Assessment in Higher Education and Student Affairs Graduate Education
Professionalization and Its Implications

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Abstract: Courses focused on assessment within higher education have proliferated across Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) graduate programs, tied to an emphasis on using data and evidence in decision making in the field. The intended outcomes and curriculum of these courses vary widely between institutions, at times producing confusion over the competencies needed in student affairs assessment. This project evaluated syllabi from over 100 HESA graduate assessment and evaluation courses to develop a more robust understanding of the skill sets of entry-level student affairs practitioners entering the field from HESA graduate programs and the core outcomes and texts of student affairs assessment education. We describe student affairs as a field engaged in the process of professionalization (Perozzi & Shea, 2023, McGill et al., 2021) through the development of standardized knowledge and the ongoing integration of community-driven standards. Study findings illustrate that courses tended to focus on technical knowledge, such as data

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collection methods and analysis, over the political and contextual dimensions of assessment. Extant standards and competencies, as well as emerging topics and methods, were also incorporated inconsistently. Implications for faculty, practitioners, early career professionals, and professional associations are discussed.

Keywords: assessment, assessment education, graduate education, HESA graduate programs, student affairs education, curriculum development

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A core focus of research in student affairs is the degree to which the field has become professionalized by developing its own system of competencies and professional standards (Dean & Jones, 2013; Hevel, 2016; McGill et al., 2021; Perozzi & Shea, 2023). The creation of core competencies and standards, as exemplified in the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas (2015) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (Dean & Jones, 2013), shows that while the field continues to draw upon diverse disciplines, specific domains have emerged to guide practice (Torres et al., 2019). These domains are reflected in coursework in student affairs graduate programs, which play a vital role in preparing many professionals for careers in higher education (Hendrickson, 2013).

Competency in student affairs assessment is particularly critical, as it may inform potential institutional and programmatic change efforts (Mitchell & Dixon, 2022; Wright & Freeman, 2013) and the integration of broader theory into everyday practice (Torres et al., 2019). A sustained and informed assessment practice is particularly critical to meet growing accountability demands for higher education and to underscore the role of co-curricular work in student success (Blimling, 2013). However, several tensions are evident when attempting to identify the theories and methods driving student affairs assessment education. Assessment skill sets taught in student affairs graduate coursework vary widely by program (Aaron & Cogswell, 2022) and implementation of assessment practices is influenced by the culture and resources of individual institutions (Dean & Langham, 2022). Early career professionals may be confused as to what are exactly the expected practices in student affairs assessment, and faculty may struggle to identify the texts and theories that should be driving the curriculum.

The present paper uses the concept of professionalization of student affairs (McGill et al., 2021) to explore the diverse curriculum around student affairs assessment within graduate coursework syllabi. Through reviewing over 100 syllabi, the research team addressed the following questions:
- What are the core approaches, outcomes, and texts driving higher education and student affairs assessment curriculum?
- To what degree do the core approaches, outcomes, and texts reflect consensus across the field of student affairs assessment?
- What are the implications of professionalization (or lack thereof) for student affairs faculty and entry level practitioners?

Our findings suggest that student affairs itself is a field in the process of professionalization, with applications for assessment that vary widely based on institutional and programmatic context. We suggest that while assessment education faculty may want to draw on several key texts and standards identified in this analysis common to many assessment courses, graduate students should also be prepared to adapt to individual organizational situations and grow their assessment practice beyond a single semester of a graduate program. Professional associations should engage in work to ensure that standards and competencies are shared across the field, especially collaboration and the development of teaching guides and instructional resources.

Literature Review

The present article explores theories of professionalization, specifically examining how student affairs as a field has become professionalized. Professionalization of a field describes a systemic organization and performance of work, grounded in control of standards and guidelines that shape approaches to work (Perozzi & Shea, 2023; Torres et al., 2019). Members of occupations often seek to professionalize a field to confer status for the occupation and build public understanding of work (Perozzi & Shea, 2023). McGill et al. (2021) identify five tensions in professionalization of student affairs: (a) lack of specialized knowledge (i.e., basic knowledge that members must have to enter a field); (b) lack of unified focus; (c) divided professional community; (d) diversity in credentialing, and (e) lack of autonomy. Our analysis of higher education assessment syllabi primarily addresses the first tension, by exploring the degree to which graduate programs align in the approaches, outcomes, and texts driving curriculum in higher education and student affairs assessment coursework. Assessment in relation to standards is particularly critical to professionalization, as widespread understanding and application of standards is necessary for continued specialization of the field (Dean & Jones, 2013). Our research also explicitly references use and alignment with established standards developed in the field. The design of this research also addresses the third tension identified by McGill et al. (2021) by demonstrating unity across multiple professional entities in developing a project to strengthen student affairs as a field. By developing a cohesive framework for assessment education driven by standards, this project seeks to highlight the importance of assessment education to student affairs practice and to the co-curricular contribution to student success.

