APPLYING THE SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL TO PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT

LEARNING ASSESSMENT AMONG STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS:

A Q METHODOLOGICAL STUDY

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this ***disquisition*** complies with North Dakota

State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the range of perceptions of student affairs practitioners regarding student affairs assessment practice. This was accomplished by integrating various individual and environmental factors into a comprehensive framework that encompasses the multiple levels of the social ecological model (McLeroy, Steckler, Bibeau, & Glanz, 1988). Further, the study was intended to investigate whether background characteristics, such as education level, position and area in student affairs, or the assumptions individuals hold about the role of student affairs, are associated with differing viewpoints. This investigation was expected to help bridge the critical disconnection between the espoused value of assessment in student affairs and the actual integration of assessment into practice.

This study employed the methods and techniques of Q methodology to illustrate the subjective viewpoints of 44 student affairs practitioners regarding assessment of student learning in student affairs. Participants from various functional areas, position levels, and institution types shared their views regarding assessment in student affairs by rank ordering assessment-related statements into a forced distribution ranging from "most like my beliefs" to "most unlike my beliefs," according to their beliefs about those statements. Participant sorting data was subjected to factor analysis using a combination of principal components analysis extraction with varimax rotation, resulting in identification of a three-factor solution. Additional qualitative data was collected via post-sort questions and follow-up interviews to assist with interpretation of three participant viewpoints: Assessment-as-Significant, Assessment-as-Irrelevant, and Assessment-in-Isolation. Differences were noted regarding the roles that various, interrelated individual and environmental factors played in shaping practitioner viewpoints of assessment in student affairs.

An examination of the data also revealed background characteristics associated with differences among the viewpoints.

The emergent results of this study inform the literature on the application of the social ecological model to social science phenomena outside of the public health field, as well as provide practical insight into ways to address the gap between the espoused value of assessment in student affairs and the actual integration of assessment into practice. Implications for future research were also discussed.

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I want to thank my participants for their time and their willingness to be reflective and share their perspectives. I thank them, as well, for the passion, commitment, and sense of service they bring to the important work of supporting students in their educational pursuits.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Jack and Milo. May you both find, in whatever you do, the kind of

inspiration, challenge, and support I have experienced throughout this journey. May you

persevere and contribute to this world in meaningful ways.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Student affairs practitioners are being called to engage in their work in a more scholarly fashion (Bresciani, 2012; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Schroeder & Pike, 2001), and it is imperative that they answer the call. At the core of this charge is the necessity to fully understand the needs of students, institutions, and the public, determine if current programs and services are appropriate and effective, communicate contributions, and demonstrate the ability to respond to evidence with adaptation and innovation. The increasingly diverse and complex higher education environment demands both a willingness to engage in critical self-examination and the capacity to integrate this type of assessment directly into the daily work of student affairs. For some, this may necessitate a shift in the view of student affairs practitioners from program facilitators and service providers to educators committed to student learning. It also necessitates a shift in the view of assessment of student learning from an accountability-driven add-on responsibility to a fully integrated and essential element of student affairs practice. The need for assessment of student learning is at the core of this shift, but, in the words of Astin and Associates (1992), "assessment is not an end in itself but a vehicle for educational improvement. Its effective practice, then, begins with and enacts a vision of the kinds of learning we most value for students and strive to help them achieve" (p. 1). In this sense, the ways in which student affairs practitioners view the purpose of education, the assessment of learning, and their role in both of these are integrally connected and are critical elements to continue to explore and develop in pursuit of enhancing student success.

Today's higher education environment demands that all educators – including student affairs practitioners – demonstrate an internal commitment to improvement with regard to the quality and effectiveness of programs and services that promote achievement of student learning,

as well as an external commitment to addressing federal compliance requirements, accreditation criteria, and the call for publicly available comparison data on student outcomes. These pressures have strengthened over time with the shifting demographics and needs of the student body, growing scrutiny of the public, and increasing demands and decreasing resources leveled toward student affairs. In response, the field of student affairs has issued a call to practitioners to engage in regular assessment in support of holistic student development and learning. This call can be traced back to foundational publications, beginning with the American Council on Education's (ACE) *Student Personnel Point of View* in 1937, and it has grown louder in recent decades, culminating in the identification and endorsement of clear expectations related to practitioner competency in the critical areas of assessment, evaluation, and research (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 2006; Council for the Advancement of Standards [CAS], 2012; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] & ACPA, 2010). During this time, colleges and universities have devoted increasing levels of human and fiscal resources to student affairs assessment (Livingston & Zerulik, 2013; Sponsler & Wesaw, 2014; Tull & Kuk, 2012), support from professional organizations for integrating assessment into student affairs work has increased (Elkins, 2015), models of assessment specific to student affairs have been developed (Barham & Scott, 2006; Shutt, Garrett, Lynch, & Dean, 2012; Suskie, 2009), and meta-analyses of studies related to student affairs have shown that research, assessment, and evaluation have come to be the most frequently mentioned desired competencies among student affairs practitioners (Herdlein, Reifler, & Mrowka, 2013; Lovell & Kosten, 2000).

Despite this growing awareness and emphasis on assessment of learning in student affairs, a review of literature revealed a complex and interrelated array of factors that have been found to impact the actual integration of assessment into student affairs practice. These include

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position level and functional area in student affairs, lack of time and competing priorities, institutional culture and expectations, resistance to change, source of motivation, lack of assessment expertise and self-efficacy, and perceptions that practitioners hold about assessment and the role of student affairs. While many authors have generated lists of challenges and barriers to engaging in effective student affairs assessment, the majority of empirical studies related to these factors have not approached the issue in a way that either illustrates the full range of practitioner attitudes and beliefs related to assessment of student learning or incorporates the various factors in a comprehensive framework that accounts for the reciprocal relationship between the individual and various environmental influences. A notable exception to this is Baum's (2015) qualitative examination of the process of meaning-making regarding responsibility for assessing student learning among ten mid-level student affairs practitioners. In his study, Baum (2015) found a complex interplay of factors at both the individual and institutional level that contributed to practitioners' views of assessment work. In their discussion of the development of an assessment mindset among practitioners, Love and Estanek (2004) also posited that individual views and the resulting practice of assessment were rooted in both individual assumptions about assessment and the organizational context. The findings of these authors provide clear support for a study that holistically considers the presence and interplay of both individual and environmental factors that impact practitioner perceptions of assessment.

Statement of the Problem

In spite of the urgent call for improvement and accountability in all areas of higher education and the growing emphasis on assessment of learning in student affairs in particular, a gap has remained between these espoused values and the values in practice (Bresciani, 2009; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Doyle, 2004; Elkins, 2015; Love & Estanek, 2004; Rothenberg,

2011; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Schuh, 2013; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

Progress toward embedding assessment into student affairs practice remains slow, as many institutions have yet to develop learning outcomes for student affairs programs and services, and the field continues to struggle with a lack of evidence of program effectiveness (Rothenberg, 2011). John Schuh (2013), a noted expert in the area of student affairs assessment, concluded that sustaining assessment activities continues to be a key challenge among student affairs practitioners. Why, despite decades of discussion and advocacy for assessment activities and a myriad of studies investigating factors that impact assessment practice, does the field continue to struggle to embed assessment into daily student affairs work?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the range of perceptions of student affairs practitioners regarding student affairs assessment practice. This was accomplished by integrating various individual and environmental factors into a comprehensive framework that encompasses the multiple levels of the social ecological model (McLeroy, Steckler, Bibeau, & Glanz, 1988). Further, the study was intended to investigate whether background characteristics, such as education level, position and area in student affairs, or the assumptions individuals hold about the role of student affairs, are associated with differing viewpoints. The emergent results of this study were used to provide insight into the roles that various individual and environmental factors play in these viewpoints and, ultimately, how those perceptions impact the practice of assessment in student affairs.

Research Questions

To achieve the intended purpose, the following research questions were explored.

1. What are the perceptions of practitioners regarding various individual and environmental factors posited to impact the practice of assessment of student learning in student affairs?

2. Are there any background characteristics associated with differences among the various perceptions?

Significance of the Study

It is clear that the segmented approach to investigating barriers to student affairs assessment practice that has been taken to date has not sufficiently bridged the theory-practice gap. A more comprehensive framework was needed to fully understand the myriad of individual and environmental factors that impact assessment beliefs and, ultimately, assessment practice in student affairs and to illustrate how individual characteristics may influence those beliefs. The results of this study were intended to fill the gap in the existing body of knowledge regarding the roles that various individual and environmental factors and background characteristics play in perceptions of student affairs assessment. Addressing this gap in the literature was expected to assist with bridging the critical disconnection between the espoused value of assessment in student affairs and the actual integration of assessment into practice. Implications for theory, research, and assessment practice were discussed.

Definition of Terms

Before proceeding, it is critical to define two key terms used in this study, student affairs and assessment, as substantial variation exists in how these terms are defined in the literature.

Student Affairs

In this study, the term "student affairs" was intended to encompass the broad set of functional areas within colleges and universities that provide programs or services to students in

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primarily non-classroom settings. These programs and services are sometimes referred to as "co-curricular," and they may include, but are not limited to, orientation and transition services, multicultural programs, career services, campus bookstore, residence life, dining services, fraternity and sorority life, financial aid, student wellness services, student involvement, leadership programs, and international and study abroad programs (Sandeen, 1996).

Assessment

The term "assessment" was intended to represent the concept of "assessment of student learning." In the context of this study, assessment was defined as the on-going process of identifying student learning outcomes that are the intended result of a program or service; collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data related to those learning outcomes; determining and disseminating findings; and using results to improve student learning via changes to practice (Huba & Freed, 1999; Suskie, 2004; Suskie, 2009). In this context, assessment also encompasses the concept of evaluation, or using assessment evidence to judge and improve the effectiveness of programs and services in achieving student learning outcomes, in order to best reflect how assessment is defined in practice in higher education and student affairs (Love & Estanek, 2004).

<div align="center">**Organization of the Dissertation**</div>

In Chapter 1, a general overview was provided of the research study, including the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the research, research questions, significance of the study, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 provides a thorough review of literature related to the history and current context of student affairs assessment, as well as the various factors that have been found to impact the practice of student affairs assessment. Additionally, Chapter 2 includes a thorough discussion of the conceptual framework of the study, based on the social ecological model (McLeroy et al., 1988). Chapter 3 includes a detailed

explanation of Q methodology and the methods used in this research, as well as the delimitations

of the study. Chapter 4 provides a description of the data analysis and explores the findings of

the study and the answers to the research questions. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of

those findings, including an interpretation of findings based on the conceptual framework of the

study and the limitations of the study. Implications for theory, future research, and the practice of

student affairs assessment are explored.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Student affairs practitioners are being increasingly thought of as educators – individuals responsible for creating environments and activities that contribute directly to student learning – and they are being called to engage in their work in a more scholarly and purposeful fashion in response to an increasingly diverse and complex higher education environment and an urgent cry for accountability to the public. The field of student affairs, and higher education in general, is facing mounting pressure from ever-multiplying federal compliance requirements, the shifting focus of accreditors on co-curricular learning outcomes, the need for publicly available outcomes data to allow for institutional comparisons, pressure for an educated workforce, and a shift in education costs to the individual. In other words, student affairs must be prepared to demonstrate a positive return-on-investment for our students and the public (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2012; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Grund, 2010; Schuh & Associates, 2009; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010; Shutt, et al., 2012; Suskie, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

Furthermore, in order to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body, it is also essential that student affairs practitioners demonstrate an internal commitment to improving the quality and effectiveness of programs and services that promote achievement of student learning. In this context, diversity refers to a broad range of differences among students, including, but not limited to, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, language fluency, socioeconomic status, religion, and ability. Effectively engaging with a diverse campus requires sustained attention to the effectiveness of student affairs programs and services in meeting student needs and fostering student learning and development (Chang, Milem, & Antonio, 2011). As such, it is incumbent upon practitioners to integrate assessment and reflexivity into student affairs work in order to adapt and innovate in the face of these challenges. In this sense, assessment should be considered

to be a tool to inform decision-making and achieve outcomes (Banta, 2007; Gipps, 1999; Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008), but, more importantly, it should be considered to be education itself. In support of this notion, Keeling, et al. (2008) stated:

> Indeed, assessment is integral to, perhaps even synonymous with, learning. That is, when one realizes that to learn is to make meaning of events… then, the full breadth of what it means "to learn" can be understood and conceptualized. Based on that premise, to assess (which is to observe) then is the foundation of learning. (p. 6)

It is clear from this statement that assessment should be considered a central tenet of the work of student affairs practitioners as educators. Yet, it is not always viewed as such and many student affairs practitioners still fail to fully integrate assessment into practice. The question has been raised as to why, after 30 years of discussion and promotion of assessment, does the field "continue to struggle to recognize the value of assessment or use it to make decisions" (Elkins, 2015, p. 43)? In an effort to explore possible answers to this question, this chapter will provide an overview of the evolution of assessment of student learning in student affairs, including both the history and current state of student affairs assessment; the factors that impact the integration of assessment into the daily work of student affairs practitioners; and a comprehensive framework for investigating the beliefs of those practitioners regarding assessment of student learning and the individual and environmental factors that impact those beliefs.

Assessment in Student Affairs: A Brief History

Throughout the history of student affairs, the commitment of the field to holistic student development, supporting the academic mission of institutions of higher education, and determining the effectiveness of programs and services has been emphasized time and again, beginning with the foundational publications of the field and continuing on to more recent

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guiding documents. The American Council on Education's (ACE) *Student Personnel Point of View* (1937), a landmark report upon which many of the guiding assumptions of student affairs still rest, emphasized that an effective educational program includes not only instruction but also a comprehensive set of programs and services aimed at developing the student as a whole – "his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional make up, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, his aesthetic appreciations…" (p. 3). Incumbent upon student affairs practitioners was the responsibility to carry out their work in a manner that contributed to the well-rounded development of students. This type of work necessitated that practitioners also collect and use information in order to improve various programs and services in support of achieving these educational goals. To this end, seven of the 23 expectations outlined in the *Student Personnel Point of View* (ACE, 1937) referenced the need for evaluation or assessment of various student needs and aspects of student affairs programs and services. The idea that student affairs practitioners should foster student learning and development and engage in continuous assessment and evaluation of their work to ensure achievement of outcomes was further espoused in the revised *Student Personnel Point of View*, published in 1949 (ACE).

Over the course of the next several decades, authors of other foundational publications continued to advocate for student learning and development as the central focus of student affairs work. These publications included *Student Development in Tomorrow's Higher Education: A Return to the Academy* (Brown, 1972), the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators' (NASPA) *A Perspective on Student Affairs* in 1987, and the *Principles of Good Practice in Student Affairs* in 1997 (ACPA & NASPA). Over time, this focus extended to creating and refining standards and learning outcomes for student affairs programs and services

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(Council for the Advancement of Standards [CAS], 1986) and establishing clear guidelines for assessing those programs and services (ACPA & NASPA, 2006; Keeling et al., 2008). Much of this movement can be linked directly to the appeals for reform in higher education that first emerged in the 1980s with the publication of *Involvement in Learning* (National Institute of Education, 1984), which called for clear evidence of what students were learning in higher education, and *Time for Results* (National Governors Association, 1986), which called for accountability with regard to return on public investment in higher education. These appeals strengthened over the next 30 years with the 1992 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which implored accreditors to demand evidence of student learning as part of the accreditation process, and the 2006 report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (known as the Spellings Commission), which called for urgent reform in higher education in the form of increased transparency, accountability, quality of learning outcomes, and economic value of a college education. These calls for accountability and quality improvement in higher education have prompted a variety of efforts ranging from the development of the Voluntary System of Accountability as a tool for public comparison of colleges and universities to the increased adoption of standardized instruments, such as the College Learning Assessment (CLA), to measure learning outcomes (Ewell, 2008).

In the field of student affairs, the focus on assessment of student learning also continued to grow over the past two decades with the publication in 1996 of ACPA's *Student Learning Imperative* and Upcraft and Schuh's *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners*, followed by ACPA and NASPA's joint publication, *Learning Reconsidered*, in 2004. All of these publications argued for student affairs practitioners to take responsibility for student learning in the planning and implementation of programs and services. In *Critical Issues for*

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Student Affairs, Sandeen and Barr (2006) argued that assessment practice should be considered to be equally important as other fundamental activities in student affairs, including program development. Further, in the past ten years, all of the major professional organizations in student affairs have identified assessment of student learning as an area of critical professional competency for practitioners (ACPA, 2006; CAS, 2012; NASPA & ACPA, 2010), and the focus of assessment in student affairs has shifted from counts of student participation and measures of student satisfaction to efforts to determine what students actually learn from experiences outside of the classroom (Bresciani et al., 2009; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010), in their discussion of the role of student affairs in student learning assessment, noted that "student affairs staff members need to have more than programs, activities, and experiences they *think* [emphasis added] would contribute to student learning. They need to have the empirical evidence to be confident that these programs, activities, and experiences *actually do* [emphasis added] contribute to student learning" (p. 12). Grund (2010), reporting on the findings of the Task Force on the Future of Student Affairs, further implored all student affairs practitioners to engage in regular assessment, stating:

> All aspects of higher education must provide clear evidence of effectiveness and efficiency. The use of high-quality data to support decisions about policies, programs, and practices is increasingly expected. All student affairs practitioners, regardless of functional area, must approach their work with the assumption that all aspects of it must be supported by evidence gathered through accepted models of assessment and consistent with the research about college student success. (p. 14)

Studies related to desired professional competencies in student affairs have also revealed a strong emphasis on assessment. In a meta-analysis of 30 years of literature related to student

affairs administration, Lovell and Kosten (2000) found that 57% of studies related to student affairs included research, assessment, and evaluation as a necessary skill for practitioners. Additionally, in their 2013 update to the Lovell and Kosten study, Herdlein et al. noted that research, assessment, and evaluation were the most frequently mentioned desired competencies for student affairs practitioners, with 68% of studies identifying research, assessment, and evaluation as a critical skill in the field.

As the focus on assessment of student learning has evolved, multiple authors have argued that two contrasting paradigms regarding the purpose of assessment have emerged: assessment for improvement and assessment for accountability (Bogue & Hall, 2003; Ewell, 1987; Ewell, 2002; Love & Estanek, 2004; Penn, 2007; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). The improvement-centered paradigm is focused on the purpose of assessment as the continuous enhancement of student learning within the institution, and the primary motivation for assessment activities is considered to be internal. The accountability-centered paradigm, on the other hand, views the purpose of assessment as justification of the worthiness of programs and services, and the source of motivation is primarily compliance with external stakeholders. Ewell (1987) posited that higher education has historically struggled with balancing these two purposes, with the result being a stronger focus on the accountability paradigm, rather than the improvement paradigm, due to the increasing pressure from the public. This dualism and the resulting views of the purpose of assessment are believed to have a differential impact on the practice of assessment in student affairs, with assessment for accountability being viewed as something imposed from the outside and "at best tangential to student affairs work, which implies that to excise assessment practice would result in no overall loss for the organization" (Love & Estanek, 2004, p. 84). Arum and

Roksa (2010) also expressed skepticism that externally imposed accountability will result in desirable changes in higher education practices, as a whole.

In support of a more integrated view, authors have also argued that these two conceptions of assessment do not, necessarily, have to be in competition, as assessment efforts aimed at improving student learning can certainly be used for accountability purposes and assessment efforts for accountability can contribute to developing capacity for continuous improvement (Ewell, 2009; Love & Estanek, 2004; Penn, 2007; Schuh, 2013). In a follow-up to his 1987 discussion of the contrasting paradigms, Ewell (2009) recognized that the differences between the two conceptions of assessment are exaggerated and institutions rarely conform strictly to one or the other. Ewell also contended, however, that "despite many changes in motive and circumstances, the tension between the purposes of assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement that characterized the higher education landscape 20 years ago continues to exist today" (p. 20). This discussion remains relevant even now, as Schuh (2013) recently agreed with Ewell's (2009) assertion that the dualism continues to exist, though Schuh continued on to argue that assessment can and should be conducted for both accountability and improvement purposes in order to be effective.

It is clear that the emphasis on improving student learning and the pressure to demonstrate accountability to the public has grown, especially over the past few decades, for higher education, in general, and student affairs, in particular. The complexity of assessment efforts and the ways in which assessment of student learning is viewed and practiced have also evolved. The next section of this literature review will discuss the current context of assessment efforts in student affairs, including the response of institutions to pressures for increased assessment efforts and the gap that remains between espoused values and actual practice.

Assessment in Student Affairs: Current Context

Even a cursory review of recent student affairs literature provides ample evidence that assessment of student learning has been and continues to be considered an essential dimension of contemporary practice, and institutions of higher education have been exploring ways to infuse this practice into student affairs. Models of assessment that are tailored to student affairs have been developed over the past decade in order to support the integration of assessment into student affairs practice (Barham & Scott, 2006; Suskie, 2009; Shutt et al., 2012). Additionally, many colleges and universities are increasing their allocation of human and fiscal resources to assessment efforts. In a 2014 NASPA study of chief student affairs officers, Sponsler and Wesaw found student affairs assessment to be one of the most commonly added functional areas over the preceding three years. Furthermore, full-time student affairs assessment positions have emerged in recent years at many institutions (Livingston & Zerulik, 2013; Tull & Kuk, 2012), with an estimated 129 institutions in the U.S., Mexico, and Canada reporting having a full-time individual dedicated to student affairs assessment (Henning, 2016). This is an increase from 40 institutions that had full-time student affairs assessment professionals in 1999 (Malaney, 1999). Other institutions are exploring or recommending the use of mentors or coaches as a strategy to help staff develop assessment skills and knowledge (Hodes, 2009; Slager & Oaks, 2013). Professional development support for integrating assessment into student affairs work has increased, as well, with two of the major student affairs national organizations, NASPA and ACPA, each sponsoring an annual assessment-focused conference and with the establishment of Student Affairs Assessment Leaders in 2008, a professional organization composed of more than 650 student affairs practitioners engaged in division-level student affairs assessment efforts (Elkins, 2015; Henning, 2016). Recently, NASPA and ACPA (2015) reviewed and released an

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updated version of the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners*, which

was originally published in 2010 and contains clear guidelines for competency standards related

to assessment, evaluation, and research.

Yet, in spite of the long-standing emphasis on assessment of student learning in student

affairs, the urgent call to engage in systematic study of the effectiveness of student affairs

programs and services, and the increasing level of resources being allocated in support of

assessment activities over the past two decades, a gap has remained between these espoused

values and the values in practice (Bresciani, 2009; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Doyle, 2004;

Elkins, 2015; Love & Estanek, 2004; Rothenberg, 2011; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Schroeder &

Pike, 2001; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Love and Estanek (2004) noted:

> Yet for all the action and rhetoric, the struggle continues for most student affairs
>
> professionals and programs to move beyond discourse and beyond individual assessment
>
> projects or programs focused on particular problems to integrating and incorporating
>
> assessment as a fundamental aspect of student affairs practice. (p.83)

In 2011, the Student Affairs Leadership Council (Rothenberg), in an overarching study of

the role of learning outcomes and outcomes assessment in student affairs, noted that very few

student affairs divisions had actually developed learning outcomes for programs and services as

of 2009, and the field continued to struggle with a lack of evidence of program effectiveness.

While the prevalence of student affairs learning outcomes development has increased in more

recent years, the results of the 2014 Student Affairs Assessment Leaders Landscape Survey of

student affairs professionals still indicated that only 63.1% of institutions had identified student

learning outcomes within their division of student affairs (Center for the Study of Student Life

[CSSL], 2015). Miller (2012) compared the evolution of the assessment movement in higher

education to Kubler-Ross's (1997) stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – in her evaluation of *Change* magazine's publications related to assessment between 1986 and 2011. While Miller concluded that the overarching stage of assessment in higher education is one of acceptance, she also noted that articulating common learning outcomes, reporting assessment results, and using results to make decisions were areas of continued challenge. Schuh (2013) also recognized that sustaining assessment activities continues to be a key challenge among student affairs practitioners. Furthermore, Elkins (2015) observed that the continued prevalence of calls for student affairs to actively engage in assessment activities is evidence, itself, that work remains to be done to overcome challenges and embed assessment into student affairs practice. The challenges outlined in the literature range from inadequate time and preparation of practitioners to a lack of institutional culture or motivation in support of conducting assessment activities. The next section of this literature review will delve into the various constraints and challenges to fully integrating assessment into student affairs practice.

Factors Impacting the Integration of Assessment into Student Affairs Practice

Perhaps due to the inconsistency between the espoused value of assessment of student learning and the actual practice of assessment in student affairs, the factors that impact the integration of assessment into student affairs practice have been discussed and studied at far greater length than many other areas related to student affairs assessment. A comprehensive review of literature in this area revealed several common factors that are the focus of this next section, including position level and area within student affairs, lack of time and competing priorities, institutional culture and expectations, resistance to change, source of motivation, lack of assessment expertise and self-efficacy, and perceptions of assessment and the role of student affairs.

Position Level and Functional Area within Student Affairs

In the aforementioned 2014 Student Affairs Assessment Leaders Landscape Survey (CSSL, 2015), 180 student affairs assessment professionals were asked to share their beliefs and perspectives with regard to assessment of student learning in student affairs at their institutions. Key findings of this survey included differences in perceived knowledge of student affairs assessment practices and integration of assessment into practice among student affairs practitioners at different levels and in different functional areas. The respondents perceived senior student affairs officers and director level staff as having the highest level of knowledge and providing the highest level of support for assessment activities, while administrative support or front-line staff were perceived as lowest in both knowledge and championing assessment activities. These findings suggest that a relationship may exist between an individual's position level in student affairs and that individual's skill set, attitudes, and beliefs regarding assessment. Furthermore, respondents perceived that different functional areas of student affairs, such as residence life, leadership programs, orientation programs, registrar, financial aid, and dining, integrate assessment into practice with varying levels of effectiveness. The areas considered to be more programmatic were perceived to integrate assessment with moderate to significant effectiveness. These areas included residence life (82.6%), leadership programs (79.2%), and orientation programs (70.7%). In contrast, the areas considered to be more service-oriented were perceived as not assessing student learning at all or integrating assessment ineffectively. These areas included the registrar (68.3%), financial aid (58.0%), and dining (57.7%). These trends indicate that the functional area within which student affairs practitioners work may impact the likelihood of engaging in effective assessment practice. It should be noted, however, that the data

in this study was collected from student affairs assessment professionals, and is therefore limited to those perspectives.

Lack of Time and Competing Priorities

Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010), in their discussion of the role of student affairs in student learning assessment, posited that student affairs units must allocate time and resources in support of assessment efforts in order to function in our current environment. In response to concerns about a lack of available resources for assessment activities, the authors stated, "Can we afford *not* [emphasis added] to do assessment?" (p. 10). Despite this clear statement of the need to prioritize assessment, time constraints and competing priorities are widely identified as one of the major barriers to integrating assessment into both student affairs and faculty work (Beseler Thompson & Penn, 2015; Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2009; CSSL, 2015; Culp, 2012; Green, Jones, & Aloi, 2008; Kreber, 2010; Payne & Miller, 2009; Rothenberg, 2011; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Slager & Oaks, 2013; Sriram & Oster, 2012; Suskie, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003).

