

Defining and Operationalizing Equity-Centered Assessment

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Abstract: The discussions on the intersection of equity and assessment continue to expand in higher education, spanning from the inclusion of critical theory (DeLuca Fernández, 2015; Heiser et al., 2017) to a continuum of philosophies (Lundquist & Henning, 2020), and finally to embedding equity in assessment practice (Lundquist & Heiser, 2021; Henning et al., 2021; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). This article contributes to the ongoing conversation by (a) offering a transparent definition of equity-centered assessment, (b) providing characteristics of equity-centered assessment in practice, (c) giving examples of equity-centered assessment in Student Affairs, and (d) providing a theoretical framework for operationalizing equity-centered assessment.

Keywords: equity, assessment, student affairs, methods, positionality

Discussions on the intersection of equity and assessment continue to expand in higher education, spanning from the use of critical theory to shape assessment work (DeLuca Fernández, 2015; Heiser, Prince, and Levy, 2017) to a continuum of approaches beginning with causing harm and moving towards assessment for social justice and decolonization (Lundquist & Henning, 2020) to embedding equity in assessment practice (Henning et al., 2021; Lundquist & Heiser, 2021; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020) and using assessment findings to increase equity in higher education (Heiser & Lundquist, 2021; Heiser & Milligan, 2021). Assessment processes seek to facilitate continuous improvement and include components of identifying outcomes, providing learning opportunities, selecting and applying methods for measuring outcomes, analyzing data, reporting and sharing results, and using these results to foster change. Given the central focus of students in the work of student affairs practitioners, student affairs professionals and our close partners in higher education are uniquely positioned to engage in assessment practices which center the lived experiences of historically underserved students, to challenge policies and processes which foster inequities, and to champion a better future for students by leveraging data to advance equity. As such, this article is designed to be accessible for student affairs and diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners engaging in assessment work as full-time assessment staff, leaders of divisional assessment, those with assessment as a portion of their job, graduate students with assessment responsibilities, or those engaged in cross-functional training. This article contributes to the ongoing conversation by offering (a) a transparent definition of equity-centered assessment, (b) characteristics of

equity-centered assessment in practice, (c) examples of equity-centered assessment in student affairs, and (d) a theoretical framework for operationalizing equity-centered assessment which includes attention to practitioner positionality and power, assessment processes, and higher education systems and structures, each of which need to be considered to truly advance equity. At the heart of this article is a sincere hope to encourage scholars and practitioners alike to create cultures of assessment which foster equity and justice.

Intersections of Equity and Assessment

Prior to the emergence of equity-centered nomenclature and philosophies, the existing landscape of intersections between equity and assessment include assessment and social justice, critical theory and assessment, and cultural responsiveness in assessment. This section explores each of these three intersections within the context of student affairs. Drawing on existing contributions to propose a clear definition of equity-centered assessment currently missing from the literature.

Assessment and Social Justice

Practitioners in student affairs are often encouraged to develop their competencies in core areas of assessment as well as social justice. The NASPA/ACPA competency document states, “social justice is defined as both a process and a goal that includes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to create learning environments that foster equitable participation of all groups and seeks to address issues of oppression, privilege, and power” (p. 30). Central to this definition of social justice are concepts of practitioner skills and dispositions, fostering equity, and addressing contextual factors such as power and oppression. In their work on social justice and assessment, Henning and Lundquist (2018) discuss how past dialogues and skill development in assessment and social justice have been siloed rather than intertwined. They proceed to highlight how culture, philosophical assumptions, and systems of power and oppression are areas of overlap between these two functional areas in the profession.

In their discussion of assessment and social justice, McArthur (2016) looks to policy and procedures as an area where assessment and social justice intersect. McArthur’s (2016) work on assessment for social justice focuses on assessment in higher education and how learning promotes social justice (p. 968). McArthur’s (2016) pushes against “procedural notions of justice” where the ways in which fair treatment of students is operationalized and assessed are shaped by procedures and policies which are implemented under the guise of equity (p. 968). This is a top down approach to fairness based in policy and procedure, which emphasizes what students are learning about social justice from engaging in our processes and procedures at the institutional or organizational level. Assessment for social justice calls into question how our policies and procedures replicate larger, oppressive, societal structures which are problematic and reinforce the marginalization of populations in higher education.

