

## **Perceptions and Practice: A Social Ecological Approach to Investigating Assessment Culture in Student Affairs**

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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 remains between the espoused value of assessment and its actual practice (Bresciani, 2009; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Elkins, 2015; Love & Estanek, 2004; Rothenberg, 2011; Sandeen & Barr, 2006; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Schuh, 2013). Progress toward embedding assessment into student affairs practice remains slow. The field continues to struggle with a lack of evidence of program effectiveness, and sustaining assessment activities continues to be a key challenge among practitioners (Rothenberg, 2011; Schuh, 2013). This begs the question, 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? Scholars and practitioners are looking to elements of institutional culture to begin to address this question, but these investigations necessitate consideration of what constitutes assessment culture and how culture is perceived by – and shapes the behavior of – practitioners.

In the American Association for Higher Education's *Nine Principles of Good Practice for Assessing Student Learning*, Astin and Associates (1992) noted "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 asserted 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 interested in the climate for assessment practice in student affairs (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009; Culp, 2012; Green, Jones, & Aloi, 2008; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Julian, 2013; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Schuh, 2013; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Suskie, 2009). While several common conditions posited to characterize a culture of assessment have emerged from these studies, the definition of culture has been understood and presented differently among the various authors (as it has been for decades among scholars in many fields). Thus, we believe it is critical to begin by defining the concept of culture used in this manuscript in order to delve more fully into the impact of culture on student affairs assessment practice.

We ascribe to Matsumoto’s (1996) conception of culture as a “set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (p. 16). This definition rests on the assumption that culture is both an individual construct, in that it exists in and is experienced differently by each person, and a social construct, in that it arises from shared experiences and assumptions. This conception of culture allows for recognition of culture as reciprocal – meaning it both shapes and emerges from the experiences and beliefs of individuals positioned within that group. To this end, Geertz (1973) analogously defined culture as a web in which individuals, collectively, find themselves situated, stating:

Believing... that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not

an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (p. 5)

Tierney (1988) applied Geertz's definition to higher education, noting:

Thus, an analysis of organizational culture of a college or university occurs as if the institution were an interconnected web that cannot be understood unless one looks not only at the structure and natural laws of that web, but also at the actors' interpretations of the web itself. (p. 4)

In this sense, Tierney was positing that one cannot understand culture without considering both the attributes of the organization and the perceptions of those situated within that organization. It was in the spirit of understanding student affairs practitioners' interpretations of culture – specifically, assessment culture – in a way that accounts for the interconnected nature of the individual and their surrounding environment that we conducted the current study. Culture emerges from shared beliefs of those within the institution, which necessitates a deeper look into the variety of beliefs held by those individuals about both themselves and their environment and how those facilitate or hinder meaningful, embedded assessment practice.

### **Review of Literature**

Perhaps due to inconsistency between the espoused value of assessment of student learning and the actual practice of assessment in student affairs, the issues that impact the integration of assessment into practice have been discussed and studied at greater length than many other facets of student affairs assessment. Institutional culture has emerged as a salient aspect of student affairs assessment practice, along with several other considerations, including position level and area within student affairs, lack of time and competing priorities, source of motivation, assessment expertise and self-

efficacy, change resistance, and perceptions of assessment and the role of student affairs.

Our analysis of previous literature related to assessment culture in student affairs revealed several common conditions that are posited to support the integration of assessment into practice, including a) expectations from administrators that all student affairs practitioners engage in and report on assessment activities; b) support for assessment in the form of professional development or coordinating committees; and c) and the use of assessment results for decision-making (Green et al., 2008; Julian, 2013; Schuh, 2013; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Suskie, 2009). Several case studies of student affairs divisions have helped illustrate how these conditions impact assessment practice. Green, Jones, and Aloi (2008) studied student affairs divisions at 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 assessment committee, and results were used to make informed decisions. It is important to note, however, that their data were collected primarily from administrators at three large research institutions and are, therefore, limited to those perspectives. In a qualitative study of conditions that impact assessment practice in student affairs at three small institutions, Seagraves and Dean (2010) also noted that leadership from chief student affairs officers and consistent use of assessment for program improvement were 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.