In 2001, Schroeder and Pike examined the implications of Ernest Boyer's (1990) idea of the *scholarship of application* or the application of forms of scholarship, such as research and assessment, to critical issues for student affairs. In their discussion, Schroeder and Pike (2001) used the phrase "tyranny of the immediate" in reference to the idea of time constraints or competing priorities as an impediment to assessment activities. They posited that practitioners spend much of their time and energy responding to situations and problems that are taking place at the present, resulting in less time for proactive planning and implementation of assessment activities. This tyranny of the immediate has its roots in the call for student affairs to expand its programs and services to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body – beginning

with the passage of the GI Bill and the growth of colleges and universities in the 1950s and 1960s and continuing on to the present. Ten years after Schroeder and Pike's observation, the Student Affairs Leadership Council (Rothenberg, 2011) determined that a range of attitudes towards learning outcomes exists, with most practitioners feeling relatively neutral regarding learning outcomes themselves, while also feeling "overwhelmed about the implications of learning outcomes, especially in terms of time and resources" (p. 55). Culp (2012) also noted the day-to-day responsibilities of student affairs practitioners create a barrier to setting aside time to engage in assessment of student learning. Beseler Thompson and Penn (2015), conducted a survey of 229 student affairs staff members at one, mid-sized research institution to determine staff members' assessment attitudes and beliefs, level of engagement in assessment activities, and assessment-related professional development needs. The study findings indicated that respondents, particularly those in administrative positions, reported concerns related to not having enough time to conduct or use the results of assessment, despite holding overall positive views of assessment. Even among student affairs divisions that were known to have high-quality assessment practices, Green et al. (2008) found that a lack of time to plan and administer assessment activities was identified as a major challenge.

Interestingly, along with identification of time constraints as a key challenge to conducting assessment, multiple authors have noted that this issue is often a symptom of a deeper issue – that of the allocation of time as a reflection of the value placed on various tasks (Bresciani, 2009; Payne & Miller, 2009; Sriram & Oster, 2012). In 2012, Sriram and Oster examined the level of engagement in research activities of 74 student affairs practitioners and graduate students at one private, research institution using a pretest-intervention-posttest design. The intervention was comprised of the dissemination of an email newsletter intended to increase

the accessibility of reading research through summaries and highlighting key points in relevant articles. The authors found that participants continued to report limited time as one of the largest obstacles to engaging in research activities, despite the intervention intended to make engagement with research less time consuming. The authors concluded that the lack of engagement was likely more of a cultural problem than an issue of time and could be rooted in individuals' views of the importance of integrating research into practice or a lack of expectations from administrators to engage in such activities. While the study was limited to a small sample from one institution and the focus of Sriram and Oster's (2012) research was not specifically on assessment activities, it adds to the argument that the allocation of time to various tasks is not only a practical concern, but also a reflection of individual and institutional values.

Institutional Culture and Expectations

In the American Association for Higher Education's *Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning*, Astin and Associates (1992) noted that "assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change" (para. 8). The authors continued on to note that this requires strong support from leadership for improving educational performance and a commitment to using information about learning outcomes in decision-making. Schuh (2013) labeled these institutional conditions a "culture of assessment," a phenomenon that has been alternately referred to as a "culture of evidence" or "culture of continuous improvement" and has been studied or articulated by many authors (Angelo, 1995; Barham & Scott, 2006; Bresciani et al., 2009; Culp, 2012; Green et al., 2008; Huba & Freed, 2000; Julian, 2013; Kirsky, 2010; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Schuh, 2013; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Suskie, 2009). While the definition of culture has been understood differently among the various studies, several common conditions related to institutional culture have emerged,

including expectations from administrators that all student affairs practitioners engage in and report on assessment activities, support for assessment in the form of professional development or coordinating committees, and the use of assessment results for decision-making.

Astin and Associates (1992) noted that assessment, much like student learning, is a campus-wide responsibility, and, as such, assessment is likely to foster greater improvement when individuals from across institutions, including faculty and student affairs staff, are involved in assessment efforts. This principle of good practice for assessing student learning is reiterated by research findings related to instilling a culture of assessment, but may not be fully realized in practice. In her grounded theory approach to understanding barriers to student affairs practitioners' engagement in assessment at 13 different institutions, Bresciani (2009) observed that inconsistencies regarding where responsibility for application of student development and learning theories resides was a barrier to engagement in assessment of student learning. Hoffman and Bresciani (2010) explored the assessment skills and job duties expected of new employees through an analysis of 1,759 job openings posted through *The Placement Exchange* in 2008. The researchers found that only 27.1% of posted positions required assessment competencies or identified assessment as a required job duty. Those positions that did require assessment competencies or duties were typically those that required more years of experience or were located in areas such as new student programs and multicultural services, further emphasizing that assessment beliefs and practices may vary depending on both position level and functional area within student affairs. Recommendations based on these findings included the incorporation of assessment into the responsibilities of a broad set of student affairs practitioners. In their previously described single-institution study, Beseler Thompson and Penn (2015) also found that many student affairs staff members were uncertain as to whether assessment was part of their

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official job duties. As such, the researchers recommended that assessment be added as an official responsibility for a wider array of staff members in order to increase engagement across the division.

Several case studies of student affairs divisions have also helped illustrate how elements of institutional culture impact assessment practice. Green et al. (2008) studied student affairs divisions at three large research institutions known for having high quality assessment practices. The authors concluded that a key to effective assessment efforts at the institutional level was a decentralized model in which each unit was responsible to carry out assessment, efforts were supported by a coordinator or an assessment committee, and results were used to make informed decisions. It is important to note, however, that the data in Green et al.'s (2008) study was collected primarily from administrators at the three institutions, and is therefore limited to those perspectives. In a qualitative study of conditions that impact assessment practice in student affairs at three small colleges and universities, Seagraves and Dean (2010) also noted that leadership from chief student affairs officers and consistent use of assessment for program improvement are key factors in the development of a culture of assessment. Julian (2013) conducted a mixed methods case study to explore effective practices implemented by a division of student affairs at one large, public institution in an attempt to develop a culture of assessment. Similar to the Green et al. (2008) study, Julian's findings indicated that the establishment of a culture of assessment was tied closely to consistent support by leadership, involving all members of the division in assessment activities, and using the results of assessment to improve student learning. Despite several promising findings, Julian also found that differences still existed between the perceptions of administrators and other members of the student affairs division regarding the extent of adoption of a culture of assessment at the institution, with the

administrators who lead assessment efforts indicating a higher level of adoption than the general members of the division.

To complement the findings of studies that indicate the use of the results is a central aspect of a culture of assessment, other researchers have identified the lack of use of results as a major challenge to integrating assessment into student affairs practice (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani et al., 2009; Rothenberg, 2011; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Bresciani et al. (2009) stated, "[r]esearchers all agree that the results of outcomes-based assessment are fruitless if they are not shared with appropriate stakeholders and implemented effectively" (p. 28). The results of research by the Student Affairs Leadership Council (Rothenberg, 2011) indicated that few student affairs divisions consistently use assessment data to systematically improve programs and services and "closing the loop" is still a major challenge for the field of student affairs. The Student Affairs Leadership Council postulated that a lack of accountability to senior administrators regarding staff members' use of data to implement changes was a key contributor to a lack of use of assessment data. This finding connects the ideas that administrative support and expectations and the use of data are both key elements to embedding assessment into student affairs practice. Blimling (2013) further argued that results from some of the most popular and commercially-available assessments of student learning do not provide actionable information to student affairs, and as such are not considered to be useful.

Resistance to Change

Linda Suskie (2004) identified faculty and staff resistance as the major obstacle to assessment activities. The underlying reasons for that resistance were rooted in a fear of change and a misunderstanding of the purpose of assessment. Payne and Miller (2009) also noted that the creation of a culture of evidence among faculty members would require overcoming

resistance from a lack of trust that assessment data will not lead to negative performance

evaluations or be used to reduce faculty autonomy. Regarding fear of assessment among student

affairs practitioners, Schroeder and Pike (2001) surmised that the "tyranny of custom," in which

student affairs staff strive for stability and predictability in their work, can lead to views of

change as undesirable. Dean Bresciani (2012), in his call for student affairs to clearly

demonstrate its contributions to student learning, observed that practitioners may "find it

challenging to step back from and evaluate their contributions in a detached and dispassionate

manner" due to their passion and commitment for current practice (p. 40). It has also been noted

that practitioners may experience fear and anxiety regarding how the outcomes of assessment

may impact their jobs (Culp, 2012), and in response to this fear, Slager and Oaks (2013)

advocated for the use of assessment coaches to help practitioners view negative assessment

results as an opportunity to improve services rather than a threat to their programs.

Source of Motivation

Another factor that has been considered to impact the practice of assessment in higher

education and student affairs is that of the source of motivation for conducting assessment. This

factor is rooted in the dualistic view of assessment that was previously discussed in the history of

student affairs assessment: assessment for accountability versus assessment for improvement. As

noted earlier, the source of motivation in the accountability-centered paradigm is external

compliance, while the source of motivation associated with the improvement-centered paradigm

is internal improvement. Despite a recognition that these two views are not as polar as once

posited (Ewell, 2009), it is still widely accepted that the perceived or real source of motivation

for assessment activities has an impact on the practice of assessment (Arum & Roska, 2010;

Baum, 2015; Blimling, 2013; Love & Estanek, 2004; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003).

Welsh and Metcalf (2003) surveyed 294 academic administrators regarding their perspectives on the importance of institutional effectiveness activities in higher education and the impact of four predictor variables: internal versus external motivation, depth of implementation, definition of quality, and level of involvement. Study findings indicated that perceived motivation, depth of implementation, and level of involvement were predictors of perceptions that institutional effectiveness was more important. Specifically, with regard to perceived motivation, Welsh and Metcalf observed, "if campus constituents, including administrators, perceive institutional effectiveness activities as undertaken primarily to satisfy the standards of external groups, they will likely assign low levels of importance to them" (2003, p. 185). Thus, the authors concluded that external accountability requirements were less motivating than intrinsic factors such as improving institutional programs and services.

Ray, Peterson, and Montgomery (2012) conducted a Q study investigating perceptions of faculty members with regard to the perceived accountability versus improvement dichotomy. The study involved 34 participants with a range of assessment experiences and academic disciplines who were asked to rank-sort 36 statements related to the purpose of assessment according to their level of agreement with the statement. Factor analysis of the study results revealed two different viewpoints. One viewpoint emphasized that assessment was valuable at all levels in order to evaluate and improve student learning and demonstrate accountability, while the other viewpoint emphasized that assessment was focused on the course level, rather than on accountability, and was either useful primarily to improve student learning or was not useful at all. Based on these findings, Ray et al. (2012) observed that accountability "does not appear to be

the primary motivator for faculty who appreciate the value of assessment," regardless of whether demands for external accountability were recognized (p. 97).

Speaking specifically to student affairs assessment, Blimling (2013) noted that external forces may not be sufficiently motivating, as they may be seen as irrelevant, uninteresting, or taking valuable time away from other demands, or practitioners may not have the skills necessary to conduct assessment or use results. Seagraves and Dean (2010) reported that student affairs staff at small institutions with effective assessment practices were motivated by a desire for improvement, rather than external compliance. As such, the authors recommended that efforts to convince staff to engage in assessment emphasize internal improvement, rather than external demands. Baum (2015) also found that mid-level student affairs staff members who viewed the motivation for assessment as an exploration of student learning rather than an obligation to external stakeholders were more likely to feel empowered (as opposed to frustrated) by their assessment work.

Lack of Assessment Expertise and Self-efficacy

In 2002, Banta and Associates noted a lack of experience existed among student affairs practitioners regarding application of assessment methods to evaluate and improve programs, and the authors called for increased graduate preparation that emphasizes skills and competencies needed for assessment activities. Since that time, despite the strong emphasis on the need for assessment, evaluation, and research competencies by professional organizations in student affairs (ACPA, 2006; CAS, 2012; Elkins, 2015; NASPA & ACPA, 2010; NASPA & ACPA, 2015), inadequate preparation for assessment activities has continued to be identified as a critical barrier to assessment efforts (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2009; CSSL, 2015; Culp, 2012; Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Payne &

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Miller, 2009; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Rothenberg, 2011; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Waple, 2006).

In her previously discussed grounded theory study, Bresciani (2009) found that a lack of professional preparation and professional development for assessment activities and a lack of understanding of both research and assessment were critical barriers to assessment practice. Livingston and Zerulik (2013) identified the need to enhance the assessment skills of student affairs practitioners as one of the key challenges for division-wide assessment coordinators. Multiple studies have also explored the assessment competency levels of student affairs practitioners from the perspectives of senior student affairs officers (SSAOs), faculty in student affairs graduate preparation programs, or new practitioners (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Young & Janosik, 2007). In 2004, Herdlein surveyed SSAOs at 50 institutions to determine their perceptions regarding the extent to which graduate programs were effectively preparing new professionals for student affairs work. While the study results indicated SSAOs were generally satisfied with the preparation of new professionals in most skill areas, research and assessment was an area of concern with only 16% of SSAOs indicating they believed new professionals were proficient or above average in this area. In a complementary study of practitioners, Young and Janosik (2007) found that recent alumni of student affairs graduate programs also indicated a lack of preparation in the area of research and assessment. Additionally, a qualitative study of 90 new student affairs practitioners revealed that new practitioners consistently identified assessment and evaluation as essential skills they believed they were lacking (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Cuyjet et al. (2009) found a gap between the perceptions of new practitioners and their supervisors regarding the abilities of new practitioners to understand research, with entry-level staff rating their abilities higher than

their supervisors' perceptions of their abilities. Further, Dickerson et al. (2011) investigated the expectations and perceptions of 99 SSAOs and 43 graduate program faculty with regard to competencies of new practitioners. The researchers found that both SSAOs and faculty perceived large gaps in new practitioners' knowledge and skill competencies related to assessment.

More experienced practitioners have also reported a lack of assessment competence. In their national survey of 450 mid-level managers, Sermersheim and Keim (2005) found that 56% of mid-level student affairs practitioners rated research and evaluation as a skill area needing improvement. More recently, in the aforementioned study by Beseler Thompson and Penn (2015), 62% of respondents, representing a variety of positions within student affairs, indicated they did not feel prepared to meet the assessment responsibilities of their current position.

The real or perceived lack of assessment competence among student affairs practitioners may also contribute to a lack of self-efficacy, or belief in one's ability to successfully carry out a behavior (Bandura, 1977), with regard to assessment activities. Bandura (1977) theorized that efficacy beliefs impact an individual's level of motivation and performance toward a specific behavior. In the context of student affairs assessment, self-efficacy beliefs can be thought of as the beliefs of an individual regarding one's ability to successfully engage in a variety of assessment activities. On this note, Schroeder and Pike (2001) observed that "many practitioners feel they simply do not have the skills to be successful scholar-practitioners" (p. 349). In addition to Young and Janosik's (2007) finding of a lack of preparation for assessment activities among recent graduates of student affairs preparation programs, they also found the new alumni reported low levels of confidence in the area of research and assessment. Furthermore, Bresciani (2009) also found a lack of confidence among a range of new, mid-, and senior-level practitioners in their ability to conduct quality research and assessment, and Baum (2015)

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observed that mid-level student affairs practitioners – those most likely to be responsible for assessment activities – continue to struggle to gain confidence with respect to assessing student learning until later in their professional experience.

Perceptions of Assessment and the Role of Student Affairs

Further compounding the challenge of lacking assessment expertise and confidence is the fact that assessment is not always perceived by practitioners themselves as a critical competency. Nearly two decades ago, Upcraft and Schuh (1996) stated:

Unfortunately, among many staff in student affairs, assessment is an unknown quantity at best, or at worst, it is misguided and misused. It has been our experience that while everyone in student affairs would agree that assessment is important, too often it is considered a low priority and never conducted in any systematic, comprehensive way. And even if it is done, it is often done poorly; as a result, it simply gathers dust on someone's shelf, with little or no impact. (p. 4)

Upcraft and Schuh's statement was further supported by Fey and Carpenter's (1996) finding that mid-level practitioners ranked research and evaluation sixth of seven professional skill sets in terms of perceived importance, and this perception has remained prevalent over the years and among a variety of practitioners. Saunders and Cooper (1999) conducted a study of 151 CSAOs to determine their perceptions of the most important skills and competencies that should be possessed by new doctoral graduates aspiring to mid-level student affairs positions. The authors found that research and evaluation skills were seen as the least essential among seven categories. Interestingly, the second-ranked category, "leadership," included the need to "generate, facilitate, and evaluate planning, programming, and assessment initiatives" and the third-ranked category, "student contact," included "assess student needs" and "provide programs

to enhance social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and vocational growth" as the first- and second-rated elements of the category, respectively (p. 188-189). The high ranking of these elements of various skills without a concurrent high ranking of research and assessment skills is an interesting paradox.

Another paradox was uncovered in Burkard, Cole, Ott, and Stoflet's (2005) Delphi study of 104 mid- and senior-level student affairs administrators. The researchers found that program evaluation was ranked 25th and research was ranked 32nd out of 32 competencies desired in entry-level staff, far below the rankings of competencies such as problem-solving and program development/planning. The authors also found that program evaluation was listed 15th out of 26 desired responsibilities, with responsibilities such as "plan, coordinate, and oversee student programming" and "be a problem-solver" ranked first and third, respectively. These findings are another example of the contradictory views inherent in much of current student affairs practice: the need to engage in effective, developmental, student-focused programming and problem solving without the accompanying competencies and responsibilities of assessment and evaluation.

Other researchers have also noted that assessment is not considered a priority among all in student affairs. In the 2014 Student Affairs Assessment Leaders Landscape Survey, 52.2% of respondents identified "apathy in general for assessment by staff" to be a barrier to adopting a greater emphasis on student learning assessment within their division of student affairs (CSSL, 2015). Baum (2015), in his thorough review of literature on student affairs assessment, made the keen observation that two key studies on socialization in student affairs notably did not identify assessment of student learning as a perceived value in the field (Bureau, 2011; Tull & Medrano, 2008). Green et al. (2008) concluded that a challenge to systematically engaging in assessment

activities was that learning outcomes assessment was not viewed as a priority among all practitioners, even within student affairs divisions known for high-quality assessment practices. This finding connects to Hatfield's (2015) observation that the beliefs of peers may have an influence on how student affairs practitioners view themselves. In her comprehensive review of literature related to scholarly identity, Hatfield stated, "if many student affairs professionals in a department or institution do not identify as scholars, then there may be little inclination for others to do so" (p. 33). Baum (2015) also noted that having views of assessment that are in contrast to those around them contributed to a "frustrated mindset" among the ten mid-level student affairs practitioners who participated in his qualitative study exploring how practitioners make meaning of the responsibility for assessing student learning.

Multiple authors have explored potential reasons for the lack of importance that some practitioners place on assessment in student affairs. Schroeder and Pike (2001) noted that prevailing mental models are a key constraint to consider, stating "the way we think about our roles and make meaning of our experiences are critical to our professional identity" (p. 349). In their discussion, Schroeder and Pike highlighted that the ways student affairs practitioners view themselves and their roles has an impact on the likelihood of engaging in scholarly practice. Following their meta-analysis of literature on professionalism in student affairs, Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) observed that the unfamiliarity of tasks related to research and scholarship may lead to those tasks being considered less necessary or desirable than the other daily tasks facing student affairs practitioners. Keeling et al. (2008) argued that the core of the issue may be related to a lack of student affairs practitioners perceiving themselves as educators. The authors noted that "one of the primary implications of understanding oneself professionally as an educator is the obligation to assess the learning that happens in one's programs and services" (p. 8). As such,

student affairs practitioners who do not see themselves as educators, or who resist that label, may also fail to see themselves as individuals responsible to assess student learning. The Student Affairs Leadership Council (Rothenberg, 2011) further posited that focusing on learning outcomes in student affairs "requires a significant mind shift as practitioners move from viewing themselves as program facilitators to thinking of themselves as educators" (p. 54).

In *Rethinking Student Affairs Practice*, Love and Estanek (2004) theorized that the assumptions that individuals hold about themselves, their roles in student affairs, and the issues they face are the key obstacles to individuals developing an assessment mindset, a way of thinking that is necessary in order to sustain effective student affairs assessment efforts. Regarding the definition of assessment mindset, the authors stated:

> An assessment mindset means that an individual's view of the world is one in which assessment is a filter that shapes that view of the world and the individual's experience in it. It means that individuals live the definition of assessment in their individual professional practice. That is, they consciously and intentionally gather, analyze, and interpret evidence that describes their individual effectiveness and use that evidence to improve their effectiveness. (p. 90)

The authors continued on to posit that an assessment mindset can be consciously adopted or cultivated by addressing the aforementioned assumptions, and, indeed, this mindset must be adopted by a critical mass of individuals in order to shape assessment practice more broadly. In order to accomplish this, Love and Estanek recommended beginning with training and focusing that training on the cultivation of an assessment mindset within each individual.

The ways in which assessment and the overarching role of student affairs practitioners in the educational process are viewed clearly have a profound impact on the practice of assessment

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in student affairs. These factors, coupled with the others discussed in this section, illustrate that the barriers to integrating assessment into student affairs work are complex, interrelated, and are affected by an array of individual and environmental influences. That said, the majority of efforts to study these factors have not approached the issue in a fashion that incorporates the various factors in an inclusive model that accounts for this variety of influences. The final section of this literature review will present a comprehensive conceptual framework to investigating beliefs about assessment in student affairs and the factors that impact those beliefs.

Conceptual Framework: A Social Ecological Approach

In his qualitative study exploring the process of meaning-making regarding responsibility for assessing student learning among ten mid-level student affairs practitioners, Baum (2015) found that practitioners experienced cognitive challenges as assessment was introduced into their job responsibilities. These challenges were encompassed in the concept of a "frustrated mindset," in which practitioners struggled with multiple priorities, feeling overwhelmed, and having views of assessment that were in contrast to the views of those around them. The factors that contributed to participants moving from a "frustrated mindset" to an "empowered mindset" included meaning-making catalysts at the individual level (acknowledging limitations and lack of preparation), department level (pausing and gaining focus through reflection and purpose-seeking), division or institutional level (receiving critical feedback and support), and the external audience level (connecting assessment work to academics, mission, and theory). The findings of Baum's unique study clearly illustrate the complexity of factors that contribute to various beliefs and behaviors related to assessment, including competency, self-efficacy, reflection on the purpose of assessment, institutional support, professional standards, and accountability. In his recommendations for future research, Baum noted that it is not enough to investigate this issue

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by focusing solely on either the individual or the organization. Instead, he implored researchers to consider the intersection of the individual and the environment in order to more fully understand the factors that impact the practice of assessment among student affairs practitioners.

Love and Estanek (2004), in their discussion of the development of an assessment mindset, posited that the most salient obstacles to assessment practice are rooted in the assumptions individuals hold about themselves (i.e., "There's nothing I can do anyway"), their roles (i.e., "It's not my job"), and the issues they face (i.e., "That's beyond my control"). The authors noted that these assumptions influence individual behavior and must be brought to the surface for analysis and reflection in order to develop a critical mass of individuals with assessment mindsets and, ultimately, impact assessment practice on a broader scale. They also observed that a supportive organizational context facilitates the adoption of such a mindset. This supportive organizational context is characterized by the use and communication of assessment data to enhance organizational functioning, the allocation of resources to assessment activities, as well as a focus on conducting assessment for improvement, rather than accountability purposes. The interplay of these factors then becomes the basis for development of effective, embedded assessment practice in student affairs.

Considering the insightful recommendations of Baum (2015) and Love and Estanek (2004), coupled with prior research on barriers to assessment practice, a comprehensive approach to investigating this issue should account for the reciprocal interaction of the individual and the surrounding environment in determining individual perceptions of assessment. As such, the conceptual framework of this study incorporated factors associated with the background characteristics of student affairs practitioners, the range of assumptions and beliefs that those

practitioners hold about themselves and their roles, and beliefs about the environmental influences around them.

The Social Ecological Model

In support of the notion that multiple factors influence individual behavior, Urie Bronfennbrenner (1977; 1979) proposed an ecological perspective in which behavior is believed to be affected by both individual and environmental influences. Bronfennbrenner (1977) posited that environmental influences were divided into multiple levels, including micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem levels of influence. The microsystem includes interactions within one's immediate social networks. The mesosystem incorporates interrelations among those in the microsystems (i.e., how various significant others and groups interrelate). The exosystem includes forces within the larger social system or the setting in which the micro- and mesosystems are positioned. Finally, the macrosystem refers to cultural values, customs, and laws of society. These various subsystems are believed to influence each other and individual behavior, thus this model implies a reciprocal relationship exists between the individual and the various environmental influences.

McLeroy et al. (1988) built on Bronfenbrenner's model as the framework for their social ecological model (SEM) in which individuals are embedded within and interact with larger social systems. In the SEM, behavior is determined by multiple dimensions including intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes and social networks, institutional factors, community factors, and public policy. Intrapersonal factors are characteristics of the individual, such as knowledge, attitudes, skills, self-efficacy, values, and expectations of the individual. Research has long suggested that individual attitudes, expectations, and beliefs are key predictors of individual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Bandura, 1977). Interpersonal factors

incorporate formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including

significant others, such as colleagues and friends. These social relationships are also considered

to have substantial influence on individual behavior. Institutional factors refer to social

institutions and organizations with formal and informal rules and regulations for operations that

affect the practice and views of individuals and, ultimately, support certain behaviors over

others. These factors include the allocation of various economic and social resources,

transmission of social norms and values, and socialization into organizational culture.

Community factors include the groups to which individuals belong, the relationships among

organizations within a defined area, and geographically or politically-defined areas overseen by

one or more power structures. The concept of community incorporates sources of social

resources and social identity, which are known to influence norms and values, as well as

individual beliefs and attitudes. Finally, public policy refers to local, state, and national laws and

policies. These laws and policies are the mandates within which society functions and serve to

raise awareness of key issues, shape environments, and directly or indirectly affect behavior.

As demonstrated in Figure 1, these factors are nested structures in which the individual

and significant others (characterized as the interpersonal dimension) are situated within

organizations, which are, in turn, embedded within the larger community and public policy

environments. Stokols (1996) contended that this multilayered environmental context may

influence individuals differently, depending on their unique characteristics, beliefs, and

behaviors. A critical element of the SEM is the argument that specific changes in behavior may

require intervention at different model levels. For example, modifications to the knowledge or

skills of an individual would require intervention at the individual level, while modifications to

social norms would require intervention at the institutional and interpersonal levels. According to

Stokols, this approach reduces "conceptual 'blind spots' resulting from an exclusive focus on either behavioral or environmental factors at single analytical levels by giving explicit attention to the dynamic interplay among personal and situational factors… at both individual and aggregate levels" (p. 287).

Policy
local, state, and national laws and policies

Community
Relationships among groups of individuals, organizations, and information networks with defined boundaries

Institutional
Organizations with formal and informal rules

Interpersonal
Social networks and support systems

Intrapersonal
Knowledge, Attitudes, Behavior, Self-efficacy, Values
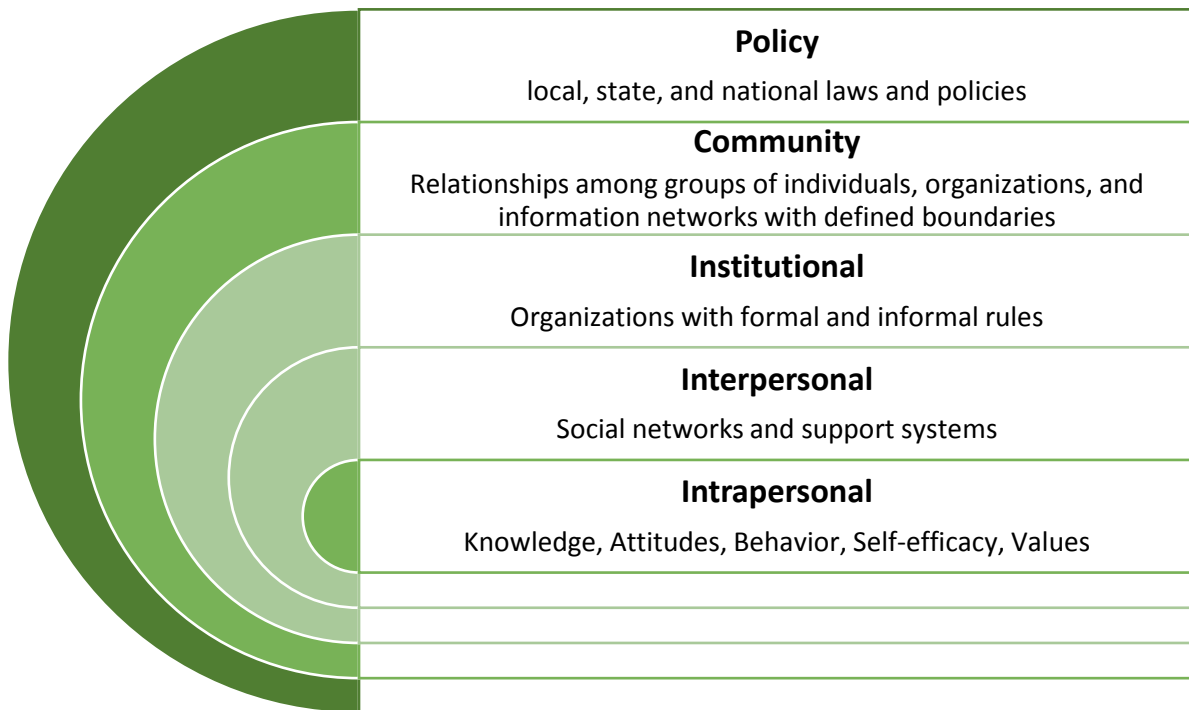
Figure 1. Social Ecological Model. Adapted from McLeroy et al., 1988

Researchers have found that the SEM provides a robust framework that more fully explains variance in individual behaviors such as influenza vaccine uptake (Kumar et al., 2012) and diabetes illness management (Naar-King, Podolski, Ellis, Frey, & Templin, 2006) and informs effective practice and intervention related to issues such as asthma management (Nuss et al., 2016), childhood obesity (Callahan-Myrick, 2014), breastfeeding initiation and duration (Dunn, Kalich, Fedrizzi, & Phillips, 2015), and use of sexual and reproductive health services (Chimphamba Gombachika et al., 2012). In these studies, interventions that targeted multiple levels of the SEM were found to be more effective than interventions aimed at a single level.

