Defining a Culture of Assessment in Student Affairs: A Delphi Study

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What is a culture of assessment? This was the first of several questions defining the topic area for this issue of the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*. The subsequent questions about how to facilitate a culture of assessment, how we can know if the culture is functioning well, how to share practices across institution types, and ensure the culture focuses on improvement and inquiry rather than just compliance cannot be answered through research without defining what we, as scholars, mean by a culture of assessment. This is no easy feat. As a key element of the concept – culture of assessment – we have to understand culture from a broader perspective to get to a meaning for culture of assessment. The term culture is a complex construct for which many, sometimes competing definitions exist and researchers have studied it from many angles (Martin 2002). Organizational culture is a field that can absorb this ambiguity because it covers a lot of ground in terms of sectors. However, despite the ubiquitous nature of the term culture, at its very essence it is context based; where and how it exists matters. Defining it for precise use in various contexts is important. As the scope narrows from the organizational culture field to that of higher education and further to student affairs, a definition is needed so that a concept such as a culture of assessment in student affairs can be empirically studied.

While organizational culture scholars have debated a definition for culture at the broadest levels (Martin 2002), other scholars have brought the scope of culture to the higher education context. Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) identified six cultures of the academy and bring to life the various cultures operating within higher education institutions. Tierney (2008) provided a framework for understanding organizational

culture in higher education. These lenses regarding the unique culture in higher education added elements of context that did not exist in the broader organizational culture literature and shed light on distinguishing features that informed leaders in the higher education context. Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) and Tierney (2008) offered these insights at the institutional level and while student affairs is part of the institutional landscape, the authors did not speak specifically to student affairs culture.

As the scope of the concept is narrowed further to a culture of assessment in student affairs, the current literature related to student affairs assessment lacks empirical study underlying this construct. Student affairs assessment scholars provided ample rationale for why assessment should be conducted in student affairs and hailed creating a culture of assessment as an important element for how to go about implementing it (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2010; Culp, 2012; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Schuh, 2013). While some of these scholars offer definitions of a culture of evidence (Culp, 2012) or culture of assessment (Henning & Roberts, 2016) in student affairs they do not offer an empirically grounded definition upon which to base systematic study of this important construct.

The purpose of this Delphi study was to fill this gap in the student affairs assessment literature and provide a definition that can promote scholarship around the often-used yet ill-defined concept of culture of assessment in student affairs. This study examined the following research question: how is a culture of assessment in student affairs defined by experts in the student affairs assessment field? First, I will review the student affairs assessment literature identifying the current themes and how they relate to one another as well as what they say about cultures of assessment in student affairs. Next, I will discuss the Delphi method and its suitability for providing the evidence to

respond to the research questions as well as outline the methodology employed in this three round study. And finally, I will review the results of the study, a definition and characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs, and discuss their significance and implications for further study.

Review of the Literature

The student affairs assessment literature centers around three areas (1) rationale for conducting assessment in student affairs, (2) strategies for implementing assessment in student affairs, and (3) definitions and descriptions of a culture of assessment in student affairs as well as its characteristics.

Clear evidence exists in the literature for why student affairs professionals should engage in the practice of assessment. Several scholars highlighted different components of a robust argument supporting the case for assessment in student affairs. Upcraft and Schuh (1996) laid the foundation for student affairs assessment and framed the rationale for conducting assessment in student affairs as a matter of survival, quality, affordability, strategic planning, policy development and decision-making, and politics (pp. 7-16). They argued that in times of declining budgets, student affairs must justify its existence by demonstrating the quality of the services it provides in an affordable manner as well as how it supports the academic mission of the institution. When student affairs can produce evidence of its impact through assessment this can inform strategic planning, policy development and decision-making, and serve to inform institutional political forces related to resource allocation. Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2010) pointed to the increasing calls for accountability for higher education to clearly demonstrate the value of a college degree to its stakeholders and the link shown between student learning and development established by the *Student Learning*

Imperative (American College Personnel Association, 1996) and furthered by *Learning*

Reconsidered (Keeling, 2004) as reasons for conducting assessment in student affairs.

