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Editorial Team

Contents

A Refined Focus on Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact

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This issue is special. For starters, it is the first issue with the refined focus to include *improvement* and *impact* in the title. Second, it is the first issue for which *JSAIII* is situated within a new organizational home. Finally, to lower perceived barriers and encourage practitioners to write, it is the first issue to accept articles through a proposal that can be discussed and honed rather than submitting a completed manuscript.

Clarified Name

The journal's name has expanded to become the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry**, Improvement, and Impact*** (bolded words were added in December 2023). While the name has slightly changed by expanding the title to include these two critical "i" words, the editorial leadership team maintained the historical legacy through the acronym, *JSAIII*, to sound the same (jā-sī). These additional words are intended to clarify *JSAIII*'s niche in the field of student affairs. It is not enough to say that the field engages in inquiry, simply for curiosity; the field of student affairs assessment must do something with that information—by seeking improvement or sharing stories of impact. To that end, the editorial leadership team defines these three words as follows:

- *Inquiry* is the process of seeking evidence to inform student needs, quality improvement efforts, and demonstration of impact.
- *Improvement* is the process of refining and enriching conditions and experiences that influence student perceptions, engagement, learning, development, wellbeing, and success.
- *Impact* is the demonstration of the extent to which conditions and experiences create change in students–both individually and collectively.

New Partnerships

This refined focus comes alongside new partnerships the *Journal* has made in the field of student affairs assessment. First, *JSAIII* is now aligned with the Center for Leading Improvements in Higher Education at Indiana University Indianapolis (IU Indianapolis) and hosted as one of IU's open access journals (https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/). Additionally, *JSAIII* is creating formal partnerships with three of the leading organizations for student affairs assessment: (a) ACPA College Student Educators International - Commission for Assessment and Evaluation, (b) NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education - Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community, and (c) Student Affairs Assessment Leaders. All three organizations have a commitment to advance the field of student affairs assessment, and all three have committed to supporting *JSAIII* through representation on the editorial and issue leadership teams. Finally, *JSAIII* has also joined the Consortium of Organizations for Student Affairs Assessment (COSAA), to center the field's journal among its leaders. These partnerships are already apparent through some of the excellent Field Note pieces in this issue (see Delgado-Riley et al., 2024; Rehr et al., 2024; Wells & Dean, 2024).

Commitment to Practitioners, and Commitment from Practitioners

Finally, *JSAIII* has adopted an internal motto to be a journal for the people, by the people of student affairs assessment. In the past, we have seen a scarcity of contributions from campus-based practitioners; we have implemented changes designed to increase their contributions. It is imperative that campus-based practitioners contribute to the field's scholarship to ground our advances in the field with their scholarship-informed and experience-based perspective and application (e.g., Boren et al., 2024; Duncan et al., 2024; Gordon et al., 2024; Strine-Patterson et al., 2024; Wild et al., 2024). In centering campus-based practitioners, *JSAIII* has made two changes:

First, *JSAIII* added an article type, called "Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact in Action" that provides tangible, easily adaptable or replicable strategies, questions, or tools that have helped student affairs practitioners, leaders, and assessment professionals implement quality improvement efforts and share evidence of impact in a local context.

Second, we recognized that the traditional publication model does not always welcome or support practitioners in their desire to write for dissemination. To encourage campus-based practitioners to contribute, our revised model asks for thoughtful article proposals rather than completed manuscripts. As a result, we saw an increase in proposals, and this issue shows the fruit of that increase.

This issue of *JSAIII* traces an arch to the student affairs assessment story. It revisits where we have been, reviews where we are, and challenges us to consider where we need to go. We invite you to join us as we unfold and build that story together.

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Revisiting Accreditation Standards and the Impact on Student Affairs

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Abstract: This manuscript focuses on the role of student affairs in a changing accreditation environment. We update and extend our argument (Gordon et al., 2019) to first, note changes in accreditation standards (especially those involving student affairs work), and second, describe how student affairs might engage in praxis to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals set forth by accreditors. After reviewing changes in the standards, we interviewed three student affairs assessment practitioners from different accreditation environments to contextualize changes in real experiences. Key findings include a shift in accreditation standards towards institutional responsibility for student outcomes, a greater emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and a need for student affairs professionals to adapt to these changes. Practitioners and student affairs scholars are called to pay closer attention to the accreditation landscape and its impact on student affairs on our campuses. The ability of student affairs educators to be nimble with their work and how it applies to students' needs is paramount in the coming accreditation cycles. Implications for student affairs and other professionals include responses to broader pressures on higher education such as enrollment, workforce, budget, and economic development.