Although this model has been previously used and found effective primarily in the fields of public health and health promotion (Golden & Earp, 2012), the framework is easily adopted to help explain other social science phenomena involving the interplay of the individual and the environment and the subsequent impact on perceptions and behavior.

An Ecology of Student Affairs Assessment Practice

With regard to student affairs assessment, the various individual and environmental factors that have been found to impact the practice of assessment among student affairs practitioners readily map on to the five levels of the social ecological model, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Policy
external source of motivation (i.e., accreditation requirements, governing body policies and expectations)

Community
socialization into student affairs, perceived importance of assessment within student affairs as a whole

Institutional
administrator expectations, resource/support availability, use of results, perceived importance of assessment within student affairs division

Interpersonal
perceptions of peer assessment beliefs and peer involvement in assessment, perceived importance of assessment within student affairs department

Intrapersonal
assessment competency, beliefs about purpose of assessment, fear/resistance to change, perceived importance of assessment to the individual, self-efficacy, competing priorities, internal source of motivation, years of experience, education, position level and functional area, beliefs about the role of student affairs

Figure 2. Social Ecological Model Applied to Student Affairs Assessment Practice

At the intrapersonal level, factors that may impact assessment practice include assessment competency, beliefs about the purpose of assessment, fear or resistance to change,

perceived importance of assessment (i.e., how assessment is valued) to the individual, self-efficacy with regard to assessment practice, lack of time and/or competing priorities, internal commitment to improvement as a source of motivation to engage in assessment, years of experience in student affairs, educational level, position level and functional area within student affairs, responsibility level for assessment, and individual beliefs about the role of student affairs.

Interpersonal factors include normative perceptions regarding the beliefs of one's peers about assessment, as well as beliefs about peer involvement in assessment activities. Further, based on the assumption that departmental colleagues may be considered proximal peers, the perceived importance of assessment within one's student affairs department is considered an element of the interpersonal level.

At the institutional level, factors include the various elements of institutional culture identified in previous research. These consist of expectations from administrators regarding the extent to which all or some student affairs practitioners should engage in and report on assessment activities, support for assessment in the form of professional development or adequate resources, the use of assessment results for decision-making, and the perceived importance of assessment within one's division of student affairs.

The community level is characterized by primary groups to which individuals belong, the relationships among organizations within a defined area, and geographically or politically-defined areas overseen by one or more power structures. In this study, the field of student affairs, as characterized and defined by its overarching values and beliefs, professional organizations and the interactions among student affairs practitioners is considered the community of interest. To this end, factors within the community level that may impact assessment practice include perceived importance of assessment within the field of student affairs, as a whole, and

socialization into student affairs via membership in professional organizations, introductory experiences (i.e., graduate programs, new employee orientations, etc.), and one's understanding of professional standards.

Finally, the policy level encompasses local, state, and national laws and policies. For the purposes of this research, the policy level incorporates external compliance as a source of motivation to conduct assessment. External compliance includes, but is not limited to, accountability to the policies of the state-wide governing bodies that oversee the institutions of interest, along with requirements of the federal government and the regional accreditor for the institutions.

The five levels of the SEM, applied to factors impacting student affairs assessment, allow for consideration of the dynamic interplay of these various factors and the mutual influence of the individual student affairs practitioner and the surrounding environment. The perceptions and, ultimately, behavior of individuals is too complex to be analyzed at the individual level, alone (Stokols, 1996). This framework allows for a comprehensive approach to investigate the multifaceted issues that contribute to the gap between the espoused value and actual practice of student affairs assessment.

<div align="center">**Summary**</div>

Assessment has been considered a central component of effective student affairs practice for decades, but practitioners continue to struggle to embed assessment into programs and services and assessment continues to be viewed as an ancillary component of student affairs work in many cases. The literature available to date fails to adequately account for and describe the range of views held by student affairs practitioners regarding student affairs assessment practice while holistically accounting for the various individual and environmental factors that

have been studied or have emerged from studies in the past. This research built on the work of

Bresciani (2009), Seagraves and Dean (2010), Baum (2015), and others by not only seeking to

identify and understand factors that impact student affairs practitioner engagement in assessment,

but to more fully describe the array of perspectives that exist by accounting for factors at

multiple levels of the social ecological model and seeking to illustrate how individual

characteristics are associated with those viewpoints. The next chapter will go into greater detail

regarding the methods used to accomplish these aims.

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

This study used the methods and techniques of Q methodology to illustrate the subjective beliefs or viewpoints of study participants with regard to the various levels of the social ecological model that influence their engagement in assessment of student learning in student affairs. Throughout this chapter, the term "Q methodology" will be used in reference to the philosophical and conceptual principles associated with this approach (Ramlo, 2015). The term "Q method" will refer to the procedures for gathering (i.e., Q sort) and analyzing the data (i.e., factor analysis). In the literature, both Q methodology and Q method are commonly referred to as "Q."

The purpose of this study was to explore the range of perceptions of student affairs practitioners regarding student affairs assessment practice. This was accomplished by integrating various individual and environmental factors into a comprehensive framework that encompasses the multiple levels of the social ecological model (McLeroy et al., 1988). Further, the study was intended to investigate whether background characteristics, such as education level, position and area in student affairs, or the assumptions individuals hold about the role of student affairs, are associated with differing viewpoints. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions were explored.

1. What are the perceptions of practitioners regarding various individual and environmental factors posited to impact the practice of assessment of student learning in student affairs?

2. Are there any background characteristics associated with differences among the various perceptions?

The design of the study, participants, data collection and analysis methods, and study delimitations are discussed below.

Research Design

The research questions were addressed through the use of Q methodology, which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches in an effort to reveal a variety of social perspectives on a given phenomenon, taking care to preserve and reflect the viewpoints of participants (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Q methodology has been called "the scientific study of human subjectivity," with subjectivity, in this sense, meaning "a person's communication of his or her point of view" (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 12). It has been noted that this sort of self-referent subjectivity has been equated with behavior, as subjectivity is considered "the sum of behavioral activity that constitutes a person's current point of view" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 26). This methodology and its associated methods provide a systematic approach to examining and understanding the experiences, views, and beliefs of participants through a blend of quantitative and qualitative research methods. At its basic level, Q combines the gathering and sorting of data with a subsequent analysis of their intercorrelation and factor analysis. This approach "allows us to interpret the emergent factors, and, hence to understand the nature of shared viewpoints we have discovered, to a very high level of qualitative detail" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 18). Q methodology has been identified as a promising approach in student affairs research, in particular, as it offers a novel and useful approach to identifying primary issues of concern among student affairs practitioners, as well as areas of consensus among participants (Woosley, Hyman, & Graunke, 2004).

The Q method research technique involves generating a group of statements about a topic, known as the Q set. The Q set is taken from a comprehensive compilation of statements,

called the concourse, that are intended to reflect all of the relevant aspects of all of the discourses about a particular subject that have been identified by the researcher. These statements may be developed from extensive reference to previous academic literature, interviews of subjects of interest, researcher experiences, or other documents. The researcher is then responsible for selecting broadly representative statements from the concourse for inclusion in the Q set based on prior research and the conceptual framework of the study. This Q set then becomes the study sample, and, as such, should thoroughly cover all of the relevant "ground" related to the topic of interest while avoiding redundancy (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Research participants are then asked to rank order the statements in the Q set into a forced distribution, approximating a normal distribution, typically ranging from *most agree* or *most like my beliefs* to *most disagree* or *most unlike my beliefs*, according to their beliefs or perceptions about those statements (Brown, 1993). This process, called Q sorting, allows participants to reveal their subjective viewpoint about the topic. These viewpoints are then subject to intercorrelation and factor analysis to identify one or more factor groups, or Q factors. The resulting Q factors are representative of common viewpoints and denote qualitative differences in perspective. Q factors are "grounded in concrete behavior, are usually reliable and easily replicated, and, happily, are subject to statistical summary which facilitates more careful description and comparison" (Brown, 1980, p. 6). Q factors are then interpreted based on the factor scores of members belonging to that particular group. An individual who loads positively on a factor is then shown to have shared subjectivity with others on that factor. Conversely, a negative loading demonstrates a rejection of that factor (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). This interpretation process also includes a follow-up analysis of the various characteristics of the participants representing each resulting factor in order to gain a deeper understanding of how

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experiences may shape these theoretical viewpoints. Further, following the Q sorting and factor analysis processes, additional data is gathered through post-sort questions and interviews with participants in order to achieve deeper understanding of each participant's Q sort and assist with the process of factor interpretation. While this critical step has been overlooked in many Q studies, "the interview generally serves to increase the richness and quality of the data" (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 82). This type of contextuality is considered critical to the factor interpretation process in order to retain the voice of the participant.

Unlike other forms of research, in Q method each participant, rather than each Q set statement, is considered a variable in the study. As such, the selection of participants, or P set, is typically structured to ensure a group of respondents who are conceptually or theoretically relevant to the problem under consideration (Brown, 1980). The number of participants is fairly limited, as Q method requires only "enough subjects [or participants] to establish the existence of a factor for purposes of comparing one factor with another" (Brown, 1980, p. 192). The generalizability of that factor or the number of individuals who belong in one factor or another is not the primary area of interest in this method. Rather, the interest lies in describing the range of viewpoints that emerge, and, as such, a purposeful, small sample is typically deemed sufficient. Much like the number of variables in an individual study is invariably limited, a large number of participants is not required by Q method (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

At this point, it may be necessary to denote the differences between traditional factor analysis, known as R technique, or simply, "R" (Gorsuch, 1983), and the factor analysis employed in Q method. Q factor analysis is commonly referred to as inverted factor analysis as it is the participants, rather than items, grouped in the analytic process (Brown, 1980). In R, participants are measured for various traits and attitudes from the point of view of the

researcher's conceptual framework. The meanings are predetermined and validated prior to gathering responses, and, as such, the respondent's subjective experience is of little interest or significance (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Conversely, Q does not begin with *a priori* assumptions about meaning, but rather seeks to preserve the subjective experience of the participant. There is no single continuum of meaning for the phenomenon of interest. While the researcher is responsible for selection of the Q set, any researcher-assigned meaning of the statements is unknown to the participants. Instead, the participants place statements within the grid based on their own interpretation of the statement meaning, preserving the self-referent, subjective nature of the approach (Brown, 1980). Further, in the contextual interpretation stage of Q method factor analysis, participants are considered study variables and are grouped to identify shared social perspectives. In contrast, R's traditional factor analysis involves the grouping of items or variables, rather than participants themselves, according to shared variance to reveal an underlying construct.

Q methodology was selected for this study in order to gain insight into the subjective perspectives of student affairs practitioners with regard to the factors impacting assessment practice. Of particular relevance to this study was the ability of participants to rank order statements that relate to the factors that emerged from the literature and were subsequently mapped to the five levels of the social ecological model (SEM) and, in doing so, to communicate the relative significance of those various factors to their overarching perspective on student affairs assessment. Q methodology also allows for interpretation of those shared perspectives through the lens of the characteristics of the participants, such as position and area in student affairs or education level. This step provided insight into how the various levels of influence play out for those in different positions and with different levels of education in student affairs.

<center>**Instrumentation**</center>

The careful design of the instrumentation employed in Q method is of critical importance, as it should be comprehensive enough to allow participants to successfully express their viewpoint. The description of the Q set design and content, as well as the selection of the post-sort and follow-up interview questions intended to address the research questions are discussed below.

Q Set Design and Content

The Q set for this study was derived from a comprehensive concourse related to various individual and environmental factors that impact the assessment of student learning in student affairs. The concourse is intended to be a broad list of statements that represent all of the relevant aspects of the topic of interest (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). The concourse for this study was developed from the findings of research studies reviewed in the previous chapters of this dissertation. A structured approach was then taken to select the sample of statements for the Q set. Structured samples are composed systematically based on the research framework. This type of sampling allows the researcher to incorporate the conceptual foundation of the study as a framework for the Q set, and provides clear guidance for composing a balanced and comprehensive sample. Ultimately, this type of structuring is intended to make the researcher's framework explicit in the study, as well as maximize the likelihood that participants may adequately express their varying viewpoints. In crafting a structured sample, the investigator chooses a certain number of items from each category included in the framework. The items in each category are then purposefully selected to maximize heterogeneity, as the selection of statements within each category that are the most different from one another is more likely to produce a comprehensive sample (Brown, 1980). For this study, 17 of the 22 factors that were

<center>48</center>

previously mapped to the five levels of the SEM were selected as the categories for Q set

selection. The remaining factors (position level and functional area in student affairs, education

level, responsibility level for assessment, and beliefs about the role of student affairs) were

accounted for in the post-sort questions, discussed below. The 17 relevant factors and the levels

to which they are mapped are represented in Table 1.

Table 1

Factors Impacting Assessment Practice and Related Social Ecological Levels

Social Ecological Level	Relevant Factor
Intrapersonal	Assessment competency
	Purpose of assessment
	Fear or resistance to change
	Perceived importance of assessment to the individual
	Internal source of motivation
	Self-efficacy
	Competing priorities
Interpersonal	Perceptions of peer assessment beliefs
	Perceptions of peer assessment involvement
	Perceived importance of assessment within the department
Institutional	Resource/support availability
	Perceived importance of assessment within the division
	Use of assessment results
	Administrator expectations
Community	Socialization into student affairs
	Perceived importance of assessment within the field of student affairs
Policy	External source of motivation

Three statements were then selected from each of the 17 factors, resulting in a Q set of 51

statements (see Appendix A). Generally, between 40 and 80 statements is considered acceptable

for a Q set (Brown, 1980; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The Q set was reviewed by multiple researchers and practitioners in the field of student affairs assessment, including faculty and student affairs staff members, to provide insight into whether the final instrument represented the full range of possible subjective views of assessment in student affairs. Feedback was used to refine and finalize the Q set, as well as the post-sort questions, prior to data collection.

Within the Q set, statements that represented the intrapersonal level focused on issues such as assessment competency and self-efficacy, beliefs about the purpose of assessment, perceived importance of assessment to the individual, resistance to or fear of change, internal improvement as the source of motivation to conduct assessment, and lack of time and competing priorities. Sample statements related to these factors included "I have both the knowledge and skills needed to carry out effective assessment," "Assessment results can be used negatively against me and my program or service area," "Assessment helps me determine what students are learning as they engage in or with programs and services," "I do not care about assessment," and "I make time to do assessment."

Interpersonal Q statements were related to perceptions of how one's peers view assessment and perceptions of peer involvement in assessment activities. Q statements at this level also referenced the perceived importance of assessment at the departmental level. Statements included "My views of assessment are in contrast to the views of those I work with in student affairs," "Assessment is everyone's responsibility in my department," and "While most of the people I work with in student affairs say assessment is important, their actions do not match their words."

Q statements related to the institutional level focused on the resources and support available for assessment activities within the participant's division of student affairs, the

perceived importance of assessment at the division level, the use of assessment results within the participant's division, and expectations of division administrators. Institutional Q statements included "Assessment is a priority activity in my division of student affairs," "Decisions that are made in my division of student affairs are based on assessment results," "Administrators in my division choose things to assess that are not important to me or my program/service area," and "I have access to helpful support, including resources, if I struggle with conducting assessment activities."

At the community level, Q statements were crafted to allow participants to indicate their perceptions of the views of the field of student affairs, as a whole. These statements focused on perceived importance of assessment within the field of student affairs, as a whole, and socialization into student affairs via support from professional organizations, introductory experiences (i.e., graduate programs, new employee orientations, etc.), and one's understanding of professional standards. Sample statements included "My introduction into student affairs included an emphasis on assessing my programs and/or services," "A culture of assessment exists within the field of student affairs, as a whole," and "Professional standards in student affairs clearly call for engaging in regular assessment."

Finally, policy level Q statements focused on external accountability to accreditors, legislators, governing bodies, and the public as the primary source of motivation to conduct assessment. Policy level statements included "Assessment is an exercise primarily for compliance purposes (i.e., accreditation, federal requirements, etc.)," and "The primary driving factor behind assessment efforts is demonstrating the value of student affairs programs and services."

Before moving on to discussion of the post-sort questions, it should be noted that the structured approach taken to craft the Q set based on the study's conceptual framework did not preclude participants from rendering viewpoints that are not readily connected to the levels of the SEM. While the conceptual framework provided guidance for development of a comprehensive and balanced sample and provided insight into the resulting viewpoints and their implications for theory and practice, it did not block the emergence of unrelated findings. In Brown's (1980) words:

> In short, structured Q samples provide the launch pad for an investigation; an entré [*sic*] into a phenomenon, the scientist's best initial guess as to how a particular administration situation, social consciousness, or whatever operates. The data gathered with the Q sample may lead in quite different directions, however, since theoretical rotation may produce a factor structure about which the original statement design has little to say. There is never a guarantee, in other words, that splashdown will occur in the same area as the point of departure. (p. 39)

Post-Sort Questions and Interviews

Questions related to background characteristics of participants were included to get a sense of the characteristics of the participants that represented the emergent viewpoints. For this study, the selection of these background characteristics, like the concourse development, was based on a thorough review of previous literature related to factors impacting engagement in assessment in student affairs. These intrapersonal-level factors included position level and functional area in student affairs, education level, responsibility level for assessment, and years of experience. In order to assist with factor interpretation by exploring the meaning of items that participants place at the extreme ends of the distribution, participants were also asked to respond

to open-ended questions regarding why particular Q statements were either *most like* or *most unlike* their views and whether any statements were missing from the set that prevented participants from fully sharing their viewpoint. Additionally, participants were asked to share their view of the role of student affairs in higher education to provide insight into whether they viewed themselves and others in student affairs as educators or in some other way. The full list of post-sort questions is available in Appendix B.

Finally, participants were invited to volunteer for follow-up semi-structured interviews to assist with further exploration of the factors derived from the data analysis and to engage in member checking to ensure authenticity in the interpretation of the viewpoints. This step provided a more detailed understanding of the participant's Q sort and allowed for additional exploration of the meaning of emergent factors (van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). Interviewees were asked to describe the role that assessment currently and ideally plays in their student affairs work, reflect on the statements ranked highest and lowest in their factor's theoretical array, discuss how their beliefs about the role of student affairs in higher education relate to their views of assessment, reflect on the researcher's initial interpretation of their associated factor, and share their thoughts on the other viewpoints that emerged from the analysis. The complete list of interview questions is available in Appendix C.

Study Participants

As noted previously, the focus of Q method is on recruiting participants that provide a diversity of viewpoints rather than striving for a large number of participants. A general guideline for selection of participants is to recruit individuals who are likely to have distinct viewpoints related to the subject area under study and to select a number of participants that is smaller than the number of items in the Q set (Watts & Stenner, 2012). For this study, the goal

was to recruit an equal number of participants from three types of institutions. A variety of institutional types were selected in order to investigate whether institutional focus (i.e., research, teaching, technical preparation, etc.) was associated with varying viewpoints related to assessment. The institutions in this study included one large, public, land-grant, research-focused university (Institution A); two four-year, teaching-focused public universities (one small [Institution B] and one mid-sized [Institution C]); and one small, two-year, public community and technical college (Institution D). All of the institutions included in the study were located in the Upper Midwest. Two four-year, teaching-focused public universities (Institutions B and C) were selected in order to ensure enough student affairs practitioners were employed at the institution type to meet the sampling frame, discussed below. A purposive sample of participants from each institution type was selected to represent a range of positions within student affairs including entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level positions. For the purposes of this study, entry-level staff members were defined as those who occupied positions that were typically several levels removed from the senior student affairs officer (SSAO) and did not supervise any professional staff members. These positions are typically filled by individuals entering their first full-time job in student affairs. Mid-level staff members were defined as those who occupied a position at least two levels removed from the SSAO and were responsible for direct oversight of one or more student affairs functions and/or supervision of one or more professional staff members (Fey & Carpenter, 1996). Senior-level staff members were defined as those who occupied a SSAO position, reported directly to the SSAO, or were no more than one level removed from the SSAO and were responsible for oversight of multiple student affairs functions and/or supervision of multiple professional staff members. Example titles were provided to respondents to enable them to more effectively select their level of participation. These titles

included administrative assistant, hall director, processor, and program coordinator for entry-level positions; associate director and assistant director for mid-level positions; and director, assistant vice president, dean, and vice president for senior-level positions. Participants were also purposively sampled to represent a range of functional areas including both service-oriented areas, such as financial aid, registrar, and dining services, and program-oriented areas, such as leadership programs, residence life, and orientation programs. The range of positions and functional areas was selected based on available literature illustrating that self-reported level of assessment competency, responsibility for assessment, education level, and perceptions of institutional culture related to assessment differ among these position levels and functional areas (Beseler Thompson & Penn, 2015; CSSL, 2015; Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010; Julian, 2013). Table 2 provides an overview of the sample framework. The goal was to obtain approximately 36 participants who represented the full spectrum of position levels and functional areas at the three institution types.

Table 2

Sampling Frame for Q Method Study of Assessment Beliefs in Student Affairs

	Functional Area	
Position Level	Service-oriented Area	Program-oriented Area
Entry-level	n = 6 (2 participants x 3 institution types)	n = 6 (2 participants x 3 institution types)
Mid-level	n = 6 (2 participants x 3 institution types)	n = 6 (2 participants x 3 institution types)
Senior-level	n = 6 (2 participants x 3 institution types)	n = 6 (2 participants x 3 institution types)

Participants were recruited by asking for assistance from SSAOs at each institution to identify potential participants who fit the proposed sampling frame (see Appendix D for email requesting support from SSAOs). The SSAOs themselves could also choose to participate given the inclusion in the sampling frame of those in senior-level positions. Each SSAO provided email addresses of 24 potential participants, with the exception of the SSAO at the small public, four-year institution (Institution B), where only nine names could be provided due to staffing levels.

Description of Participants

Of the 81 invited participants, 44 (54.3%) completed the sorting activity and post-sort questions. The inclusion of 44 participants met Watts and Stenner's (2012) recommendation that the number of participants included in the study be less than the number of items in the Q set. The 44 respondents were fairly well-distributed amongst the sampling frame categories, with the goal of six participants in most categories met or exceeded. Entry-level participants were the exception, as there were only five respondents in each of the service and program-oriented areas. Regarding institution type, nine respondents were from the four-year, public, research-focused university, 17 respondents were from the four-year, public, teaching-focused universities, and 13 respondents were from the two-year, public, community college. The institution type was unknown for five of the respondents. An overview of the number of respondents by institution type, functional area, and position level is presented in Table 3.

Participants reported a wide range of time spent working in student affairs, with nine participants reporting less than three years, ten participants reporting 3-6 years, seven participants reporting 7-10 years, six participants reporting 11-14 years, and 12 participants reporting 15 or more years. Regarding highest degree earned, four participants held associate's

degrees, 16 held bachelor's degrees, 12 held master's degrees in education or a related field, nine held master's degrees in non-education fields, two held doctoral degrees in non-education fields, and one held a professional degree. The majority of respondents (n = 24) indicated assessment was an official responsibility, while nine indicated they engaged in assessment but it was not an official responsibility, seven engaged in assessment but were unsure if it was an official responsibility, and four indicated they did not engage in assessment. Forty-two of the 44 participants defined one of the three factors, and ten participants agreed to follow-up interviews.

Table 3

Respondents by Institution Type, Functional Area, and Position Level

Institution Type	Service-oriented Area			Program-oriented Area			
	Entry-level	Mid-level	Senior-level	Entry-level	Mid-level	Senior-level	**Total**
Four-Year Research	1	2	2	1	2	1	**9**
Four-Year Teaching	2	3	4	1	3	4	**17**
Two-Year Community	2	2	2	3	2	2	**13**
Unknown	0	2	1	0	2	0	**5**
Total	**5**	**9**	**9**	**5**	**9**	**7**	**44**

Data Collection and Analysis

The 81 potential participants were contacted via their institutional email address to request participation in the study, which was approved by the researcher's Institutional Review Board. A reminder email was sent one week after the initial invitation. The full text of the email invitation and reminder message is provided in Appendix E. Participants were provided with an

institution-specific link to HTMLQ (2015), an online Q sort software program that guided the participants through the Q sorting process. After reviewing the informed consent (see Appendix F) and agreeing to participate in the study, participants reviewed and sorted the 51 Q statements based on the question: "What are your beliefs about assessment of student learning in student affairs?" Participants were also provided with the following instructions regarding the definition of assessment of student learning:

> In this study, "assessment of student learning" refers to the on-going process of identifying student learning outcomes that are the intended result of a program or service; collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data related to those learning outcomes; determining and sharing findings; and using results to improve student learning via changes to practice. Please keep this definition in mind as you share your beliefs through this process.

The Q sorting process included two steps: 1) an initial sort of the statements into three categories: "*most like my beliefs*," "*most unlike my beliefs*," and "*neutral*" and 2) organizing the statements into the Q plot, a series of 11 columns arranged in normal distribution with values assigned from "-5" or "*most unlike my beliefs*" in the left-most column to "+5" or "*most like my beliefs*" in the right-most column (see Figure 3).

After completing the Q sort, participants were asked to respond to a brief questionnaire to collect background information, including position level and functional area in student affairs, education level, responsibility level for assessment, and years of experience. Participants were also asked to respond to open-ended questions regarding their view of the role of student affairs in higher education and why particular Q statements were either *most like* or *most unlike* their views. The background information and open-ended responses were used to help the researcher

better understand differences associated with various perceptions that emerged from the

collected data. Finally, participants were invited to volunteer for follow-up interviews.