Assessment in the Student Affairs Education

The primary focus of this project was to unearth the core frameworks guiding student affairs assessment. First, a definition of assessment is provided. Given that assessment is often coupled with the terms "evaluation" and "research," this review also provides definitions for each term and describes their application in the student affairs field. This review concludes with a summary of tensions with student affairs assessment education.

Assessment Defined

Assessment has come to be characterized as an action-oriented process or cycle to determine outcomes associated with a particular intervention or group of interventions for the purposes of continuous improvement. The purpose of the co-curricular assessment

process is thought to encompass improving the effectiveness and efficiency of programs and services, the conditions of student life, student development and learning, and institutional effectiveness (Blimling, 2013; NILOA, 2019; Schuh et al., 2016; Timm et al., 2013). Scholar-practitioners broadly identify two main sub-areas of assessment, each with their own definitions: student learning and outcomes assessment, and institutional effectiveness assessment (Banta & Palomba, 2014; Suskie, 2018). Student learning and outcomes assessment focuses on understanding "how educational programs and services are working and to determine whether they are contributing to student growth and development" (Banta & Palomba, 2014, p. 10). It is less focused on individual measures and more focused on group aggregates to understand cumulative program and service effectiveness (Banta & Palomba, 2014). Texts such as *Learning Reconsidered* were important for fostering a campus-wide curriculum using student learning outcomes to delineate the impact of co-curricular experiences (NASPA & ACPA, 2004). In contrast, institutional effectiveness assessment focuses on the need for accountability to accrediting bodies (Banta & Palomba, 2014). It involves "providing credible evidence of resources, implementation actions, and outcomes undertaken" to improve instruction, programs, and services (Banta & Palomba, 2014, p. 10).

Differentiating Assessment from Evaluation and Research

It is common for assessment to be conflated with evaluation and/or research. All three use similar strategies to understand an outcome or phenomenon, but they do so with greatly different ends. Following is a description of evaluation and research, and how these practices differ in focus from assessment.

Like assessment, the term *evaluation* is defined inconsistently and depends on the context (Chen & Mathies, 2016; Wise & Davenport, 2019). Some scholar-practitioners think of evaluation as the process that comes after the assessment process. They posit that evaluation is the use of what is learned during assessment to determine organizational effectiveness (Schuh et al., 2016; Suskie, 2018; Timm et al., 2013). Evaluation is described as determining the "value, worth, or merit" of programs by determining the "match between intended outcomes … and actual outcomes" (Suskie, 2018, p. 12). Evaluation is thus making an informed judgment on the attainment of learning goals and is not the measure of student learning (Schuh et al., 2016; Suskie, 2018).

Research involves collecting information to guide or develop theory by testing hypotheses, concepts, and constructs (Suskie, 2018; Timm et al., 2013; Upcraft & Schuh, 2002). Assessment and research differ in both purpose and scope. While research is undertaken to make broad generalizations about theory, assessment is more related to determining the effectiveness of a program or service (Henning & Roberts, 2024). Assessments are guided by theory, but research is what tests these guiding theories (Schuh et al., 2016; Suskie, 2018; Upcraft & Schuh, 2002). Timm et al. (2013) remark that assessment "should be directly linked to departmental mission and goals," whereas research "is intended to answer larger questions or lead to understanding of broader phenomena" (p. 5).

Overall, definitions of assessment, evaluation, and research are imperfectly crafted. It is important that institutions and individuals define assessment, evaluation, and research

explicitly and intentionally before undertaking those processes (Banta & Palomba, 2014). Faculty and practitioners alike may be understandably confused about the distinctions between terms, with resulting lack of clarity in course syllabi. Creating resources for staff and faculty that include common language and definitions of assessment, evaluation, and research will help create agreement and efficiency in these processes (Aaron & Cogswell, 2022; Banta & Palomba, 2014; Henning & Roberts, 2016), specifically including the tailoring of assessment education materials. The impact of definitions of assessment, evaluation, and research in literature are not constrained to institutional praxis; they also influence professional competencies and standards in the field of student affairs assessment.

Assessment as a Student Affairs Competency

Multiple frameworks provide guidance on developing competency for assessment in student affairs professionals. This section reviews three different frameworks: the ACPA and NASPA Competencies for Student Affairs Professionals, the ACPA Assessment Skills and Knowledge Content Standards, and the CAS Standards for Master's Level Higher Education and Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs.