Banta and Palomba (2015) discussed the impact that "extra-class activities" have on

college student learning and development and argued that assessing these activities is as

important as assessing academic teaching and learning (p. 193). The Council for the

Advancement of Standards (CAS) (2015) includes assessment and evaluation among the

12 standards that define best practice for the 45 functional areas often represented in

student affairs divisions. That assessment is included as a general CAS standard is

evidence of the importance of incorporating assessment practice into the student affairs

field. These arguments and evidence provide compelling rationale for why student

affairs practitioners should embed the practice of assessment in their work. These and

other authors also offered insight about how to carry out assessment.

Regarding the mechanics of implementing assessment, the literature has grown

with respect to student affairs-specific guides on how to conduct assessment. Beyond

resources that can be gleaned at the many conferences, institutes, and professional

practice groups about how to implement assessment in student affairs, several authors

have provided detailed guides (e.g., Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2010; Bresciani,

Zelna, & Anderson, 2004; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). These

volumes include information about the specific context of student affairs and how that

influences assessment practice, the various assessment methods that work in the

student affairs setting, ways to summarize and report assessment results, as well as the

challenges associated with implementing assessment in student affairs. These guides

emphasize different elements of the assessment cycle or types of assessment and taken

together, they provide robust resources for helping student affairs professionals

understand the mechanics of conducting assessment in their work. Many of these scholars referred to creating a culture of assessment as a way to be successful in implementing assessment in a sustainable manner so that it becomes pervasive and embedded in the work of student affairs professionals (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2010; Culp, 2012; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Schuh, 2013). However, only two scholars have defined a culture of assessment in student affairs.

Culp (2012) defined a culture of evidence as

a commitment among student affairs professionals to use hard data to show how the programs they offer, the processes they implement, and the services they provide are effective and contribute significantly to an institution' ability to reach its stated goals and fulfill its mission. (p.5)

Henning and Roberts (2016) offered a definition of a culture of assessment in student affairs as

a set of pervasive actions and behaviors by staff across an organization (e.g., unit, division) focusing on the use of data in decision-making regarding the accountability and improvement of programs and services. But the use of data to demonstrate the impact of programs and services is not sufficient. Data must also be used to identify ways in which the programs and services can be continuously improved (p. 263).

These definitions both emphasize that a culture of assessment in student affairs reflects a commitment to assessment as a practice. However Henning and Roberts (2016) further emphasize that the practice be pervasive across the organization, and Culp (2012) more generally refers to 'student affairs professionals'. Both definitions refer to the use of data to inform decision-making and both point to accountability as a defining

element of a culture of assessment. Where Culp (2012) uses language that underscores accountability as the purpose of assessment, Henning and Roberts (2016) add language that emphasizes continuous improvement as well.

In addition to Culp's (2012) and Henning and Roberts' (2016) definitions, other scholars have described and characterized a culture of assessment in student affairs and offer some varying perspectives. Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2010) described a culture of continuous improvement and brought in concepts related to Senge's (1990) learning organization where members question underlying values and assumptions for the purpose of shared learning and growth. Schuh (2013) emphasized culture by indicating that a central element to a definition of culture involves the phrase "how we do things here" (p. 89). This alluded to concepts from the organizational theory literature such as underlying assumptions (Schein, 2010) and theories-in-use (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Henning and Roberts (2016) referred to "shared values, symbols, behaviors, and assumptions" (p. 263) when describing characteristics a culture of assessment in student affairs, which also points to organizational theory language. While necessary as the literature and practice of student affairs assessment proliferated, these descriptions and definitions each emphasize slightly different perspectives about culture, are not related to one another in the literature, and do not center on a common definition of culture of assessment in student affairs. While scholars discuss and put forth building a culture of assessment as a strategy, the lack of consensus about what a student affairs assessment culture is leaves practitioners to wonder how to define such a culture on their campus, how they would know if they have one or not, and how to go about creating and sustaining such a culture.

Further, a limitation of the extant literature regarding definitions and characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs is that it appears to be based on valuable practitioner experience. However, empirical study is needed to define and examine this important element of student affairs practice. With a common research-based definition, scholars can begin the work of better understanding how to foster and sustain such a culture. This Delphi study is designed to take the first step in defining culture of assessment in student affairs.