Most unlike my beliefs   Most like my beliefs

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
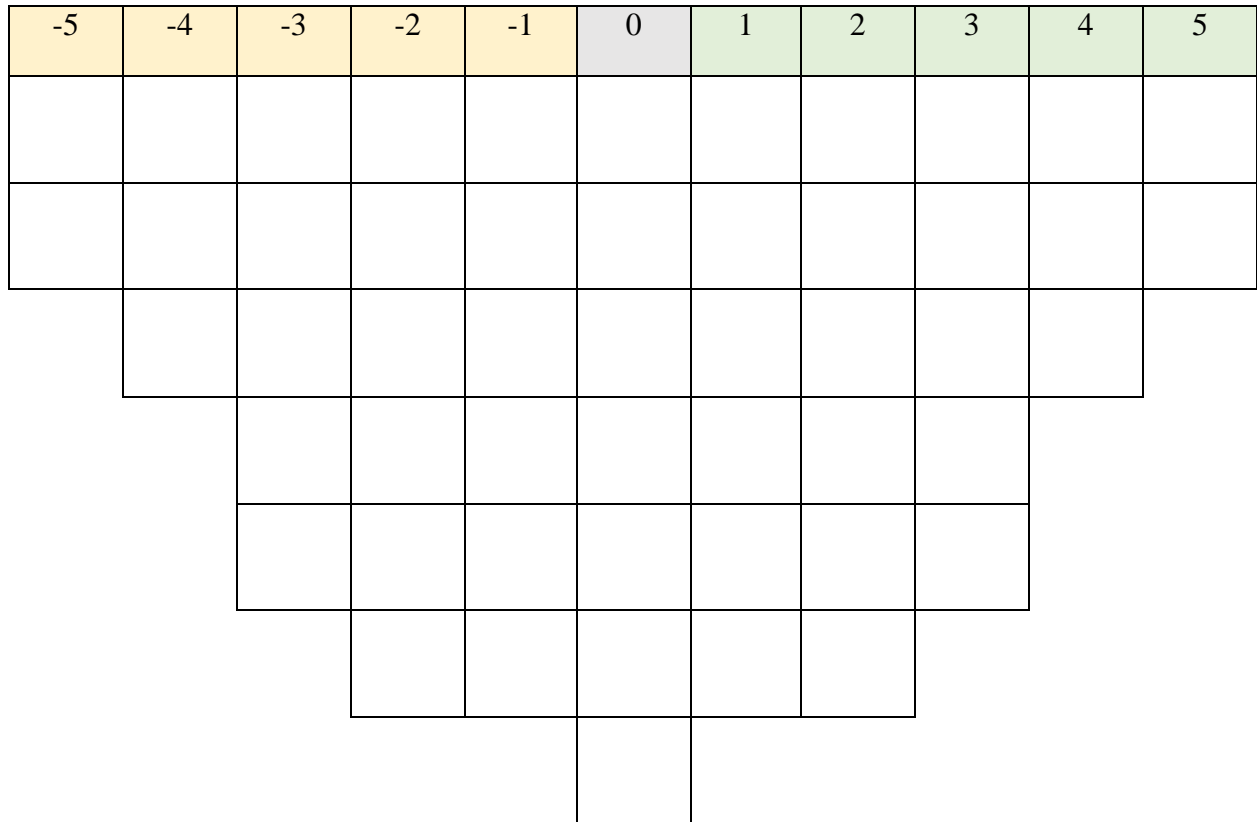
Figure 3. Q Plot Distribution Matrix

Participant data was stored on a secured server accessible only to the primary investigator

and co-investigator. Due to an initial coding error, data from participants at all institutions was

stored in the same folder on the server. As such, it was impossible to determine the institution

type for five of the 44 participants, despite use of the institution-specific links provided to the

participants. No other participant data was lost due to the coding error. Once detected, the error

was resolved, and data for all remaining participants was stored in institution-specific folders to

ensure that institution type was recorded for analysis purposes. Participant Q sort data was coded

using individual results. Each statement was given a score ranging from "-5" (*most unlike my*

beliefs) to "+5" (*most like my beliefs*), depending upon the placement of the statement in the 11-column distribution frame. The responses were then subject to exploratory factor analysis via principal components analysis (PCA) and rotated with varimax factor rotation utilizing PQMethod software (Schmolck, 2002). After a solution was reached, the three resulting factors were examined for distinguishing and consensus statements, as well as statements associated with either extreme of the factor array, in order to identify differences between factors, thereby defining the emergent viewpoints. The background information of participants associated with each viewpoint was then considered in order to provide additional insight.

After the three emergent viewpoints were identified, data from open-ended post-sort questions and participant interviews were used to help explore meaning and provide a richer and more detailed understanding of participant views. Ideally, one participant per factor – those who defined the viewpoint – would have been available for follow-up interviews, however there were no participants who defined Factor 2 who indicated willingness to participate in an interview. Of the ten participants who volunteered for follow-up interviews, five had sorts that loaded positively on Factor 1, one had a sort that loaded negatively on Factor 1, three had sorts that loaded positively on Factor 3, and one was a confounded loading – meaning the respondent's sort loaded significantly on more than one factor. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants whose sorts loaded positively on Factor 1, one participant whose sort loaded negatively on Factor 1, and three participants whose sorts loaded positively on Factor 3. In selecting interviewees, the researcher looked for those whose sorts loaded most strongly (either positively or negatively) on each factor, in addition to purposefully selecting interviewees who represented a variety of position levels, functional areas, and institution types.

The interviews were conducted via phone, skype, or in-person, depending on the preference of the interviewee. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis of themes, and all responses to open-ended, post-sort questions were also gathered for thematic analysis. As part of this analysis, the researcher coded the data to assist with capturing and interpreting the salient components of participant viewpoints, while preserving the voices of the individuals and attempting to set aside preconceived ideas of what would emerge. Coding approaches included both values coding and pattern coding. Values coding involves identifying and applying codes that "reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 110). This particular approach to coding was appropriate for this study as it prioritizes uncovering the viewpoints of participants and analyzing those viewpoints to explore their origins (Saldaña, 2013). The initial round of values coding resulted in important themes related to the alignment (or lack thereof) of intrapersonal and environmental factors impacting assessment practice, views of assessment as central or ancillary to one's responsibilities, the key role of past experience in shaping viewpoints, and the impact of competing priorities. The researcher also identified key interview excerpts and post-sort question responses that provided helpful illustrations of participant perceptions. Following values coding, pattern coding was used to help identify the primary themes that emerged through the values coding process and search for causes and explanations of those themes. These themes included, but are not limited to, the significance of assessment, paradoxical views of assessment-in-theory versus assessment-in-practice, and incongruence between intrapersonal and institutional valuing of assessment. Ultimately, these approaches to coding assisted with interpreting the emergent viewpoints of study participants through the development of robust themes supported by the

voices of participants. Results were interpreted and implications discussed through the lens of the social ecological model.

Researcher Positionality

As Q has been referred to as a qualitative-dominant methodology (Ramlo, 2016) and is considered as such by this researcher, a discussion of positionality is critical at this point. In order to adequately describe the researcher's beliefs, experiences, and expertise related to this study, it is necessary to shift to first person narrative. This discussion of my positionality is important for several reasons. First, it is essential that I, as a researcher, make clear my views of the role of student affairs in higher education and the role of assessment of student learning in student affairs, as well as my philosophical beliefs regarding qualitative inquiry. Further, the credibility of qualitative inquiry rests largely on the shoulders of the researcher, and, as such, it is critical that the reader understand my experience, expertise, and perceptions in the area of student affairs assessment and qualitative analysis (Patton, 2002).

At the time of this writing, I was in my tenth year of working in student affairs. During those ten years, I found myself increasingly exposed to and responsible for assessment of student learning. Initially, this happened by chance. My entry-level positions in student affairs had not required any particular knowledge, skills, or application of assessment. I had been in student affairs for four years when I completed my master's degree and was offered the opportunity to step into a new role in my department that carried with it responsibility for assessment of student learning. Coupled with that responsibility came a high level of guidance, support, and expectation from my supervisor for engaging in rigorous and meaningful assessment. In retrospect, I was woefully unprepared for these responsibilities, but the expectations of my position and the accompanying support led me to focus on and grow in this area. I began my

doctoral classes committed to further developing my skills related to assessment, and throughout my coursework, my competency, sense of self-efficacy, and commitment to embedding assessment in all programs and services grew. Mid-way through my doctoral career, I took on a new position that included leading assessment efforts for my department, and I began serving on the assessment committee in my division of student affairs.

Throughout my coursework and in my daily work with assessment in my own programs and within my department, I found myself returning time and again to the question of how views of assessment of student learning in student affairs impact one's practice. I was intrigued by the various attitudes and beliefs that I was observing in my interactions with colleagues and how those attitudes and beliefs played out in actions and level of willingness to learn about and practice assessment. I regularly interacted with student affairs colleagues who clearly cared deeply about students and their own programs and services, as evidenced by the passion with which they approached their work and their thoughtful interactions with students. Yet, despite this deep caring and concern for students and their work, some of these same individuals demonstrated a strong reliance on anecdote or instinct, alone, to determine whether their programs and services were truly meeting student needs or contributing to student learning. While nearly everyone I worked with would agree that programs and services need to be assessed, some of my colleagues demonstrated resistance to expanding assessment efforts beyond satisfaction or operational effectiveness to actual student learning. Others seemed to approach assessment as an after-thought, where programs and services were implemented without clear outcomes and assessment efforts were tacked on in order to meet requirements. Still others indicated that their work just simply did not directly relate to student learning, and therefore assessment was pointless and forced. At times, it was even challenging to maintain my

own commitment to evidence-based decision-making due to external pressure to engage in flashy, "feel-good" programming at the expense of less flashy but more effective evidence-based programming. Again, I want to reiterate that these reactions to assessment came from individuals who demonstrated deep caring and commitment to the students around them and to their program and service areas. The various forms of resistance to assessment that I encountered did not appear to originate from a lack of concern for doing one's job well; something else was at the root of this disconnect.

In response to my confusion over these seemingly-contradictory beliefs, I conducted research studies related to student learning and assessment, including a constructivist analysis of discourse related to the at-times competing forces of aspiration and accountability in higher education and a study of competency, beliefs, and experiences related to assessment within my own division of student affairs. My initial efforts toward understanding perceptions of assessment provided me with some insight into the role that competency, accountability, and institutional support played in shaping assessment beliefs and practice. Further, this work attuned me to the idea that individuals' beliefs were formed in response to a variety of individual and environmental factors, but questions remained as to the relative level of influence and interplay of those factors.

Moving forward, I co-lead the effort within my division of student affairs to adopt division-wide learning and service outcomes to guide our work and assessment efforts. My advocacy for orienting the work of the division further toward student learning was intrinsically tied to my beliefs about the role of student affairs in higher education. I believe that all individuals involved in the educational process, including those of us in student affairs, are educators with a responsibility to put in place systems, structures, and practices that provide

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empowering, developmental experiences and support to students. I further believe that we, as educators, serve as facilitators of experiences that help bring students to a greater understanding of themselves and the world around them. Implicit in the idea that we, as educators, are responsible for facilitating meaningful, developmental experiences, is the idea that we must assess whether or not we are actually accomplishing this goal. As Keeling et al. noted, "one of the primary implications of understanding oneself professionally as an educator is the obligation to assess the learning that happens in one's programs and services" (p. 8).

My beliefs about learning, assessment, and the role of the educator in these processes are rooted in elements of both pragmatic and constructivist philosophies. I believe that individuals construct their own perspectives based on engagement with the world and these perspectives ultimately impact how they act and interact with others. This belief led me to search for a research methodology that would allow the lived experience and values of my participants to emerge. My beliefs, experiences, and previous research efforts also influenced the development of my conceptual framework, which situates the individual within various elements of the surrounding environment and allows for consideration of the reciprocal interaction between those levels. It is in the spirit of understanding how individual perspectives are constructed by individual experiences and environmental context that I undertook this research, and it is in the spirit of theoretical and practical utility that I put forth my findings.

Delimitations

Several delimitations existed with this study. First, based on the sampling procedures, the study may have been subject to self-selection bias with only those with distinctly positive or negative opinions related to assessment of student learning in student affairs electing to participate. As such, it is possible that those with other views were missed in the description of

the array of viewpoints that emerged from this study. Additionally, while the generation of the Q set for this study was carefully crafted based on an extensive literature review and the conceptual framework of the study and was piloted extensively, it is possible that the Q set did not allow for expression of the full set of possible viewpoints related to student affairs assessment. Watts and Stenner (2012) have noted that achieving a perfectly representative Q set is unattainable. To offset this concern, a structured Q set was developed based on the conceptual framework of the study to increase the likelihood of a comprehensive and balanced sample. Further, participants were given an opportunity to indicate whether any statements were missing from the set that prevented them from fully sharing their viewpoint, and interview participants also had an opportunity to share concerns with the Q set. As no substantial concerns were raised in participant feedback, it is assumed that participants were sufficiently able to share their viewpoint given the provided Q set.

This study included a sample of institutions that were all public and were limited to one geographic area in the Midwest and one regional accreditor. Given this limitation, it is possible that the range of perspectives gathered from this study is not representative of perspectives held by student affairs practitioners in private and/or religiously-affiliated institutions, institutions located in other geographic regions, or institutions governed by other regional accreditors. Of particular note, no faith-based institutions or institutions that primarily serve students of color were included in the study. This delimitation connects to the policy level of the social ecological model, as it is possible that the impact of policy may be felt differently depending on the institutional type and the policies of the regional accreditor. Additionally, there are implications for how student affairs practitioners at other institution types view their role within their

institution, given the varying institutional missions, and how that connects to their responsibility for and views of assessment of student learning.

Finally, a risk of bias at the interpretation stage existed, as this task lay with the researcher. Post-sort question responses were gathered and interviews were conducted with individuals whose viewpoints aligned with the emergent factors in order to offset this risk through discussion of the researcher's interpretation of the viewpoints and member-checking with regard to study findings. Wherever possible, direct quotes from participants were used to aid with interpretation and demonstrate the authenticity of findings.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of the rationale for the use of Q, as well as the methods used for data collection, including the development of the Q set, identification of the P set, Q sorting process, and collection of additional data via post-sort questions and follow-up interviews. Further, the positionality of the researcher, as it relates to the conceptual framework and methodology of this research, was established, along with the delimitations of the study. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to explore the range of perceptions of student affairs practitioners regarding student affairs assessment practice. This was accomplished by integrating various individual and environmental factors into a comprehensive framework that encompasses the multiple levels of the social ecological model (McLeroy, Steckler, Bibeau, & Glanz, 1988). Further, the study was intended to investigate whether background characteristics, such as education level, position and area in student affairs, or the assumptions individuals hold about the role of student affairs, are associated with differing viewpoints. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions were explored.

1. What are the perceptions of practitioners regarding various individual and environmental factors posited to impact the practice of assessment of student learning in student affairs?

2. Are there any background characteristics associated with differences among the various perceptions?

Study participants (n = 44) sorted 51 Q statements that were derived from a concourse of statements related to assessment of student learning in student affairs. Following the sorting process, participants responded to a series of questions related to the highest and lowest-ranked statements, their view of the role of student affairs in higher education, and background characteristics, such as position level and functional area in student affairs, highest degree earned, time in student affairs, and level of responsibility for assessment in their current position. The analysis and interpretation of these data are presented below, including a description of statistical analysis techniques used to identify factors, as well as the interpretation of the factors, organized by research question.

Data Analysis

Participant Q sort data were analyzed using PQMethod 2.35 (Schmolck, 2002), computer software designed for use in Q method studies. The analysis included correlation of participant sorts, factor analysis and rotation, and the creation of a factor array (i.e., model Q sort) for each factor via computation of statement z-scores.

A correlation matrix was created calculating Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient between the Q sorts of each pair of participants. Based upon a review of the correlation matrix, it was determined that factor analysis was suitable due to the high number of correlations found to be .3 or higher.

Following the correlation of participant sorts, a variety of factor extraction and rotation combinations were performed. While some Q methodologists have advocated for the exclusive use of the centroid method of factor analysis due to its simplicity and its connection to theoretical exploration of factors (Brown, 1980), others recommend the use of the more mathematically precise principal components analysis (PCA) approach based on the rationale that the results rarely differ substantially between the two approaches and PCA provides the solution considered to be statistically best (McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2012). To ensure due diligence was given to both the traditional preference for the centroid method of analysis and the statistical rigor of PCA, both approaches were used, in combination with varimax rotation, to identify the factor solution with the most appropriate theoretical and statistical fit, as advised by McKeown and Thomas (1988). In determining the best approach to factor extraction and rotation, the goal was to maximize explained variance and the number of significant sorts for each factor (i.e., those that loaded significantly onto a factor), while minimizing the number of confounded sorts (i.e., those that loaded significantly onto two or more factors) and non-

significant sorts (i.e., those that did not load significantly onto any factor) (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Significance level was calculated using McKeown and Thomas's (1988) equation: $1/\sqrt{N}$ x 2.58, for significance $\alpha < .01$, where N represents the number of items in the Q set. Given the 51-item Q set in this study ($N = 51$), significance was calculated as 0.3613 using a z-score of 2.58 to establish a 99% confidence interval ($\alpha < .01$).

Following a comparison of each approach and the resulting values (see Appendix G), the best solution was found using the combination of PCA extraction with varimax rotation of three factors. The three-factor solution accounted for 51% of the variance. Using the 0.3613 significance level, 42 of the 44 sorts loaded significantly on one of the three factors, only two sorts were confounded by loading on multiple factors, and there were no nonsignificant sorts. While the four and five-factor PCA solutions accounted for 55% and 60% of variance, respectively, the confounded sorts were substantially higher (eight and ten confounded sorts, respectively). The three-factor centroid solution resulted in a similar number of defining and confounded sorts as the PCA solution, however the explained variance was lower (47%). It should be noted, however, that the three-factor centroid solution resulted in identical participant loadings on the three factors, adding further strength to McKeown & Thomas's (1988) claim that the PCA and centroid methods of analysis rarely differ when it comes to the final factor solution. Table 4 presents the sorts that loaded significantly onto each of the three factors (denoted by X). According to Brown (1980), a minimum of four sorts are typically recommended in order to define each factor. This condition was fulfilled, as Factor 1 had 21 defining sorts, Factor 2 had ten defining sorts, and Factor 3 had 11 defining sorts. The negative loadings of participants 25 and 28 on Factor 1 indicate that the participants rejected the views of that factor.

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Table 4

Factor Matrix with Significance Denoted by X

Q Sort	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	
1	0.8854X	0.0240	-0.0592	
2	0.8446X	0.0383	0.0679	
3	0.1018	0.6129X	0.1715	
4	0.5665X	0.4156	-0.0062	
5	0.4459X	0.3146	0.2498	
6	0.8174X	0.1896	0.0879	
7	0.5006X	0.0289	-0.1312	
8	0.7799X	-0.0487	0.0406	
9	0.0398	0.7117X	0.1657	
10	-0.2724	0.5139	0.5359	(confounded sort)
11	0.0366	-0.1069	0.4653X	
12	0.0936	0.3750	0.5405X	
13	0.7425X	0.0227	0.1406	
14	0.2400	0.4761X	0.0560	
15	-0.0767	0.1755	0.5992X	
16	0.8100X	0.0207	0.2539	
17	0.4847	0.4984	0.2058	(confounded sort)
18	0.0133	0.3902X	-0.1127	
19	0.4847	0.0214	0.5842X	
20	0.7832X	0.2394	0.2721	
21	-0.3613	0.5186X	0.2668	
22	0.0907	-0.0247	0.7675X	
23	-0.3685	0.4608X	0.1413	
24	-0.0295	0.2791	0.4339X	
25	-0.7113X	0.4592	0.0575	
26	0.8195X	-0.0935	0.1635	
27	0.1215	0.5300X	-0.2103	
28	-0.5244X	0.3631	0.0120	
29	0.8209X	0.1750	0.0321	
30	0.1050	-0.2294	0.6840X	
31	0.1800	0.5199X	0.0736	
32	0.7830X	0.2840	-0.0888	
33	-0.1783	0.1540	0.6704X	
34	0.3678	0.3357	0.4974X	
35	0.7193X	0.1711	0.3165	
36	0.8066X	0.1659	0.0548	
37	0.3893	0.0404	0.6244X	
38	0.4323X	0.2112	-0.2987	

Table 4. *Factor Matrix with Significance Denoted by X* (continued)

Q Sort	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
39	0.7372X	0.1845	-0.0404
40	0.8397X	0.0645	0.1469
41	0.0336	0.5142X	0.1353
42	0.1692	0.3840	0.6135X
43	0.3278	0.6622X	0.1375
44	0.4387X	0.3794	-0.1063
% expl. Var.	28	12	11

X indicates significant loading at p < .01

The final factor solution resulted in low correlations between the factors, with factor correlations ranging from 0.1959 to 0.3144, as seen in Table 5. These low correlations indicate the presence of three distinct views of assessment of student learning in student affairs.

Table 5

Correlation Matrix between Factor Scores

	1	2	3
1	1.0000		
2	0.1959	1.0000	
3	0.2832	0.3144	1.0000

Z-scores were then calculated for each statement in each factor in order to create a factor array. This factor array functions as a composite theoretical Q sort that defines a particular factor. The z-scores were arranged in descending order and mapped to the array positions on the distribution matrix to assist with interpretation. The items with the highest z-scores were those that were most like the beliefs of the participants who loaded positively on that particular factor. Likewise, the items with the lowest (most negative) z-scores were those that were most unlike their beliefs. For each factor, a list of distinguishing and consensus statements was produced. Distinguishing statements were those that were ranked significantly differently in that factor, as compared to the other two factors. Consensus statements were those that did not significantly

differ in placement among all three factors (Watts & Stenner, 2012). The distinguishing and consensus statements, along with the items placed at the extreme ends of each factor array (i.e., +5 and -5) and participant responses to open-ended post-sort and interview questions, were used to interpret the three factors. The factor scores and ranking for each item for all three factors are available in Appendix H.

Research Question 1: Practitioner Perceptions

The first research question in this study was: What are the perceptions of practitioners regarding various individual and environmental factors posited to impact the practice of assessment of student learning in student affairs? The data analysis revealed three distinct views of assessment of student learning in student affairs: Assessment-as-Significant, Assessment-as-Irrelevant, and Assessment-in-Isolation. Differences were noted among the viewpoints with regard to the influence and interplay of various individual and environmental considerations, as represented by the five levels of the social ecological model (see Figure 2 on page 39).

Before proceeding to a discussion of the differences among the viewpoints, it is important to acknowledge that some similarities also existed among them. Several consensus statements – those that did not significantly differ in their placement among the factors – reveal areas of agreement among the viewpoints. The array positions associated with each consensus statement, as shown in Table 6, indicate the level to which individuals who loaded on all three factors feel the statement is "most like" or "most unlike" their beliefs. Of particular note is the high ranking of statement 16, "Assessment helps me determine what students are learning as they engage in or with programs and services." The array positions of this consensus statement indicate that participants whose sorts loaded positively on any of the three viewpoints view the purpose of assessment as improving student learning that takes place as a result of their program or service.

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This belief about the purpose of assessment remained consistent among participants, regardless

of their perceptions of institutional support, compliance requirements, intrapersonal self-efficacy

and competency, or competing priorities, which differed substantially among the viewpoints.

Table 6

Consensus Statements with Array Positions

Statement	Array Position		
	1	2	3
2. Assessment is critical in order to maintain funding for my program or service area	0	0	2
11. In general, people I work with in student affairs do not believe assessment is important	-2	-2	-2
16. Assessment helps me determine what students are learning as they engage in or with programs and services	4	3	4
17. I am more involved in assessment activities than most others that I work with in student affairs	-1	-2	-1
25. Professional standards in student affairs clearly call for engaging in regular assessment	3	2	3
26. Assessment is everyone's responsibility in my department	2	0	1
29. The primary driving factor behind assessment efforts is demonstrating the value of student affairs programs and services	1	3	2
31. Decisions that are made in my division of student affairs are based on assessment results	0	2	1
45. Student affairs professional organizations provide helpful support, including resources, for their members to engage in assessment activities	2	0	1

The majority of the other consensus statements were positioned neutrally, which

communicated that these items held a relatively low level of influence on participant views of

assessment in student affairs. The neutral placement of statement 31, "Decisions that are made in

my division of student affairs are based on assessment results," was particularly interesting, as

the use of assessment results at the intrapersonal level (i.e., to improve the participant's own program or service area) was highly ranked for multiple factors. The neutrality regarding whether division-level decisions are assessment-based may communicate a lack of knowledge about how division-level decisions are made or a lack of relevance regarding whether assessment drives decision-making outside of one's own area. Finally, with regard to the field of student affairs as a whole, participants ranked statement 25 moderately high, indicating that they believe professional standards clearly communicate the need to engage in regular assessment; however, the neutral placement of statement 45 indicated that participants do not feel that support from professional organizations has played a large role in developing actual capacity for assessment.

While consensus statements provide insight into the similar ways participants in all three factors ranked certain statements, it is the relative positioning of those statements compared to the others and the interpretation of those statements with the help of participant open-ended responses that provides insight into the variety of perceptions held by participants. This variety of viewpoints is presented in the following sections. Throughout the sections, all participants will be referred to by feminine pronouns, regardless of their gender identity, in order to ensure participant confidentiality.

Factor 1: Assessment-as-Significant

Factor 1, Assessment-as-Significant, was a bipolar factor defined by 19 positively-loaded sorts and two negatively-loaded sorts, as previously shown in Table 4. The full theoretical factor array for individuals whose sorts loaded positively on Factor 1 is provided in Figure 4, with distinguishing statements bolded and consensus statements italicized. The extreme statements for Factor 1, including the five "most like" and "most unlike" statements in the array are provided in Table 7. For those whose sorts loaded negatively on the factor, the array position and polarity of

the z-scores for each statement were reversed. Central to the views of both those whose sorts loaded positively and negatively on the factor are strong beliefs about the significance of assessment to their work, the use of assessment results for improvement in their own program or service area, and the institutional culture regarding assessment.

Most unlike my beliefs   Most like my beliefs

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
42	**51**	**34**	**8**	**3**	*31*	**41**	**49**	**19**	*16*	40
38	**37**	43	**20**	27	14	**33**	**5**	**13**	**48**	12
	50	36	**28**	**1**	4	**6**	*45*	**35**	**21**	
		18	*11*	*17*	**46**	9	**44**	**39**		
		22	**15**	30	*2*	29	7	*25*		
			47	**10**	**32**	23	*26*			
					24					

Figure 4. Factor 1 Theoretical Array. Distinguishing statements are bolded and consensus statements are italicized.

     Those whose sorts loaded positively on the factor experienced a high level of alignment between their intrapersonal views of the purpose of assessment, their sense of self-efficacy and agency – meaning the capacity to take action – with regard to engaging in assessment activities and using assessment results to make changes, and their beliefs about the culture of their division regarding assessment. Specifically, those whose sorts loaded positively on this factor reported a deep level of intrapersonal caring about assessment and see assessment as directly connected to enhancing student learning and improving programs and services. As a result, they view assessment as central to their work. Individuals who hold this positive viewpoint see themselves

as capable of both engaging in effective assessment efforts and using the results of the

assessment to make changes. Further, these individuals are situated in an environment in which

assessment efforts are strongly supported, both in terms of consistent institutional-level

expectations that assessment results are used in decision-making and in the allocation of support

and resources toward assessment activities.

Table 7

Factor 1 Extreme Statements

"Most Like My Beliefs" Statements	Array Position	Z-score
40. It is an expectation in my division of student affairs that staff members use assessment results to improve programs and services	5	1.730
12. Assessment is a fundamental aspect of effective student affairs practice	5	1.612
16. Assessment helps me determine what students are learning as they engage in or with programs and services	4	1.523
48. The culture within my division of student affairs supports assessment efforts	4	1.382*
21. Assessment is a priority activity in my division of student affairs	4	1.120*
"Most Unlike My Beliefs" Statements	Array Position	Z-score
50. I know how my program or service area is performing without having to engage in assessment	-4	-1.273
37. Assessment is not a priority activity in my department	-4	-1.580*
51. I am frustrated by the continued focus on assessment in student affairs	-4	-1.753*
38. I'm not sure of the purpose of assessment	-5	-1.810
42. I do not care about assessment	-5	-2.032

Note. *denotes a distinguishing statement

Those whose sorts loaded negatively on this factor also experienced alignment between

their intrapersonal views of assessment and perceptions of their surrounding environment.

Specifically, these individuals reported they do not care about assessment and view assessment

as ancillary to their work based on a lack of use of results for decision-making. This intrapersonal view of assessment was compounded, or perhaps driven, by a perceived lack of institutional-level support and resources for enhancing assessment competency, as well as a lack of expectations that assessment results are used to make improvements to programs or services.