Assessment and evaluation for social justice as discussed by Zerquera et al. (2018) focuses on the process of justice and the inclusion of justice principles throughout the assessment process. Zerquera et al. (2018) write,

The process for achieving justice is to be democratic, participatory, inclusive, affirming, and collaborative. Thus, as we conceive of it, social justice-focused assessment integrates these aspects of the definition throughout the entire process - in identifying aims of the assessment, in study design, and in how assessment results are interpreted and used to inform change. (p. 17)

With an emphasis on fostering social change, this approach centers on social justice throughout the assessment process and prioritizes using results to inform justice-oriented change. Drawing on the work of the NASPA/ACPA competencies, Henning and Lundquist (2018), McArthur (2016), and Zerquera et al. (2018), it is clear that power, policies and procedures, and the assessment process are critical considerations for assessment and social justice work.

Critical Theory and Assessment

Separate, but related to social justice is understanding *critical epistemologies* which, “center and critique issues of power, identity, and representation” (Phelps-Ward et al., 2017, p. 9). Critical epistemology draws attention to practitioner identity or positionality and the critical examination, not just acknowledgement, of power. Additionally, representation becomes a consideration throughout the assessment process. Critical theory can provide a useful lens for drawing out the potential of assessment in higher education to support transformation towards equity within colleges and universities. Critical theory used for assessment and equity focuses on the key tenets of implicit bias, agency, methodological diversity, power dynamics, analysis, and reporting (Heiser et al., 2017). Key tenets for applying a critical lens to assessment practice include reflecting on practitioner positionality and subjectivity, recognizing the agency and expertise of students, incorporating diverse methodologies, translating from data to information for multiple audiences, and collaborating with stakeholders to shape the entire process (DeLuca Fernández, 2015; Heiser et al., 2017). The intersection of critical theory and assessment adds to the power and policy component provided by the examination of social justice and assessment. Critical theory adds practitioner positionality and identities as critical factors in leveraging data to advance equity. Where social justice and assessment intersections focus on power, policy and process, the intersection of critical theory and assessment highlights positionality, agency, and methodology.

Cultural Responsiveness, Cultural Appropriateness, and Assessment

Culturally responsive assessment centers historically underserved students and their cultures throughout each element of the assessment process (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) write,

Culturally responsive assessment is thus thought of as assessment that is mindful of the student populations the institution serves, using language that is appropriate for all students when developing learning outcomes, acknowledging students’ differences in the planning phases of an assessment effort, developing and/or using

assessment tools that are appropriate for different students, and being intentional in using assessment results to improve learning for all students. (p.10)

In this approach, notions of culture are more central to the practice of assessment and are woven throughout the assessment process. Students are centered in the process. Where McArthur's (2016) work speaks to systems and structures which impact social justice work and assessment work in higher education, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) speak more to the process of assessment and how to integrate students, foster student agency, and encourage student-centered, co-created and authentic evidence collection techniques which represent the diverse ways students learn and demonstrate learning.

Culturally appropriate assessment (Johnston & Awanuiarangi, 2010; Slee, 2010) includes both diverse groups of people being served by the assessment practice in the context of the culture of the institution and the practices and knowledge systems of that institution, which tend to be culturally biased towards dominant group interests. In this approach, universities have the responsibility to be proactive in accommodating the cultural differences of their students through situating students in positions of power where they can be involved in decision making and challenging the dominant group's harmful practices. Standard assessment practice reflects external mandates which limits assessment approaches and perpetuates replicating assessment (Wall et al., 2014). Oftentimes, standard assessment processes fail to meet the distinct needs of diverse students. Inclusion must encompass the ability to revise policies and practices that disserve marginalized populations and implement new ones that better serve them. Creating spaces within the institution that specifically serve marginalized students, prioritizing their cultures, and providing teaching and learning environments specifically designed around their cultural practices are key elements. Assessment should account for the uniqueness of specific cultural groups through multiple approaches and indicators that are holistic and culturally reflective. Such approaches should be co-created with stakeholders and enable stakeholders to fully operationalize their agency. Culturally responsive and appropriate assessment approaches challenge practitioners to center students in the work as critical stakeholders rather than subjects of study and reminds practitioners of the power of the assessment process to reinforce harm and perpetuate inequities.