Methodology

The student affairs assessment literature lacks an empirically based definition of culture of assessment in student affairs. While scholars uphold creating a culture of assessment as a way to implement assessment practice in student affairs, systematic study about such a culture is absent. The current literature is based on valuable practitioner experience and it can be strengthened by research that examines what a culture of assessment is, how it is created, and more importantly, how it is sustained. To begin this research, a definition of the construct, culture of assessment in student affairs, is needed. This Delphi study explores how experts in the student affairs assessment field define culture of assessment in student affairs.

The Delphi technique is a research method designed to collect input from experts through a structured process involving multiple steps of collecting feedback, synthesizing it, and distilling it to meaningful information to answer a question or solve a problem (Ziglio, 1996). Delphi is an effective research method in situations where collective expert judgment provides more appropriate evidence for answering a question than more objective, analytical techniques (Linstone & Turoff, 2002, p. 4) and where knowledge of the topic is limited or lacks consensus (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). For the

purpose of this study, seeking a definition of culture of assessment in student affairs, the Delphi method is appropriate to gather and analyze the judgment of experts in the student affairs assessment field to determine how they define a culture of assessment in student affairs. As discussed, scholars do not agree on a common definition of a culture of assessment in student affairs. The Delphi method provides a means for experts to deal with this ill-defined concept in a systematic way.

I considered other more analytical techniques such as a survey to a larger range of practitioners. However, in weighing the strengths and limitations of each method, the Delphi method was a stronger choice. The Delphi method allows for experts to be in dialogue about a topic through a series of structured communications with the input from each round informing the structure and content of the subsequent rounds. While a survey to a more diverse sample in terms of experience, contribution to the field, and commitment to the topic could have produced more robust data and allowed for different kinds of analysis, the result would most likely not have been a precise definition. The Delphi method is the most appropriate one to address the focused question of this study and perhaps a more analytical design can be used to test the findings of this study. The Delphi method allows for subjectivity and multiple iterations of engaging the participants that different designs would not support.

As with any research method, there are limitations associated with the Delphi technique. With a small panel of experts, attrition in respondents is a concern as well as the experts' competence in answering the questions (Gordon & Helmer, 1966). To identify participants for the study, I consulted an authority in the student affairs assessment field to generate a list of experts on the topic. The criteria for identifying experts included those with practical expertise in student affairs assessment and a

willingness to engage in the study in a meaningful way (Ziglio, 1996). Since this purposive sample is homogeneous in terms of their expertise, the initial group of 16 was appropriate to produce adequate coverage of the topic (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). A second concern related to the Delphi method is a risk of producing the lowest common denominator of agreement (Fink, Kosecoff, Chassin, & Brook, 1984) or that experts may not reach consensus (Combs, 1985; Lawrence, 1980). To address these concerns, I developed the survey for each subsequent round based on careful analysis of the previous round, involved peer reviewers to objectively evaluate my decisions, and included ample open response options to encourage participants to clarify their responses. As with any research study, the quality of the study is reliant on the quality of the execution (Linstone & Turroff, 2002). Involving peer reviewers between rounds ensured that the survey developed for each round included clear instructions and closely represented the expert input from previous rounds (Ziglio, 1996). I also detailed the steps taken to carry out the study to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

This study included three rounds. I sent the round one survey to the 16 identified experts via an email using Qualtrics software. Round one included two open-ended questions, one asking respondents to identify elements to be included in a definition of a culture of assessment in student affairs and the other asking how many years the respondent worked as a student affairs assessment leader. The latter question was included to gauge the range of experience among the participants. See Appendix A for the survey instrument.

Round one was in the field for eight days. After the initial invitation and two reminder emails, I received 11 responses. I determined that this was an adequate response rate to move to round two because the open response data included redundant

responses from the participants and it was clear that I was reaching saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I analyzed the round one responses using structural coding (Saldaña, 2016). Through this analysis, I determined that some of the responses referred to a definition while others referred to characteristics of a culture of assessment. I distinguished these in the second round by creating two five-point Likert scale questions; one asking respondents to indicate how important it was to include each element in the definition and one asking respondents to indicate how important it was to include each element in the list of characteristics describing a culture of assessment in student affairs. In each question, I included an option for open response so that other ideas could be included and rated. I also included an open response question after each Likert scale question so that the participant could further clarify their responses. This proved very useful in interpreting the responses as participants could explain or qualify their rating. Additionally, one respondent indicated a preference for an alternate term to culture of assessment in round one. I included a question in round two to determine agreement with this statement.