Significance of assessment. The significance of assessment at the intrapersonal level is a central component of this viewpoint – meaning the impact or consequence of engaging in assessment appears to drive individuals' beliefs about the role of assessment in their work. At the very core of their beliefs about assessment are these individuals' perceptions of how it impacts their ability to do their jobs better. Individuals whose sorts loaded positively on this viewpoint had a strong positive intrapersonal connection with assessment. Their ranking of statements related to caring about assessment, understanding the purpose of assessment, and focusing assessment on student learning in their own programs and services, along with their open-ended responses, emphasized that they care deeply about assessment. Furthermore, they see it as directly connected to enhancing student learning and improving their own programs and services; therefore, assessment is central to their ability to engage in effective student affairs practice. Participant responses to this effect included:

> *"Our role on campus is to provide our students with programs and services to help them succeed in College and life. Assessing our programs and services is a critical step in achieving results."*

> *"I do have experience, and I've seen how it helps. I have seen what the purpose is, and I care because it helps me be more knowledgeable about what I'm doing, and hopefully helps me to serve the students better."*

"Because our mission statement is that we support students in the college by collaborating to provide inclusive programming and services focused on broadening access to your education and developing students' lifelong skills for success. The only way we can do that is if we assess what we're doing and know where to go."

Note the focus of all of these participants on the role that assessment plays in enhancing their ability to fulfill their purpose or mission. Conversely, individuals whose sorts loaded negatively on this viewpoint feel a lack of intrapersonal significance or consequence related to engaging in assessment. Their ranking of statements demonstrated a lack of care for assessment, frustration with the continued focus in this area, and a disconnection between assessment activities and program or service improvement. As a result of these beliefs, they feel as though assessment is a waste of time and there is no purpose to engaging in assessment given it does not contribute to improving their programs or services or enhancing student learning. One interviewee specifically noted the lack of significance of assessment to her work:

"I have to admit, it's something that just makes me cringe, because I don't feel like… I have much control over fixing anything that would come to light. Then I feel like there hasn't been much… out there that seems like it would really be significant, you know?.... Sometimes I just think it's so surface. I think that what is hard for me about it is we send out these surveys, and we love to just say, "Well look at this, and look at this," but we never do anything about it."

It is clear from her statement that this individual's past experiences with assessment have contributed to her current viewpoint. Interestingly, in discussion about the polarization of the viewpoint, individuals from both sides noted that their views were shaped by their past experiences with assessment and admitted they could see how someone might hold the opposite

viewpoint. Some even reflected that they had held the polarized view at one point, themselves. Regarding the polarization, individuals who held the positive viewpoint reflected:

> *"Maybe if you bang your head against the wall so many times and you know you're not going to get anywhere, it's [assessment] probably just a motion you're going to go through."*

> *"The polarizing view, I feel, is due to maybe a lack of information, lack of leader support, that assessment might be getting a bad name with them because of previous efforts that have failed…"*

> *"I would say in [the past], those probably would have been my top two statements, most like my views, because it was you just do what you need to do."*

Along these lines, one individual who held the negative viewpoint noted that her current beliefs had probably been shaped by a lack of exposure to effective assessment practice, stating, "I probably have never been in an environment where it's really done well." In reference to those who held the positive viewpoint, following an initial expression of disbelief that others genuinely viewed assessment so positively, she reflected:

> *"I think they might have experience that they've seen it work. They've seen something improve because of assessment.… Or they might have been mentored by someone who has really shown how it works as well. I think that that has a lot to do with it too."*

The intrapersonal views of these individuals with regard to the significance of assessment to their work appear to be directly connected to, or perhaps even derived from, their views of the use of assessment results for decision-making and improvement within their own programs and services.

Use of assessment results for improvement. Individuals with this viewpoint indicated that the use of assessment results for program and service improvement, or lack thereof, was a key element of their overall perceptions of assessment. Individuals whose sorts loaded positively strongly believed that it was an expectation within their divisions that assessment results were used for program or service improvement. As a result of this emphasis on using assessment results for decision-making, these participants rejected the notion that assessment was conducted for compliance purposes alone or merely to submit an assessment report. Instead, as the following quotes illustrate, participants viewed the institutional-level expectation as one that drove meaningful, embedded assessment activities.

> *" …because of our expectations within our department and within student affairs of having those metrics, and those evaluations being done, we know that we're completing the needs of the department. Without it, I think you're just flying blind."*
>
> *"I think that it's clear when we do our annual strategic planning that [using results for improvement] is a part of the expectation that's there. The resources that have been put into assessment over the years make it clear that it's an expectation, and there is actually somebody like following up."*

Again, note that participants recognize the institutional-level expectation but frame it as connected to program or service improvement, rather than compliance. On the polarized end of the viewpoint, the opposite rang true. Individuals whose sorts loaded negatively noted a lack of institutional expectations that assessment results were used for improvement, coupled with an emphasis on conducting assessment solely for compliance purposes. These institutional and policy-level factors subsequently influenced their views of assessment, as noted by one interviewee:

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"In higher ed, I've always been involved in [this area], and so I do feel like in any office that I've been in, we just did it because we had to…. Because it needed to go in the annual reports. I have to admit, I've never worked somewhere where there was a champion for assessment that you could get behind. Someone that you really could get behind, and support, and understand where they're coming from. It's always just kind of been an after thought."

In this statement, assessment is referred to as an "after thought" by the participant, communicating that it is secondary or ancillary to the ability to do one's job well. In this participant's viewpoint, assessment is conducted solely "because it needed to go in the annual reports."

While it is clear that the use of results for decision-making, or lack thereof, is strongly tied to how these individuals view assessment, an important distinction emerged in participant responses regarding *who* was actually using the results. Individuals with both the positive and negative viewpoints indicated neutrality with regard to whether their peers or division-level administrators were using assessment results to make decisions. Based on the positioning of these statements, it does not appear that the activities of others with regard to using assessment results were particularly salient; rather, it is the level of intrapersonal commitment within individuals and their past experiences regarding whether or not results were used for improvement that appear to shape their views of assessment. The significance of assessment activities to improve one's *own* area seems to be of utmost importance to these individuals; however, despite a lack of concern for the use of assessment results at the institutional level, the perceived culture of the institution with regard to assessment was strongly associated with participant views of assessment.

Institutional culture of assessment. This viewpoint is characterized by alignment between intrapersonal views of assessment and the institutional culture regarding assessment. Specifically, participants who held the positive viewpoint also indicated that the culture within their division supported assessment activities, assessment was a priority activity in their division, a division-level expectation existed that results were used to improve programs and services, and there existed a concurrent provision of helpful resources, including, in some cases, an individual dedicated to providing assessment support.

While culture is complex and is frequently understood differently, in this context it appears that participants with the positive viewpoint understand assessment culture to be a set of expectations and circumstances in their institution that lead to assessment being embedded into daily practice. In describing the role that assessment plays in his work, one participant noted that "it's really woven into most things, and so anything new that we try automatically has to have an assessment component with it so that we know if it's working or not." The participant went on to note that the resources that the division had put into assessment over the years and the follow-up on assessment reporting communicated a clear message that assessment was an expected part of the job. Another participant observed that the culture within the division, as represented by institutional expectations and support, provided her with a greater sense of self-efficacy and agency with regard to conducting assessment and making program and service improvements. She stated:

> *"So I know that it will have the support, and to me, when it has the support from our leaders, you know, I think that any other limitations that come up are probably going to be addressed, and ultimately neutralized or removed, just to advance the work."*

This participant also recognized that this support was integrally connected to decisions about prioritizing assessment in her work, as evidenced by the following quote.

> *"If you have the support of... your administrators... for doing that assessment, it gives you that push to allow time for that assessment, and opportunity to grow... the department. Without that support it doesn't carry the weight that it needs to, also."*

Note the recognition in this statement of the impact of institutional-level support and expectations on decisions about prioritizing assessment. This observation connects to the high (+3) ranking of statement 35, "I make time to do assessment," among those whose sorts loaded positively on this factor. Beliefs about the priority placed on assessment within the division (statement 21) were reflected then in the priorities of the individuals. This divisional priority was also reflected in the support provided to individuals who struggled with conducting assessment activities. Multiple individuals with the positive viewpoint noted that the presence of a divisional assessment director provided critical education and feedback that fostered "an assessment-minded culture within the division" and allowed them to engage in effective assessment within their program or service area. The support for assessment at the institutional-level, for these individuals, complemented their view that assessment was central to their ability to engage in effective practice and, therefore, carried a high level of significance for their work.

Views of institutional-level support among those whose sorts loaded negatively on the factor also emphasized the salience of having an individual providing feedback and support; however, in this case it was the lack of availability of such an individual that had an impact. One participant noted:

"It's so complicated. You need to have a lot of training and time to do it correctly and

who has that time! Unless you have a dedicated person to work with assessment who has

been well trained, the results are useless most of the time."

Note the intersection here of intrapersonal beliefs about the complicated and time-intensive

nature of assessment and the lack of availability of an institutional resource to assist with making

results useful. This lack of institutional-level resources and expectations that results are used to

make assessment-based improvements contributed to frustration with the continued focus on

assessment among these individuals (statement 51). To this end, the participant also reflected:

"To me, a lot of time I feel like [assessment] is just a time stealer, because we don't…

Because number one, if we want to do something about it, we need resources to do it,

which no one has any. Number two, we probably need manpower, well I mean that's part

of resources, but you know. You need the time to want to devote to it, which no one has

any. It's just like sometimes I think that it's so surface, it's just so fake sometimes. They

do assessment, but they just… It's just to do assessments. It's not to actually make a

change."

In short, among those with the negative viewpoint, the perceived culture of assessment within

their divisions, as reflected in a lack of support, resources, or prioritization of assessment,

compounded or perhaps fostered intrapersonal views that assessment is a waste of time and is,

therefore, insignificant to one's work.

In summary, participants who held either the positive or negative viewpoint associated

with Factor 1 experienced a high level of alignment between their own beliefs about the

significance of assessment to their work and their surrounding environment, as defined by the

culture of assessment within their division and reflected in institutional expectations and support

regarding assessment activities. The views of these participants appeared to be rooted in their past experiences regarding how assessment has or has not been supported and used for program or service improvement.

Factor 2: Assessment-as-Irrelevant

Factor 2 was defined by ten sorts and was named Assessment-as-Irrelevant. Central to the beliefs of participants who held this viewpoint were a paradoxical view of assessment as important in theory but irrelevant to their own work in practice, as well as a lack of self-efficacy and competency with regard to assessment. The full theoretical factor array for individuals whose sorts loaded on Factor 2 is provided in Figure 5, with distinguishing statements bolded and consensus statements italicized. The extreme statements for Factor 2, including the five "most like" and "most unlike" statements in the array are provided in Table 8.

Most unlike my beliefs   Most like my beliefs

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
24	**23**	**6**	**38**	51	*45*	4	22	*16*	**50**	**19**
41	27	**49**	35	8	*26*	**12**	*25*	**30**	**28**	40
	47	42	9	37	14	**39**	*31*	**36**	20	
		18	*11*	5	*2*	**21**	48	*29*		
		43	*17*	**32**	**13**	3	**10**	7		
			46	44	33	**1**	**34**			
					15					

Figure 5. Factor 2 Theoretical Array. Distinguishing statements are bolded and consensus statements are italicized.

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Table 8

Factor 2 Extreme Statements

"Most Like My Beliefs" Statements	Array Position	Z-score
19. The primary purpose of engaging in assessment is to improve my programs and/or services	5	2.113*
40. It is an expectation in my division of student affairs that staff members use assessment results to improve programs and services	5	1.864
50. I know how my program or service area is performing without having to engage in assessment	4	1.548*
28. I find assessment to be confusing	4	1.363*
20. I find it hard to effectively conduct assessment in my program or service area	4	1.187*
"Most Unlike My Beliefs" Statements	Array Position	Z-score
47. Assessment is communicated to be important in my division of student affairs but there is little to no follow-through	-4	-1.314*
27. Assessment results are criticized for going nowhere in my division	-4	-1.472*
23. I have both the knowledge and skills needed to carry out effective assessment	-4	-1.487*
41. I enjoy doing assessment	-5	-2.074*
24. My introduction into student affairs included an emphasis on assessing my programs and/or services	-5	-2.110

Note. *denotes a distinguishing statement

Important in theory, irrelevant in practice: A paradox. Like those who held the

positive viewpoint associated with Factor 1, participants whose sorts loaded on Factor 2

indicated they strongly believe the primary purpose of engaging in assessment is to improve

programs or services. Furthermore, they also indicated that it was an expectation in their division

that assessment results are used to improve programs and services, and it is their perception that

assessment results are used and shared within their division. To this effect, participants noted:

"The primary focus for assessment is to improve in the way we supply programs or

instruct our students in learning about areas."

"I believe that assessment is very important to continue offering strong and high quality

programs, services and facilities. If we did not assess, we would never know, and couldn't

justify changes/additions/subtractions."

"Assessment and the effectiveness of programming is often discussed during our staff

meetings. By conducting various assessments we are able to determine what is working

and what areas need improvement."

Further, these participants indicated that they care about assessment, understand its necessity,

and embrace opportunities for change that may result from assessment activities, stating:

"I am not frustrated by the focus on assessment because I understand the necessity of it."

"Some think results that are negative are a bad thing, it just means a time for change."

"Change sometimes is hard to accept and I understand that I'm not always going to

agree with it. Change must occur for us to better ourselves and the college as a whole."

Yet, despite this openness to change and view of assessment as theoretically necessary

for program and service improvement overall, individuals with this viewpoint paradoxically

believe that assessment is irrelevant to *their own* work in practice. In stark contrast to the

positive viewpoint associated with Factor 1, while these individuals recognize that assessment

may be important to others' work or to the institution as a whole, that importance does not carry

over to their own areas. One participant's quote clearly illustrates this paradox:

"I am aware of the reason for assessment I just don't believe that it is as important for my

job role as it is for a faculty member. It is always a good thing to know where you stand

and have accurate and up to date information but not sure that always doing assessments

is the only way to obtain this data."

Note how this participant recognizes that assessment has a purpose for some – in this case for

faculty members – but it is not as necessary for her own area based on other ways of determining

"where you stand."

For some, this seemingly contradictory view appears to be tied to a belief that assessment

is unenjoyable and simply unnecessary due to a lack of applicability to their own work or to their

functional area. This is reflected in the following participant statements.

"I don't believe that I need assessment to do my work within student affairs."

"Being on the service side of student affairs, it's hard to assess learning."

 "I do not enjoy assessment because I don't see a need for it in my area... I feel

assessment in [my] office is very hard to complete. It is hard to figure out what exactly to

assess, especially when it comes to student learning outcomes."

In the last two statements, it appears participants' beliefs about the irrelevance of assessment to

their work are connected to their perceptions that engaging in assessment in their area is too hard

– a belief that is tied to feelings of competency and explored further in the next section.

Resistance to engaging in formalized assessment within participants' own areas may also

be connected to beliefs about the primary motivation for conducting assessment. The high

rankings (+3) of two policy-level statements, statement 36, "Assessment is an exercise primarily

for compliance purposes" and statement 29, "The primary driving factor behind assessment

efforts is demonstrating the value of student affairs programs and services" place the focus of

formalized assessment in a realm that is, once again, viewed as irrelevant to the participants'

own work. The same participant who wrote that it is hard to figure out what to assess in her area

when it comes to student learning outcomes also commented on the recent introduction of compliance-driven assessment activities into that area.

> *"Assessment has never been done in our office before last year. The university is now encouraging and making assessment mandatory. We have to pick a university wide student learning outcome to assess and develop a report each year."*

This recent, externally imposed requirement may add to the sense that formalized assessment is an artificial or meaningless activity based on the perception that it is not connected to the participants' own work.

For other participants, the view that formalized assessment is irrelevant to their own work seems to be rooted in a reliance on expertise or intuition as informal approaches to assessing and improving their programs and services. The high ranking (+4) of statement 50, "I know how my program or service area is performing without having to engage in assessment," was explained by participants as the ability to informally assess their area based on their own subject-specific knowledge or understanding of that area. To this end, one participant stated, "[My program] is an area where we are required to teach and instruct students in certain areas, which is why I know how and what needs to be performed without assessment." Another one simply replied with "Experience" when prompted to explain the high ranking of statement 50. Furthermore, the same participant who previously noted a lack of frustration due to understanding the necessity of assessment, also reflected, "I do not enjoy conducting assessments. I prefer to just be told the problem and I will create the solution." Note how this participant tied a lack of enjoyment for doing assessment to a preference for creating solutions that are not connected to formal assessment activities. This same participant went on to state, "I find conducting assessments confusing due to my lack of experience," emphasizing another key aspect of the beliefs of these

participants: a deep lack of self-efficacy and competency with regard to engaging in assessment activities.

Lack of self-efficacy and competency. Individuals with this viewpoint reported a lack of assessment-related self-efficacy and competency that was rooted in a lack of exposure to assessment in their introduction to student affairs and reflected in assessment activities taking a back seat to other job functions and their lack of enjoyment for doing assessment. As noted previously, some participants found assessment to be challenging due to the unique characteristics of their functional areas. Other participants found assessment to be confusing in general and reported a lack of knowledge and skills needed to carry out effective assessment. Reflecting on the low ranking (-5) of statement 41, "I enjoy doing assessment," one participant stated, "I think this relates to my belief that assessment is confusing. Anything really confusing isn't the most fun to do…" This participant went on to expand on her lack of competency and self-efficacy, stating:

> *"The biggest thing for me is that I believe assessment to be important, but I don't know how to properly accomplish these types of tasks on this campus. I am very happy we have a great resource to assist, but I feel that I would need step-by-step guidance in order to be effective in any assessment project."*

Note how this participant referenced the availability of an institutional-level resource but remained firmly convinced that her lack of competency would prevent engaging in effective assessment. Interestingly, this participant's feelings about institutional resources were reflective of the general neutrality with which these individuals viewed institutional-level support for assessment. Nearly all statements regarding the availability of institutional assessment resources and support were placed in the neutral columns of the Factor 2 array. This communicates an

ambiguity with regard to the provision of assessment-related training, feedback, or other

resources within their divisions. The neutral placement of nearly all of the interpersonal-level

statements related to perceptions of their peers' assessment involvement and beliefs further

emphasizes that these individuals are relatively unconcerned with how others view or engage in

assessment. As such, it appears that their lack of competency or self-efficacy is not attributed to

an absence of institutional-level or interpersonal-level support. Instead, it seems to be connected

to a lack of desire to prioritize formal assessment training and activities based on intrapersonal

beliefs that assessment is not relevant to their work or they are not individuals who do, or need to

do, assessment. This is also reflected in the low ranking (-3) of statement 6, "I consider myself to

have an assessment mindset." When asked to explain this low ranking, one participant replied, "I

am knowledgeable when it comes to assessment; however I do not have a mindset for it." This

statement communicates a clear rejection of an identity as one who does assessment that is

separate from concerns about competency.

In summary, these participants view formalized assessment as something that is good in

theory for others but irrelevant to their own work based on perceptions that assessment is

incompatible with the work they do in their areas or the belief that their own experience provides

them with the necessary insight to effectively manage their program or service. In general, these

individuals do not consider themselves to be assessment minded nor to have the competency

needed to engage in formalized assessment, regardless of the availability of institutional or

interpersonal-level support.

Factor 3: Assessment-in-Isolation

Factor 3 was defined by 11 sorts and was named Assessment-in-Isolation. Central to the

views of participants who held this viewpoint were feelings of being torn between a commitment

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to meaningful, embedded assessment practice and competing priorities in their everyday work, as well as feelings of isolation that were rooted in a lack of alignment between the high intrapersonal value these participants place on assessment and their perceptions of the low value placed on assessment at the interpersonal, institutional, and community levels. The full theoretical factor array for individuals whose sorts loaded on Factor 3 is provided in Figure 6, with distinguishing statements bolded and consensus statements italicized. The extreme statements for Factor 3, including the five "most like" and "most unlike" statements in the array are provided in Table 9.

Most unlike my beliefs   Most like my beliefs

-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
44	42	**13**	*11*	8	**28**	22	**40**	**47**	12	**30**
24	38	50	51	**34**	27	9	*29*	**10**	*16*	**19**
	32	7	4	*17*	48	*31*	20	1	5	
		33	49	39	**6**	23	**37**	**46**		
		36	**43**	14	3	*26*	**35**	*25*		
			21	18	41	*45*	2			
					15					

Figure 6. Factor 3 Theoretical Array. Distinguishing statements are bolded and consensus statements are italicized.

Competing priorities: Care and the tyranny of the immediate. Individuals with this viewpoint care deeply about assessment, view assessment as a fundamental aspect of effective student affairs practice, and believe the purpose is to improve programs and services. At the core of this belief about the essential nature of assessment is a strong sense of agency and

responsibility with regard to making evidence-based changes as a result of engaging in assessment activities. These participants see assessment as intrinsically linked with the use of results for program and service improvement, as illustrated in the following quotes.

> *"I believe and have seen that data and assessment can lead to change. Data can be powerful when decisions need to be made about the direction of a program or department."*
>
> *"I believe that by completing assessment techniques I can adjust my programs and strategies to better serve the students and create the most positive atmosphere possible."*
>
> *"I don't believe that anyone knows how well they are doing in their specific area without assessment - it is an absolute need in all areas."*

This commitment to engaging in meaningful assessment and using results for improvement is tested, however, by the consistent presence of what Schroeder and Pike (2001) referred to as the "tyranny of the immediate" – competing priorities that impede one's ability to do assessment. One participant simply stated, "I care about assessment. I see the value of it. There just isn't enough time in the day." Describing her commitment to assessment, an interviewee noted, "Without assessment, you're just running in a direction. Whether or not it's the right one, you don't know," but she then went on to lament the lack of time available for her to engage in assessment activities.

> *"Unfortunately, being in a small college atmosphere, I have a lot of different hats that I wear on top of my student affairs duties. I find that I'm able to do assessment activities and really look at things when I have time, when other things are done, or when I have a break."*

Table 9

Factor 3 Extreme Statements

"Most Like My Beliefs" Statements	Array Position	Z-score
30. Assessment activities often take a back seat to my other job functions	5	1.908*
19. The primary purpose of engaging in assessment is to improve my programs and/or services	5	1.684*
12. Assessment is a fundamental aspect of effective student affairs practice	4	1.507
16. Assessment helps me determine what students are learning as they engage in or with programs and services	4	1.483
5. It is within my power to make changes in my area based on assessment results	4	1.390*

"Most Unlike My Beliefs" Statements	Array Position	Z-score
32. I consider most of the people I work with in student affairs to be assessment-minded	-4	-1.452*
38. I'm not sure of the purpose of assessment	-4	-1.458
42. I do not care about assessment	-4	-1.684
24. My introduction into student affairs included an emphasis on assessing my programs and/or services	-5	-1.744
44. My division provides adequate training for assessment activities	-5	-1.962*

Note. *denotes a distinguishing statement

Another interviewee shared that she would like the opportunity to spend more time developing assessment knowledge and skills among her staff members, but workload responsibilities and "what are seen as more urgent and more time-sensitive matters" cause assessment to take a backseat. In reflecting on this conflict between one's strong commitment to assessment and the tyranny of the immediate, one participant noted that the root of the issue is in the challenge to integrating assessment into daily work.

"Too often we get caught up in the day-to-day grind of our other job functions.

Assessment is not a daily task that you can just decide I'm going to do today. It is a

process of creating and developing a plan within your department that can be integrated

into your daily work. It takes being proactive and intentional about what we intend to

have as outcomes, how we hope to achieve them and how we plan to assess our results. It

is easy to put off this planning to do other, more urgent items of the day and it also

requires bringing your department together for intentional conversation. Just the

planning and implementation is a challenge."

Note that this participant is referring to both the need to engage in assessment as an individual

and the need to engage with one's colleagues in planning activities. This illustrates the crucial

role of interpersonal interactions and perceptions in this viewpoint.

Interpersonal and community isolation. Individuals with this viewpoint feel their

commitment to assessment makes them unlike their peers, and this commitment was not

reflected in either their introduction to student affairs or in the focus of the field, as a whole, on

assessment. Participants indicated they believe that most of the people they work with in student

affairs say assessment is important, but their actions do not match their words. Additionally, they

do not consider most of the people they work with in student affairs to be assessment-minded. As

the following quotes illustrate, multiple participants attributed this low level of peer commitment

to assessment to a lack of education or training in assessment.

"A lot of the people I work with in student affairs do not have advanced degrees and/or

training in assessment; verbally and through their actions they shy away from

assessment."

"I think that at our institution the profession of student affairs isn't as strong as it might be at other institutions, so that really that baseline understanding of a lot of the employees of theory, student development, all of those pieces, a lot of the people employed in many areas didn't come up through that educational track or don't hold degrees related to that."

Compounding the issue of a lack of peer commitment to assessment activities is a lack of emphasis on assessment in these participants' orientation to student affairs. In reflecting on their introduction into student affairs, participants noted:

"When I came to the institution 10 years ago and began my work.… There really wasn't a lot of discussion about assessment. It really was just more focused on the day-to-day tasks and duties. I didn't really have an introduction on understanding of the assessment, how to look at that, how to conduct it, and how to use it to inform your work."

"When I entered the student affairs profession (20 yrs), assessment was not recognized as necessary."

Instead, participants felt it was up to them to build their assessment competency on their own.

"As far as training goes, I was never really trained on how to assess my programs and devise strategies to improve on things. It's really just been something I've picked up in the past and things I've looked at myself. As far as building a strategy to assessing, I've done that all on my own."

This sense of assessment-related isolation at the interpersonal level and community level was also reflected in how these individuals viewed the commitment of their institutions to assessment.

Intrapersonal-institutional incongruence. Individuals with this viewpoint find their beliefs about the critical nature of assessment at odds with the lack of availability of support and resources at their institutions, the institutional focus on assessment primarily for compliance purposes, and the lack of follow-through with regard to assessment within their divisions. This lack of congruence between these participants' intrapersonal beliefs about assessment and their perceptions of institutional support and action manifested as frustration with the institutional culture related to assessment, as reflected in one participant's quote: "Assessment is stated to be a priority activity, however, there needs to be much more education before it will truly become part of the culture and ongoing practice of student affairs at our institution."

Participants also strongly believed that training, support and feedback regarding assessment activities were lacking at the institutional level, as evidenced by the lowest possible ranking (-5) of statement 44, "My division provides adequate training for assessment activities," and the low ranking (-3) of both statement 13, "I have access to helpful support, including resources, if I struggle with conducting assessment activities" and statement 33, "I receive helpful feedback on my assessment activities and results." Multiple participants noted that they felt a need for more training and development in the area of assessment and guidance for their assessment activities.

Participants also reported feelings of frustration with assessment activities in their division being handled by a select few individuals and a lack of sharing assessment results within the division. One participant noted, "Leadership within my division handles the assessment and very rarely values or even asks for input from the department." Another participant wrote, "I am only aware of my department's assessment outcomes. I would be interested to see other areas' assessment tools and results, but they are not shared frequently enough."

Perhaps magnifying the frustration these individuals feel with the lack of institutional-level support is the perception that the focus of their institution's assessment efforts is on compliance – a notion at odds with these individuals' beliefs that assessment is intrinsically linked to program and service improvement. Regarding institutional-level commitment to assessment activities, one participant reflected that "Assessment primarily happens only when necessary, and is conducted with thoroughness only when required for official paperwork." Participants from multiple institutions also referenced the impact of recent accreditation efforts on institutional assessment efforts, noting that these accreditation efforts have led to a renewed focus on assessing learning within student affairs programs and services at their institutions; however, perhaps in response to an institutional focus on assessment that is not accompanied by increased support for assessment activities, one participant expressed frustration with this focus.

> *"Assessment is fundamental to the functioning of any department, so long as it is worthwhile and effective assessment. There is no reason to assess what is happening to keep accreditation, as it is not benefitting the development of professionals nor improving the success of students."*

Note how this participant makes clear her intrapersonal beliefs about the fundamental nature of assessment *so long as it is worthwhile and effective*. The reference to the futility of focusing on assessment solely to keep accreditation, without a concurrent focus on using assessment for improvement, makes clear the frustration of these individuals with the current institutional culture regarding assessment.