Keywords: accreditation standards, regional accrediting bodies, institutional accountability, quality assurance, colleges and universities, student affairs

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Recent changes to standards by several U.S. accreditation bodies create new opportunities and new questions for how student affairs staff and leaders might find their way to seats at the accreditation table. In 2019, we argued that student affairs professionals, after a generation of assessment work, needed to take an active role in accreditation documentation and efforts on their campuses because of the inclusion of student affairs in the standards of the time (Gordon et al., 2019). We made recommendations for the intentional inclusion of student affairs' assessment and outcomes data in accreditation conversations and reports. In the current article, we update and extend our work, noting changes in accreditation standards involving student affairs and anticipating the ways student affairs might engage in praxis with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals.

Since 2018 (when we finalized Gordon et al., 2019), accreditors have been responding to the shifts in the student success movement, and thereby the inclusion of student affairs assessment has shifted. Most notably, while student affairs efforts are included in college/university accreditation standards, the language used in the standards may not include the words “student affairs.” This creates both confusion and opportunity. The language used by different accreditors refers more to the function or work often undertaken by student affairs professionals and, increasingly, less about the offices and other named practices. Further, accreditors are pushing campuses to focus on their core values and student outcomes. Student affairs assessment leader efforts are needed in the current landscape to respond to accreditation changes while leading campuses in connecting and reporting academic, career development, retention, and engagement outcomes for students. The purpose of this paper is to provide an updated overview of institutional accreditation (including changes to the standards since our first overview on this topic in Gordon et al., 2019), provide our reflections on what those changes mean broadly and for student affairs specifically, share insights from three student affairs practitioners working in three different institutions belonging to three different accrediting bodies, and end with a discussion of ways student affairs might engage in praxis with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals. Therefore, there will be two separate methods and findings in this article to bring forward the conversation needed for today’s student affairs professionals.

Overview of the Institutional Accreditation Process

The following provides an overview of how the institutional accreditation process works, as well as an understanding of the importance and purpose of maintaining institutional accreditation. It should be noted that the principles of accreditation are largely similar across organizations. In our earlier article, we provided student affairs professionals with a guide to the process. Therefore, the present article provides a quick outline with a focus on the more current standards and the implications for our work.

Over the past 200 plus years, accreditation efforts have included state oversight and regulations, specialized accreditation of academic disciplines, institutional accrediting associations, and the federal government’s statistical reporting function (Harcleroad, 1980). The accreditation process itself has largely remained unchanged for institutions since our last overview in Gordon et al. (2019). Most accreditors have a 10-year re-accreditation cycle, with some including a standard mid-cycle check-in. Accreditors also require continuous, regular, and ongoing reporting for any substantive programmatic changes or responses to federal regulatory changes regardless of where the institution may be in the 10-year cycle.

Typically, a major part of accreditation and re-accreditation efforts center around an institutional self-study. Self-study is a comprehensive review *of* the institution, *by* the institution, based on accreditation standards; the self-study results in a written document that is submitted to the accreditor. The self-study report is typically reviewed by members from the accrediting agency who are also administrators, staff, or faculty from institutions similar to the one submitting the self-study. Additionally, due to federal and accrediting agency regulations, institutions are required to also have a review team physically visit the campus and provide a decision on the status or compliance with the accreditation standards. The accreditation process, from the self-study to the on-site team visit, is (and always has been) centered around each accrediting body's standards.

Changes to the "Regional" Accreditation System

The accreditation structure in the United States is complex and decentralized, covering public and private, two- and four-year, and nonprofit and for-profit institutions (Eaton, 2015). There are seven major institutional accrediting commissions for higher education recognized in the United States: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC); Higher Learning Commission (HLC); Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE); New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE); Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU); Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC); and WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). These agencies provide accreditation to institutions that enroll approximately 85% of students nationwide (Eaton, 2015).

Maintaining good status with one of these institutional accrediting bodies has four main purposes: (a) to provide an assurance to students and the public of institutional quality and financial stability; (b) to allow access to state and federal funds (only accredited institutions may receive federal and state monies, including funds for student aid); (c) to assure private sector confidence for employment of students and giving of private funds; and (d) to ease transfer of courses between colleges and universities (Eaton, 2015). Although accreditation is voluntary, most institutions seek it because of these recognized benefits, and most eligible institutions become (and remain) accredited (WSCUC, 2024).