The ACPA and NASPA Competencies provide guidelines on ten foundational, intermediate, and advanced competency areas in which student affairs professionals should demonstrate proficiency (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) is designated as a core competency, with a particular emphasis on methodologies, AER practices, and their contexts (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). Torres et al. (2019) observe that the ACPA and NASPA Competencies may suffer from student affairs' low consensus, noting that the lack of cited definitions and theories leaves the competencies open to interpretation by various audiences. As of the writing of this manuscript, the ACPA and NASPA Competencies are under revision.

The ACPA Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Content Standards provide content areas in which student affairs assessment professionals should develop proficiency. The ASK Content Standards complement the ACPA and NASPA Competencies by providing 13 content standards across diverse assessment practice areas (ACPA, 2006). Even more specifically, the ASK Content Standards ask in Content Standard 13: Assessment Education, that professionals demonstrate the "[a]bility to educate others about the goals, needs, and techniques of assessment" (ACPA, 2006, p. 9), suggesting an eventual leadership role in preparing others for divisional assessment.

Finally, the CAS Standards for Master's Level Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) Professional Preparation Programs (2019) provide guidance on the structure of HESA graduate curricula. In Subpart 5b.5: Assessment, Evaluation, and Research, the guidance lists assessment-related content that should be included in HESA graduate courses, such as assessment planning, a diverse mix of methodologies, critiquing public research, and awareness of ethical issues around AER (CAS, 2019).

These various assessment competency frameworks have existed for over a decade and provided a robust foundation for identifying the core knowledge and skills needed to engage in student affairs assessment. However, the use of the competencies and

standards in assessment education is unclear. One of the aims of the present study was to identify whether these competencies and standards are evident in the core approaches and outcomes of HESA graduate curriculum as a driver of professionalization of the student affairs field and consensus within the graduate curriculum.

Student Affairs Assessment Education

There are numerous challenges in articulating a clear framework for teaching assessment at the graduate level. HESA graduate faculty and senior leaders in divisions of student affairs may differ in their views on what information should be taught, how information should be taught, the degree to which the information should be taught, and if in- or out-of-classroom experiences are most impactful to the learning of graduate students (Ardoin et al., 2019; Gansemer-Topf & Ryder, 2017; Kuk et al., 2007; Torres et al., 2019). Faculty may struggle to understand the language of programmatic assessment specifically, as some instructors are more comfortable with classroom assessment over student learning outcomes assessment and are more familiar with performance evaluations rather than program evaluations (Banta & Palomba, 2014). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education has published guidance for student affairs assessment, evaluation, and research proficiencies in HESA graduate programs, though offers no proposed course or program structures (CAS, 2019). HESA graduate program faculty must therefore navigate existing research, definitions, competencies, and professional organizations with little concrete guidance.

Outside of graduate education, diverse professional opportunities are available to student affairs staff provided by associations and specific institutions (Delgado-Riley et al., 2024). While these opportunities are outside of the formal graduate curriculum, they provide important ongoing professional development opportunities, particularly for staff that did not attend a HESA graduate program. Staff designing professional development opportunities in student affairs assessment may also benefit from guidance through understanding the content of HESA graduate coursework.

The present research study attempts to identify the guiding texts, approaches, and outcomes shaping the field of student affairs assessment education, as identified in HESA graduate assessment courses. In doing so, this study aims to help faculty and practitioners alike shape educational efforts that can contribute to the professionalization of student affairs as a field, as well as support early career professionals in identifying frameworks and texts they may use for guidance.

Data Collection and Methodology

Data collection of current syllabi from student affairs graduate programs assessment courses utilized two main sources of inquiry: targeted outreach requests and the online and publicly available NASPA graduate program directory (https://apps.naspa.org/gradprograms/search.cfm). Targeted outreach requests included open invitations for faculty or programs to share existing syllabi for courses on assessment within student affairs graduate programs. Invitations were sent to various assessment audiences via the ASSESS listserv (an assessment-related listserv from the Association for the Assessment of

Learning in Higher Education), the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) listserv, the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) network, the CSPTalk listserv (a higher education faculty listserv), the International Association of Student Affairs and Services membership mailing list, and to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) Assessment Leadership Academy alumni members. In addition to listservs, social media posts on LinkedIn and X (formerly known as Twitter) invited anyone with a syllabus to share it with the research team.