In summary, these individuals view assessment as a critical aspect of their work that is intrinsically tied to improving their programs and services, but this intrapersonal commitment is in constant conflict with competing priorities these individuals face due to their positions.

Further, these individuals experience a lack of interpersonal, institutional, and community-level support for assessment, resulting in assessment activities being carried out in isolation, if at all.

<div align="center">**Research Question 2: Background Characteristics**</div>

The second research question in this study was: Are there any background characteristics associated with differences among the various perceptions? An examination of the data revealed several background characteristics were associated with differences among viewpoints, including institution type, position level, level of responsibility for assessment activities, time spent working in student affairs, highest degree earned, and the beliefs participants held about the role of student affairs in higher education. While participants' functional area did not appear to differ substantially among the viewpoints, the ways in which participants understood the definition of assessment and viewed the applicability of assessment of student learning to their area did differ, as described below. Table 10 provides an overview of the various participant background characteristics associated with the three emergent viewpoints: Assessment-as Significant (Factor 1), Assessment-as-Irrelevant (Factor 2), and Assessment-in-Isolation (Factor 3).

Assessment-as-Significant Characteristics

The polarized Assessment-as-Significant (Factor 1) viewpoint was defined by participants' beliefs about the significance of assessment to their work, the use of assessment results for improvement in their own program or service area, and the alignment of intrapersonal beliefs and perceived institutional culture regarding assessment. In the investigation of characteristics associated with this viewpoint, attention was paid not only to differences in characteristics among those whose sorts loaded on to the factor overall, but also to differences between the individuals holding the opposing views within the bipolar factor.

Table 10

Participant Background Characteristics Associated with Emergent Viewpoints

Characteristic	Factor 1 (n = 21; 50%)	Factor 2 (n = 10; 24%)	Factor 3 (n = 11; 26%)	Total (n = 42; 100%)
Institution type				
4-year research university	7 (78%)	2 (22%)	0 (0%)	9 (100%)
4-year teaching university	5 (33%)	4 (27%)	6 (40%)	15 (100%)
2-year community college	7 (54%)	2 (15%)	4 (31%)	13 (100%)
Unknown	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	1 (20%)	5 (100%)
Position level				
Entry	4 (40%)	2 (20%)	4 (40%)	10 (100%)
Mid	8 (50%)	6 (38%)	2 (13%)	16 (100%)
Senior	9 (56%)	2 (13%)	5 (31%)	16 (100%)
Functional area				
Program-oriented	8 (40%)	6 (30%)	6 (30%)	20 (100%)
Service-oriented	13 (59%)	4 (18%)	5 (23%)	22 (100%)
Responsibility for assessment				
I do not engage in assessment	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	3 (100%)
Engage; unsure if official responsibility	4 (57%)	1 (14%)	2 (29%)	7 (100%)
Engage; not official responsibility	2 (25%)	5 (63%)	1 (13%)	8 (100%)
Official responsibility	15 (63%)	3 (13%)	6 (25%)	24 (100%)
Time in student affairs				
Less than 3 years	3 (33%)	4 (44%)	2 (22%)	9 (100%)
3-6 years	5 (56%)	2 (22%)	2 (22%)	9 (100%)
7-10 years	3 (43%)	1 (14%)	3 (43%)	7 (100%)
11-14 years	3 (50%)	1 (17%)	2 (33%)	6 (100%)
15+ years	7 (64%)	2 (18%)	2 (18%)	11 (100%)
Highest degree earned				
Associate's	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)
Bachelor's	5 (31%)	6 (38%)	5 (31%)	16 (100%)
Master's, Education	5 (45%)	1 (9%)	5 (45%)	11 (100%)
Master's, Non-education	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	8 (100%)
Doctorate, Non-education	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)
Professional	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)

Note. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Twenty-one participants held the Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint; nineteen held the

positive viewpoint and two held the negative viewpoint. In general, participants whose sorts

loaded either positively or negatively on this factor held mid or senior-level positions, had spent

seven or more years working in student affairs, held a graduate degree (master's level or higher) that they had obtained six or more years ago, and reported that assessment responsibilities were part of their official job duties. Additionally, while all institutional types were represented among participants with this viewpoint, the majority of participants from the four-year research university (78%) and the two-year community college (54%) held this viewpoint. Participants with this viewpoint also held similar beliefs about the role of student affairs in higher education, viewing the purpose of student affairs as supporting the academic mission of the institution.

Student affairs and assessment experience. The defining characteristics of individuals with this viewpoint point to the likelihood that these individuals have extensive experience and preparation in student affairs, as evidenced by 81% of participants whose sorts defined this viewpoint holding mid and senior-level positions, 62% indicating they had spent seven or more years working in student affairs, 71% reporting they were officially responsible for assessment activities, and 62% holding graduate degrees. That extensive experience and preparation appears to equate to more exposure to and responsibility for assessment activities, as well as distinct opinions with regard to whether assessment is ultimately significant to their work. This is true of individuals with either the positive or negative viewpoint. The polarity of the viewpoint appears to hinge on whether that exposure to assessment activities resulted in positive or negative experiences and whether the individuals viewed the motivation for engaging in assessment as rooted in institutionally-supported improvement of programs and services or mere compliance with institutional-level assessment requirements without accompanying support.

Institution type. As noted previously, the majority of participants from the research university (78%) and the community college (54%) were associated with this viewpoint; however, participants from all institution types were represented, with seven participants

representing the four-year research university, seven from the two-year community college, five

from the four-year teaching universities, and two unknown. It should be noted that the two

individuals whose sorts loaded negatively on this factor came from the same institutions as

several individuals whose sorts loaded positively on this factor, including one of the four-year

teaching universities and the two-year community college. These initial results do not indicate a

clear link between institution type and the Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint. Rather, the link

between participant institutions and viewpoints appeared to hinge on participant perceptions of

institutional culture related to assessment, which is discussed further in chapter 5.

      Functional area: Service-oriented definitions of assessment. Of the 21 participants

who held this viewpoint, 62% were employed in service-oriented areas, while 38% were from

program-oriented areas. Regarding the polarization of the viewpoint, there was no discernible

difference in the functional area of those whose sorts loaded positively or negatively on the

factor, with individuals from both service and program-oriented areas holding both the positive

and negative viewpoints. There did, however, seem to be differences in how participants from

service-oriented areas defined assessment and how service-oriented individuals from either end

of the viewpoint viewed the relevance of assessment to their work. Service-oriented practitioners

whose sorts loaded either positively or negatively on this factor appeared to think of assessment

in terms of determining operational effectiveness, rather than determining the level of student

learning that resulted from engagement with their service area, despite the definition of

assessment of student learning that was provided in the instructions for the sorting activity.

Examples of assessment activities provided by interviewees from service-oriented areas focused

on student satisfaction, recruitment numbers, or student exposure to important messages.

Differences did emerge, however, between service-oriented individuals with the positive and

negative viewpoints regarding how they viewed the purpose of assessment and their positioning in student affairs. All of the service-oriented individuals with the positive viewpoint ultimately related their assessment efforts back to enhancing the success of the students they serve, noting their motivations for ensuring their service was delivered effectively were driven by the need to create an environment conducive to student learning. In this sense, the spirit behind assessment of operational effectiveness seemed to be enhancing services to better support students even if those services do not directly contribute to student learning. One participant who worked in a campus bookstore noted how the connection to student affairs allowed this type of focus, stating:

> *"A big part of being a student affairs ran store versus a business office in that respect, or a finance office ran store, is, yes, we have to consider our finances as a big part of the picture, but we can focus more on delivering it at the best value for the students rather than making a profit from the students."*

Note how this interviewee drew a parallel between operating effectively in student affairs and focusing on delivering services in the best interest of the students. In contrast, on the polarized end of this viewpoint, one individual noted that the service focus of her department prevented meaningful engagement in assessment. This individual stated, "I think that… [my] area is really a lot different than a programming office. I think that that's another huge difference…. [This] office does not really program." The participant went on to reflect that the positioning of her office within student affairs was incongruent with her departmental focus, stating:

> *"I always say all the time, 'You know, we're just not as touchy feely as student affairs a lot of the times'…. Sometimes I think that you can't just make everybody fit in the same mold, because we just don't program the same way. We don't operate. Everything we do is so much more just process and technical."*

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This quote illustrates how this participant views both assessment and the department's positioning in student affairs as unnecessary to the successful operation of the service area, in contrast with the view of service-oriented participants with the positive viewpoint.

Student affairs as support for the academic mission. Another characteristic associated with this viewpoint was the belief these participants held about the purpose of student affairs. An analysis of open-ended responses regarding participant views of the role of student affairs in higher education revealed that individuals on both ends of this viewpoint view the role of student affairs as supporting the academic mission of the institution. Participant responses, depicted in a word cloud in Figure 7, demonstrated a clear connection between student affairs programs and services, academics, and student learning. Participant responses to this effect included:

"Student affairs supports the academic mission of the university by creating and sustaining an environment that promotes learning and development."

"Student affairs is a collaborative partner with academic affairs in delivering on the promise, mission, and purpose of higher education to help all students complete the personal, academic and occupational journey..."

"Student affairs programs and services are critical in serving/supporting our students on a day-to-day basis, as well as retaining them, and contributing to their academic success."

Keeling, Wall, Underhile, and Dungy (2008) posited that the implications of viewing student affairs as part of the academic endeavor is that practitioners must perceive themselves as educators who are responsible to assess the learning that is taking place in one's programs and services. This appears to be the mindset of those with the positive viewpoint who indicated that assessment was tied to improving their programs and services and, ultimately, fulfilling their

purpose within the institution. To this end, one individual reflected, "Our role on campus is to provide our students with programs and services to help them succeed in college and life. Assessing our programs and services is a critical step in achieving results."

Figure 7. Word Cloud of Factor 1 Participant Views of Student Affairs Role in Higher Education

At first glance, then, one might assume that those participants whose sorts loaded negatively on this factor would not view the role of student affairs in the same light as those who loaded positively. It should be noted, however, that one interviewee who held the negative viewpoint felt quite strongly that student affairs provided support for the academic mission of the institution. When questioned about the incongruence between viewing student affairs as directly connected to supporting student learning and believing that assessment was not significant to one's work, she responded:

> *"That's a good question. I mean, well, I suppose we've got to use assessment to figure out if we're really achieving what we're supposed to be achieving. Are we really preparing them for the real world? Yeah, you know lately maybe not. Maybe we do need some assessment to figure out why."*

By this comment, which came at the very end of the interview, the participant appears to be conceding that assessment may, indeed, be a critical aspect of student affairs practice given the focus on providing academic support.

Assessment-as-Irrelevant Characteristics

The Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoint was defined by participants' paradoxical view of assessment as important in theory but irrelevant to their own work in practice, as well as a lack of self-efficacy and competency with regard to assessment. The ten participants who held this viewpoint represented the full range of institution types and both program and service-oriented functional areas. Typically, individuals with this viewpoint have spent less than seven years working in student affairs, have earned a bachelor's degree, and hold entry or mid-level positions. While these participants did report engaging in assessment activities, they were also likely to report that it was not part of their official job duties.

Institution type and functional area. Individuals with this viewpoint represented all institution types and both functional areas. Regarding institution type, 40% of participants with this viewpoint were from the four-year teaching universities, 20% were from the four-year research university, 20% were from the two-year community college, and institution was unknown for the remaining 20%. Regarding functional area, 60% of participants represented program-oriented areas and 40% were from service-oriented areas. This relatively even distribution of participants among institution types and functional areas, coupled with the saliency of intrapersonal factors associated with this viewpoint rather than factors associated with the surrounding environment, indicates the viewpoint may be institutionally ubiquitous. In other words, since this viewpoint is defined primarily by intrapersonal-level beliefs about

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assessment and participants represent the full range of institution types, it is likely that individuals with this viewpoint can be found everywhere.

Student affairs and assessment experience. In contrast to participants who held the Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint, Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants typically had much less experience and preparation in student affairs overall and with assessment activities in particular. This is evidenced by 80% of participants with this viewpoint holding entry or mid-level positions, 60% reporting they had worked in student affairs for less than seven years, 70% reporting they had earned an associate's or bachelor's degree rather than a graduate degree, and 70% indicating assessment was not an official responsibility in their positions. The lower levels of experience and responsibility for assessment of the individuals with this viewpoint appear to be associated with the lack of assessment self-efficacy and competency and belief that assessment is irrelevant to one's own work that characterized this viewpoint.

Student affairs as real-world preparation. One notable characteristic of those who held this viewpoint was their view of the role of student affairs in higher education as preparation and development of skills for the "real world." Figure 8 depicts a word cloud of participant responses regarding the role of student affairs. Central to this perspective is the belief that student affairs fills a gap between what students are learning within the classroom and what they will actually need in order to be prepared for life after college. The following participant quotes regarding the role of student affairs illustrate this finding.

> *"Student Affairs often encompasses learning life skills or 'soft skills' that students may not be getting within their classroom environments, but will need to become successful members of society."*

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"Rounding out the student experience, to help the student be more prepared for the world

outside of college."

"Student affairs in higher education is all about student growth. This is the mechanism

that supports academics through professional development, support services, etc. I view

student affairs as the college life internship, and the more students can be involved while

in school, the more prepared they will be for life and career after college."

This last statement highlights a particularly interesting concept – that student affairs provides

opportunities to be an apprentice to life, becoming prepared for the real world through applicable

experiences that are not accessible in the formal classroom environment. There appears to be an

interesting connection here between this practical experience-focused view of the role of student

affairs and these participants' beliefs that formalized assessment is irrelevant to their work due to

their ability to effectively manage their area based on practical experience alone.

Figure 8. Word Cloud of Factor 2 Participant Views of Student Affairs Role in Higher Education

Assessment in Isolation Characteristics

The Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoint was defined by participant feelings of being torn between a commitment to meaningful, embedded assessment practice and the pressing nature of competing priorities in their everyday work, as well as feelings of isolation stemming from a lack of alignment between intrapersonal valuing of assessment and interpersonal, institutional, and community-level support for assessment activities. The 11 participants with this viewpoint represented a range of position levels, both program and service-oriented areas, and the full array of time spent working in student affairs, ranging from less than three years to 15 or more years. Participants were nearly equally split regarding the highest degree they had earned with 45% having earned bachelor's degrees, 45% holding Education-related master's degrees, and 9% (one participant) holding a doctoral degree. While there were only three participants whose sorts loaded on one of the three factors who indicated they did not engage in assessment activities at all, two of those three participants were associated with this viewpoint. In general, however, the majority (55%) of these participants reported that they engaged in assessment as an official job duty. Regarding institution type, participants were typically from one of the four-year teaching universities or the two-year community college.

Institution type and institution size. The institution types associated with this viewpoint notably excluded the four-year, research-focused university. Of the participants who held this viewpoint, 55% were from one of the four-year teaching-focused universities, 31% were from the community college, and 9% (1 participant) had an unknown institution type. It is possible that this is due to the mission and focus of the institution driving participants' perceptions and beliefs about how the institution does, or does not, support assessment. This was evident in how several interviewees discussed how their institutional culture was at odds with their interpersonal

commitment to engaging in assessment. Some of these statements were presented earlier, in the interpretation of Factor 3, but are repeated here with bolded excerpts to emphasize the relationship of institution type to this viewpoint.

> *"... in our area, assessment doesn't happen a lot directly. **I think part of that is because the nature of the kind of institution we are.** We're a two-year institution, so when you think about the folks that are instructors and the type of education we provide, **we're not a research university**, so that's not naturally part of what happens on our campus."*
>
> *"I think that at our institution the profession of student affairs **isn't as strong as it might be at other institutions,** so that really that baseline understanding of a lot of the employees of theory, student development, all of those pieces, a lot of the people employed in many areas didn't come up through that educational track or don't hold degrees related to that."*
>
> *"Unfortunately**, being in a small college atmosphere**, I have a lot of different hats that I wear on top of my student affairs duties. I find that I'm able to do assessment activities and really look at things when I have time, when other things are done, or when I have a break."*

One element of institution type that was not viewed as salient in the construction of the participant framework but clearly emerged as such in the analysis of the statements above was the size of the institution, independent of its mission. Specifically, the small size of an institution seemed to be associated with the likelihood that a student affairs practitioner might "wear multiple hats" or be responsible for a variety of programmatic or service areas, thereby limiting the availability of time to engage in assessment activities within any one of their areas. After these participant comments were noted, the researcher looked more closely at the specific

institutions associated with this viewpoint and noted that participants from the small, four year teaching college (Institution B) and the small, two-year community college (Institution D) accounted for 64% of participants whose sorts loaded on this factor.

Student affairs as outside-of-classroom development. Individuals who held the Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoint indicated they believed the role of student affairs in higher education was to provide support for student learning and development that takes place outside of the classroom. Figure 9 presents a word cloud of Factor 3 participant responses regarding the role of student affairs in higher education.

Figure 9. Word Cloud of Factor 3 Participant Views of Student Affairs Role in Higher Education

While there appears to be a parallel here between this view of student affairs and the "student affairs as real-world experience" view of Factor 2 participants, these participants specifically view student affairs programs and services as supporting student learning and development in a way that is complementary to – as opposed to in addition to or in lieu of – the development that takes place within the classroom. This view is distinct in its focus on the creation of environments, programs, and services intended to enhance the learning and development that

occurs in classrooms. The following participant responses related to the role of student affairs in higher education illustrate this focus.

> *"Students need support through the educational process. Much of that support is related to academics in the classroom. However, students are varied and complex, and student affairs professionals and services provide the additional support needed to enhance learning and allowing students to persist through graduation and beyond."*

> *"A student affairs professional's function is to help aid the development of students outside of the classroom and academic setting. To help provide an environment of opportunities and challenges that promotes intrapersonal development."*

> *"The role of student affairs in higher education is to provide for the personal development of students outside of what they learn in the classroom. Student Affairs exposes students to leadership, to diversity and inclusion issues, and supports the needs of students and the personal development of soft skills."*

In this sense, student affairs connects academic learning to real life experience rather than supporting either one to the exclusion of the other, as emphasized in bold in the following participant quote.

> *"I believe that Students Affairs serves as the conduit to **connect what is learned in the classroom to real life experience**. Student Affairs can provide real life opportunities for students to apply what they are learning and gain real world skills. Student Affairs is also a great mechanism to **support student growth inside and outside of the classroom**. This could be through tutoring, counseling, social interaction, student employment and other related activities."*

Like the connection previously drawn between Factor 1 participants' beliefs that their work is connected to student learning and concurrent feelings of responsibility to assess that learning, Factor 3 participants' views of the purpose of student affairs likely connect to their intrapersonal commitment to engaging in meaningful assessment, despite the competing priorities they face. It may also connect to the frustration these individuals experience regarding the compliance-driven culture of assessment within their institutions coupled with the perceived lack of institutional-level support for assessment activities.

Summary

This chapter provided a description of the data analysis and explored the findings of the study and the answers to the research questions. The data analysis revealed a three-factor solution that was interpreted to reveal three distinct viewpoints related to assessment of student learning in student affairs: Assessment-as-Significant, Assessment-as-Irrelevant, and Assessment-in-Isolation. The background characteristics of participants were then examined to determine differences among the viewpoints. Chapter 5 provides discussion concerning these three viewpoints and associated background characteristics, including the practical and theoretical implications of the findings. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are also provided.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the range of perceptions of student affairs practitioners regarding student affairs assessment practice. This was accomplished by integrating various individual and environmental factors into a comprehensive framework that encompasses the multiple levels of the social ecological model (McLeroy, Steckler, Bibeau, & Glanz, 1988). Further, the study was intended to investigate whether background characteristics, such as education level, position and area in student affairs, or the assumptions individuals hold about the role of student affairs, are associated with differing viewpoints. To achieve this purpose, the following research questions were explored.

1. What are the perceptions of practitioners regarding various individual and environmental factors posited to impact the practice of assessment of student learning in student affairs?

2. Are there any background characteristics associated with differences among the various perceptions?

Summary of Findings

Study participants (n = 44) sorted 51 Q statements based on their perceptions of various individual and environmental factors related to assessment of student learning in student affairs. Following the sorting process, participants responded to a series of questions related to their background characteristics. Analysis of this data revealed three distinct viewpoints related to assessment of student learning in student affairs: Assessment-as-Significant, Assessment-as-Irrelevant, and Assessment-in-Isolation. An examination of background characteristics associated with each viewpoint revealed differences among the viewpoints with regard to participant position levels, time spent working in student affairs, highest degree earned,

responsibility for assessment activities, institution type, and the beliefs participants held about the role of student affairs in higher education. The following sections provide a summary of the three viewpoints and the background characteristics associated with each viewpoint.

Assessment-as-Significant Viewpoint and Background Characteristics

The Assessment-as-Significant bipolar viewpoint was defined by 19 positively-loaded sorts and two negatively-loaded sorts. Participants with either the positive or negative Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint had strong feelings about the level of significance (i.e., the meaning or consequence) assessment held for their work. Participants who held the positive viewpoint reported they care deeply about assessment and see assessment as a fundamental aspect of student affairs practice that is directly connected to their ability to enhance student learning. Further, these participants believe they are capable of effectively engaging in assessment activities and using the results to make necessary changes and reported that they make time to do assessment. These individuals' intrapersonal beliefs about assessment were aligned with their perceptions of their institution's culture regarding assessment. Participants indicated that the culture within their division supports assessment activities, assessment is a priority activity in their division, it is a division-level expectation that assessment results are used for program and service improvement, and division resources and support are levied toward assessment activities. In contrast, participants who held the negative viewpoint reported they do not care about assessment, do not feel prepared to engage in effective assessment activities, and see assessment as inconsequential given a lack of use of results for program or service improvement. This view of assessment as insignificant to one's work was compounded or perhaps fostered by a perceived lack of institutional-level support and resources for engaging in assessment activities, as well as a lack of expectations that assessment results are used to make

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decisions about programs and services. The polarization of this viewpoint appeared to hinge on the individuals' previous experiences with assessment, with participants from both the positive and negative viewpoint recognizing that past exposure to effective or ineffective assessment practice, respectively, had shaped their current beliefs about the significance of assessment to their current work.

Participants with the Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint generally had extensive experience and preparation in student affairs, as evidenced by the vast majority of participants holding mid or senior-level positions, indicating they had spent seven or more years working in student affairs, reporting they were officially responsible for assessment activities, and holding graduate degrees. Participants represented all institution types, though a majority of participants from the four-year research university and two-year community college were associated with the viewpoint. Notably, the participants who held the negative viewpoint were from the same institutions as several participants who held the positive viewpoint. The functional area of participants did not appear to be directly related to the likelihood of holding this viewpoint. Service-oriented and program-oriented practitioners did, however, understand assessment differently in this study, with service-oriented practitioners focusing on examples of assessment that were dealt with operational effectiveness rather than student learning. Differences also emerged between service-oriented practitioners with either the positive or negative viewpoint regarding how they viewed the purpose of assessment. Those with the positive viewpoint were motivated to assess their operational effectiveness in the spirit of enhancing services to better support students, even if those services do not directly contribute to student learning. In contrast, service practitioners with the negative viewpoint believed assessment was entirely inconsequential given a perceived disconnect between their work and student learning. Finally,

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individuals with this viewpoint viewed the role of student affairs as supporting the academic mission of the institution and felt there existed a clear connection between student affairs programs and services, academics, and student learning.

Assessment-as-Irrelevant Viewpoint and Background Characteristics

The second viewpoint was defined by ten sorts and was named Assessment-as-Irrelevant, because participants with this viewpoint view formalized assessment as something that is good in theory for others but irrelevant to their own work in practice. This belief is based on perceptions that assessment is incompatible with the work they do in their particular areas or perceptions that their own experience provides them with all of the insight necessary to effectively manage their program or service area. These individuals do not consider themselves to be assessment minded nor to have the competency needed to engage in formalized assessment. Participants were neutral regarding the availability of institutional or interpersonal-level support for assessment activities, indicating that the institutional support for assessment and their peers' beliefs and actions related to assessment were not salient to their intrapersonal views of assessment or their lack of assessment competency or self-efficacy. Further, individuals with this viewpoint perceived the institutional motivation for assessment to primarily be compliance or accountability, which reinforced their beliefs that formalized assessment was irrelevant to their own work.

The participants with this viewpoint represented the full range of institution types and both program and service-oriented functional areas. They typically had less experience and preparation in student affairs than those with the Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint, with the majority reporting they had worked in student affairs for less than seven years, held entry or mid-level positions, held associate's or bachelor's degrees, and were not officially responsible for engaging in assessment. Finally, these participants viewed the role of student affairs in higher

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education as filling a gap between what students are learning within the classroom and the skills they will actually need in order to be prepared for life in the "real world."

Assessment-in-Isolation Viewpoint and Background Characteristics

The third viewpoint was defined by 11 sorts and was named Assessment-in-Isolation. These individuals care deeply about assessment and view it as a critical aspect of their work that is intrinsically tied to improving their programs and services. This commitment is in constant conflict, however, with the "tyranny of the immediate" – the competing priorities these individuals face that cause assessment to take a back seat to other job functions. Further, these individuals experience a sense of isolation in their commitment to meaningful, embedded assessment due to lack of interpersonal, institutional, and community-level support for assessment activities. This lack of support manifested as a low level of peer commitment and follow-through regarding assessment activities and an institutional culture that does not support assessment activities due to a focus on assessment primarily for compliance purposes. They also experienced a lack of emphasis on assessment in their introduction to student affairs, coupled with a lack of institutional training, support, and feedback regarding assessment, that led them to develop competency in assessment on their own.

The participants with this viewpoint represented a range of position levels, both program and service-oriented areas, and the full array of time spent working in student affairs. Participants were split between holding bachelor's and master's degrees, and the majority reported they engaged in assessment as an official job duty. The individuals with this viewpoint represented the four-year teaching universities and the two-year community college. Specifically, the majority of participants were from the small institutions included in the study. In general, these participants viewed the role of student affairs in higher education as providing support for

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student learning and development in a way that is complementary to the learning that takes place within the classroom environment and connects that learning to lived experience.

Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the notion that the barriers to integrating assessment of student learning into student affairs work are complex and interrelated. The following sections provide discussion of the reciprocal relationships that exist between the various individual and environmental factors posited to impact student affairs assessment practice, as reflected in participant perceptions of those factors and the background characteristics associated with those perceptions. To divide the discussion of viewpoints and characteristics in this section would communicate an artificial divide between the various individual and environmental factors under investigation; therefore, what follows is a thematic discussion that explores the interpretation of the study findings across both research questions.

Co-occurrence of Background Characteristics

Previous research has suggested that a relationship exists between an individual's position level in student affairs and that individual's skill set, attitudes, and beliefs regarding assessment (CSSL, 2015). While the findings of this study confirm this relationship to some degree, they also highlight the relationship between position level and other intrapersonal factors such as time spent working in student affairs, the educational preparation of the practitioner, and the level of responsibility one has for engaging in assessment practice. Trends in the background characteristics of participants indicated that more experience in student affairs, as reflected in more time spent working in student affairs and higher position levels, was also associated with an increased likelihood that one was officially responsible for engaging in assessment. This is consistent with Hoffman and Bresciani's (2010) findings that student affairs positions that

required assessment duties were typically those that also required more years of experience. Additionally, the achievement of a graduate degree was associated with more time in student affairs, higher position levels, and assessment as an official job duty.

The high level of co-occurrence of these background factors makes it challenging to draw connections between only one aspect of experience in student affairs and a given perspective. Considered together, however, these characteristics were generally associated with the more intrapersonally-positive perceptions of assessment that characterized the positive Assessment-as-Significant and Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoints. That said, these characteristics were not only found among those with positive views of assessment, as they were also somewhat associated with the negative Assessment-as-Significant and Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoints. Furthermore, many of those with less experience and education held the more positive views of assessment, including 70% of entry-level participants and 75% of participants with associate's degrees. In short, while the trends indicate that more experience in student affairs leads to more positive intrapersonal perceptions of assessment, there are other, interrelated factors that moderate those perceptions, including the nature of those experiences, to which the discussion turns next.