Defining Equity-Centered Assessment

Drawing from the existing dialogue, assessment approaches that intersect with social justice, critical theory, and cultural responsiveness prioritizes the lived experiences and intersectional identities of students throughout the assessment process and addresses the power dynamics, policies, and practices ingrained in the higher education context which shape assessment work. These qualities of assessment position assessment as a process and outcome leveraged to advance equity. Equity-centered assessment leverages the assessment process to foster equity, address issues of oppression and privilege, improve student learning, and reshape systems and structures influencing the environments in which students learn. Through collaboration with students, faculty, staff, and administrators, equity-centered assessment practitioners work to develop the skills and dispositions necessary to collect, analyze, and communicate data that disrupts the status quo and

advances equitable outcomes, policies, processes and systems. The emphasis on continuous improvement is central to traditional approaches to assessment as well as an equity-centered approach. This approach to assessment looks beyond students for the improvement of student learning by focusing on how systems and structures can be dismantled and rebuilt to advance equity, justice, and student success. In 2020, Montenegro and Jankowski proposed the idea of equity-minded assessment and focus on meaningful student involvement, data disaggregation, context specific approaches, and embedding equity in all things assessment. Equity-centered assessment diverges from equity-minded assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020) by moving beyond the thoughtful inclusion of, or attention to, diverse learning experiences and instead locates equity issues, how they are grounded in systems and structures, and how they are upheld or dismantled at the heart of the assessment process. This approach also calls on assessment practitioners to examine their own social locations and how their positionality influences the process and advances equity or propagates harm.

Proposed Characteristics of Equity-Centered Assessment

Equity-centered assessment has six core characteristics: considering the larger motivations and goals for assessment practice, knowledge construction and epistemology, reification of power structures, methodological pluralism, collaboration and voice, and positionality and reflexivity.

Consider the Purpose and Goals of Assessment

The motivations for assessment matter. Dorimé-Williams (2018) centers the goals of the assessment process, “from a social justice perspective” as one that “should be to further an equitable and fair learning environment” (p. 53). The role of assessment goals can serve to enhance the use of assessment to advance socially-just intentions and to truly embrace social justice which requires that the process itself be oriented towards justice. An emphasis on process offers an important differentiation between assessment working within an equity agenda or under the focus of fairness more broadly. Setting assessment goals around equity may emphasize highlighting needs of marginalized students, but does not necessarily integrate them in the process (discussed more later). Socially-just assessment practice “should demonstrate commitment to equity through action” (Bourke, 2017, p.3). Where fairness in assessment may align with general good practice, McArthur (2016) argues that as framed, fairness typically emphasizes “procedural notions of justice: ensuring the right procedures will ensure students are assessed fairly” (p. 968). He argues that assessment goal setting could serve as an advocacy role in ways that are participatory and reflect the needs and voices of those who have been systematically impacted. Thus, it is not sufficient to espouse social justice aspirations in assessment, as the goals of this work must integrate a focus on practice as well.

Historical motivations for assessment work focus largely on responding to external accountability claims, but more recently there has been a shift towards internal curiosity as a motivator for engaging in assessment work. Internal and external motivations for assessment work have implications for advancing equity. Standard assessment practice largely reflects external mandates which limits assessment approaches and perpetuates

replicating assessment that fails to meet the distinct needs of diverse students (Johnston and Awanuiarangi, 2010). Thus, it is critical that socially-just assessment be driven by “internal motivation to determine when, how, why and where their students learn” (Learning Reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience. NASPA-042, 2004, p. 26). A way in which assessment work is pivotal to advancing equity is in completing the process of assessment, first by using data to inform substantive rather than performative change and second by re-assessing to determine if changes had the intended impact. If the goal or purpose for engaging in the assessment process is to address gaps in programmatic outreach, student engagement, or learning, this information can be used to respond to accountability claims and support the success of historically underserved students.