One major change that has occurred since our first writing on this topic is the elimination of the "regional" accreditor. For many years, most colleges and universities in the US belonged to a regional accrediting agency that was then accountable to the US Department of Education. That is, the institution did not choose which accrediting body they belonged to; instead, the accrediting body to which an institution belonged depended on geography (i.e., in which "region" the institution was located). In 2020, in an effort to streamline processes and encourage accreditors to embrace innovation (CHEA, 2019) the US Department of Education (2020) eliminated the distinction between regional and national accreditors and "remov[ed] geography from an accrediting agency's scope" (para 5). Now, institutions and/or the states in which they are located have the ability to choose (or change) with which accreditor they want to align (Weisman, 2022). This new landscape may require a student affairs professional not only to be aware of the standards of their current agency but also other accreditors. This newer development of accreditor choice (and future policy/law changes that may or may not occur as a result) will likely further elevate the relevance of accreditation knowledge for student affairs professionals.

Table 1. *Each Institutional Accreditor and their Last Revision between 2018–2024*

Institutional Accreditor	Last Revision of Standards
Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)	June 2023
Higher Learning Commission (HLC)	September 2020 (upcoming changes in September 2025)
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	July 2023
New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)	January 2021
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	November 2020
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)	December 2023
WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC)	November 2022

Updates in Standards Across Accreditors

Each accreditor has a cycle for reviewing and revising their standards. Since our last article on the inclusion of student affairs at the accreditation table (Gordon et al., 2019), each agency has had a revision in their standards. The dates of the most recent standards for the seven accreditors are provided in Table 1.

Methods and Findings

For this manuscript, we explored the changes and shifts in accreditation standards in two ways: first, via a document analysis, and second, via interviews with student affairs practitioners. Our methods and findings are presented in this section.

Positionality

As scholar practitioners (Green et al., 2022), the authors each bring more than 20 years of work in a variety of assessment, student affairs, accreditation, strategy, faculty, and department leadership roles. As scholars, the authors bring perspectives on assessment, change, student learning, leadership, and institutional operations. Through a series of reflective conversations and collaborative inquiry (Green et al., 2018) the authors took a praxis approach (Rendon, 2009) to examining changes to accreditation standards across agencies. Applying our perspectives and experience as scholar practitioners, we aimed to describe changes and anticipate implications for practice in the field of student affairs, and more broadly the impact on student success issues like persistence, learning, and graduation (Torres & Renn, 2021).

Accreditation Standards Review

In revisiting the accreditation standards for where student affairs "fits," we first explored if and how student affairs might remain embedded in the accreditation process. Given trends in the literature and changes by accreditors, we reanalyzed the accreditation standards with a renewed focus on areas impacting student affairs. Our positionality and methods for this exploration are detailed below.

Methods—Document Analysis for Accreditation Standards

Document analysis is a qualitative research method that, amongst other functions, can provide a means of tracking change and development (Bowen, 2019). Because, as noted above, accreditation standards have been updated since our first analysis of the standards in 2018 (Gordon, et al., 2019), we engaged in analysis of each of the seven accreditation standards documents. Using current and past accreditation standards posted on each accreditor's website, we obtained copies of the accreditation standards as they appeared in 2018, along with the most recently published version of each. We reanalyzed accreditation language in two ways: (a) observing overall changes (or not) to each document/standard and (b) with a continued focus on areas impacting student affairs. We looked for similarities, differences, and themes amongst the changes within and between each of the seven accreditation standards documents. Through this document analysis, we noted updates and changes we observed into three categories: (a) none, (b) minor changes, and (c) major changes. After analyzing all seven accreditation standards documents, we further engaged in a thematic analysis of those where minor or major changes were noted. We studied these changes for patterns and coded and categorized our notes to help us explore themes in the changes we observed (Bowen, 2019).

Findings—Changes in Accreditation Standards

Through document analysis, we observed three types of updates to the accreditation standards: (a) none, (b) minor changes, and (c) major changes.

No Changes. Two accrediting bodies, ACCJC and MSCHE, have not made any substantive updates or changes to their accreditation standards since we first examined them (see Table 2). It should be noted that ACCJC has changes planned for Fall 2025.

Table 2. *No Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards*

Institutional Accreditor	Example of No Change (2018 and 2024)
Accrediting Commission for Community & Junior Colleges (ACCJC)	II.C.3. The institution assures equitable access to all of its students by providing appropriate, comprehensive, and reliable services to students regardless of service location or delivery method
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	4.4. If offered, athletic, student life, and other extracurricular activities that are regulated by the same academic, fiscal, and administrative principles and procedures that govern all other programs

Minor Changes. Two accrediting bodies, SACSCOC and HLC, have made minor changes to their accreditation standards since our first examination in 2018 (see Tables 2 and 3). We defined "minor changes" as clarifications, format changes, or other tweaks to the standards that did not change the meaning or spirit of the language and did not meaningfully nor drastically impact student affairs work or practitioners. The following tables provide examples of minor changes observed in the accreditation standards for SACSCOC and HLC since our last look at them. It should be noted that HLC has changes planned for Fall 2025 (HLC, 2024).