Round two was in the field for 17 days. After the initial invitation and two reminders I received responses from each of the 11 round one participants. Because there was strong agreement among participants regarding the importance of including or excluding elements of the definition or characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs, it was appropriate to move to the final round of the study, round three. To develop the round three survey, I drafted a definition using the terms identified as having a mean score of 4 or above from round two with slight revisions based on respondent's clarifying comments in the open response questions. The mean score cut off was determined based on the scale, a four or above indicated that the item was very

or extremely important to include in the definition or list of characteristics. After considering respondents' clarifying comments, input from peer reviewers, and the organizational theory literature, I included one item that scored below the cutoff established (four or above). The item, *shared values and beliefs*, scored a 3.6 on the Likert scale. Specifically, in the open response question, one respondent that scored *shared values and beliefs* lower indicated disagreement with the qualifying language in the phrasing rather than the concept *shared values and beliefs*. That respondent clarified that he/she would have scored *shared values and beliefs* a four if not for the qualifying language. Additionally, *shared values and beliefs* is a key element in many definitions of culture in the organizational theory literature. After considering this information with peer reviewers, I decided to include the item *shared values and beliefs* in the definition.

Using all of the items that scored a four or above and the item *shared values and beliefs*, I drafted a definition of culture of assessment in student affairs and asked participants to offer improvements to the draft definition via an open response question as the round three survey. I also listed the characteristics having a mean score of four or above with the option to comment on each to refine the language or add other ideas. And finally, I included one open response question so that respondents could offer any other insights about the definition or characteristics.

Round three was in the field for 11 days. After the initial invitation and two reminders, I received responses from 10 of the round one and round two participants. I incorporated the feedback provided by the round three participants as well as peer reviewers to create a final definition for culture of assessment in student affairs. The following section presents the results of the study.

Results

The key finding drawn from this study is that there is general agreement among student affairs assessment experts regarding a definition and characteristics of a culture of student affairs assessment.

Definition

Through the round one analysis, clear themes emerged among the open responses to the initial question asking participants to list the essential elements of a definition of culture of assessment in student affairs. These themes indicated general agreement among the participants while the Delphi method allowed for including outlier ideas as well. Further, in round two, the scores from the Likert-scale questions regarding the level of importance of including elements in the definition and characteristic descriptors of a culture of assessment in student affairs also support strong levels of agreement (see Appendix B, Table B1). The general agreement of participants informed the following definition. *A culture of assessment in student affairs is defined as a set of shared values and beliefs that inspire an ongoing, embedded practice of data collection and analysis that informs decision-making for the purpose of continuously improving programs and services at all levels of the organization.* Beyond the definition, there was agreement among the participants about the characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs.

One point of disagreement emerged in round one, when one participant offered an alternate term to culture of assessment – culture of evidence. In round two, I tested this suggestion and found that two participants agreed that the terms are interchangeable for the purpose of research, three indicated that the terms may be interchangeable, and five disagreed that they are interchangeable. The two participants

that agreed did not offer clarifying comments and all of the others did. Analysis of the comments revealed that the disagreement focused on the interpretation of the word evidence as more focused on accountability than improvement as well as the perspective that evidence is more narrow and rather an element of the more comprehensive term assessment; evidence is what we base our consistent examination on in order to improve.

Characteristics

Through the round one analysis, it became clear that some of the themes that emerged from the initial question were elements of the definition while others were more descriptive characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs. At this point, I differentiated the two and tailored the round two survey to reflect this. The list of characteristics included both the items scoring above a four in round two (see Appendix B, Table B2) as well as the elements included in the definition (listed in italics):

1. Strong role models – Members from varying levels of the organization serve as strong role models and champions for assessment.

2. Safety in sharing negative results - Members of the organization feel safe in sharing negative assessment results, they trust that the purpose of assessment is improvement rather than accountability. Leaders in the organization foster this sense of trust.