- *Recommendations for Practice:* At the onset of an assessment discussion, ask critical questions about the purpose of the proposed assessment project and how the data will be used, how decisions will be made with the data, and which groups may be impacted. Engage with diverse perspectives to consider the intended and unintended consequences of a given assessment project.
- *Example of Practice:* Assessment practitioners are often content experts and our partners in Student Affairs work are context experts. When working to support the assessment of learning and operational outcomes for a Men of Color student success initiative a group of faculty, staff, and students who led the initiative served as key collaborators and stakeholders in developing the assessment process within this context including defining the purpose of the assessment, the methods used, questions asked, data used, and reporting.

What counts as “knowledge?”: Epistemology in Assessment

Challenging dominant epistemological choices, specifically the ways in which different types of information count as true “knowledge” is a core characteristic of equity-centered assessment. As Phelps-Ward et al. (2017) articulate, “limited or absent conversations around epistemology inadvertently communicate an unsettling dominant narrative and value around an objectivist epistemological preference in student affairs” (p 7). In practice, our epistemological frames, and how we generate knowledge, largely influence the ways in which we consider the outcomes of our assessments. Are we designing assessments to be as objective as possible? Such choices may mask the differences in students’ lived experiences that may differentially influence their meaning-making processes. Are we providing flexibility to students to allow them to identify the ways in which they want to discuss and demonstrate their learning, or do we hold fast to ‘gold standard’ standardized and generalizable approaches? Considering what counts as knowledge, what counts as credible evidence of knowledge, and for whom, may better allow students to express the knowledge and skills they have gained from engaging in Student Affairs programs and services. Are we seeking out the stories of students who did not learn from our programs and asking them why, or are we discounting those experiences had by “too few” students to be “valid” or “significant?” Critical information about challenges or successes of our programs may go unnoticed because too few students expressed that viewpoint.

- *Recommendations for Practice:* Revisit and reflect on epistemological frames and incorporate student feedback into the assessment process. Involve students in determinations of what students are learning and what counts as credible evidence of that learning.
- *Example of Practice:* Prior to a four-day study abroad experience for a small group of first-year, first generation college students, the students attend a series of orientations. At the orientations, students identified and explained what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to demonstrate that learning. At a subsequent meeting, the assessment plan including a pre/posttest was shared with students for their feedback and they contribute the additional ideas of wanting to journal and provide video evidence of their learning.
- *Example of Practice:* In assessing an Alternative Break student leaders' ability to facilitate reflection, a rubric, which was constructed with input from past student leaders and shared with those observed prior to its use, administered by the program coordinator and student interns, is used to assess student leaders reflection facilitation skills as exhibited during a training session. The student interns then follow up with the student leaders after the training to debrief the exercise, asking them about the experience, identify their success and areas of improvement, and discuss the scores given on the rubric. Both the more objective rubric and the student leaders' reflection on the experience are used in the assessment of the students' skill in facilitating reflection.

Reification of Dominant Power Structures

Recognizing and addressing the ways in which the assessment process and the cultures surrounding those processes can reify dominant power structures and discourses is critical to equity-centered assessment. Assessment operates within a context that is often political and informed by social norms and values. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) caution that

Assessment, if not done with equity in mind, privileges and validates certain types of learning and evidence of learning over others, can hinder the validation of multiple means of demonstration, and can reinforce within students the false notion that they do not belong in higher education. (p. 5)

Examples of this practice are: failing to disaggregate data, using demographic questions which are not identity affirming, measuring metrics related to rankings and not incorporating student feedback into the development of meaningful metrics or performance indicators. Failing to disaggregate data is problematic in that considerations of averages bring voices in from the margins and mask underlying differences in the data that may be held by historically marginalized populations on campus, which has a silencing effect. Without critically examining the data from multiple perspectives, assumptions can easily be made that the data captures all student experiences equally well. Advancing equity through assessment attends to and dismantles these assumptions. Defaulting to the same tools (e.g. surveys, focus groups) to evaluate student learning and asking students to demonstrate their learning in the same ways is another way in which assessment can reify that only specific ways of learning and demonstrating learning matter.