A wide range of variables related to either the individual or their environment have also been found to have substantial impact on assessment practice in student affairs. For example, previous research has identified a relationship between an individual's position level and area within the institution and their competencies and views related to assessment (Center for the Study of Student Life [CSSL], 2015). Further, time constraints and competing priorities (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2009; CSSL, 2015; Culp, 2012; Green et al., 2008; Rothenberg, 2011; Schroeder & Pike, 2001; Suskie, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), resistance to or fear of change (Payne & Miller, 2009; Suskie, 2009), motivation that results from either compliance or improvement mindsets (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Baum, 2015; Blimling, 2013; Love & Estanek, 2004; Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003), and inadequate preparation and a lack of self-efficacy (Blimling, 2013; Bresciani, 2009; CSSL, 2015; Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, & Molina, 2009; Dickerson et al., 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Rothenberg, 2011; Waple, 2006) have all been identified as variables that impact the actual implementation of meaningful assessment. 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. Research and

evaluation skills are frequently ranked as less essential than other skills and competencies associated with student affairs practice, even by mid and senior-level administrators (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005; Saunders & Cooper, 1999). Keeling, Wall, Underhile, and Dungy (2008) argued that the core of this issue may be related to student affairs practitioners not perceiving themselves as educators – an argument supported by the Student Affairs Leadership Council’s (Rothenberg, 2011) finding 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).

This extensive list of conditions illustrates that the barriers to integrating assessment into student affairs work are complex, interrelated, and affected by an array of individual and environmental influences. However, the majority of empirical studies have focused on particular facets of assessment practice rather than attending to the complex interplay of multiple individual and environmental variables from which behaviors – and culture – emerge. 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. Baum (2015) found a complex interplay of considerations 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

framework that holistically considers the reciprocal interaction of individual and environmental variables that impact practitioner perceptions of assessment.

### **A Social Ecological Approach: Integrating the Individual and the Environment**

In support of the notion that multiple variables influence individual behavior, McLeroy, Steckler, Bibeau, and Glanz (1988) presented a social ecological model (SEM) in which individuals are embedded within and interact with larger social systems and behavior is determined by multiple nested dimensions including intrapersonal variables, interpersonal processes and social networks, institutional considerations, community influences, and public policy. Intrapersonal variables are characteristics of the individual, such as knowledge, attitudes, skills, self-efficacy, values, and expectations of the individual. Interpersonal influences incorporate formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including significant others, such as colleagues and friends. Institutional considerations 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 considerations include the allocation of various economic and social resources, transmission of social norms and values, and socialization into organizational culture. Community influences 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. Finally, public policy refers to local, state, and national laws and policies – 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 various

influences are nested structures in which the individual and significant others (characterized as the interpersonal dimension) are situated within institutions, 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 (1996), 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).

The SEM has been found to provide a robust framework that more fully explains variance in individual behaviors (Callahan-Myrick, 2014; Dunn, Kalich, Fedrizzi, & Phillips, 2015; Kumar et al., 2012). Although the SEM 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.

With regard to student affairs assessment, the array of individual and environmental variables that have been found to impact the practice of assessment among student affairs practitioners readily map on to the five levels of the SEM, as



illustrated in Figure 1. This application of the SEM allows for consideration of the dynamic interplay of these variables and the mutual influence of the individual practitioner and the surrounding environment. This framework allowed for a comprehensive approach to our investigation of the multifaceted issues that contribute to cultural emergence and impact the practice of student affairs assessment.

### **Methods**

By nature, individual perceptions arise from dynamic interactions between individuals and their surrounding environments. As such, we employed a methodology designed to capture both the subjectivity of individual perceptions and the dynamic influences on those perceptions. Q methodology, hereafter referred to as “Q,” is a mixed methods approach designed to allow individuals to communicate their point of view about a topic of interest and uncover patterns in those perceptions that allow for identification of a finite number of qualitatively-distinct viewpoints (McKeown & Thomas, 1988).