3. Ongoing capacity building – Assessment capacity building efforts are ongoing and available for staff at all levels of assessment competency.

4. Transparency in assessment results – Members of the organization share assessment results transparently.

5. Resources to support assessment practice – Organizational resources are dedicated to the practice of assessment, examples include positions, time, funding for capacity building, etc.

6. Resources to support findings that require changes – Organizational resources are dedicated to support changes that are suggested by assessment evidence.

7. Confidence in assessment ability – Members of the organization feel confident in their ability to successfully conduct assessment in their work.

8. *Assessment is an ongoing process – When the end of the assessment cycle is reached, it begins again; assessment practice continues regardless of budgetary priorities.*

9. *Assessment results are used to inform decision-making – Multiple forms of assessment are used to inform decision-making at all levels of the organization.*

10. *Assessment is embedded in every day practice – Members of the organization view assessment as a normal part of practice rather than as an add-on.*

11. *The purpose of assessment is improvement – Assessment is implemented for the purpose of improving programs and services in support of student learning, development, and success.*

12. *Shared values and beliefs – Members of the organization share a common language, values, and beliefs about assessment; it is a mindset that permeates the organization.*

The next section discusses the results in the context of the current literature, the significance of the findings, and areas for future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore a gap in the student affairs assessment literature by inquiring as to how student affairs assessment experts define a culture of assessment in student affairs. This three-round Delphi study produced a definition as well as a set of characteristics that describe a culture of assessment in student affairs that can now be used to promote scholarship in this important area.

The Definition in Context

The definition derived from this study aligns with some of the elements discussed in the extant literature, to some extent, and adds to and refines some of the ideas put forth by Culp, (2012) and Henning and Roberts (2016). The definition also distinguishes between defining and descriptive characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs, see Tables 1 and 2. For example, Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2010) emphasized a culture of continuous improvement and features of a learning organization (Senge, 1990). Henning and Roberts (2016) and Schuh (2013) alluded to organizational theory by highlighting "shared values, symbols, behaviors, and assumptions" (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 263), and "how we do things here" (Schuh, 2013, p. 89). Culp's (2012) definition reflects the rationale put forth by Upcraft and Schuh (1996) emphasizing effectiveness and contribution to institutional mission and goals. I will discuss each of the main elements of the definition of a culture of assessment in student affairs derived from this study in the context of the extant literature.

A set of shared values and beliefs

The first main element of the definition derived from this study, *a set of shared values and beliefs,* refers to a general framework for culture and connects with Henning

and Roberts' (2016) and Schuh's (2013) <u>descriptions and characteristics</u> of culture of assessment in student affairs, not with Culp's (2013) and Henning and Roberts' (2016) <u>definitions (see Tables 1 and 2)</u>. As discussed in the results, this item, *shared values and beliefs*, only scored 3.6 on the Likert scale in round two. This could be due to some of the qualifying language associated with the item (shared values and beliefs driving self-reflection and continuous improvement) or due to a rejection of the concept of *shared values and beliefs*. After considering clarifying comments from respondents, peer reviewer input, as well as the organizational culture literature, I kept *shared values and beliefs* as an element of the definition. As mentioned, one participant indicated that he/she would have scored *shared values and beliefs* a four if not for the qualifying language. While participants had the option to dissent about its inclusion in round three, they did not do so which confirmed that the reason for the lower score was related to the clarifying language in the item rather than a rejection of *shared values and belief* being included in the definition. In round three, the initial phrasing about what the shared set of values and beliefs inspires was revised based on participant responses. The initial phrasing was ...ongoing, embedded practice of *rigorous examination generating evidence* that informs... After incorporating round three feedback, it was revised to ...ongoing, embedded practice of *data collection and analysis* that informs... Feedback about the initial phrasing included a reaction to the word rigorous as more reflective of research rather than assessment.

This element, *shared values and beliefs*, points to another way to strengthen the student affairs assessment literature. Where Bergquist and Pawlak (2008) and Tierney (2008) offered organizational cultural frameworks specific to higher education, there is little reference to student affairs culture in the extant literature. Considering the

connections between organizational culture theories and student affairs as an entity within higher education may shed light on strategies for fostering and sustaining a culture of assessment in student affairs.