SACSCOC has made some wording refinements and changes, but none to standards that apply to student affairs/co-curricular work. The changes we observed for this accreditor seemed focused on clarifications (for example, changing "is responsible" to "has responsibility"; see Table 3 for examples).

Table 3. *Examples of Minor Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSOC)*

Text in 2018–19 (last revised in 2017)	Current Text (last revised in 2023)
4.2.b. ensures a clear and appropriate distinction between the policymaking function of the board and the responsibility of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy. (Board/administrative distinction)	4.2.b. ensures a clear and appropriate distinction between the policymaking function of the board and the **respective** responsibilit**ies** of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy. (Board/administrative distinction **and shared governance**)
4.2.g. defines and regularly evaluates its responsibilities and expectations. (Board self-evaluation)	4.2.g. defines its responsibilities and regularly evaluates **its effectiveness**. (Board self-evaluation)
Section 6: Faculty ....Because student learning is central to the institution's mission and educational degrees, the faculty is responsible for directing the learning enterprise, including overseeing and coordinating educational programs to ensure that each contains essential curricular components, has appropriate content and pedagogy, and maintains discipline currency.	Section 6: Faculty ....Because student learning is central to the institution's mission and educational degrees, the faculty **has responsibility** for directing the learning enterprise including overseeing and coordinating educational programs to ensure that each contains essential curricular components, has appropriate content and pedagogy, and maintains discipline currency.

Note. Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

HLC also made wording refinements and changes, but again, none to standards that apply to student affairs/co-curricular work (see Table 4). For example, HLC Criterion 1 had four components (A–D) in 2018; in 2020 it had three (A–C), with component 1B, "the mission is articulated publicly," combined into other areas in 2020. Similarly, core component 1A had three subcomponents in 2018; in 2020, it had five. Also, core component 1C seemed to be revised to be clearer about how the mission connects to society and addresses/expands on the idea of "multicultural society" (in 2013/18 version) to "informed citizenship," "workplace success," and "diverse backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives" in the 2020 revisions.

Table 4. *Examples of Minor Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Higher Learning Commission (HLC)*

Text in 2018–19 (last revised in 2013)	Current Text (last revised in 2020)
1.A. The institution's mission is broadly understood within the institution and guides its operations.	1.A. The institution's mission is **articulated publicly and operationalized throughout the institution**.
1.C. The institution understands the relationship between its mission and the diversity of society.	1.C. The institution **provides opportunities for civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally connected world, as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves**.
1.C.1. The institution addresses its role in a multicultural society.	1.C.1. **The institution encourages curricular or co curricular activities that prepare students for informed citizenship and workplace success**.
1.C.2. The institution's processes and activities reflect attention to human diversity as appropriate within its mission and for the constituencies it serves.	1.C.2. The institution's processes and activities **demonstrate inclusive and equitable treatment of diverse populations**.
3.B. The institution demonstrates that the exercise of intellectual inquiry and the acquisition, application, and integration of broad learning and skills are integral to its educational programs.	3.B.* The institution **offers programs that engage students in collecting, analyzing and communicating information; in mastering modes of intellectual inquiry or creative work; and in developing skills adaptable to changing environments**.

Text in 2018–19 (last revised in 2013)	Current Text (last revised in 2020)
4.B.2. The institution assesses achievement of the learning outcomes that it claims for its curricular and co-curricular programs	4.B.1. The institution **has effective processes for assessment of student learning & for achievement of learning goals** in academic & co-curricular offerings

Note. Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.
* All of Section 3 was revised. This is an example; also went from 3.B. 1–4 to 3.B. 1–5

Major Changes. Three accrediting bodies, NECHE, NWCCU, and WASC, all have made what we categorized as major changes to their standards since our first examination in 2018 (see Tables 4–6). We defined major changes as those that reflected a paradigm shift in focusing on outcomes instead of inputs (e.g., NWCCU), student success more broadly (e.g., WASC), and/or a shift to include language that specifically included or clarified a focus on diversity, equity, and/or inclusion (e.g., NECHE, NWCCU, & WASC). We do note that while HLC had some changes that involved clarifications to diversity and diverse populations, these terms were broadly represented in their standards before and thus, to us, did not constitute a major change, whereas those we categorized as major changes did not include this terminology prior to the revision.

NECHE changes seem to emphasize ensuring transparency (not listed in the table), underscoring a focus on quality and effectiveness, and adding "equity" and "inclusion" to their standards (see Table 5).