- *Recommendations for Practice:* Examine the assessment process and the culture surrounding the process for messages that reinforce dominant discourses and undervalue diverse ways of learning, learning demonstration and measurement.
- *Example of Practice:* A committee of people from across campus representative of the diverse students, faculty, and staff came together to prepare a common set of inclusive demographic questions to be used across campus.
- *Example of Practice:* When defining student success and subsequent metrics, work with students to develop these definitions and measures.

Methodological Choices and Application

Another characteristic is intentionally selecting assessment methods to ensure students have various opportunities to provide authentic evidence of their learning. Assessment methodologies are influenced by a number of factors (what is deemed credible evidence by accreditation agencies, political preferences for statistics or narrative) and may limit the ability of students to provide evidence of their learning, potentially perpetuating inequalities. When selecting an assessment method, practitioners should focus on how it accurately, fairly, and justly collects data (Dorimé-Williams, 2018). Are reasonable accommodations made for students with different needs? Is it assumed that tools standardized on predominantly white populations are effective and accurate measures for students historically marginalized in higher education? Practitioners should explore allowing students the choice of method when measuring their learning, thereby supporting student agency in the assessment process and centering assessment in the student experience (Dorimé- Williams, 2018; Heiser et al., 2017; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). As long as the same learning outcomes and evaluative criteria are used, it is not necessary to apply a consistent method to gather assessment evidence (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) challenge assessment practitioners to consider: “is it that we want students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills or attainment of learning outcomes in a particular way, or that they demonstrate their learning (p. 16)?” Student-centered assessment practices place students and student success at the core of all practices and provide multiple opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, skills, or changes in behavior that have resulted from students’ educational experience.

Which methods are used is as important as how the methods are implemented. When deciding to use a survey, creating questions that focus on student strengths rather than deficits, allow for easy responses for English language learners, and are fair and accurate across populations is critical. When using qualitative methods, the design and implementation of focus groups and interviews in ways that honor student cultures and create culturally safe spaces for sharing is critical. One example of this practice is using simple strategies to foster inclusive spaces such as sharing pronouns when facilitating introductions.

Equity-centered assessment practices locate students and their diverse lived experiences at the heart of the process. Incorporating diverse methodological approaches includes incorporating multiple methods, being cognizant of how certain methods perpetuate inequity through their design or emphasis on “majority,” and allowing space for voice and

qualitative reflections. Practitioners should focus on ensuring that their selected methods accurately, fairly, and justly collect data from students. After data collection, appropriate use of data should consider how data may be used for political expediency and educators should be cautious in using assessment data as the only motivation for change.

- *Recommendation for Practice:* Use a variety of methodologies to measure student knowledge, behaviors, experiences, etc. Solicit student feedback in the development and use of these methods of data collection.
- *Example of Practice:* Using journaling, video-blogs, and pre-posttest results to capture student learning after working with students to define learning outcomes and assessment strategies.
- *Example of Practice:* After identifying areas of impact for sense of belonging for diverse student populations, hosting photovoice or focus group opportunities to identify in more detail the lived experiences of students.

Centering Student Voice

Often, student affairs staff determine what skills and knowledge are important for students to gain from their programs and services. The importance of seeking feedback and collaboration from students by providing the opportunity for agency and voice throughout the assessment cycle is another core characteristic of equity-centered assessment. By doing so, we are better able to consider different ways of knowing, understand how our programs might influence students with different life experiences than those with which we are most familiar, and increase students' awareness of the learning goals and what is expected of them (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). A key consideration here is recognizing the agency and expertise of the lived experience of the students and building this into the assessment process. This can be facilitated through engaging collaborative processes that encourage cross-institutional collaboration and involvement through assessment design, meaning-making, and implications discussions.

- *Recommendations for Practice:* Solicit student input and feedback when designing assessment plans, instruments, and learning outcomes. Convene a student stakeholder group to review data analysis strategies, interpretations, and action items.
- *Example of Practice:* After coming up with learning outcomes for the Multicultural Office, staff ask the students who engage in the different programs to offer what they learned from those experiences. After students shared what they had learned, the staff members share the learning outcomes they generated and ask for feedback on what they had generated, noting where the learning expectations overlapped with what students shared and highlighting the learning students reported that staff had not identified.
- *Example of Practice:* When working to develop an additional set of questions for a benchmarking instrument, work with student organizations to collect feedback on the items.