To ensure fulsome data collection from programs and faculty that may not frequent outlets utilized in the targeted outreach invitations, each institutional website was examined for every graduate program listed in the NASPA graduate program directory, focused on institutions in the United States. Information for each NASPA-listed graduate program were cataloged in a research team standard data collection form. The website review included a review of the graduate program website, as well as the institutional course catalog, to identify any possible course on student affairs assessment. Information collected included whether the graduate student affairs programs included a course on assessment, title of said course, if it was required, at what level (MA, MEd, EdD, PhD), title of graduate program, when it was last taught, and the modality used (in-person, online, or hybrid). For any institution that offered a course on assessment, the graduate program coordinator and faculty, where known, were emailed directly to request a copy of the syllabus for inclusion in the study. Across the two approaches of social outreach and direct contact, a total of 276 institutions with 396 graduate programs (including master, doctoral, and certificate) were reviewed. Of those reviewed and cataloged, a total of 116 applicable syllabi were received from 102 institutions in alignment with the purposes of this research project.

An additional 83 institutions offered a course on assessment, but the research team was unable to secure a copy of the syllabi from those institutions due to intellectual property restrictions, courses not being offered within the past three years, lack of interest in the study, or current revisions being made to the course. That means that of the 276 institutions with graduate programs reviewed in this study, 67%, or 185 institutions, offered a course on assessment while 33% did not. Of the 67% of institutions that offered a relevant course on assessment, the research team was able to examine 55%, with representation from across all NASPA graduate program directory regions. Of note, institutions that housed multiple programs (i.e., a master and a doctoral program), shared a course on assessment between the offered programs. Thus, for ease of analysis, findings were examined by the institution as opposed to a graduate program within an institution.

Of the 185 institutions with assessment courses, those courses took place across a variety of degree programs with 52 occurring in MEd programs, 42 in EdD programs, 40 in MS programs, 30 in MA programs, and 21 in PhD programs. The majority of courses on assessment were offered in a hybrid format, with an additional 64 institutions offering the course in-person only and 47 offering it fully online. Further, of the 185 institutions, 60 of them offered the course as an elective option to students while 125 required the course on student affairs assessment of all students. Collectively, 16 institutions included specific reference to curricular alignment with NASPA, ACPA, or CAS standards for their program. Specific to the 102 institutions that provided syllabi for review in this study, 79% required

the course for graduation, and the course was offered evenly between face-to-face or online options.

Analysis

Analysis of the syllabi unfolded within research sub-teams focused on course descriptions, learning outcomes, and required texts through iterative document analysis (Bowen, 2009). Each team reviewed the syllabi for their section and foci, engaged in thematic coding, and reviewed and refined codes and findings within their research sub-team. After initial analysis, the research team met as a collective to review sub-team approaches and findings, serve as quality control for each other, as well as to examine findings across the sub-teams for any overarching themes in relation to the research questions. Coding strategies differed within each subgroup given the different focus of each team; coding approaches are described in the respective section for each subgroup. Where applicable, sub-teams engaged in inter-rater reliability in coding, as well as expert review of findings and sample codes. The start of each finding section includes a brief overview of the analysis employed within each sub-team.

Limitations

There are several limitations with the data and analysis in this study. The first is that the data are incomplete and only obtained from those willing and able to share their syllabi, impacting the picture presented on assessment course design. Second, courses change year to year, along with changes in the faculty who teach the courses, how the syllabus is interpreted, and how it is implemented or experienced by the students. Minor changes and additional readings may not be captured in the official syllabus on file with a program and do not represent the entirety of instruction. Further, syllabi offer a snapshot of an approved course within a larger program. By necessity, the research study removed the syllabi from its place within a program to examine it on its own. Thus, intentional connections to other scaffolded courses designed to integrate student learning across a program are lost when looking at one course within a larger program. With so much diversity in the field of assessment regarding definitions, approaches, and history, one would expect to see a diversity of assessment in the curriculum. Much like the practice of assessment is of specific place, courses sit within programs that have history and context in place. The removal of place in the analysis and review of syllabi in this study means that assumptions are made in interpretation of course-based learning outcomes, terms, and intent from the written materials reviewed and themes implied without the context of place.

Of note, during the individual examination of NASPA directory-listed graduate degree programs, a total of 15 institutions had either put their student affairs degree program on hold or ended their program offering in student affairs. Further, while the NASPA graduate program directory was utilized, the programs and their content were out of date and in need of revision, necessitating direct searching on institutional websites and course catalogs for accurate program information. Programs not included in the directory that may offer an assessment course were not captured in this study.

Findings

Core Course Focus

One sub-team's analysis was focused on reviewing course descriptions to identify the overall focus and intent of each course. The analysis was shaped by the following questions: what is the primary focus of these courses; what research methods were taught; and what, if any, professional standards or competencies were taught in these courses or used in instruction?