The Mutable Nature of Viewpoints

In discussion of the polarization of the Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint, individuals from both sides reflected that their views were shaped by past experiences with assessment, and multiple participants with the positive viewpoint indicated that they had held the polarized view at one point, themselves. Participants reflected that their shifts in viewpoints came from their experiences with learning more about assessment, having administrative expectations and support for assessment activities, and seeing how results have been used to improve programs.

One participant reflected that experiencing a different institutional culture regarding assessment was responsible for her viewpoint shifting. She noted:

> *"Coming from an institution that the assessment was based more on other people's success versus figuring out what we could do within the institution, that really has changed my perspective, coming here and seeing what we can do by assessing, and the changes we can make."*

Another participant with the positive Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint even went so far as to say she had held each of the emergent viewpoints at one point or another during her years in student affairs, further emphasizing the mutable nature of these beliefs. This finding is also supported by the turn of discussion that occurred at the end of the interview with the individual who held the negative Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint. Throughout the interview, the participant had regularly expressed that assessment was not significant to her work due to a lack of connection to her area, a compliance-driven focus on assessment within her division, and her past experiences that assessment results were not useful. In discussing the role of student affairs in higher education, however, she noted that she felt the role of student affairs was to provide support for the academic mission of the institution and for student learning. When questioned about the incongruence between this view of student affairs and her belief that assessment of student learning was not significant to her work, she responded:

> *"That's a good question. I mean, well, I suppose we've got to use assessment to figure out if we're really achieving what we're supposed to be achieving. Are we really preparing them for the real world? Yeah, you know lately maybe not. Maybe we do need some assessment to figure out why."*

Note how the participant came to a realization that assessment may in fact be an important facet of her work following only a brief interview regarding her perceptions. This realization, coupled with the reflections of those who had previously held other viewpoints regarding assessment, reinforces Love and Estanek's (2004) notion that an assessment mindset can be consciously adopted or cultivated by addressing various individual assumptions about assessment and ensuring the presence of a supportive organizational context. This finding also illustrates the connection between how participants view their role in student affairs and their beliefs about assessment of student learning.

The Role of Student Affairs: Support for Academics or Real World Preparation

Multiple authors have suggested that the views student affairs practitioners have of themselves and their role in higher education may impact the likelihood of practitioners embedding assessment into their work (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Keeling et al., 2008; Rothenberg, 2011; Schroeder & Pike, 2001). Participants with the Assessment-in-Isolation and positive Assessment-as-Significant viewpoints both viewed the role of student affairs as directly connected to student learning via providing support for the academic mission of the institution and enhancing the learning and development taking place inside of the classroom. In essence, participants with these viewpoints see themselves as part of the academic endeavor. In keeping with Keeling et al.'s (2008) assertion that viewing oneself as an educator carries with it an obligation to assess learning, these participants also viewed assessment of student learning as a fundamental aspect of their work. Even among the few service-oriented practitioners who thought of assessment in terms of operational effectiveness, rather than student learning, the primary motivation behind assessment was a belief that their work contributed to student learning, albeit indirectly.

In contrast, Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants viewed their role in higher education as facilitating experiences that fill a gap between what students are learning within the classroom and the experiences they believe students will actually need in order to be prepared for life after college. For these participants, the absence of "real world" experiences in the formal classroom setting necessitates a focus within student affairs on applicable, practical experiences. There is an interesting connection here between this practical-experience focused view of student affairs and these participants' beliefs that formalized assessment is irrelevant to their own work due to their ability to rely on experience to make program or service improvements. This finding relates to the Student Affairs Leadership Council's position that focusing on learning outcomes in student affairs would require a "significant mind shift as practitioners move from viewing themselves as program facilitators to thinking of themselves as educators" (Rothenberg, 2011, p. 54).

This reliance on experience and intuition as informal assessment tools also provides some helpful insight into the paradox that has emerged in the literature regarding the value placed on various competencies in student affairs. Multiple researchers have found that student affairs practitioners consistently rank competencies related to effectively planning and carrying out programs and services as very important while assessment skills are considered relatively unimportant (Burkard et al., 2005; CSSL, 2015; Fey & Carpenter, 1996; Green et al., 2008; Saunders & Cooper, 1999; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Along those lines, the perceptions of Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants show that they are not unwilling or resistant to actively improving the ways in which they plan and carry out their programs and services; rather, they simply believe that formalized assessment is irrelevant to that process due to their ability to rely on their own experience or intuition to effectively facilitate their programs and services. They care about their work, but do not see assessment as a critical aspect of that work. This disregard

for formalized assessment also seems to connect to a sense of apathy with regard to the availability of institution-level support and resources intended to enhance their ability to engage in effective assessment.

Competency, Community, and Care

A lack of assessment competency among practitioners has consistently been identified as a critical barrier to student affairs assessment efforts, despite the long-standing emphasis on the need for assessment competencies by professional organizations in student affairs (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2009; CSSL, 2015; Culp, 2012; Cuyjet et al, 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Elkins, 2015; Herdlein, 2004; Payne & Miller, 2009; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Rothenberg, 2011; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Waple, 2006). Much of the previous research related to student affairs assessment competency has focused primarily on inadequate preparation of student affairs practitioners, and recommendations have emphasized the need to enhance graduate preparation of entry-level practitioners or provide professional development opportunities related to assessment (Banta and Associates, 2002; Bresciani, 2009; Cuyjet et al., 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Young & Janosik, 2007). It is important to note, however, that these previous findings and recommendations do not account for the complexity of factors beyond inadequate preparation that were found to relate to assessment competency in this study. Furthermore, graduate preparation and the provision of professional development opportunities may be effective for those who actively engage in such programs, but they do not account for practitioners who are unlikely to complete a student affairs-related graduate degree or actively engage in assessment-related professional development.

With regard to focusing on graduate preparation to enhance competency, it is critical to note that only 12 of the 44 participants in this study held Education-related master's degrees. Of

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those 12, half earned their master's degrees after they had already been working in student affairs for several years. To focus largely on student affairs-focused graduate programs as a solution to lacking assessment competency is short-sighted and neglects the experience of the majority of practitioners. One experience that was common to nearly all participants, however, was a lack of emphasis on assessment in their introduction to student affairs. This was the case despite a consensus among participants in all three viewpoints that professional standards in student affairs clearly call for engaging in regular assessment. Once again, this finding illustrates a theory-practice gap in student affairs assessment practice; this time at the level of the student affairs field, as a whole. This highlights a need for institutions to orient practitioners to assessment activities without relying solely on graduate preparation or on the advocacy of professional organizations for development of assessment competency.

Another issue to consider when investigating issues of assessment competency is that of the motivation of the individual to develop that competency. Despite a lack of emphasis on assessment in their introduction to student affairs and inadequate institutional resources and support for assessment, Assessment-in-Isolation participants strived to develop a sense of competency on their own based on their intrapersonal commitment to assessment practice. In contrast, Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants demonstrated a sense of apathy for the availability of institutional support and resources for assessment, despite indicating they do not possess the knowledge and skills needed to carry out effective assessment and acknowledging they find assessment to be confusing or hard to conduct in their area. These participants' beliefs that assessment is irrelevant to their work translate to ambiguity regarding resources that may support effective assessment practice. This finding negates the idea that simply providing more professional development opportunities to student affairs practitioners can alleviate concerns

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about competency. While this may meet the needs of some practitioners, such as those with an Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoint, for others issues of competency appear to be directly connected to their overall level of motivation to engage in assessment – an issue that needs addressing before institutional resources become salient.

Motivation: Accountability and/or Improvement

One of the ongoing discussions related to motivation for assessment activities is rooted in the tension posited to exist between the purposes of assessment for accountability and assessment for improvement (Bogue & Hall, 2003; Ewell, 1987; Ewell, 2002; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). In this study, participants with the Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoint felt frustrated with their institutions' focus on assessment for compliance or accountability purposes alone, as this contradicted their intrapersonal beliefs that the purpose of assessment is program or service improvement. Similarly, the responses of Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants and participants with the negative Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint indicated the compliance focus of assessment at their institutions contributed to their beliefs that assessment was not relevant to their work. This finding reinforced previous research (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Love & Estanek, 2004) indicating that accountability-driven assessment is unlikely to result in meaningful improvements or perceptions of assessment as central to effective student affairs practice. It is important to note, however, that the more recent assertion that assessment efforts aimed at improving student learning can be rooted in both accountability and improvement (Ewell, 2009; Penn, 2007; Schuh, 2013) was reflected in the positive Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint. In this viewpoint, institutional-level expectations regarding assessment were perceived to drive meaningful, embedded assessment activities. The difference here appears to hinge on the focus of accountability for the use of results for making meaningful program and service

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improvements, rather than accountability for merely engaging in the act of collecting and reporting data. In this viewpoint, participant motivation and institutional expectations were rooted in both accountability *and* improvement, and this dual motivation was reflected in both the intrapersonal and institutional prioritization of assessment activities.

Priorities as a Reflection of Intrapersonal and Institutional Influences

Lack of time for assessment and competing priorities have been widely identified as critical barriers to effective student affairs assessment practice (Beseler Thompson & Penn, 2015; Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2009; CSSL, 2015; Culp, 2012; Green, Jones, & Aloi, 2008; Kreber, 2010; Payne & Miller, 2009; Rothenberg, 2011; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Slager & Oaks, 2013; Sriram & Oster, 2012; Suskie, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003). Unsurprisingly, lack of time and competing priorities emerged as salient in this study as well, though the ways in which they manifested as barriers differed depending on participants' perceptions of various intrapersonal and institutional-level influences. For Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants, the lack of time allocated to assessment appeared to be a reflection of the low intrapersonal value they placed on assessment – a finding consistent with Sriram and Oster's (2012) assertion that lack of engagement in scholarly activities was likely rooted in individuals' views of the relative importance of the task or a lack of expectations from administrators to engage in such activities. In this case, Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants did not see the relevance of assessment to their own work and they were typically not directly responsible for assessment activities; as such, they did not prioritize assessment in their daily work. Conversely, individuals with the positive Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint indicated they made time for assessment based on their beliefs about the importance of assessment to their work and institution-level expectations that they engage in meaningful assessment activities. It is also

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notable that these individuals were likely to be officially responsible for assessment activities in their roles, adding weight to the idea that level of responsibility for assessment contributes to the likelihood that assessment activities will be prioritized.

The source of competing priorities was different, however, for participants with the Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoint. For these participants, the tyranny of the immediate (Schroeder & Pike, 2001) – the need to respond to urgent situations and problems at the expense of time spent engaging in assessment activities – was a key factor in assessment activities taking a back seat to other job functions. Many of these individuals reflected that the widely-varied responsibilities that accompanied their positions within small institutions were a barrier to engaging in assessment activities. To this end, one participant noted (bolded for emphasis):

> *"Unfortunately, **being in a small college atmosphere**, I have a lot of different hats that I wear on top of my student affairs duties. I find that I'm able to do assessment activities and really look at things when I have time, when other things are done, or when I have a break."*

Note how the participant referenced doing assessment once other things were done or when she had a break. This was the case for many of these participants, despite their intrapersonal commitment to assessment and the high likelihood that they were officially responsible for assessment activities. In this viewpoint, competing priorities were not an issue of willingness to prioritize assessment activities; rather, the issue was rooted in the nature of their positions and the small size of their institutions. The influence of institution type and culture is further explored in the next section.

Influence of Institutional Type and Culture

A variety of institutional types were selected for this study in order to investigate whether institutional focus (i.e., research, teaching, or technical preparation) was associated with varying viewpoints related to assessment. With regard to this association, multiple community college participants who held the Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoint felt that the institutional challenges they faced in embedding assessment into their work were rooted in the nature of their institution. More specifically, the challenges were rooted in what their institution was not, as illustrated by the following participant quote (bolded for emphasis):

> *"… in our area, assessment doesn't happen a lot directly. I think part of that is because the nature of the kind of institution we are. We're a two-year institution, so when you think about the folks that are instructors and the type of education we provide, **we're not a research university**, so that's not naturally part of what happens on our campus."*

That said, it is important to recognize that participants from this community college also held the Assessment-as-Significant and Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoints. In fact, with few exceptions, all of the emergent viewpoints were associated to some degree with all of the institution types. Individuals from the same institutions even represented both the positive and negative Assessment-as-Significant viewpoints. This finding illustrates that it is unlikely that the focus of the institution is a critical factor in the development of viewpoints related to assessment. Instead, what appear more salient are participants' perceptions of their institutional culture regarding assessment and the previously-discussed connection between institutional size, practitioner job duties, and the tyranny of the immediate.

An institutional culture of assessment encompasses several of the factors already discussed in this chapter, including administrators' expectations that practitioners engage in

assessment, expectations that results are used for program or service improvement, and the provision of helpful support and resources for assessment activities. These factors emerged as relevant in both the Assessment-as-Significant and Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoints, though differently so. For the positive Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint, the institutional culture regarding assessment was aligned with participants' intrapersonal commitment to meaningful assessment. The institution-level expectations that assessment results were used in decision-making, coupled with the availability of helpful support and resources, communicated to the participants that assessment was a priority within their divisions. These participants were then more likely than those with other viewpoints to indicate they competently incorporate assessment directly into their work and are able to make time for assessment. This sort of alignment relates to Love and Estanek's (2004) claim that the basis for development of effective, embedded assessment practice in student affairs lies in the interplay of a supportive organizational context and the adoption of an assessment mindset, discussed in the next section.

In contrast, Assessment-in-Isolation participants specifically identified their institutional culture as being at odds with their intrapersonal commitment to engaging in assessment. The lack of available resources and support for assessment, along with the institutional focus on assessment for compliance purposes and the lack of follow-through, fostered a sense of assessment-related isolation and frustration in participants. As a result of this lack of alignment between their intrapersonal beliefs and their institutional culture, these participants were far more likely to indicate that they were unable to allocate enough time for assessment activities or competently incorporate assessment directly into their work. While both Assessment-in-Isolation participants and participants with the negative Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint experienced their institutional culture similarly, one clear distinction between the viewpoints emerged.

Assessment-in-Isolation participants engaged in assessment in spite of their beliefs that their institutions lacked a culture of assessment, while those with the negative Assessment-as-Significant embraced that lack of assessment culture as evidence that assessment had little or no significance for their work.

Interestingly, as previously noted, institutional culture regarding assessment did not emerge as important in the Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoint based on the neutral positioning of all institution-level statements in the theoretical array for the viewpoint. In essence, Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants are apathetic regarding the presence or absence of a culture of assessment within their institutions. This finding, coupled with the nearly equal representation of these participants across all institutions, indicates that practitioners who view assessment as irrelevant are likely to be found at all institutions, regardless of the institution's level of commitment to meaningful, embedded assessment practice. As such, the intrapersonal beliefs or mindset of participants regarding assessment bears further discussion.

Assessment Mindset

The concept of mindset, meaning an established set of attitudes held by someone, has been applied to individual beliefs about assessment practice by Love and Estanek (2004) and Baum (2015). Love and Estanek (2004) developed the following definition of an assessment mindset:

> An assessment mindset means that an individual's view of the world is one in which assessment is a filter that shapes that view of the world and the individual's experience in it. It means that individuals live the definition of assessment in their individual professional practice. That is, they consciously and intentionally gather, analyze, and

interpret evidence that describes their individual effectiveness and use that evidence to

improve their effectiveness. (p. 90)

Baum (2015) used the phrase "empowered mindset" in reference to practitioners viewing student

learning outcomes assessment as "an integrated, essential, and foundational component of the

delivery of any program or service for which they were responsible" (p. 123). Both of these

definitions frame the concept of assessment mindset in terms of viewing assessment of student

learning as an essential component of one's daily student affairs practice that is intrinsically tied

to program or service delivery and improvement – a definition that has clear connections to

multiple viewpoints that emerged in this study.

Despite expressing neutrality with regard to having an assessment mindset, the following

statements of participants with the positive Assessment-as-Significant and the Assessment-in-

Isolation viewpoints reflect this kind of integration of assessment into their beliefs and practices.

"I don't believe that anyone knows how well they are doing in their specific area without

assessment - it is an absolute need in all areas."

"Our role on campus is to provide our students with programs and services to help them

succeed in College and life. Assessing our programs and services is a critical step in

achieving results."

"I believe that assessment is very important to continue offering strong and high quality

programs, services and facilities. If we did not assess, we would never know, and couldn't

justify changes/additions/subtractions."

Conversely, participants with the Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoint unsurprisingly rejected the

notion of having an assessment mindset, stating:

"I don't believe that I need assessment to do my work within student affairs."

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"I do not enjoy assessment because I don't see a need for it in my area..."

"I am knowledgeable when it comes to assessment; however I do not have a mindset for it."

Note how this last participant rejected the idea of having an assessment mindset, despite recognizing she feels knowledgeable about assessment. In this case, the participant's beliefs about assessment are firmly rooted in a rejection of an identity as one who does assessment. For participants with this viewpoint, this intrapersonal rejection of an assessment mindset appears to be at the very core of their beliefs about assessment. While this rejection appears quite definitive, both Baum (2015) and Love and Estanek (2004) noted that a positive assessment mindset could be cultivated given time and the right circumstances – a notion that connects back to the earlier discussion of the mutable nature of these viewpoints.

Negative Case Analysis

One final area of discussion relates to factors previously posited to impact assessment practice that notably did not emerge as salient in this study. This negative case analysis approach revealed resistance to change and the functional area of practitioners as areas with little impact on participant perceptions.

Resistance to change was identified by multiple researchers as an obstacle to assessment activities (Bresciani, 2012; Culp, 2012; Payne & Miller, 2009; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Suskie, 2004), and this resistance was characterized as practitioners viewing change as undesirable due to the need for stability in their work or a fear that negative results would be used against them or their area. In this study, as one might expect, the positive Assessment-as-Significant and Assessment-in-Isolation participants who viewed assessment as central to their work also viewed change as a necessary component of effective practice. One participant illustrated the direct

connection she saw between assessment and change, stating, "I believe and have seen that data and assessment can lead to change. Data can be powerful when decisions need to be made about the direction of a program or department." More surprisingly, however, the Assessment-as-Irrelevant participants also noted that they embraced opportunities for change within their program and service areas. This openness to change was reflected in the following quotes:

"Some think results that are negative are a bad thing, it just means a time for change."

"Change sometimes is hard to accept and I understand that I'm not always going to agree with it. Change must occur for us to better ourselves and the college as a whole."

Even those who held the negative Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint believed that change should be a natural component of assessment. One participant revealed some of her frustration with the lack of change that resulted from assessment at her institution, stating, "It's just like sometimes I think that it's so surface, it's just so fake sometimes. They do assessment, but they just… It's just to do assessments. It's not to actually make a change." These findings clearly illustrate that resistance to change is not considered a key barrier to assessment practice by these participants, even among those who are resistant to assessment, overall.

The findings of previous studies also indicated that differences existed among practitioners from various functional areas with regard to the integration of assessment into practice. Practitioners in areas considered more programmatic were perceived to have more assessment competency and integrate assessment more effectively than those in more service-oriented areas (CSSL, 2015; Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010). In this study, service and program-oriented practitioners were fairly evenly associated with the various viewpoints, indicating that functional area was not a key factor in the development of overall perceptions of assessment. While some service-oriented practitioners interpreted the definition of assessment more broadly

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than intended in this study, in general they appeared to hold views of assessment that were consistent with those of program-oriented practitioners.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Implications</h2>

The results of this study have several implications for theory and practice. The next sections outline how the study findings inform the literature on the application of the social ecological model to social science phenomena outside of the public health field, as well as provide practical insight into ways to address the gap between the espoused value of assessment in student affairs and the actual integration of assessment into practice.

Implications for Theory

In their social ecological model (SEM), McLeroy et al. (1988) posited that individuals are embedded within and interact with larger social systems. In this model, individual behavior is influenced by multiple dimensions, including intrapersonal factors, interpersonal processes, institutional factors, community factors, and policy, and these influences interact across the different dimensions. A critical element of the SEM is the argument that specific changes in behavior may require intervention at different levels given the reciprocal interactions of the individual with the various levels of the model. According to Stokols (1996), this approach reduces conceptual "blind spots" that may result from focusing on one factor at a time by, instead, paying attention to the dynamic interplay of the various individual and environmental factors.

The SEM has often been employed in the field of public health to explain variance in individual behaviors and inform interventions related to health issues (Callahan-Myrick, 2014; Chimphamba Gombachika et al., 2012; Dunn et al., 2015; Kumar et al., 2012; Naar-King et al., 2006). This study broadened the application of the SEM to factors posited to impact assessment

practice in order to understand variance in perspectives related to assessment in student affairs. By mapping the various factors onto the levels of the SEM and allowing participants to communicate the relative impact of each of those factors on their perceptions of assessment via their Q sort, the reciprocal relationships among those factors and the differential impact of the various levels of the SEM were able to emerge. The findings of this study illustrated that the various individual and environmental dimensions of the model dynamically interacted to impact participants' perceptions of assessment. For example, while individuals with the positive Assessment-as-Significant and Assessment-in-Isolation viewpoints expressed similar intrapersonal beliefs with regard to the salience of assessment to their work, the differences in interpersonal, institutional, and community-level factors associated with the viewpoints led to markedly different overall perceptions and experiences regarding assessment. Stokols (1996) also posited that the multilayered environmental context may influence individuals differently depending on their unique characteristics, experiences, and beliefs. This contention played out in this study, as well, as evidenced by the presence of individuals in similar environments who had polarized views about assessment (e.g., the positive and negative Assessment-as-Significant viewpoints) and the ubiquity of the Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoint across all institutions.

In past studies, interventions that targeted multiple levels of the SEM were found to be more effective than those aimed at a single level based on the need to address multiple factors related to the phenomena of interest. This key element of the model also emerged in this study's findings, as the concept of alignment among the multiple levels of the SEM was found to be salient to the effective practice of assessment in student affairs. For Assessment-in-Isolation participants who found their intrapersonal beliefs about assessment to be at odds with their environmental context, assessment practice took a back seat to other responsibilities. Conversely,

the alignment between intrapersonal beliefs and environmental context experienced by those with the positive Assessment-as-Significant viewpoint resulted in feelings that assessment was fully embedded into their daily work. It is clear from these findings that the recommendations of McLeroy et al. (1988) to consider all levels of the SEM when identifying influences on behavior is crucial in order to make progress toward embedding assessment into student affairs practice.

This study was a novel application of the SEM, demonstrating that consideration of the multiple, interacting levels of influence on individual perceptions and behavior has clear application to issues outside of the realm of public health and health behaviors. The SEM is, in many ways, a practitioner-oriented theory given the focus on application of the theory to intervention design and testing. In this sense, it was well-suited for focusing on barriers to student affairs assessment practice, given the need in the field to address those barriers to more fully embed assessment in daily student affairs practice. The practical implications of this study are the focus of the next section.

Implications for Practice

The viewpoints that emerged from this study and the participant characteristics associated with those viewpoints provide insight into the reasons for the gap that continues to exist between the espoused value of assessment in student affairs and the actual integration of assessment into practice. These reasons include a lack of alignment between one's intrapersonal commitment to assessment and the surrounding institutional culture, a perceived lack of intrapersonal relevance of assessment to one's own work, and negative past experiences with assessment coupled with an unsupportive institutional culture that contributed to beliefs that assessment is inconsequential, in general. Past approaches to addressing this gap have often focused on improving graduate preparation and training entry-level practitioners to conduct assessment. The

findings of this study demonstrate that these approaches are insufficient given the challenges that established student affairs practitioners continue to face regarding assessment practice and the limited number of practitioners who have completed or will ultimately complete Education-focused graduate programs. While attention is certainly needed regarding the orientation student affairs practitioners receive to the field and how assessment is framed for entry-level practitioners, consideration must also be given to those who already have clearly defined views of assessment. Luckily, the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that viewpoints can and do change over time based on the varying experiences and reflections of practitioners. The majority of participants in this study who reported that their viewpoints had changed over time to be more positive towards assessment specifically noted that this happened when they saw assessment work – in other words, their perceptions changed when they saw that assessment was useful in improving their own programs and services. It is not a stretch, then, to assume that those who held the Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoint have not yet had that experience, but their views of assessment might be changed by such an opportunity. That said, those types of experiences require adequate support and tailored communication at the institution level in order to ensure that frustration and environmental limitations do not ultimately turn into assessment consistently taking a back seat to other issues or responsibilities, as it did for the Assessment-in-Isolation participants.

The following recommendations are intended for use by administrators and others who work with assessment to address these issues in a holistic fashion. The researcher recognizes that it is rarely one individual who creates or shapes an environment. As such, in the recommendations below, the term "administrators" is used for ease of communication, but may be interpreted to encompass any individuals who have the ability to shape the experiences and

environments of other practitioners. This may include, but is not limited to, senior student affairs officers, practitioners who provide direct oversight to a functional area, and/or practitioners who work directly with assessment or support assessment efforts.

Initially, it is critical that administrators recognize the ubiquitous nature of the various viewpoints that emerged in this study and be prepared to address barriers at multiple levels, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy levels, in order to attend to the variety of issues that may be relevant to the practitioners within their institutions. Looking with a critical eye at how assessment requirements are presented and how expectations are framed may provide administrators with insight into how practitioners interpret their responsibility for assessment. Even administrators who believe their division has an established culture that supports assessment may benefit from engaging in this type of reflection, given previous studies have indicated that administrators often perceive their culture to be more supportive of assessment than do other members of their divisions (Julian, 2013). Keeping in mind the critical need for practitioners to see assessment as relevant to their own work, administrators may wish to reflect on the following questions:

- Are practitioners in my division expected to turn in reports that show they *gathered* data, or are they expected to turn in reports that show they *used* data to make decisions and/or improvements?
- Are expectations that practitioners engage in assessment presented as necessary for some external reason such as accreditation or reporting requirements, or are they presented as critical for ensuring students are learning as a result of engaging with our programs and services?

If the answers to these questions reveal that assessment requirements are framed primarily in terms of compliance rather than expectations that data are used to improve programs and services, a reframing of those requirements may prove beneficial. Another element that emerged in this study as critical to enhancing the relevance of assessment to student affairs work is how practitioners view the role of student affairs as a whole. Consistent with the findings of previous studies (Keeling et al., 2008; Rothenberg, 2011; Schroeder & Pike, 2001), practitioners who viewed student affairs as an essential contributor to student learning and a collaborative partner in the academic endeavor were more likely to see themselves as educators responsible to assess student learning. To this end, administrators might ask themselves questions, such as:

- How is the purpose of student affairs framed and communicated in this division?

- What opportunities do practitioners have to reflect on how that purpose connects to their work?

- Do practitioners in this division view themselves as educators responsible for student learning?

Again, if the answers to these questions reveal that the focus of practitioners' efforts is on program facilitation or service delivery, rather than a broader commitment to student learning, a reframing of that purpose may contribute to a sense of responsibility for assessing student learning.

Other barriers for administrators to consider include the need to establish a positive environmental context or culture of assessment within their divisions. While this culture must initially be rooted in expectations that assessment is conducted to enhance student learning and improve programs and services, another key factor to consider is the need to provide support and resources for assessment activities. Assessment coordinator positions have emerged at

institutions in recent years (Livingston & Zerulik, 2013; Tull & Kuk, 2012), however, at many institutions, providing support in the form of an assessment coordinator – a resource that several study participants identified as particularly helpful – may not be realistic. Nevertheless, for those who experience a sense of isolation in their commitment to assessment, even opportunities to engage in regular discussion and collaboration with others may begin to alleviate their concerns about their institutional context. Hearing how others are engaging in assessment activities and using results may reduce their sense of isolation or feelings that those around them do not value assessment. To this end, administrators may ask themselves the following:

- What opportunities exist for providing support and resources for assessment activities in my division?

- What opportunities exist to bring staff together for regular discussions regarding the use of assessment results for program and service improvement?