Table 5. *Major Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)*

Text in 2018–19 (revised in 2016)	Current Text (last revised in 2021)
Evaluation 2.6 The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide valid information to support institutional improvement. The institution's evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods	Evaluation 2.6 The institution regularly and systematically evaluates the achievement of its mission and purposes, **the quality of its academic programs, and the effectiveness of its operational and administrative activities**, giving primary focus to the realization of its educational objectives. Its system of evaluation is designed to provide valid information to support institutional improvement. The institution's evaluation efforts are effective for addressing its unique circumstances. These efforts use both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Text in 2018–19 (revised in 2016)	Current Text (last revised in 2021)
7.1 The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission.	7.1 The institution employs sufficient and qualified personnel to fulfill its mission. **It addresses its own goals for the achievement of diversity, equity, and inclusion among its personnel and assesses the effectiveness of its efforts to achieve those goals. (See also 9.5)**
8.10 The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students. (See also 9.24)	8.10 The institution integrates the findings of its assessment process and measures of student success into its **institutional and** program evaluation activities and uses the findings to inform its planning and resource allocation and to establish claims the institution makes to students and prospective students. (See also 9.22)
9.21 The institution publishes the locations and programs available at branch campuses and other instructional locations, including those overseas operations at which students can enroll for a degree, along with a description of the programs and services available at each location.	9.20 The institution publishes **a description of the size and characteristics of its student population(s), as well as a description of the campus setting for each of its physical locations (main campus, branch campuses, other instructional locations and overseas locations at which students can enroll for a degree). For each location and modality of instruction, the institution publishes a description of the programs, academic and other support services, co-curricular and nonacademic opportunities, and library and other information resources available to students**.

Note. Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

NWCCU made extensive changes to their standards, with revisions in almost every criterion and sub-criterion. Their revisions marked a clear change to a comprehensive focus on student outcomes and meaningful indicators of student success and achievement (see Table 6).

Table 6. *Major Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)*

Text in 2018–19 (revised in 2010)	Current Text (last revised in 2023)
Standard One – Mission and Core Themes The institution articulates its purpose in a mission statement, and identifies core themes that comprise essential elements of that mission. In an examination of its purpose, characteristics, and expectations, the institution defines the parameters for mission fulfillment. Guided by that definition, it identifies an acceptable threshold or extent of mission fulfillment.	Standard One—**Student Success, and Institutional Mission and Effectiveness** **The institution articulates its commitment to student success, primarily measured through student learning and achievement, for all students, with a focus on equity and closure of achievement gaps, and establishes a mission statement, acceptable thresholds, and benchmarks for effectiveness with meaningful indicators. The institution's programs are consistent with its mission and culminate in identified student outcomes leading to degrees, certificates, credentials, employment, or transfer to other higher education institutions or programs. Programs are systematically assessed using meaningful indicators to assure currency, improve teaching and learning strategies, and achieve stated student learning outcomes for all students, including underrepresented students and first-generation college students.**
2.D.1: Consistent with the nature of its educational programs & methods of delivery, the institution creates effective learning environments with appropriate programs & services to support student learning needs.	2.**G**.1: Consistent with the nature of its educational programs & methods of delivery, **& with a particular focus on equity & closure of equity gaps in achievement,** the institution creates & maintains effective learning environments with appropriate programs & services to support student learning **& success.**

Note. Text in bold indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

Similarly, the WASC standards changed substantially as well. Between 2013 and 2023, the standards are quite different and clearly shift to a focus on quality and student success broadly and including diversity, equity, and inclusion (see Table 7).

Table 7. *Examples of Major Changes Observed in Accreditation Standards—Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC)*

Text in 2018–19 (revised in 2013)	Current Text (last revised in 2023)
Standard 1: Defining Institutional Purposes And Ensuring Educational Objectives The institution defines its purposes and establishes educational objectives aligned with those purposes. The institution has a clear and explicit sense of its essential values and character, its distinctive elements, its place in both the higher education community and society, and its contribution to the public good. It functions with integrity, transparency, and autonomy.	Standard 1: Defining Institutional **Mission And Acting With Integrity** The institution defines its **mission** and establishes educational **and student success** objectives aligned with **that mission**. The institution has a clear sense of its essential values, **culture,** and distinctive elements, and **its contributions to society and the public good**. **It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The institution** functions with integrity and transparency.
1.4 Consistent with its purposes and character, the institution demonstrates appropriate attention to the increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion through its policies, its educational and co-curricular programs, its hiring and admissions criteria, and its administrative and organizational practices.	**1.2** Consistent with its purposes and character, the institution **defines and acts with intention to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in all its activities, including its goal setting, policies, practices, and use of resources across academic, student support, and co-curricular programs and services.**
Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives Through Core Functions The institution achieves its purposes and attains its educational objectives at the institutional and program level through the core functions of teaching and learning, scholarship and creative activity, and support for student learning and success. The institution demonstrates that these core functions are performed effectively by evaluating valid and reliable evidence of learning and by supporting the success of every student.	Standard 2: Achieving Educational Objectives **And Student Success** The institution achieves its **educational and student success** objectives through the core functions of teaching and learning, **and through support for student learning, scholarship, and creative activity. It promotes the success of all students and makes explicit its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.** The institution demonstrates that core functions are performed effectively by evaluating valid and reliable evidence of learning.