To obtain a strong sense of the course's overall focus and goals, open coding was used to separate data into distinct parts for analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Researchers coded syllabi from within one NASPA directory region first and identified 96 open codes. These 96 codes were then reorganized and refined into a code book by identifying overlapping and redundant codes. A code book was then developed consisting of 10 codes and their corresponding definitions. The code book was applied to the remaining syllabi from all regions while researchers remained attuned to potential new codes that were not originally captured. Upon the end of the coding process, 14 codes were used to analyze syllabi. Throughout the coding process, researchers met regularly to debrief codes to ensure codes were not vague, uncover any biases and assumptions, identify any errors in the coding process, and refine code definitions. These 14 codes were combined into thematic categories and served as the foundation for creating the main themes and findings. To add another level of trustworthiness; the codes, code book, and themes were all reviewed by a national expert in learning outcomes and assessment to ensure consistency in findings and alignment with research questions.

By Categories and Themes

The research team identified seven course categories and themes of the focus of the assessment course including: Student affairs assessment; Higher education assessment; Research; Counseling based assessment; Program evaluation; Equity-minded assessment; and Classroom assessment.

Student affairs assessment courses focused on basic assessment principles, assessment planning, connection to theory, writing student learning or program outcomes, identifying, and applying assessment methods, and continuous improvement of student affairs programs. Higher education assessment courses not only included assessment, but also addressed program evaluation, research, and accreditation. The focus of these courses is not assessment in student affairs specifically, but more broadly speaking assessment in higher education. Higher education assessment courses call attention to how assessment is conducted and applied at the administrative level at colleges and universities and the external factors that influence assessment on campuses. Research courses primarily focused on research planning, design, and execution. While assessment and program evaluation were often mentioned in these courses, the primary topics included writing research questions, performing literature reviews, designing a study, and analyzing results. Counseling-based assessment courses addressed assessment and evaluation principles along with a review of instruments, tests, assessments, and other clinical measures used in counseling sessions. While program evaluation courses focused specifically on evaluation

models, classroom assessment courses concentrated on evaluating student learning in a classroom setting. Lastly, there was an emerging focus of courses on equity-minded assessment. The center pillar of these courses was examining equity in education and its relationship to assessment.

Analyzing the syllabi for the seven course categories and themes, the course focus sub-team observed that most syllabi were tailored to either student affairs assessment or, more broadly, higher education assessment (together, they represented 83 or 74.77% of syllabi). Separately, student affairs assessment was represented in 37 (33.33%) of the syllabi, and higher education assessment was represented in 46 (41.44%) of the syllabi. Relatively smaller yet significant representations in the syllabi were research (n = 12 or 10.81%), program evaluation (n = 7 or 6.31%), equity-minded/centered assessment (n = 7 or 6.31%), and classroom assessment (n = 6 or 5.41%).

Of note in comparing student affairs assessment and higher education assessment are the representations of NASPA regions within these two categories. Syllabi from Southeast (n = 12 or 26.09%), Mideast (n = 10 or 21.74%), and Great Lakes (n = 8 or 17.39%) institutions represented the majority of syllabi that focused on higher education assessment. The majority of syllabi from Mideast institutions in particular focused on higher education assessment (n = 10 of 16, or 62.50%). Syllabi from Southeast institutions (n = 13 of 32, or 13.54%) in particular represented the majority of syllabi that focused on student affairs assessment, though this does not represent a majority of Southeast institutions. Southeast institutions' syllabi interestingly account for the most diverse categorical/thematic foci in our analysis.

By Research Methods

A total of 71 syllabi (63.96%) included a focus on research methods. Syllabi were coded for whether the course included quantitative, qualitative, and/or mixed methods. Overall, quantitative methods were most often mentioned (n = 26, or 23.42%), followed by mixed methods (n = 24, or 21.62%), and then followed by qualitative (n = 21, or 18.92%).

All but 5 syllabi (n = 66, or 92.96%) either mentioned both qualitative and quantitative together or mixed methods. Some syllabi presented mixed methods to include quantitative and qualitative methods, and others made no mention of "mixed methods," but did include quantitative and qualitative methods. In all 5 syllabi (7.04%) that mentioned one methodology alone (aside from mixed methods), quantitative was the sole methodology mentioned; there were no syllabi that focused on qualitative methods only.

By Professional Competencies and Standards

Analyzing the syllabi for mention of alignment with ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies and CAS Standards, a total of 41 (36.94%) syllabi included explicit mention of these professional competencies or standards. Overall, ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies were most often mentioned (n = 28, or 25.23%), with CAS Standards mentioned 13 times (11.71%). The ASK Standards were not used in the sub-team's review of syllabi.