In Q, researchers construct a series of statements, called a Q set, that is intended to represent the relevant aspects of a topic of interest. Participants are then asked to rank order those statements according to their beliefs in order to reveal their individual viewpoint on the topic (Brown, 1993). These viewpoints are then subject to intercorrelation and factor analysis – the statistical reduction of multiple variables (viewpoints, in this case) to a smaller number of groups based on their commonalities – to identify one or more common viewpoints, called factors. Qualitative interpretation of these shared viewpoints subsequently involves an analysis of the rank-ordered statements, as well as the gathering and analysis of additional data through post-sort questions and follow-up interviews. Ultimately, 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). Of particular relevance to this study was the ability of participants to rank order statements that relate to the variables that emerged from the literature and were subsequently mapped to the five levels of the SEM and, in doing so, to communicate the relative significance of those various elements to their overarching perspective on assessment.

### **Instrumentation**

We derived the Q set used for this study from a comprehensive concourse of statements related to the range of individual and environmental variables that impact the assessment of student learning in student affairs. The concourse was generated from themes found in our review of literature, and the statements were grouped into 17 categories that were previously mapped to the five levels of the SEM. A structured approach to sampling the statements was used, wherein we selected three statements from each of those 17 categories, resulting in a Q set of 51 statements (see Figure 2 for sample statements). Statements related to assessment culture took two forms in the Q set. First, institutional level statements that reflect the conditions previously posited to characterize a culture of assessment were included. These were statements such as “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,” and “I have access to helpful support, including resources, if I struggle with conducting assessment activities.” Additionally, we included the statement, “The culture within my division of student affairs supports assessment efforts,” to allow participants to distinguish assessment culture differently, should they disagree with the statements intended to

characterize assessment culture but still wish to indicate the presence of such a culture within their division.

We also included post-sort questions related to background characteristics of participants to get a sense of the characteristics of the participants that represented the emergent viewpoints. These questions included position level and functional area in student affairs, educational attainment 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 to elaborate on the statements they ranked as *most like* or *most unlike* their views. Finally, participants were invited to volunteer for follow-up semi-structured interviews in which they were asked for feedback on our initial interpretations of their associated factor 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.

### **Study Participants**

A general guideline for selection of participants in a Q study is to recruit a small number of individuals who are likely to have distinct viewpoints related to the subject area 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, we purposefully recruited participants who represented a variety of institution types (four-year research, four-year teaching, and two-year community college), position levels (entry, mid, and senior-level), and functional areas in student affairs (service or program-oriented areas). Of 81 invited participants, 44 (54.3%) completed the sorting activity and post-sort questions, and ten agreed to participate in follow-up interviews. Table 1 provides an overview of respondents by institution type, functional area, and position level.

## Procedure

We contacted potential participants via email to request participation in the study following approval by the Institutional Review Board. Participants followed a link to HTMLQ (2015), an online program that guided them through the process of reviewing and sorting the 51 Q-statements based on the question: “What are your beliefs about assessment of student learning in student affairs?” The Q sorting process included two steps: 1) an initial sort of the statements into three groups: “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). To facilitate the organization of statements, participants were first asked to choose the two statements from their “most unlike my beliefs” group they felt were most *unlike* their beliefs and place those statements in the -5 column. Participants were then asked to choose the two statements they felt were most *like* their beliefs and place those statements in the +5 column. Participants subsequently returned to their “most unlike my beliefs” group and selected the three statements they felt were next most unlike their beliefs and place them in the -4 column. Working back and forth in that fashion, participants continued placing statements in the table until all spaces were filled. After completing the Q sort, participants responded to the post-sort questionnaire, described previously, and indicated whether they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