Ongoing, embedded practice of data collection and analysis

The first part of the second element of the definition, *ongoing, embedded practice,* resonates and places more precise language on what Culp (2012) referred to as a "commitment among student affairs professionals" (p. 5), and Henning and Roberts (2016) referred to as "a set of pervasive actions and behaviors by staff" (p. 263). The second part of this element, *data collection and analysis*, addresses some of the concerns raised by participants about the difference between research and assessment. Participants indicated a desire to avoid language that reflected research, a practice they regarded as more rigorous than assessment. Culp's (2012) definition stresses "using hard data to demonstrate effectiveness and contribution to institutional mission and goals" (p. 5). The phrase "hard data" points more to research than what participants in this study considered assessment. This difference may be related to the fact that Culp (2012) is defining a culture of evidence rather than assessment. Henning and Roberts (2016) referenced the "use of data" in their definition which is more general than the phrase, data collection and analysis, used in this study's definition. The latter strikes the balance between more precision than Henning and Roberts' (2016) phrasing and allows for various levels of rigor within the practice of assessment in student affairs.

Informs decision-making for the purpose of continuously improving programs and services

The phrase, *informs decision-making*, refers to the notion that data must not only be collected and analyzed but that it must be used if assessment is to be a

productive practice and worth the time and investment to engage in it. This element is consistent with both Culp's (2012) and Henning and Roberts' (2016) definitions where they use the phrases "use hard data" (p. 5) and "use of data" (p. 263) respectively. However, how and for what the data are used differs slightly among the definitions. Culp (2012) indicated that "hard data" should be used to demonstrate effectiveness and contribution to institutional mission and goals and Henning and Roberts (2016) emphasized "the use of data in decision-making regarding the accountability and improvement of programs and services" (p. 263). In the definition derived from this study, the phrase *continuous improvement* refers to the purpose for doing assessment in student affairs. The contrast to this purpose is often phrased as "accountability" (Ewell, 2009) and perspectives vary along this continuum navigating the tension between the two purposes of assessment. Both purposes were identified in round one and were included as separate items in the second round of the study. As indicated by the mean scores, the group of experts heavily favored improvement (4.5) over accountability (2.6) as the purpose of assessment. While Culp's (2012) definition leaned toward accountability as the main use of data, Henning and Roberts (2016) pointed to both purposes. Again, the participants in this study indicated that the purpose of assessment and use of data should be focused on improvement rather than accountability. They agreed that an emphasis on accountability interferes with fostering and sustaining a culture of assessment in student affairs. Therefore, this definition refers to the use of data to inform decision-making for the purpose of continuously improving programs and services. This phrase both reflects the participants' discussion on this point and offers more precise language than Culp's (2012) and Henning and Roberts' (2016) definitions.

At all levels of the organization

A final element of the definition derived from this study relates to the practice of assessment, including the use of data, *at all levels of the organization*. Culp (2012) referred to a "commitment among student affairs staff" (p.5) and Henning and Roberts (2016) referred to "a set of pervasive actions and behaviors by staff" (p. 263) which are similar to the language used in this study's definition though the latter is more precise.

Bresciani, Gardner, and Hickmott (2010) referenced learning organization theory (Senge, 1990) in their discussion of a culture of continuous improvement. However, themes related to learning organization did not emerge through round one or later rounds where participants had the option to clarify responses and offer open responses. That learning organization features did not surface through the study is interesting and suggests that a useful connection can be drawn to strengthen the student affairs assessment literature for two reasons. One is related to the practice of assessment itself. By its nature, assessment requires practitioners to reflect on their practice, examine results, and implement changes to improve. Some of the key tenets of learning organization align well with the practice of assessment including reflective examination of underlying assumptions and values and taking on new perspectives for the purpose of growth and learning (Senge, 1990). The other reason is related to the slow adoption of assessment in student affairs. Assessment has been an expectation of student affairs practice from its roots (American Council on Education Studies 1937, 1949) and yet scholars continue to urge student affairs practitioners to take up assessment practice and create cultures of assessment within their divisions (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2010; Elkins, 2015). Drawing on the organizational learning

concepts may help student affairs practitioners break through this barrier in fostering and sustaining a culture of assessment.