Student Learning Outcomes

Student learning outcomes (SLOs) were obtained from the syllabus of each course. Out of the 98 course syllabi that clearly listed outcomes, there were 706 total SLOs. The remaining 17 syllabi did not include course learning outcomes or objectives, so they were excluded from this analysis. Four reviewers coded SLOs using the 13 content areas of the ACPA ASK Standards, since these were created to specify the assessment competencies needed by student affairs professionals, regardless of role (ACPA, 2007). Each SLO was themed into one primary standard.

Several themes emerged as frequent SLO topics not covered by the ASK Standards: overall purpose of assessment; theory/literature review; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in assessment; culture of assessment; and accreditation. When these emerging themes were more fitting than the standards, they were indicated as the primary theme to categorize the SLO. A list of primary themes are provided in Table 1 in descending count order.

Table 1. *Count of the Primary Themes for Course Student Learning Outcomes*

Primary Theme	Count
Assessment Design	152
Effective Reporting & Use of Results	90
Selection of Data Collection & Management Methods	62
* Overall Purpose of Assessment	53
Assessment Education	42
* Theory/Literature Review	44
Program Review and Evaluation	40
Assessment Methods: Analysis	39
Articulate Learning & Development Outcomes	38
Politics of Assessment	35
Assessment Ethics	33
Assessment Instruments	17
* Culture of Assessment	17
* DEI in Assessment	16
Surveys used for Assessment Purposes	11
* Accreditation	10
Interviews & Focus Groups used for assessment purposes	4
Benchmarking	3

Note. When student learning outcomes aligned with more than one theme, the theme that most aligned with the learning outcome was selected for analysis and named the primary theme.
* Emerging theme.

SLOs related to Assessment Design were the most prevalent. This is not surprising, since Assessment Design is an overarching outcome, including the "ability to articulate and execute an assessment plan at the program/service, unit, or division level" (ACPA, 2006, p. 4). Effective Reporting & Use of Results, along with Selection of Data Collection & Management Methods, were the next most prevalent categories. These themes rounding out the top three most prevalent counts are also not surprising given their essential nature and prevalence within assessment practices.

Many of the other competencies are purpose and/or method specific, including Program Review and Evaluation; Articulate Learning and Development Outcomes; Assessment Instruments; Surveys used for Assessment Purposes; Interviews and Focus Groups used for Assessment Purposes; and Benchmarking. Several might be considered essential only for those going into roles dedicated to assessment, such as Assessment Education and Accreditation. Nevertheless, all of these outcome themes are relevant and informative to enhance assessment familiarity, competency, and capacity for graduate students.

Assigned Texts

Understanding which assigned texts were used in assessment courses is critical to understanding which assessment approaches may have greater influence and in identifying gaps in assessment graduate education. To identify the assigned texts used in HESA Assessment courses, syllabi were reviewed for required texts by a sub-team composed of three researchers. Publicly available information about these assigned texts was also reviewed (e.g., publisher summaries, table of contents, and excerpts). Texts were coded to discern their applicability and relevance to student affairs assessment, depth in content, presence of diverse and emerging assessment techniques, and use of pedagogical tools.

Out of the 116 course syllabi that were reviewed, seventeen courses did not have assigned texts listed. Instead, instructors added to their syllabi that assigned texts and readings would be provided on a week-by-week basis through the institution's learning management system (LMS). There were therefore 99 syllabi with assigned texts reviewed for this analysis. Among the examined syllabi, 50.5% ($n = 50$) assigned more than one text. A total of 57 unique texts were assigned across the courses.

Our analysis first examined which texts were assigned most frequently. The three most utilized texts were *Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice* (Henning & Roberts, 2024), *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide* (Suskie, 2018), and *Assessment in Student Affairs* (Schuh et al., 2016). Table 2 displays the assigned texts that are required across three or more courses taught by distinct instructors. In 54.5% ($n = 54$) of all courses with assigned texts, a minimum of one of the top three texts were assigned. A text with a focus in higher education or student affairs assessment (*Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice*) is required in 34.3% ($n = 34$) of all courses with syllabi. This suggests that these texts may have significant influence in how student affairs practitioners come to understand and practice student affairs assessment. Another frequently included assigned text was the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA,

2020) or the APA Style website (https://apastyle.apa.org/). Since this source was assigned in varying modalities and frequently designated as optional, it was excluded from Table 2.

