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# **Exploring What is Needed to Support Equity-Centered Assessment in Higher Education**

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## Exploring What is Needed to Support Equity-Centered Assessment in Higher Education

Since the publication of *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017), discussions related to the intersection of assessment and equity work continue to evolve to include concepts of critical theory (Heiser et al., 2017), a continuum of philosophies (Lundquist & Henning, 2020), embedding equity in assessment practice (Lundquist & Heiser, 2021; Henning, Baker, et al., 2022; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020, Yngve & Brewer, 2022), and frameworks for equity-minded and equity-centered assessment (Heiser et al., 2023; Lundquist & Henning, 2021) This report expands upon the ongoing dialogue by focusing specifically on what assessment professionals need to support equity-centered assessment. Authors of this article adopted the following definition of equity-centered assessment shared by Lundquist and Heiser (2021):

Equity-centered assessment 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. (para. 4)

It is important to note that equity-centered assessment includes two components: assurance that assessment practice is implemented in an equitable way, but also advancement of equity through assessment (Lundquist & Henning, 2021). 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 427 open-ended survey responses to the question, “*what support or resources would be helpful for you in conducting equity-centered assessment?*”

### Themes for Support and Resources Needed to Conduct Equity-Centered Assessment

Six members of the research team independently read through all 427 comments, co-created a defined set of themes, and independently assigned codes to each response. Discrepancies were reviewed and discussed until consensus was reached. The review team identified seven themes for support and resources needed to implement equity-centered assessment: community of practice, infrastructure, competency development, examples of practice, leadership support, organizational collaboration and alignment, and a miscellaneous category to capture outlying responses. The themes are described below.

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## *Community of Practice*

A number of respondents explicitly stated communities of practice as a means of support would be helpful in conducting equity-centered assessment. In common usage, a *community of practice* is considered to be a group of people who share a common interest, concern, or passion for something. In the most authoritative sources on communities of practice, however, there is a strong focus on apprenticeship, of seeking to master an arcane body of knowledge or practice connected to this term (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). By Lave & Wenger's (1991) canonical definition, a criminal gang, a medieval guild, or a quilting circle would all be examples of community of practice, while a book club would probably not fit the definition. For the basis of this report, a *community of practice* is defined as a professional support group seeking to define best practice. For example, national organizations such as Canadian Association of College and University Student Services, NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, and ACPA–College Student Educators International provide knowledge communities, member interest groups, annual gatherings (conferences), and other structural support for communities of practice to form; while social media, blogs and MOOCs offer more informal or free-form virtual spaces of apprenticeship (and recruitment). Examples of comments included in this theme are shared below.

- “A community of practitioners with which I can discuss approaches both nationally and locally.”
- “Access to research, ability to network with others in similar institutions.”
- “Case studies, best practices, discussion groups.”

One participant was specific in naming the value of both diversity, equity, and inclusion and assessment professionals together. They stated, “A team of folks with various professional areas of expertise (both in assessment and DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] work) who can talk through tools and approaches to get multiple perspectives.” Communities of practice create opportunities to connect and learn with fellow colleagues near and far around a common topic area. With gaps in college and university graduation rates by race persisting (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), the work of assessment from an equity lens is critical for all universities and colleges as assessment can be a vehicle to advance equity goals. Therefore, creating communities of practice provides an avenue for students, staff, and faculty to not only discuss and practice the application of equity-centered assessment, but to contribute to a growing body of equity-centered assessment examples in practice. There is a necessary connection between assessment and diversity, equity and inclusion work and the need for those who have experience in both sectors to come together, share expertise as part of a larger community, and foster stronger outcomes with and for students.

## *Infrastructure: Funding, Staffing and Time*

Many respondents identified the need for key resources to build or sustain infrastructure such as funding, staffing, and time as their greatest support needs. The theme of funding, staffing, and time includes responses that directly mention these three items as well as indirect references such as, “...an in-house stats person,” “...more data analysts,” or a “...more versatile assessment database.” If infrastructure is the basic foundation to run an operation or process then time, personnel, and funding are critical components of an infrastructure needed to support assessment that advances equity. Comments that illustrate this theme are showcased below.

- “Financial resources to bring guest speakers to talk with and walk colleagues through equity-centered assessment so they aren't just hearing from me.”
- “We need to ensure that we are collecting the data we need to explore equity. Time to analyze equity gaps at our institution.”
- “Many times I have been told that our office of planning, assessment, and institutional research does not have the time or capacity to undergo and analyze qualitative assessment. That is incredibly disappointing because we need to hear the voices of those we assess.”
- “Time. Leadership often does not understand the incredible time commitment that assessment and analysis requires. It is important and exhausting work.”