Text in 2018–19 (revised in 2013)	Current Text (last revised in 2023)
Standard 4: Creating An Organization Committed To Quality Assurance, Institutional Learning, And Improvement	Standard 4: Creating An **Institution** Committed To **Quality Assurance** And Improvement
The institution engages in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory self-reflection about how effectively it is accomplishing its purposes and achieving its educational objectives. The institution considers the changing environment of higher education in envisioning its future. These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness. The results of institutional inquiry, research, and data collection are used to establish priorities, to plan, and to improve quality and effectiveness.	The institution engages in sustained, evidence-based, and participatory reflection about how effectively it is accomplishing its **mission,** achieving its educational **and student success** objectives, **and realizing its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.** The institution **envisions its future in light of the changing environment of higher education.** These activities inform both institutional planning and systematic evaluations of educational effectiveness.

Note. Text in bold (in Current Text column) indicates a change in wording from text in 2018–2019.

Changes Summary. Overall, accreditation standards have shifted toward institutional responsibility for student achievement, support, and outcomes, and away from prescribing programs leading to desired outcomes. After analyzing the standards, the change most often seen was a new focus on achieving success (i.e., graduation outcomes) rather than emphasizing services/programs. Standards that were changed in recent years appear to be less prescriptive about how student success is achieved (e.g., number of programs) and instead focus on outcomes (e.g., time to graduation). Institutions as a whole, including student affairs divisions and professionals, must now ensure programs and processes are in place to lead to student achievements. Previously, standards suggested “Do A to get B” (where B is graduation/student success). Now, several standards simply read “Get to B.” Further, in our observation, there is a clear shift toward including terms such as “equity” and “inclusion” in some of the standards themselves, which underscores a focus on a more holistic approach to ensuring programs and processes are in place that lead to student success. We feel it is important to note that the intent of our review of the accreditation standards was not to focus on one type of change (i.e., the inclusion of certain wording) or to determine if accreditors are becoming more or less similar to one another. The aim was to capture and analyze the changes in accreditation standards (if any) as they relate to the inclusion student affairs (or “co-curricular”) work in student outcomes and summarize trends that emerged. We recognize there is still work left for others to parse more deeply the comparative nature of changes across accreditation standards and agencies.

Practitioner Reflections

After analyzing changes in the standards documents, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with three practitioners in student affairs assessment to capture their reflections. We wanted to understand lived experiences with the accreditation process and/or accreditation requirements from student affairs assessment professionals and infuse the practitioner voice into this conversation.

Methods—Interview Protocols

In line with Bowen's (2019) suggestion that it is important to "seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources" (p. 28), we conducted semi-structured interviews with three practitioners in student affairs assessment. The interviews were meant to be informal but informative conversations about their experiences as assessment professionals in the area of student affairs and also as a rudimentary check on the themes we felt emerged in the changes to accreditation standards (interview questions can be found in the Appendix). We sought to check with practitioners from institutions under three different accrediting bodies to see if and how (a) institutional priorities (especially as they relate to accreditation standards and any changes made by accreditors) translate to student affairs work, (b) institutional priorities/needs translate into their daily work as student affairs assessment professionals, and (c) if they had noticed any changes with regard to student affairs' involvement, inclusion, and/or ownership of student success on their campus. Once interviews were finished and thematic coding was completed, the interview takeaways and quotes were given back to interviewees to member check findings.

We interviewed three individuals, one from each of the categories we observed with regard to changes in accreditation standards: no change, minor changes, and major changes. Interviewees were selected using convenience and snowball sampling, with the researchers reaching out to practitioners we knew who were working at colleges/universities belonging to different accreditors; we asked colleagues if they were interested in being interviewed and/or to pass our information along to someone who might be. The three people we interviewed worked at a community (Associates Degree) college under JCCAC (no changes since 2018), a university from SACSCOC (minor changes since 2018), and a university from WASC (major changes since 2018). Interviewees were asked to select initials to be used as their name reference for this manuscript. A description of each interviewee follows and includes the accreditor, institutional type, and professional details.