Practitioner Positionality and Reflexivity

Understanding and articulating our own positionality is an essential element of equity focused assessment. Our unique positionality can lead to assumptions, implicit bias, and unexamined power dynamics when conducting assessment, perpetuating inequalities unintentionally (Heiser et al., 2017). The importance of critical self-examination as reflection is highlighted in the NASPA/ACPA Professional Competencies under the Social Justice and Inclusion competency area, which encourages Student Affairs professionals to “engage in critical reflection in order to identify one’s own prejudices and biases” (p. 30). Once practitioners have reflected on their own positionality they can understand potential impacts when conducting assessment and work to limit these impacts.

Another way in which positionality is integral to equity-centered assessment work is that assessment practitioners can be positioned as experts and often have power over writing the narrative of the data and sharing the results. Translating data so that it is understandable to broad groups and ensuring it is accessible is foundational to assessment work. Assessment professionals should also be cognizant of how interpretations of data findings may perpetuate power dynamics, deficit based conclusions, or silence marginalized voices. Collaborative interpretation of data, equity-centered metrics, and careful disaggregation of data are critical for reducing bias related to positionality and power.

- *Recommendations for Practice:* Engage in critical reflection to understand your positionality, work in committees with memberships reflective and containing members of the student population, incorporate additional perspectives in revising assessment instruments, and include diverse perspectives in assessment design and implementation.
- *Example of Practice:* A student affairs practitioner comes from an educational background where knowledge was solely tested using questionnaires and defaults to using questionnaires to test their students’ knowledge. After reflecting on their own positionality, the student affairs practitioner better understands their default and works to incorporate a variety of methods in their assessment of student learning including presentations, videos, and other projects.

A Framework for Operationalizing Equity-Centered Assessment

Assessment work is and will remain highly contextual and political, shaped by the larger socio-economic influences on higher education and calls for accountability. With this politicized context in mind, to advance equity-centered assessment, practitioners must consider their work at three levels: self, process, and systems.

Self

Our practice is embedded and shaped by our positionality as professionals such that “as individual leaders, we practice within norms, assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors originating in our multiple identities....In addition, identity influences experiences and perceptions of power or lack thereof and affects how we think about and practice within power structures of colleges and university” (Chávez & Sanlo, 2013, p. 9). As practitioners

facilitating and engaging in the assessment process, considering equity-centered assessment at the level of self means engaging in critically reflexive work on how positionality and biases shape each step of the process. What interests shape the assessment questions? How is whiteness or a heteronormative lens centered in the process and can this be de-centered? How are findings and interpretations shaped by practitioner positionality? Is there an inherent deficit orientation related to the language used to discuss findings that may be associated with practitioner implicit bias?

In qualitative research, discussions of “self as instrument” are common for encouraging self-reflection as a form of cultural competence to mitigate bias in qualitative research. The same principle of self-examination and competency development to recognize practitioner impact on the assessment process is critical in equity-centered assessment. An additional consideration embedded in equity-centered assessment is a self-determination of whether or not practitioners have the agency to leverage data for advocacy and justice. Not all practitioners feel safe or comfortable doing so and this is a part of the self-reflection work at this level of the equity-centered assessment practice.

Process

The process of assessment, and the context in which practitioners engage in this process, are ripe with opportunities to attend to voice, operationalize agency, shift power dynamics, and leverage data for systemic social change. Practitioners engaged in equity-centered assessment recognize the ways in which the process can sustain or replicate systems and structures which sustain power and oppression and perpetuate gaps in attainment. Practitioners engaged in equity-minded assessment critically examine what experiences are shaping the assessment process and perpetually ask “who is not at the table” or “who needs to be at the table” while identifying purpose, questions, methods, and interpreting findings. How does power shape the process and whose interests are represented (e.g. leadership, employers, students)? Who shapes the narrative of the findings? Is the narrative deficit or strengths oriented when focused on historically underrepresented populations? Equity-centered assessment is an opportunity to foster holistic storytelling through multiple methods of data collection and reporting. As practitioners, it is easy to fall into the trap of routinized methodology out of expediency and efficiency often leaning on surveys; however, a critical consideration in equity-centered assessment is whose voices are highlighted or erased when drawing on averages and using analysis techniques that require large sample sizes. Data interpretation and sharing is also a pivotal opportunity in the assessment process for stakeholder engagement, agency, and voice. Engaging multiple perspectives in the interpretation of findings serves as a mechanism for contextualizing findings within the experiences of the historically underserved rather than perpetually reifying the dominant narrative.