While staffing was identified as a need to support equity-centered assessment, a sub-theme emerged that centered on the loneliness of one-person offices or of being a part-time assessment professional along with one's regular role responsibilities. The quotes below capture the sentiments of numerous survey respondents.

- “Funding; shifting of daily responsibilities to another staff in order to conduct assessment projects. I’m a single person disability service office supporting accommodations for about 200 students a semester, in addition to Title IX responsibilities and Perkins Grant administration.”
- “I have a very varied job...I’m a jack of all trades in an institutional diversity office (part of the office of the president) and I believe I have the tools...probably need more time (or clone myself) to do more assessment, more competent people to help me do assessment ...”
- “More people; I am an office of one with 350 programs to support in addition to conducting university-level assessments.”

Quality assessment work and quality equity work require time, knowledge, and human talent. Practice occurring at the intersection of assessment and equity is no different. For equity-centered assessment to be supported and sustained, investments in infrastructure by leadership are needed. Based on responses to the survey, critical components of infrastructure to support equity-centered assessment include time, money, and staff.

### *Competency Development*

One of the most robust themes emerging from the responses to the support question was the need for competency development. This theme encompassed comments which identified a need for more broad-based competency development (such as a need for workshops, training, or professional development). Comments included requests for professional development, training, resources, and spaces to practice the work of equity-centered assessment. Competency development included the need for self-growth as well as competency development for leadership and faculty. Support for competency development focused on three areas: assessment, equity, and the interaction of equity and assessment.

Specific competencies listed by respondents included developing a baseline understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion among colleagues, educating staff about assessment best practices, and the need to recognize and address one's own biases. In addition, participants responded that workshops and training focused on the assessment cycle/process, assessment tools, and assessment platforms would be helpful.

Comments for resources focused on helping others understand the importance of equity-centered assessment. Additionally, participants asked for resources related to standardized tools and templates and building their own practice/culture as well as support for cultural and institutional change. Participants also requested strategies for coordinating and educating others at their institution. Examples of comments related to competency development are below.

- “Standard tools that have been reviewed in consideration of equity-centered assessment.”
- “A set of good assessment question stems, a list of terminology to avoid, help with figuring out where this assessment can happen within the classroom.”
- “A toolkit of best practices.”
- “A two-day leadership conference on ECA (equity-centered assessment) for senior administrators.”

Outside of resources and training, comments within this theme embodied the need for a shared language and clear definitions related to the terminology of equity-centered assessment.

### *Examples of Practice*

Nearly one out of four of our respondents indicated the support they most needed was examples of effective equity-centered assessment practice. This theme included responses that referenced the word “example” itself, as well as requests for templates, case studies, tip sheets, shared question banks,

guidelines, standardized definition of terms, recognized best practices, toolkits, and research. Many comments in this theme were detailed as described below.

- “Resources and examples of what equity-centered assessment looks like. This would span question/survey design, implementation, data analysis, interpretation and visualization of demographic data (especially with quantitative approaches), implementing positionality statements in quantitative research, quantcrit methods, and more inclusive reporting methods.”
- “More resources on indigenous ways of knowing. More discussion and examples of students leading assessment efforts. How do we as professionals better advocate at each level (institution/state/national) for more inclusive data collection on students.”
- “Clear examples of model practices/processes and those that may be problematic.”
- “Examples of how other colleges have managed a culture shift to equity-centered assessment.”
- “Toolkits, organized research, examples of processes and instruments. I like the toolkit from [Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy](#) on centering racial equity in data integration. It’s more community-based research focused, and I would love to have something like that organized around educational research practices.”

Beyond examples at large, a strong sub-theme within this category was the need for examples that were context specific.

- “Examples of how that looks in practice, especially in different types of professional programs.”
- “Examples of campuses doing equity-centered assessment in student affairs (most case studies I have seen have been in the academic realm).”
- “Examples of best practices from institutions of higher education; specifically community colleges.”
- “Clear measurable assessment criteria to identify equity-inclusion content and criterion.”

Several individuals spoke of a need for more examples regarding Indigenous methodologies or storytelling methods of assessment, although few were as eloquent as this informant regarding why they feel this is important to equity, “The omnipresent focus on the ‘numbers’ relegates ‘narratives’ to second-class status, which is a Western assumption of empiricism at play. Resources that bring this to light would be extremely helpful.”