## Data Analysis

We coded participant Q sort data by assigning each statement a score ranging from “-5” to “+5,” depending upon each participant’s placement of the statement in the

Q plot. The responses were then subject to exploratory factor analysis in order to reveal patterns among the Q sorts (in essence, the viewpoints of individual participants). We used PQMethod software (Schmolck, 2002) to employ principal components analysis as the method of statistically reducing the sorts into a smaller number of factors with Varimax rotation to more clearly distinguish factors for enhanced interpretability (Thompson, 2004). The goal of our analysis was to maximize explained variance and the number of significant sorts that loaded on a factor (i.e., those sorts that were significantly associated with a single 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). We then interpreted the resulting factors based on several considerations. First, we examined distinguishing and consensus statements associated with each factor. Distinguishing statements are those that are ranked significantly differently in a particular factor, while consensus statements are those that do not significantly differ in placement among the factors. Statements associated with the extreme ends of each factor array (i.e., +5 and -5) were also examined. We then considered the background information and responses to post-sort open-ended questions of participants associated with each viewpoint to provide additional insight.

Following initial interpretation, interviews were conducted with five volunteers associated with Factor 1 and three volunteers associated with Factor 3. Unfortunately, no participants who defined Factor 2 volunteered to participate in an interview. In selecting interviewees, we 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. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis of themes. As part of this analysis, we 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. Our coding began with values coding, which 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). We subsequently used pattern coding to help identify the primary themes that emerged through the values coding process and search for underlying explanations of those themes. We also identified key interview excerpts and post-sort question responses that provided helpful illustrations of participant perceptions. Ultimately, these approaches to coding assisted us with interpreting the emergent viewpoints of study participants through the development of robust themes supported by the voices of participants.

## **Results**

Factor analysis yielded a three-factor solution that accounted for 51% of the variance. Table 2 presents the sorts that loaded significantly onto each of the three factors (denoted by X). A minimum of four sorts are typically recommended in order to define each factor (Brown, 1980). 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 remaining two sorts were confounded by loading on multiple factors and were, thus, eliminated from the interpretation. The negative loadings of participants 25 and 28 on Factor 1 indicated that the participants rejected the views of that factor. The final factor solution resulted in low correlations between the factors, with factor correlations ranging from 0.1959 to 0.3144. These low correlations indicated the presence of three

distinct views of assessment of student learning in student affairs, described below. Throughout the presentation of results and discussion, we refer to all participants by feminine pronouns, regardless of their gender identity, in order to ensure participant confidentiality.

### **Factor 1: Assessment-as-Significant**

Factor 1, named *Assessment-as-Significant*, was a bipolar viewpoint defined by 19 positively-loaded sorts and two negatively-loaded sorts. The extreme statements for Factor 1, including the five “most like” and “most unlike” statements in the array are provided in Table 3. For those whose sorts loaded negatively on the factor, the array position and polarity of the z-scores for each statement were reversed.

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 (SIG+) reported they care deeply about assessment and see assessment as fundamentally connected to their ability to enhance student learning. Further, these participants believe they are capable of effectively engaging in assessment activities and using results to make necessary changes and reported that they make time to do assessment. These individuals’ intrapersonal beliefs about assessment aligned with their perceptions of their institution’s culture regarding assessment. SIG+ participants perceived 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. A participant specifically 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.”*

In contrast, participants who held the negative viewpoint (SIG-) reported they do not care about assessment, do not feel prepared to effectively engage in assessment, and see assessment as inconsequential given a lack of use of results for program or service improvement. This view was compounded or perhaps fostered by a perceived lack of institutional-level support and resources for engaging in assessment, as well as a lack of expectations that results are used to make decisions. One SIG- participant noted:

*“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 SIG- viewpoint, the perceived culture of assessment within their divisions reinforced intrapersonal views that assessment is a waste of time and is, therefore, insignificant to one’s work.



Both SIG+ and SIG- participants generally had extensive experience and preparation in student affairs, as evidenced by the vast majority 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 (see Table 4). 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 SIG+ or SIG- viewpoints. Notably, the participants who held the SIG- and SIG+ viewpoints were from the same institutions.