Systems

Assessment as a practice with roots in accountability can perpetuate systems of power and oppression. Addressing this history and how it continues to shape the practice is central in understanding how to approach the work in ways which move beyond mindful attention to equity and towards active dismantling of systems which replicate injustice and inequity. Systems are a necessary part of higher education and supporting systems, such

as IPEDS reporting, could serve as the baseline for students describing their identities rather than the standard. Admissions applications are one prominent way in which institutional databases are populated with data, but what data might be missing that would help us better understand the student experiences (e.g. gender identity, sexual orientation)? Many institutions have mission and value statements claiming to value diversity and inclusion; how are these actualized in a way that allows assessment practitioners to cultivate data to best serve students? Equity-minded assessment calls attention to the gaps in espoused values and the capacity to make data informed decisions to support students who have been historically underserved or erased in institutional data.

Parallel to institutional data and the routinization of methods is the question of how tools for data collection impact the trustworthiness and credibility of our understanding related to diverse student experiences. How have the go-to surveys in the field of higher education and Student Affairs been validated for historically underrepresented students in higher education? What theory undergirds such tools, what are the identities of those crafting the theory and what demographic composed the samples from which that theory was developed? These kinds of critical questions bring to light the extent to which whiteness and heteronormative perspectives are embedded in the profession and subsequently, our assessment work. To be clear, this is not a rallying cry to dismantle every standardized survey in use in higher education, rather it is a call for critical awareness in who these tools serve or do not serve, if they are culturally responsive, and the intended and unintended consequences of historically underrepresented students participating in environments and instruments not designed with them in mind. Augmenting such approaches with approaches that center student voices (e.g., focus groups, interviews, photo voice, video-blogs) creates a picture of student experiences which is contextualized.

Benchmarks, metrics, and key performance indicators are necessary for institutional effectiveness and attending to student learning outcomes over time; however, such measures are often designed to provide information on a population that has never seen or shaped these pieces of information. Centering equity in the assessment process within the context of the systems and structures upheld in Student Affairs in higher education calls for practitioners to create space which, at a minimum, disaggregates and focus group such measures with students. The focus on drawing easy comparisons and efficiently launching measures meant to capture responses by the thousands can come at the cost of silencing historically underrepresented students, normalizing the white student experience and using white students as the standard for comparison. Equity-centered approaches seek to unearth the historically marginalized and silenced to provide a broader understanding of institutional impact and how data can be collected and used to evaluate the systems and structures upheld in Student Affairs and disrupt them to better serve all students.

Conclusion

This paper was drafted with four objectives in mind, to provide (a) a clear definition of equity-centered assessment, (b) characteristics of equity-centered assessment practice, (c)

examples of practice and (d) a framework for adopting this practice. Drawing on the existing dialogues in student affairs related to social justice, critical theory, and cultural responsiveness, a new definition was offered which centers equity in the assessment process. Six areas of equity-centered assessment practice were provided, including: considering the goals and purpose of assessment, epistemology, reification of power structures, multiple methodological modalities, student voices, and practitioner positionality. Recommendations and examples of practice were provided for each of these five areas. Beyond recommendations for practice, the brief ends with three areas of consideration for advancing equity work that are thus far under discussed in the field, including further embedding reflexivity, cultural competence and the impact of assessment professionals' positionality on the process and outcome of assessment. Next, is engaging in critical reflection regarding how the assessment process serves to uphold or dismantle oppressive structures. Finally, advancing equity-centered assessment as a practice involves using assessment practices and principles to examine long-standing systems and structures which support or inhibit student success in order to improve such systems and advance outcomes for all students. Finally, the authors of this brief hope to continue the conversation and encourage others to share their experiences and thoughts on how assessment can serve as a tool to advance equity in higher education.

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