Contextual and culturally specific examples of equity-centered assessment practice ranging from criteria for practice to case studies and tool kits were requested in the open-ended comments as tangible items that would help support the practice of equity-centered assessment. Respondents were eager to do this work, but curious about how to do the work well. Concrete items and examples of equity-centered practice also included how to shift institutional cultures towards equity-centered assessment. Responses clearly indicate examples are needed at the programmatic and organizational levels.

### *Leadership Support*

Another key finding observed in the qualitative responses is the need for support from leadership. Respondents defined leadership as ranging from one’s immediate supervisor to deans and institutional leadership to accreditation and other professional agencies. Responses spoke to the need for “...vocal leadership,” for “...a less-biased leadership,” and for “...support from administrators, faculty and staff who are passionate about equity.” Some respondents also identified a need for “...permission to conduct it [equity-centered assessment]” and “... policy that allows [us] to conduct equity-centered assessment,” or for “... upper administration ‘having our back’ when we work toward implementing equity-centered assessment.”

Many of these comments expressed a strong skepticism that institutional leadership really cares about assessment or about equity. The quotes below are representative of these sentiments.

- “Everything! First my leadership would have to value assessment and equity beyond lip-service.”
- “A genuine, clearly articulated statement from senior administration/faculty that equity-centered assessment is central to continuous improvement and our mission-centric focus.”



- “I believe that the stakeholders in upper administration are too compliance-minded (within an accrediting region that does not yet place as much emphasis as is perhaps ideal on the disaggregation of data and equitable education) to support furthering the relationship between equity and assessment.”

Another recurrent sub-theme was a frustration with leadership and/or faculty who would appear to have discomfort with less-than-stellar assessment findings. Such responses cited lack of transparency and a willingness to act on findings from their institutional leadership.

- “A commitment to transparency and authenticity over marketing or only sharing what admin thinks makes the university look good.”
- “I can conduct all of the equity-centered assessments I want - the question is what will be done about the unjust practices I uncover. My institution is quite vocal in its support for DEII work, but when it comes to making the changes necessary to implement it the conversation is usually put on hold. The most helpful resource would be a university leadership structure that sees DEII as a verb, not a catch-phrase.”

In a few cases, comments about leadership focused on a need for more purposeful, equity-focused collaboration and emphasized issues of organizational structure as depicted by the examples below.

- “I need the department chairs and deans to be more purposeful in (1) requesting relevant equity-centered assessment studies to answer their strategic questions and in (2) using the already collected data to inform their decisions.”
- “Institutional leaders that understand the connection between assessment of student learning and DEI. My campus tends to silo each into their own space, without integrating the analyses of student learning with the other barriers students face as they matriculate. Institutional leaders also tend to look at performance indicators that are too broad-GPA, retention, graduation rates-ones that are not helpful to individual faculty in understanding how to adjust teaching practices to better meet student needs.”

Comments in this theme pointed to a lack of genuine support for either assessment or diversity work and named a discomfort with data that may be viewed as negative, rather than a philosophy of continuous improvement. They also articulated the need for leaders that value and enacts the use of data to advance equitable outcomes for all students.

### *Organizational Collaboration and Alignment*

The last theme identified from the data was organizational collaboration and alignment. This theme included cross-campus collaborations and developing infrastructure that are aligned with a culture of assessment. Within this theme there were two distinct sub-themes: collaboration and the role of diversity, equity, and inclusion offices. Respondents’ thoughts on and definition of collaboration varied from campus to campus; however, the acknowledgement that collaboration is lacking was a clear finding as was the perceived need for collaboration as a first step towards equity-centered assessment practices.

Several participants discussed the importance of institutional alignment to support assessment practices. Respondents shared that in order for this alignment to occur, there would need to be an acknowledgement of the importance of assessment, partner buy-in, and the creation of clear links between equity-centered assessment and the institutional mission. Examples of comments which highlighted (lack of) alignment are below.

- “A structured system of assessment wherein such an assessment is an integral component [and] formal process of reporting out to campus leadership: president’s cabinet, Trustees, Dean’s [sic], student leadership.”
- “Buy-in from staff to conduct equity-centered assessment on their programs, policies, and practices.”
- “Clear definition and understanding of how it [equity-centered assessment] fits into the institutional mission. It also needs to become a priority at my institution as well as within my division.”