ACCJC Participant (no changes to accreditation requirements). MS is a faculty member and administrator at a community college, serving at this institution for over 10 years. The college is a member of a regional innovation consortium. MS' primary role on campus is focused on student information systems in an enrollment and student support functional area. They are also a member of a campus wide outcomes assessment workgroup which focuses on solutions and policies for leaders to take forward and deploy throughout the college. MS' background includes a doctorate in education with a focus on technology adoption by campus leaders.

SACSCOC Participant (minor changes to accreditation requirements). HH is a full-time student affairs assessment professional at a four-year, doctoral granting, research one, large state institution. HH's primary role is an assessment professional for a division of student affairs, facilitating the assessment efforts of more than 20 departments within the division. HH has been at this institution for more than 4 years at the time of the interview and was previously at a SACSCOC institution. HH's background includes a doctorate in higher education administration.

WASC Participant (major changes to accreditation requirements). FB is a mid-level leader and administrator at a comprehensive public, doctoral-granting, four-year institution in a major metropolitan area. FB's primary role on campus is focused on basic needs initiatives while also the chair of the division-wide student assessment council and a member of a campus-wide outcomes assessment workgroup that focuses on building a campus culture of assessment and evaluation. FB's background includes working at the same institution for 18 years and a doctorate in education with a focus on the institutional logics of middle managers of student engagement programs.

Findings—Practitioner Experiences and Reflections

While we intentionally sampled from different accreditation environments, the interviews yielded three insights that connect across those environments. Far from being representative or conclusive, we present these quotes as examples of how professionals balance their student affairs assessment priorities with the broader accreditation standards that affect them. The major themes from the deductive thematic coding were: (a) Assessment Work is Important (but not necessarily done in response to accreditation); (b) Expectations of Leadership (as both interpreter and responder to accreditor needs); and (c) Not Knowing Specific Accreditation Standard Content (but aware it must be driving some student affairs assessment practices). Each of these themes are explored in more detail below.

Assessment Work is Important. From our interviews, we heard how some student affairs professionals are aware that assessment work is important. As examples, participants shared that getting a seat at the table elevated student affairs and assessment, with FB noting that "joining the assessment conversation was kind of shocking to folks because they didn't understand what we did." Similarly, the participants also shared an understanding of why assessment work is important to their campus; MS explained, "my job is to make things better, right? Make things more efficient," whether outside standards change or not. Practitioners are also attuned to how campus efforts in student affairs have shifted in response to accreditation with MS noting that "as we were trying to make changes, we had accreditation and just recently our Chancellor's office raised the bar [in response to accreditation], the vision aligned to the reporting tool which is very similar…to the process we've mapped out." Finally, practitioners understand the relevance of accreditation to student affairs specifically through the mechanism of institutional priorities. Participants were actively engaging the role of student affairs assessment in the broader priorities of the campus. For example, FB noted:

> [P]art of our accreditation process was the division of Student Affairs trying to find ourselves in the institution's priorities and the needs. [I am] one of the lone voices in the overall university assessment council. [I]f we can understand what a student is experiencing outside of the classroom versus in the classroom, that can create a fuller picture, but we need both sides to create that picture.

Expectations of Leadership. Each of the student affairs practitioners reported a reliance on campus leaders to set priorities, and trusted that those priorities were responsive to accreditation reports or standards. Practitioners reflected that their leaders' (rather than their own) accreditation knowledge resulted in changes to practice. HH noted, "We as a division right, the Vice President of Student Affairs or whoever your senior Student affairs officer is, should consider that part of their responsibilities." Additionally, leaders had the leverage to set priorities and deploy resources, both technology and staff, to respond to accreditors' needs. For example, one participant reflected:

> ...the leverage that was really necessary to kind of get folks on board with making the change that needed to be made. We were way behind in terms of adopting technology in the services that we provide to students and therefore was lacking the ability to do all the other things that were necessary to make sure that we were efficient in the way that we serve students. And so it was one of those things where like I, I got my role and then I was able to do all the things that I needed to kind of push some of this stuff along.

However, participants actively struggled at times with translating student affairs work in terms of institutional priorities determined by accreditation. For example, FB said:

> Part of the Division of Student Affairs is trying to find ourselves in the institution's priorities and needs. When we first started that conversation...we weren't found anywhere. If this is the strategic plan, we have to do that plan whether or not the plan fits...and a lot of it is classroom-based. It's curricular-based, and a lot of it wasn't co curricular and so we struggled with that...I think that as we've developed a cycle in a plan and a committee, we are more in line with the institutional priorities and the strategic plan.

At the same time, these professionals were relied upon to correctly interpret accreditation standards by staff and peers, and when leaders changed, so did the attention to accreditation standards as drivers for action. HH pointed out, "Since....[the previous SSAO] is not here anymore, [accreditation has] zero impact practically day-to-day on my work, which feels incorrect."