### **Factor 2: Assessment-as-Irrelevant**

The second factor was defined by ten sorts and was named *Assessment-as-Irrelevant* (IRR), because participants 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. This paradoxical belief is reflected in one IRR participant's statement:

*"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."*

These individuals do not consider themselves to be assessment minded nor to have the competency needed to engage in formalized assessment. Notably, however, IRR participants placed nearly all statements regarding the availability of institutional or interpersonal-level support for assessment activities in the neutral columns of the Q

plot. This ranking communicates that the institutional support for assessment and their peers' beliefs and actions related to assessment – collectively, the culture of assessment in which these individuals find themselves situated – were not salient to their intrapersonal views of assessment or their lack of assessment competency or self-efficacy. Further, IRR individuals 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 extreme statements for Factor 2 are provided in Table 5.

IRR participants 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 (see Table 4). This relatively even distribution of IRR participants among institution types and functional areas, coupled with the saliency of intrapersonal variables associated with this viewpoint rather than environmental conditions, indicates the viewpoint may be institutionally ubiquitous. In other words, since this viewpoint is defined primarily by intrapersonal-level beliefs about assessment and participants represent the full range of institution types, it is likely that individuals with this viewpoint can be found everywhere.

### **Factor 3: Assessment-in-Isolation**

The third viewpoint was defined by 11 sorts and was named *Assessment-in-Isolation* (ISO). The extreme statements for Factor 3 are provided in Table 6. These individuals care deeply about assessment and view it as intrinsically tied to improving

their programs and services. This commitment is in constant conflict, however, with the competing priorities these individuals face that cause assessment to take a back seat to other job functions. Further, ISO individuals 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. The misalignment 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." This cultural incongruence fostered a sense of isolation among ISO participants, leading them to develop competency in assessment on their own, as reflected in the following participant statement:

*"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."*

ISO participants represented a range of position levels and functional areas, and the full array of time spent working in student affairs (see Table 4). Participants were split between holding bachelor's and master's degrees, and the majority reported they engaged in assessment as an official job duty. ISO individuals represented the four-year teaching universities and the two-year community college.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The distinct viewpoints that emerged in our study clearly illustrated that the various beliefs individuals hold about themselves and their institution's culture of assessment interact dynamically to impact participants' assessment perceptions and practice. For participants with the SIG+ viewpoint, the institutional culture regarding assessment aligned with their 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 finding lends empirical support 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 an individual commitment to assessment.

In contrast to the experience of SIG+ individuals, ISO 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 the incongruence 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. Furthermore, while both ISO

participants and participants with the SIG- viewpoint experienced their institutional culture similarly, one clear distinction between the viewpoints emerged. ISO participants engaged in assessment in spite of their beliefs that their institutions lacked a culture of assessment, while those with the SIG- viewpoint embraced that lack of assessment culture as evidence that assessment had little or no significance for their work. This finding reinforces Stokols' (1996) contention that the multilayered environmental context that is the basis for the social ecological model may influence individuals differently depending on their unique characteristics and experiences. This was further evident in our examination of the IRR viewpoint. As previously noted, institutional culture regarding assessment did not emerge as salient to the IRR viewpoint. In essence, IRR participants are apathetic regarding the presence or absence of a culture of assessment within their institutions. Critically, these individuals were nearly equally represented across all institutions in this study, indicating that practitioners who view assessment as irrelevant are likely present in all institutions, regardless of the institution's level of commitment to meaningful, embedded assessment practice.