- What mechanisms for follow-through or providing feedback exist or might be put in place to ensure assessment efforts are recognized?

Ensuring the presence of a supportive institutional context may also encourage those who are already predisposed to engage in assessment to seek out ways to embed assessment more directly in their work to offset concerns about competing priorities that are associated with the nature of their positions. To address the perceptions of those who are not already predisposed to engage in assessment, administrators may consider embedding responsibility for assessment directly into the job duties of a wider array of practitioners. Individuals in this study who reported more exposure to and responsibility for assessment activities were also more likely to indicate they saw assessment as a fundamental aspect of their work. While speculative, it is possible that embedding expectations for assessment directly into the duties of those who see assessment as

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irrelevant to their work may shift their views, given the presence of a supportive institutional context and a focus on assessment for improvement purposes.

The practical implications of this study emphasize the need to understand the complexity of factors that impact assessment practice at any given institution, recognize that a variety of perceptions exist regarding assessment and those viewpoints may change based on experiences over time, and address barriers to assessment practice at multiple levels of influence, including at the individual and environmental levels.

Limitations

The current study had several limitations. First, the researcher did not consider the size of the institutions in the original sampling frame. As this institutional characteristic emerged as salient in the findings, the inclusion of institutional size in the sampling frame may have allowed for more purposeful investigation of the association between institutional size and practitioner perspective. Additionally, the institution type was unknown for five of the 44 participants due to an initial coding error. It is possible that the association between participants' institution type and the three viewpoints may have changed slightly had the institution been known for all respondents. A further limitation of the study was the lack of interview volunteers among those with the Assessment-as-Irrelevant viewpoint. While the lack of interest in further discussing assessment was not surprising among those participants, given the paradoxical nature of that particular viewpoint, the researcher's interpretation would have been aided by engaging in discussion and member checking with a participant whose sort loaded on that factor. Finally, it should be noted that not all study participants interpreted the meaning of assessment in the same way, despite the inclusion of the definition of assessment of student learning in the sorting instructions. Differences were specifically noted in how some service-oriented practitioners

defined assessment as focused on operational effectiveness rather than student learning. While this was not the intention of the current study, this emergent finding provided interesting insight regarding how service-oriented practitioners understand assessment and their role in enhancing student learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

As illustrated by the review of literature, few studies have explored the barriers to student affairs assessment practice from a holistic perspective that accounts for the interplay between the individual and the surrounding environment. While the findings of this study have illustrated the complex array of individual and environmental factors that impact perceptions of assessment, more research is needed to consider the interplay of these factors and the impact of those perceptions on assessment practice.

The scope of this study was necessarily limited to only a few institutions, and, as such more studies are needed to explore perceptions of assessment among individuals at a wider array of institutions. The institutions in this study were all public, fell under the same regional accreditor, and served similar student populations. Future studies are needed to explore perceptions of practitioners at religiously-affiliated institutions, private institutions, institutions in other accreditation regions, and institutions that serve more demographically diverse student populations. Additionally, the emergence of institution size as a factor associated with participant perceptions of assessment indicates that this factor should be purposefully considered in the framework of future studies.

Future research is also needed with regard to the characteristics of practitioners who hold various perceptions. One approach to consider would be to conduct second-order factor analysis which would allow direct comparison of any relevant associations or differences among the

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viewpoints with regard to the characteristics of participants. Additionally, the inclusion of participant demographics such as race, gender identity, and sexual orientation, may provide helpful insight into how various identities intersect with views of the role of student affairs and perceptions of assessment.

A deeper investigation into perceptions of scholarly practice as a whole may also prove beneficial. This study was focused primarily on perceptions of assessment of student learning. An expansion of this focus to incorporate practitioner perceptions of incorporating research activities, student development theory, and empirically-based practice into student affairs work may provide insight into overall scholarly disposition in student affairs.

Finally, the results of this study beg the question as to how practitioner perceptions of assessment actually impact practice. While the self-referent subjectivity captured in this study via the use of Q method has been equated with behavior, there is a need to engage in further exploration of how these perceptions do or do not manifest as action. Behavioral theories that account for individual attitudes, beliefs, and agency may be employed to help illuminate how perceptions drive behaviors.

Conclusion

The gap between the espoused value of assessment in student affairs and the actual practice of assessment requires attention given the urgent call for improvement and accountability in student affairs. Despite decades of discussion regarding assessment of student learning, progress toward embedding assessment into student affairs practice has remained slow. Previous studies have investigated factors that impact assessment practice, though few have approached the issue from a holistic perspective that accounts for both individual and environmental influences. The aim of this study was to explore the range of perceptions of

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assessment among student affairs practitioners by integrating various individual and environmental factors into a comprehensive framework based on the social ecological model (McLeroy et al., 1988). The viewpoints that emerged from this research provided insight into reasons for the theory-practice gap and reinforced the notion that addressing this gap requires attention to the interplay of those individual and environmental factors. While the scope of the study was necessarily limited, the implications from the findings of this study may serve as a starting place for continued theoretical exploration of barriers to assessment practice and evidence-based approaches to addressing the theory-practice gap.

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APPENDIX A. Q STATEMENTS, RELEVANT FACTORS IMPACTING ASSESSMENT

PRACTICE, AND ASSOCIATED SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL LEVELS

Social Ecological Level	Relevant Factor	Statement
Intrapersonal	Assessment competency	I have both the knowledge and skills needed to carry out effective assessment
		I find assessment to be confusing
		I find it hard to effectively conduct assessment in my program or service area
	Purpose of assessment	Assessment is critical in order to maintain funding for my program or service area
		Assessment helps me determine what students are learning as they engage in or with programs and services
		I'm not sure of the purpose of assessment
	Fear or resistance to change	Assessment results can be used negatively against me and my program or service area
		I know how my program or service area is performing without having to engage in assessment
		Assessment can result in unnecessary changes in programs or services
	Perceived importance of assessment to the individual	I do not care about assessment
		Assessment is a necessary evil
		I am frustrated by the continued focus on assessment in student affairs
	Internal source of motivation	The primary purpose of engaging in assessment is to improve my programs and/or services
		I enjoy doing assessment
		I cannot effectively do my work without engaging in assessment
	Self-efficacy	It is within my power to make changes in my area based on assessment results
		I consider myself to have an assessment mindset
		I competently incorporate assessment directly into my work

Social Ecological Level	Relevant Factor	Statement
	Competing priorities	Assessment activities often take a back seat to my other job functions
		The time I spend conducting assessment takes time away from more important job duties
		I make time to do assessment
Interpersonal	Perceptions of peer assessment beliefs	I consider most of the people I work with in student affairs to be assessment-minded
		My views of assessment are in contrast to the views of those I work with in student affairs
		In general, people I work with in student affairs do not believe assessment is important
	Perceptions of peer assessment involvement	I am more involved in assessment activities than most others that I work with in student affairs
		While most of the people I work with in student affairs say assessment is important, their actions do not match their words
		Most of the student affairs staff I work with engage in assessment activities on a regular basis
	Perceived importance of assessment to the department	Assessment is not a priority activity in my department
		Assessment results are regularly used to make important decisions in my department
		Assessment is everyone's responsibility in my department
Institutional	Resource/support availability	I have access to helpful support, including resources, if I struggle with conducting assessment activities
		My division provides adequate training for assessment activities
		I receive helpful feedback on my assessment activities and results
	Perceived importance of assessment within the division	Assessment is a priority activity in my division of student affairs
		Assessment is communicated to be important in my division of student affairs but there is little to no follow-through

Social Ecological Level	Relevant Factor	Statement
		The culture within my division of student affairs supports assessment efforts
	Use of assessment results	Decisions that are made in my division of student affairs are based on assessment results
		Assessment results are criticized for going nowhere in my division
		Assessment results are regularly shared in my division
	Administrator expectations	Assessment activities in my division are handled by a select few individuals
		It is an expectation in my division of student affairs that staff members use assessment results to improve programs and services
		Administrators in my division choose things to assess that are not important to me or my program/service area
Community	Socialization into student affairs	Student affairs professional organizations provide helpful support, including resources, for their members to engage in assessment activities
		Professional standards in student affairs clearly call for engaging in regular assessment
		My introduction into student affairs included an emphasis on assessing my programs and/or services
	Perceived importance of assessment within the field of student affairs	A culture of assessment exists within the field of student affairs, as a whole
		The field of student affairs, as a whole, would do well to focus more on assessment
		Assessment is a fundamental aspect of effective student affairs practice
Policy	External source of motivation	Assessment is an exercise primarily for compliance purposes (i.e., accreditation, federal requirements, etc.)
		Assessment is done because we are required to submit an assessment report

Social Ecological Level	Relevant Factor	Statement
		The primary driving factor behind assessment efforts is demonstrating the value of student affairs programs and services

APPENDIX B. POST-SORT QUESTIONS

1. Please explain why you rated the following statements [insert highest ranked statements] as most *like* your beliefs.

2. Please explain why you rated the following statements [insert lowest ranked statements] as most *unlike* your beliefs.

3. Were any statements missing from the provided list that prevented you from fully expressing your beliefs about assessment of student learning in student affairs?
   a. Yes (Please explain: _____)
   b. No

4. In your own words, please describe how you view the role of student affairs in higher education.

5. How would you classify the level of your current position in student affairs?
   a. Entry-level (example titles include, but are not limited to, program coordinator, administrative assistant, processor, and hall director)
   b. Mid-level (example titles include, but are not limited to, associate director and assistant director)
   c. Senior-level (example titles include, but are not limited to, director, dean, assistant vice president, and vice president)

6. What is the *primary* function of your area of student affairs?
   (Note: while nearly all areas of student affairs will offer a mix of programming and services, please try to select the area below that is representative of the majority of the work you do in student affairs.)
   a. Programming (e.g., residential programming, new student programs, student activities, leadership programs, etc.)
   b. Service-provider (e.g., financial aid, campus bookstore, dining, registrar, etc.)

7. Please indicate the level of responsibility for assessment activities required in your current position.
   a. I do not engage in assessment activities
   b. I engage in assessment activities, but I am unsure if it is a part of my official job duties
   c. I engage in assessment activities, but it is not a part of my official job duties
   d. Assessment responsibilities are part of my official job duties

8. How long have you been working in student affairs (at your current or any previous institution)?
    a. Less than 3 years
    b. 3-6 years
    c. 7-10 years
    d. 11-14 years
    e. 15 or more years

9. What is the highest academic degree that you have earned?
    a. Less than high school degree
    b. High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
    c. Some college but no degree
    d. Associate's degree
    e. Bachelor's degree
    f. Master's degree in Education or student affairs-related field
    g. Master's degree in non-Education or student affairs-related field
    h. Doctorate in Education or student-affairs related field
    i. Doctorate in non-Education or student affairs-related field
    j. Professional degree (MD, JD)
    k. Other: _____

10. If Master's degree or higher: How recently have you attained your highest degree?
    a. Within the past 5 years
    b. 6-10 years ago
    c. 11-15 years ago
    d. More than 15 years ago

11. If you would be willing to participate in a brief, follow-up interview (via telephone or in-person) with the researcher, please provide your first name and the email address or telephone number at which you can be reached: _____

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe the role that assessment currently plays in your student affairs work.

2. Please describe the role that you would ideally like assessment to play in your student affairs work.
   a. If a gap exists between the role that assessment currently plays and the ideal role: what factors do you believe contribute to this gap?

3. After collecting data from all of the research participants, I was able to analyze it to find similarities between the various views of assessment of student learning in student affairs. Your responses were very similar to the views of participants in Viewpoint [X]. [reference theoretical array of Viewpoint (X)]. As you can see, those with Viewpoint [X] typically indicated that the following statements were most *like* their beliefs.
   - Statement #: Description
   - Statement #: Description
      a. Can you share your thoughts on these particular statements and elaborate on what they mean to you?

4. Those with Viewpoint [X] indicated that the following statements were most *unlike* their beliefs.
   - Statement #: Description
   - Statement #: Description
      a. Please share your thoughts on these statements and elaborate on what they meant to you.

5. The key findings from this study regarding Viewpoint [X] indicate that individuals with this view [insert initial interpretation of Viewpoint (X)].
   a. What are your thoughts about this theme?

   [Note: the following, additional question is intended only for participants who loaded on Viewpoint 1] This Viewpoint is actually considered a polarized one – meaning some individuals agree very strongly with the viewpoint, as described, and others agree with the exact opposite. Those on the opposite end of the viewpoint indicate they [insert initial interpretation of polarization of Viewpoint 1].
   b. What do you think contributes to the views of individuals who agree with this end of this viewpoint, versus the other end?
   c. Given everything we have just discussed, if you had to name this theme, what name would you select?

6. Respondents who shared this viewpoint with you indicated they view the role of student affairs in higher education as [insert interpretation of views of role of student affairs in higher education among participants who loaded on Viewpoint (X)].
   a. What are your thoughts about these views of the role of student affairs?

b. How, if at all, do you see these views relating to your viewpoint regarding assessment in student affairs?

7. Two other viewpoints also emerged from the analysis. These viewpoints include:
   - Viewpoint [Y]: [insert initial interpretation of Viewpoint (Y)]
   - Viewpoint [Z]: [insert initial interpretation of Viewpoint (Z)]
     a. How do you see these views as being similar to – or different from – your own?
     b. How might you interact with someone who holds either of these viewpoints?

8. Do you have any other thoughts or feedback to share?

APPENDIX D. REQUEST FOR RECRUITMENT ASSISTANCE

Dear [*insert Senior Student Affairs Officer title and name here*],

I am a doctoral candidate from the Education Doctoral Program at North Dakota State University, and I am working with Dr. Chris Ray on a research study investigating the perceptions of student affairs practitioners regarding assessment of student learning. I am reaching out to request your support for this upcoming research, which has been approved by the NDSU Institutional Review Board. As you know, the climate of accountability facing higher education, coupled with the need for student affairs practitioners to adapt to our changing student population, underscores the importance of effectively and consistently measuring the success of student affairs programs and services. To this end, this study is intended to provide insight into the different ways student affairs practitioners view assessment of student learning and, ultimately, how various factors that impede effective assessment practice may be addressed.

A key aspect of this study is the selection of a range of participants who may hold varying beliefs about assessment. Your division of student affairs, along with student affairs divisions at two other institutions, is being invited to participate in the study. The three invited institutions were purposefully chosen due to differing missions, institution types, and range of student affairs programs and services. An additional component of selecting participants who may hold different views of assessment is the need to identify participants with a range of experiences and responsibilities. To achieve this, we are seeking participants who hold entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level positions, as well as participants from both program-oriented and service-oriented areas of student affairs. It is important to note that we are not seeking participants who hold only positive views related to assessment. For the purposes of this research, we are hoping to discover a range of viewpoints.

The method used for this study, Q method, requires a limited number of participants. In fact, we are seeking only 12 participants from the [*insert institution name*] Division of Student Affairs. Due to the need for those participants to represent particular position levels and areas, we are hoping you may be able to assist us in identifying individuals from your institution to invite to participate in this study. To account for an anticipated response rate of 50%, **we are requesting identification of 24 potential participants representing the six categories below**:

	Program-oriented Area	Service-oriented Area
Entry-level	4 participants	4 participants
Mid-level	4 participants	4 participants
Senior-level	4 participants	4 participants

For the purposes of selecting individuals, example titles and departments representing the various position levels and functional areas have been included below:

- *Entry-level:* examples include program coordinator, hall director, administrative assistant, etc. (typically occupy positions several levels removed from senior student affairs officer (SSAO); do not supervise professional staff members)

- *Mid-level:* sample titles include associate director, assistant director, etc. (typically occupy positions at least two levels removed from SSAO; responsible for oversight of one or more student affairs functions; may supervise professional staff members)
- *Senior-level:* sample titles include director, dean, assistant vice president, vice president, etc. (typically occupy SSAO position, report directly to SSAO, or no more than one level removed from SSAO; responsible for oversight of multiple student affairs functions)
- *Service-oriented area:* example areas include financial aid, campus bookstore, dining, registrar, student health, etc.
- *Program-oriented area:* example areas include residential programming, new student programs, student activities, leadership programs, wellness education, etc.

Participants will be asked to sort various statements related to assessment based on their beliefs and answer questions related to their education, responsibility level for assessment, and position and area in student affairs. This activity should take about 20-30 minutes to complete. Participants will also have the opportunity to volunteer for a follow-up interview to clarify their viewpoints. Please note that you may include yourself in the list of potential participants, if you are interested. While participants will be informed that they were nominated to participate in the study by their SSAO, any individual who is invited to participate in the study may choose not to participate at all or to stop participating at any point during the study.

Please let me know if you are willing to assist with participant identification at your institution. If you are willing to assist, only the institutional email addresses of those selected are needed. **A response, either way, is appreciated by [*insert date*].**

If you would like any clarification regarding the study aims or participant selection, or if you have other questions, please feel free to contact me at Erika.Beseler@ndsu.edu or 701-238-9648 or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Chris Ray, at Chris.Ray@ndsu.edu or 701-231-7417. Alternately, if you have questions about participant rights, or complaints about this research, you may contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at (701) 231-8995 or ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration!

Erika Beseler Thompson, Doctoral Candidate
Education Doctoral Program
North Dakota State University

Invitation Text:

Dear [*name*],

You have been nominated by your [*insert SSAO title and name*] as someone who can provide a valuable contribution to a study on the various beliefs held by student affairs practitioners regarding assessment of student learning. Participation will involve about 20 minutes of your time. By following the link below, you will be directed to an online instrument that will allow you to rank a series of statements related to assessment in student affairs. This instrument is unlike a traditional survey; many even consider the sorting process to be more like a game, as you have the opportunity to click and drag statements into various categories and spaces based on your beliefs.

Please click the link below to participate in this voluntary study.

[*Insert link*]

I hope you are willing to volunteer your time to provide your helpful feedback for this dissertation research study. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at Erika.Beseler@ndsu.edu or 701-238-9648, or you may contact Dr. Chris Ray at Chris.Ray@ndsu.edu or 701-231-7417. Alternately, if you have questions about participant rights, or complaints about this research, you may contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at (701) 231-8995 or ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

Erika Beseler Thompson, Doctoral Candidate
Education Doctoral Program
North Dakota State University

Reminder Text:

Dear [name],

As a reminder, you have been nominated by your [*insert SSAO title and name*] as a potential participant in a study of student affairs assessment beliefs. If you have already participated in the study, please disregard this email and thank you for your time.

If you have not yet participated, please consider doing so. The study will only take about 20 minutes of your time, and your feedback will provide a valuable contribution to my dissertation research. By following the link below, you will be directed to an online instrument that will allow you to rank a series of statements related to assessment in student affairs.

[*Insert link*]

I hope you are willing to volunteer your time to provide your helpful feedback for this research study. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at Erika.Beseler@ndsu.edu or 701-238-9648, or you may contact Dr. Chris Ray at Chris.Ray@ndsu.edu or 701-231-7417. Alternately, if you have questions about participant rights, or complaints about this research, you may contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program at (701) 231-8995 or ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

Erika Beseler Thompson, Doctoral Candidate
Education Doctoral Program
North Dakota State University

Thank you for participating in this study. Please take a moment to read the text below regarding your participation in this research project.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to participate as a student affairs staff member at one of the institutions that is included in this research study. We are specifically seeking a variety of perspectives, so student affairs staff members in a wide range of positions and areas are being asked to participate. You were nominated by your Vice President of Student Affairs as someone who may be able to contribute to this variety of perspectives.

What is the reason for doing the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore the range of perceptions of student affairs practitioners regarding student affairs assessment practice. We hope this study will provide insight into how the various experiences of student affairs staff members contribute to their beliefs about assessment of student learning.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to sort a series of statements based on the question, "What are your beliefs about assessment of student learning in student affairs?" First, you will sort statements into three groups – those most like your beliefs, those most unlike your beliefs, and those that are neither like nor unlike your beliefs. You will then be asked to arrange those statements into a grid based on the degree to which they are like or unlike your beliefs. Finally, you will be asked some follow-up questions about your background and how you sorted the statements. **This process is expected to take about 15-20 minutes to complete, and many individuals who participate in this type of sorting activity report it is an engaging process.** Upon completing the process, you will be invited to participate in a follow-up interview. These interviews are entirely optional and are being conducted to provide additional information that may help the researchers understand the perspectives of participants. Please note that interviews may be recorded to assist with transcription and analysis of the data.

What are the risks and benefits of this study?

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study. Student affairs practitioners are expected to benefit from your participation through a better understanding of the range of beliefs that exist among student affairs staff members regarding assessment activities and what contributes to those viewpoints.

Do I have to take part in this study?

Your participation in this study both voluntary and confidential, and you may leave the study at any time. No one, including your Vice President for Student Affairs, will know if you choose not to participate or if you stop participating at any point. Research information will not be reported in any way that would allow individual participants to be easily identified.

What if I have questions?

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Erika Beseler Thompson, Co-PI, at (701) 231-5478 or Erika.Beseler@ndsu.edu, or Dr. Chris Ray, PI, at (701) 231-7417 or Chris.Ray@ndsu.edu.

What are my rights as a research participant?

You have rights as a participant in research. If you have questions about your rights, or complaints about this research, you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program by:

- Telephone: (701) 231-8995 or 1-855-800-6717.
- Email: ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu
- Mail: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.

The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at: www.ndsu.edu/research/irb

Thank you for your time and participation. By clicking the "Continue" link below, you indicate your willingness to participate in this study.

APPENDIX G. COMPARISON OF EXTRACTION AND ROTATION COMBINATION

OUTPUT

Extraction Method	Factors	Rotation	Variance Explained (%)	Defining Sorts (*n*/44)	Confounded Sorts	Non-Significant Sorts
Centroid	7	Varimax	53%	32	11	1→0
Centroid	6	Varimax	54%	33	11	0
Centroid	5	Varimax	50%	39	5	0
Centroid	4	Varimax	50%	40	4	0
Centroid	3	Varimax	47%	42	2	0
Centroid	2	Varimax	41%	41	0	3
PCA	8	Varimax	71%	30	14	0
PCA	7	Varimax	67%	32	12	0
PCA	6	Varimax	64%	33	11	0
PCA	5	Varimax	60%	36	8	0
PCA	4	Varimax	55%	34	10	0
PCA	3[1]	Varimax	51%	42	2	0
PCA	2	Varimax	44%	41	0	3

[1] Selected as preferred solution based on percentage of high percentage of variance explained, high number of defining sorts, and low correlation between factors

APPENDIX H. STATEMENT LIST WITH Z-SCORES AND RANK POSITIONS

Item #	Statement	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
		Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank
1	While most of the people I work with in student affairs say assessment is important, their actions do not match their words	-0.64	33	0.46	22	1.24	8
2	Assessment is critical in order to maintain funding for my program or service area	0.23	27	0.01	26	0.57	16
3	Assessment is a necessary evil	-0.78	35	0.48	21	-0.03	27
4	Most of the student affairs staff I work with engage in assessment activities on a regular basis	0.34	25	0.56	17	-0.95	39
5	It is within my power to make changes in my area based on assessment results	0.79	12	-0.46	32	1.39	5
6	I consider myself to have an assessment mindset	0.67	19	-1.3	46	0.08	26
7	Assessment results are regularly shared in my division	0.72	15	0.86	10	-1.22	44
8	Assessment can result in unnecessary changes in programs or services	-0.98	41	-0.54	34	-0.49	35
9	I cannot effectively do my work without engaging in assessment	0.64	20	-0.74	39	0.44	18
10	Assessment activities in my division are handled by a select few individuals	-0.24	30	0.71	15	1.33	7
11	In general, people I work with in student affairs do not believe assessment is important	-0.9	38	-0.74	38	-1.04	41
12	Assessment is a fundamental aspect of effective student affairs practice	1.61	2	0.56	18	1.51	3
13	I have access to helpful support, including resources, if I struggle with conducting assessment activities	1.03	7	-0.01	27	-1.29	46

Item #	Statement	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
		Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank
14	A culture of assessment exists within the field of student affairs, as a whole	0.4	24	0.28	25	-0.21	31
15	Administrators in my division choose things to assess that are not important to me or my program/service area	-0.88	37	-0.32	29	-0.08	29
16	Assessment helps me determine what students are learning as they engage in or with programs and services	1.52	3	1.15	6	1.48	4
17	I am more involved in assessment activities than most others that I work with in student affairs	-0.41	32	-0.69	37	-0.36	33
18	My views of assessment are in contrast to the views of those I work with in student affairs	-1.05	43	-0.98	43	-0.09	30
19	The primary purpose of engaging in assessment is to improve my programs and/or services	1.04	6	2.11	1	1.68	2
20	I find it hard to effectively conduct assessment in my program or service area	-0.95	40	1.19	5	0.66	13
21	Assessment is a priority activity in my division of student affairs	1.12	5	0.54	20	-0.51	36
22	Assessment is done because we are required to submit an assessment report	-1.01	42	0.83	11	0.49	17
23	I have both the knowledge and skills needed to carry out effective assessment	0.49	22	-1.49	49	0.31	20
24	My introduction into student affairs included an emphasis on assessing my programs and/or services	0.04	29	-2.11	51	-1.74	50
25	Professional standards in student affairs clearly call for engaging in regular assessment	0.93	10	0.75	12	1.08	10
26	Assessment is everyone's responsibility in my department	0.71	16	0.31	24	0.27	21

Item #	Statement	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
		Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank
27	Assessment results are criticized for going nowhere in my division	-0.73	34	-1.47	48	0.13	24
28	I find assessment to be confusing	-0.93	39	1.36	4	0.24	23
29	The primary driving factor behind assessment efforts is demonstrating the value of student affairs programs and services	0.61	21	1.03	9	0.76	12
30	Assessment activities often take a back seat to my other job functions	-0.4	31	1.07	7	1.91	1
31	Decisions that are made in my division of student affairs are based on assessment results	0.48	23	0.72	13	0.31	19
32	I consider most of the people I work with in student affairs to be assessment-minded	0.21	28	-0.38	31	-1.45	47
33	I receive helpful feedback on my assessment activities and results	0.67	18	-0.12	28	-1.16	43
34	The time I spend conducting assessment takes time away from more important job duties	-1.18	46	0.69	16	-0.38	34
35	I make time to do assessment	1	8	-0.83	40	0.61	15
36	Assessment is an exercise primarily for compliance purposes (i.e., accreditation, federal requirements, etc.)	-1.1	44	1.04	8	-1.09	42
37	Assessment is not a priority activity in my department	-1.58	48	-0.52	33	0.62	14
38	I'm not sure of the purpose of assessment	-1.81	50	-0.87	41	-1.46	48
39	Assessment results are regularly used to make important decisions in my department	0.95	9	0.54	19	-0.25	32
40	It is an expectation in my division of student affairs that staff members use assessment results to improve programs and services	1.73	1	1.86	2	0.85	11

Item #	Statement	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
		Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank	Z-score	Rank
41	I enjoy doing assessment	0.71	17	-2.07	50	-0.06	28
42	I do not care about assessment	-2.03	51	-1	44	-1.68	49
43	Assessment results can be used negatively against me and my program or service area	-1.16	45	-0.97	42	-0.53	37
44	My division provides adequate training for assessment activities	0.72	14	-0.35	30	-1.96	51
45	Student affairs professional organizations provide helpful support, including resources, for their members to engage in assessment activities	0.73	13	0.34	23	0.27	22
46	The field of student affairs, as a whole, would do well to focus more on assessment	0.29	26	-0.64	36	1.18	9
47	Assessment is communicated to be important in my division of student affairs but there is little to no follow-through	-0.79	36	-1.31	47	1.36	6
48	The culture within my division of student affairs supports assessment efforts	1.38	4	0.72	14	0.1	25
49	I competently incorporate assessment directly into my work	0.83	11	-1.23	45	-0.63	38
50	I know how my program or service area is performing without having to engage in assessment	-1.27	47	1.55	3	-1.25	45
51	I am frustrated by the continued focus on assessment in student affairs	-1.75	49	-0.56	35	-0.96	40