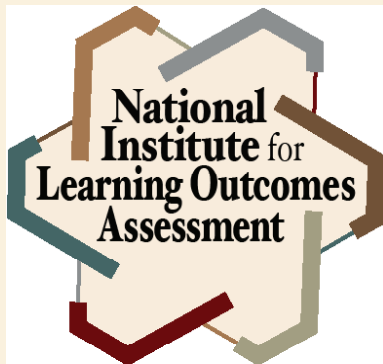
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