- Participants also discussed the connection and collaboration needed with offices focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion work.
- “Collaboration with the DEI Council and our Center for Teaching & Learning. Someone with expertise on the intersection of equity and assessment. Guidance from the national assessment organizations on how to increase equity in assessment (and I know this exists).”
- “Cross campus collaborations with different departments including student affairs, the office of institutional research, and the DEI office.”
- “(More) opportunities to collaborate between assessment offices/roles and DEII offices/roles.”

Intentional alignment of equity-centered assessment practices with institutional mission and practices as well as the intentional collaboration between DEI and assessment offices were seen as necessary to support equity-centered approach.

### *Additional Observations*

Reflections and discussions by the analysis team on the findings yielded additional observations found throughout the data and across themes as well as ideas that were absent from the data. First, the research team broadly observed the following:

- A deep desire to increase knowledge about equity-centered assessment at the individual, faculty and staff, and organizational levels.
- There is a strong demand for consultants and experts of practice in this emerging practice.

These observations were aligned to the themes discussed earlier, more specifically with the community of practice and competency development themes. Based on the findings, participants desire equity-centered assessment to be included in their daily practices but are unsure of how to engage in this work and do not feel supported in engaging in this work.

Secondly, there were two themes that did not emerge that we had expected to see.

- Although 23% of respondents were faculty and 20% were senior administrators, there were almost no comments on the connection between equity-centered assessment and pedagogy.
- Very few comments referenced students in the assessment process, DEI work, or in equity-centered assessment work. Students are the population most affected by inequitable outcomes and they should have a say in what might best meet their needs to advance their outcomes for their future.

One participant expressed that “It’s hard enough leading assessment as a single person, then you layer in the complexity, unfamiliarity, and sheer effort required to bring along more faculty and staff as equity-minded.” This statement is a direct sentiment to the labor of assessment, more specifically, equity-centered assessment. Professionals conducting assessment need to embrace the perspectives and dialogue of all campus stakeholders while moving forward to ensure success for all students, faculty, and staff. Assessment is not a siloed event or project. It is an ongoing process that requires all persons and departments to work together to advance outcomes for students.

### **Final Thoughts and the Future of Equity-Centered Assessment**

Assessment work and diversity, equity, and inclusion work are most successful when woven throughout the fabric of an organization in the mindset, attitudes, and behaviors. In assessment, this looks like curiosity and a desire to know the impact of a program or service. For some, assessment is simply wondering if we are managing to keep the promise that we make to students and families via our mission statement. When DEI is embedded in a culture, we must consider such questions as: Who is invited to the table when it comes to decision-making processes on our campuses and why are they involved? Do members of our campus communities have a sense of belonging? Why or why not? What systems and structures are promoting or inhibiting the success of our community and students? As we continue to strive towards organizational cultures with assessment, DEI, and equity-centered assessment embedded throughout the organization, we reflect on the comments of over 400 professionals and provide the following recommendations.

1. Performative DEI is no longer acceptable. If statements of support are not followed by action that makes the affected communities feel supported, nothing has changed, and the institutional promise often made in mission statements is not kept. The work of diversity, equity, and inclusion needs to be an institutional priority and embedded in daily work across campus. With the right support, education, and intentional collaboration, assessment can be a useful tool in promoting accountability around fostering inclusive environments.
2. Those engaging in equity-centered assessment work have an opportunity to start with self-reflection, considering their own power, privilege, and positionality and thinking about how these areas influence their assessment practice. They can also encourage others around them to do the same.
3. Showcasing examples of effective equity-centered assessment practices is a critical need based on responses. The [case studies](#) provided by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment lay a foundation to meet a growing need for examples in practice at the programmatic and institutional levels. A demand for guidance, examples, practices and proof of concepts are evident.
4. There is a strong literature base for integrating equity into teaching and learning. Faculty and staff should consider equity in the teaching and learning process both inside and outside the classroom.

This report builds on the growing literature regarding equity-centered assessment by outlining the types of support faculty and staff require to implement this work. It is incumbent upon institutional leaders to find ways to provide this support despite shrinking financial resources so that institutions as a whole can ensure that assessment practices are equitable, but more importantly, able to be leveraged as a tool to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion.



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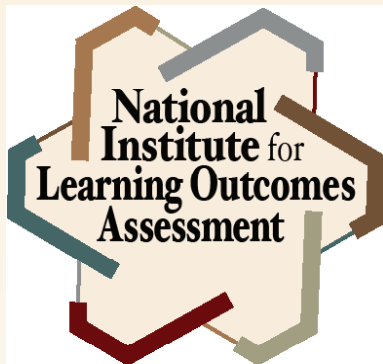
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