Taken together, the resulting definition from this study offers more specific language than the extant literature and also systematically reflects the perspective of experts in the field of student affairs.

Characteristics

An unexpected finding in this study was a differentiation between a definition of culture of assessment in student affairs and a list of characteristics that describe that culture. As I conducted my analysis of the round one data, it became clear that some emerging themes were essential to a definition, to provide meaning to the construct, whereas others were more descriptive in nature. While these characteristics are not included in the definition, the initial aim of the study, they can serve as a useful tool to help student affairs professionals evaluate their culture and perhaps inspire new ideas for strengthening that culture.

The 12 characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs derived from this study align with the extant literature, to some extent, and some produced some new insights (see Table 2). Of the five elements of the definition listed in bold in column one, two reflect *both* Schuh's (2013) and Henning and Roberts' (2016) characteristics: that assessment is an ongoing practice, and that results are shared and used to inform decision-making. Two align with Henning and Roberts (2016) *alone*: shared values and beliefs and assessment is embedded in everyday practice. And, the final element aligns with one of Schuh's (2013) characteristics *alone*: the purpose of assessment is improvement although Schuh argues that accountability is another purpose of assessment.

Three characteristics derived from this study (listed in italics in column one), have some alignment – transparency in assessment results aligns with Schuh (2013) and Henning and Roberts (2016) while resources to support assessment practice and findings that require changes only align with Schuh. The remaining four characteristics derived from this study provide new insights into characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs: (1) leadership in the form of strong role models and champions throughout the organization, (2) leadership in the form of trust to promote safety to share negative results, (3) ongoing capacity building efforts for staff at all levels of assessment competency, and (4) individuals feel confident in their assessment ability.

Schuh (2013) and Henning and Roberts (2016) are aligned on one characteristic that was not identified through this study – assessment is the responsibility of all staff members. Schuh (2013) offered several other characteristics not supported through this study: (1) institutions with a culture of assessment are self-critical, (2) assessment needs to be conducted across the institution, (3) learning outcomes need to be identified and measured, and (4) formal events are used to celebrate and discuss assessment results. While the last one was identified in round one of this study, it scored a 3.9 in round two and was not included in this list because there were no clarifying comments from participants that indicated a need to consider this. Further, Schuh (2013) discussed the tension in the dual purposes of assessment – accountability and improvement and asserted that assessment should be conducted to serve both purposes (p. 91). Both purposes were included as items in round two of this study with much stronger agreement for inclusion in the definition for the item "the purpose of assessment is improvement" (4.5) and less agreement for the item " the purpose of assessment is accountability" (2.6).

Both Schuh (2013) and Henning and Roberts (2016) offered characteristics of a culture of assessment with the latter set building on the definition of a culture of assessment Henning and Roberts (2016) identified. Some of these characteristics in the extant literature align with the definition and others with the characteristics derived from this study. This study's findings differentiate defining elements of a culture of assessment from those that simply describe it utilizing three rounds of refinement from 11 student affairs assessment experts. The characteristics identified in this study support some of the characteristics in the extant literature and offer additional characteristics not currently identified.

One limitation of this study is the number of experts who participated through the duration of all three rounds of the study. One criterion for selecting experts in a Delphi study is that they have capacity and sufficient time to dedicate to the study (Ziglio, 1996). Of the 16 original experts, 11 participated through half of round two and 10 participated through all three rounds completely. This is within the recommended range of participants when the group of experts is homogenous in terms of expertise (Kezar & Maxey, 2016). However it is unknown why others chose not to participate and whether their perspectives would have influenced the definition in meaningful ways. The high level of agreement among the 10 participants provides assurance that the appropriate elements of the definition are included.

Conclusion

The extant student affairs assessment literature lacks a definition for the important construct – student affairs assessment culture. This paper discussed the importance of assessment to student affairs practice and addressed the gap in the literature by providing an empirically based definition of culture of assessment in

student affairs. This study also identified characteristics that describe a culture of assessment in student affairs. The results invite further research to test the definition and explore possible uses for the characteristics of a culture of assessment in student affairs. Other areas of future research include testing the definition in future empirical studies of culture of assessment in student affairs and examining the connections between organizational learning and organizational culture to student affairs cultures of assessment.

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