Table 2. *Number and Percentage of Courses Requiring Texts*

Text	#	%
* Henning, G., & Roberts, D. (2024). *Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice*. Routledge.	34	34.3
* Suskie, L. (2018). *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*. Wiley.	14	14.1
* Schuh, J. H., Biddix, J.P., Dean, L. A., & Kinzie, J. (2016). *Assessment in Student Affairs*. Wiley.	13	13.1
* Banta, T. W., & Palomba, C.A. (2014). *Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education*. Wiley.	10	10.1
Kuh, G. D., Ikenberry, S. O., Jankowski, N. A., Cain, T. R., Ewell, P. T., Hutchings, P., & Kinzie, J. (2015). *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*. Wiley.	5	10.1
* Fitzpatrick, J. L., & Worthen, B. R. (2023). *Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines*. Pearson.	4	4.0
Wise, V. L., & Davenport, Z. R. (2019). *Student Affairs Assessment, Evaluation, and Research: A Guidebook for Graduate Students and New Professionals*. Charles C. Thomas.	4	4.0
Suskie, L. (2014). *Five Dimensions of Quality: A Common Sense Guide to Accreditation and Accountability*. Wiley.	3	3.0
Biddix, J. P. (2018). *Research Methods and Applications for Student Affairs*. Wiley.	3	3.0
Sriram, R. (2017). *Student Affairs by the Numbers: Quantitative Research and Statistics for Professionals*. Routledge.	3	3.0

Note. Texts included in this analysis had three or more courses that required the text with unique instructors. Therefore, texts were not included if only two syllabi required the text.

* Texts have multiple editions. Only the most recent edition is listed.

Our second set of analyses explored more about the topics of texts, specifically in teaching student affairs assessment. Over 80% (*n* = 47) of the assigned texts specifically referenced either higher education or student affairs assessment. Additionally, 42.1% of texts (*n* = 24) included pedagogical aides, most often in the form of case studies to support student application of concepts. Further analysis of text details in courses where multiple texts were assigned reveals that instructors tended to assign a core text that provides an overview of assessment theory, techniques, and approaches, supplemented with

additional texts that directly relate to particular methods or issues in assessment. Seventeen of the assigned texts focused on research methods (seven focused on quantitative methods, four on qualitative methods, and four on general research methods) and nine focused singularly on program evaluation. Additional topics of other texts included overviews of higher education issues or assessment techniques that were related to that particular graduate program (e.g., classroom-based assessment for general education).

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Discussion of Findings

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Three main themes stand out across the analyses: HESA assessment courses prioritize the techniques of assessment over the culture and human elements, there is either unclear usage or a lack of inclusion of professional standards as course materials, and there is also an absence of emerging assessment topics, issues, and methods (e.g., equity-centered assessment) as required course texts.

Prioritization of Technical Knowledge

Instructors clearly value assessment design and data collection over how assessment is situated in institutional settings and how a student affairs professional may need to navigate those cultural norms of the institution, community, region, and/or state in which it is located. The majority of courses primarily appeared to focus on preparing students to create quality assessments that include diverse data collection methods and analysis. Due to this emphasis, what is left out of the curriculum is how one should navigate the politics of assessment on any given campus, as well as the importance of relationship building in assessment. Understanding the ways in which assessment is disseminated, interpreted, and communicated in institutional context are also key pieces to being a successful student affairs professional and further professionalization of the field.

Unclear Application of or Exposure to Professional Standards

Based on the findings, professional competencies, such as the ACPA/NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Competencies, the ASK Standards, and the CAS Standards, are occasionally referenced in HESA graduate program syllabi. When they are referenced, it is unclear how meaningfully and intentionally they are incorporated to enhance the learning of students. As described by the conceptual framework, these competencies and standards are important for establishing student affairs as a distinct profession through the development of specialized knowledge. The CAS Standards are revised annually, and at the time of publication, the ACPA/NASPA Competencies are being revised. Once revisions of the competencies are complete, it will be important for HESA graduate faculty to incorporate professional competencies and standards explicitly and intentionally to maximize the learning of students. If not provided in future revisions by competencies and standards authors, HESA graduate faculty should develop teaching guides or otherwise give considerable thought to how they will teach their students with these competencies and standards in mind. By using our profession's standards and competencies to guide the development of assessment courses, HESA graduate faculty can assist our emerging student affairs professionals in identifying and planning their assessment professional development post-graduation, align academic experiences with what is needed in the

field, and provide our emerging professionals with the language to communicate the value-add to audiences within and outside higher education (e.g., nonprofit and community organizations).

Incorporation of Emerging Assessment Topics and Methods

The reviewed syllabi rarely addressed emerging topics and approaches in the field of assessment practice such as equity-minded or equity-focused assessment efforts, culturally responsive assessments, or student-centered assessment. Without a regular and ongoing update to the changing nature of the field of assessment scholarship and the practice of assessment in the field, graduate students in current assessment courses may view assessment processes as a standard checklist that is unchanging or research options to be applied without regard to context. Discussion of technology, ethical engagement in assessment, as well as philosophical and theoretical underpinnings were often lacking, areas that have been increasingly examined in the past several years. To ensure that students do not approach their assessment course as a one-and-done but as an ongoing exploration of how assessment can be valuable in their professional career, inviting students into and reviewing emerging assessment topics and methods ensures that content remains novel and in alignment with the shifting nature of the field. Professional associations can play a key role by facilitating connections between faculty members and practitioners, or otherwise highlighting emerging topics and methods through professional development opportunities.