The distinct intrapersonal beliefs and varying responses to environmental considerations that arose in this study support the assertion that culture is uniquely understood and experienced by each individual within it, which is particularly apparent given the presence of individuals with the full range of viewpoints within a given institution. While fostering an institutional culture of assessment by providing resources and support for assessment can alleviate concerns for some individuals, such as those with the ISO viewpoint, for others, issues of assessment practice appear to be directly connected to their intrapersonal commitment to assessment – an issue that needs

addressing before institutional culture becomes salient. That is not to say, however, that these individuals exist entirely independently within these institutions either. Given culture arises from shared experiences and assumptions, it is likely that IRR and SIG-participants may contribute to the sense of isolation experienced by ISO participants. Taken together, our observations support the notion of culture as emerging from the dynamic interactions of individuals within the environment, which then necessitates a focus on those interactions in order to support widespread, meaningful, and embedded assessment practice in student affairs.

### **Implications for Practice**

In the spirit of addressing barriers at multiple levels of the SEM, we have developed an array of recommendations associated with both institutions and individuals that might be collectively employed by administrators and others who work with assessment. At the institutional level, 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 investigate questions such as:

- Are practitioners 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 requirements, or are they presented as critical for ensuring students are learning as a result of 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 key institutional consideration is the need to provide support and resources for assessment activities. For those who experience a sense of isolation in their commitment to assessment, opportunities to engage in regular discussion and collaboration with others may begin to alleviate concerns about their institutional context. To this end, administrators may investigate the following:

- What opportunities exist for providing support and resources for assessment activities?
- What opportunities exist to bring staff together for regular discussions regarding the use of assessment results for 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.

At the individual level, 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, embedding expectations for assessment directly into the duties of those who see assessment as irrelevant to their work may shift their views, given the presence of a supportive institutional context and a focus on assessment for improvement purposes.

### **Implications for Future Research**

The viewpoints that emerged from our study provide further insight into reasons for the gap between the espoused value and actual practice of assessment. Specifically, our findings reinforced the notion that addressing this gap requires attention to the dynamic interactions of both individual and environmental variables. Continuing to employ methods that allow for investigation of the intersection of the individual and their organizational environment is essential as researchers seek to understand the processes and structures that interact to impact assessment practice.

It should be noted that our study was delimited to a sample of institutions that were all public and limited to one geographic area in the Midwest and one regional accreditor. Future research is needed to explore perceptions of assessment among individuals at a wider array of institutions, including private and/or religiously-affiliated institutions, institutions located in other geographic regions, institutions governed by other regional accreditors, or institutions that primarily serve students of color. The need to include a wider array of institutions connects to the policy level of the SEM, as it is possible that the impact of policy may be felt differently depending on the institution type and the policies of the regional accreditor.



A limitation of the study was the lack of interview volunteers among those with the IRR viewpoint. While we were unsurprised by the lack of interest among IRR individuals to further discuss assessment, our interpretation would have been aided by discussion with an IRR participant given the paradoxical nature of that particular viewpoint. Additional research into the perceptions of those for whom assessment is seen as irrelevant may provide insight into avenues for addressing apathy as a barrier to meaningful engagement in assessment.

The results of our study also beg the question as to how perceptions of assessment actually impact practice. The subjective viewpoints captured in this study via the use of Q method have been equated with behavior due to the nature of subjectivity as being considered “the sum of behavioral activity that constitutes a person’s current point of view” (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 26). There is a need, however, 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. Finally, additional research into how individual perceptions shift over time in conjunction with aspects of institutional culture may provide insight into the dynamic relationship between the individual and the environment and allow for practitioners to consider how to best address barriers to assessment practice in student affairs.

### **Conclusion**

Our results support the recommendation to consider all levels of the SEM when identifying influences on behavior (McLeroy et al., 1988) in order to make progress toward embedding assessment into student affairs practice. Student affairs administrators must recognize the ubiquitous nature of the various viewpoints that

emerged in this study and be prepared to address barriers at intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, and policy levels, to attend to the variety of issues that may be relevant to practitioners within their institutions. In essence, focusing attention on either institutional culture *or* individuals' intrapersonal beliefs about assessment is insufficient. Given the interdependent nature of both individual perceptions and environmental considerations, attention to both culture *and* individual beliefs is critical.

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