Implications

While there exists a great deal of diversity in the approaches and topics in HESA assessment courses, this proliferation of assessment courses has resulted in an inconsistent and imbalanced assessment curriculum. This study offers several implications for the student affairs assessment education to contribute to the professionalization of student affairs as a field: (a) faculty should revisit the structure and content of coursework to improve efficacy of learning core assessment knowledge and skills; (b) faculty and practitioners should consider the balance of standards and institution-specific goals in assessment education; (c) emerging student affairs professionals should evaluate how different graduate school curricula will meet their educational goals and be prepared to engage in ongoing professional development; and (d) professional associations should partner together to ensure the promotion of standards and competencies across the curriculum.

First, HESA faculty and practitioners need to examine the efficacy of assessment coursework. Analysis revealed that these courses were often jargon heavy with terms such as formative, summative, competencies, and outcomes referenced in the course introduction but not defined. Further, the purpose and content were hard to understand and overloaded with assignments that required advanced knowledge of assessment, such as crafting an assessment plan for a unit along with subsequent instruments and tools to complete the plan, as opposed to finding, reviewing, and commenting upon an existing unit assessment plan. HESA faculty should consider ways to ensure there is clarity of

content and purpose as well as outline for students how the content they will learn will be applied in the field.

Additionally, many graduate programs offered only one course in assessment. Due to the time constraints of an academic term, instead of having students create an assessment, faculty should consider creating assignments where students critique assessment plans from their campuses division of student affairs using the knowledge they have gained. Faculty need to also consider how they can make assessment courses more accessible by focusing on just assessment and not including research or evaluation, as well as using language that graduate students may be familiar with (e.g. the assessment cycle). Graduate programs may consider developing an assessment course sequence, or considering how assessment is explicitly embedded into other advanced courses.

Given the ongoing tensions surrounding professionalization in student affairs and the importance of contextually situating assessment approaches, assessment courses should likely differ in their coverage in alignment with the focus of the graduate program, its history, and the larger goals of the graduate program itself. Further, a strength of U.S. higher education is the diversity of institutions (Labaree, 2017), which lends itself to a diversity of approaches and definitions to assessment. Should that diversity not be reflected in assessment courses, graduate students will not be prepared for examining local context, history, and culture prior to implementing assessment approaches that may not be appropriate for a specific place, time, or student population. Practitioners and faculty designing assessment education should therefore strive to incorporate content that will help students navigate assessment within their context, in addition to referencing the broader standards and competencies of the field.

As early career student affairs professionals evaluate HESA graduate programs, they should consider that the professionalization of student affairs is ongoing, and that there is not one standard way of teaching student affairs assessment. During the application and interview process, they should review whether an assessment course is offered, if it is required or optional, and what are the foundational texts and approaches used to teach student affairs assessments. These questions will help emerging professionals consider which HESA graduate program best meets their needs, especially those with a stronger interest in assessment. Furthermore, student affairs educators and assessment professionals need to understand that recent graduates are entering the field with a wide variety of training in assessment. Staff fresh from graduate school may have less or more education around assessment basics and navigating the politics of assessment. Divisions of student affairs should be mindful of this and coordinate with assessment professionals in their division (or institution, if there are not professionals specific to student affairs) to offer supplemental training to ensure everyone has a basic understanding of assessment principles, including navigating the politics of assessment.

Outside of HESA graduate programs, professional associations should consider how these findings inform the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies and CAS Standards. The lack of integration or in some cases, the complete absence of the Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) competency area of our professional standards in these courses was

alarming and evidence of ongoing tensions related to professionalization of student affairs as a field. As these professional competencies are currently being revised, close attention should be paid to the applicability of these competencies to the work of practitioners. Furthermore, we suggest that ACPA - College Students International and NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education partner with assessment-driven professional associations (such as CAS or SAAL) in the development of the new standards. This study illustrates the necessity of creating teaching guides or manuals to support standard and competency use in graduate education and in student affairs education, or these materials may be inconsistently applied or represented. As there is increasing attention given to the quality of education on our college campuses nationwide, ensuring that HESA graduate students know how to leverage professional standards to promote stakeholder confidence and credibility while also giving equal attention to improving processes and efficiencies will be critical. By supporting the integration of these competencies and standards in HESA graduate education, we are ensuring our professionals have the necessary skills to meet the ever-changing demands in our field.

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