Not Knowing Specific Accreditation Standard Content. None of the three people we interviewed were aware of changes in language (if any) to their accreditation standards, although one participant was aware that site visits were perceived more favorably on campus. At the same time, accreditation standards were perceived as likely driving some student affairs assessment practices. For example, HH shared, "I would say the last [accreditation visit] findings for a couple of years made it easier to tell people....you have to complete all of this." Similarly, two of the three participants indicated they were working to make improvements from the last accreditation report. Regardless of the knowledge of the standards and if they changed, student affairs assessment professionals report relying on direction from leaders and strategy from institutions—rather than their own knowledge of the accreditation standards—to get their work accomplished. Accreditation was experienced as a kind of ripple effect for these assessment practitioners. FB reflected:

> ...Knowing that we are part of the accreditation process and not just contributing when we need to, it's a consistent effort now. We have domains, we can answer the question, we have a cycle, we have a report.

Discussion

This discussion represents the intersection of two methodologies (document analyses and reflective interviews) which informed this scholarly conversation. These data inform ongoing considerations of how student affairs is part of accreditation conversations on a given campus. It is incumbent on the reader to first identify their current accreditor, locate their standards, and interpret their responsibility. The layers of responsibility, however, can be complicated in institutions with distributed student success efforts (Torres & Renn, 2021). Depending on an individuals' context, assessment practitioners might find themselves interpreting standards as requiring less departmental structure changes and more cross-unit or cross-division collaboration. The latter could lead to more distributed responsibility across the institution and thus possible complexities for student affairs professionals.

The following discussion weaves the three themes from practitioners with the documented accreditation shifts. We bring to the foreground how the reflection themes might interact in a changing accreditation landscape, the importance of campus context and leadership, and how, in practice, student affairs professionals need to be aware of the collective responsibility for student success.

Changing Accreditation Landscape

Accreditation is guided by standards of practice, which are defined and applied at an institutional level to provide guidance and direction. The need for standards and definitions is a well-recognized idea in many sectors, offering "...clear and unambiguous guidelines for operationalization - the process by which an abstract concept is transformed into variables that can be observed, manipulated, and measured" (Necka et al., 2022, p. 25). Standards provide an organizing framework for research and clarify parameters for organizing work, helping both experts and the uninitiated. Updated standards provide modernization, clarity, and consistency from which we can compare and contrast levels of access and availability of college for different populations. Consistency leads to common understanding of university obligations (such as fiscal responsibility and operational integrity) as well as common expectations of the college experience as a rite of passage, developmental milestone, and a means for social mobility.

Higher education has been broadly aided by common standards, such as the idea of a degree, the credit hour, and major areas of study. A shared, collective understanding of these concepts aids college admission, graduation, transfer between institutions, and employer understanding of the content of a college degree. Collectively, these standards represent a slow and steady pace of evolutionary changes. At a slightly more rapid pace, institutions change in light of research and practice, in response to peer influence, and in response to outside pressures. Accreditors, as member-driven organizations, update their standards to reflect the needs and practices of member institutions and constituents. More recently, the influx of political influences, algorithmic acceleration of AI and other technologies, and enrollment profiles of institutions are representing rapid changes. All the while, institutions are made up of people who interpret standards as best as they can and who slowly influence shifts and revisions in standards. These shifts and changes take time. From this understanding, we consider how student affairs and assessment leaders interact with accreditation.

Importance of Campus Context and Leadership

We consider changes in accreditation standards (document analysis) as those standards are interpreted by practitioners (interview data). The interview participants, all assessment professionals, each engaged questions of leadership, interpretation, evidence-driven change, and compliance/improvement. How and why they did so was relevant in their own contexts. From the higher operational context, we can see how their comments fit with fairly standard assessment cycles (Culp & Dungy, 2012) and reflect fairly well-known assessment barriers (Heinrich, 2017).

Leaders drive change. Some leaders might be appointed and vested with authority, and other leaders might derive authority from their relationships, influence, or insights. In any case, leaders often encounter opportunities to drive change. Self-authorship theories (see Baxter Magolda, 2007) help explain how leaders co-evolve with their environments, including accreditation. The assessment professionals we interviewed largely relied on their campus leaders for both interpretations of accreditation standards (changed or not), priorities, and their understanding of the importance of assessment. In their book, *Leading Assessment for Student Success*, Bingham et al. (2023) argued for building a culture of inquiry which includes both intentionality and understanding the reasons for assessment; one of the key reasons to assess is for accountability to accreditors (Ewell, 2009). In our interviews, we saw both intentionality and accountability on display as assessment leaders joined broader campus assessment councils. They actively sought ways for student affairs to align, contribute, and add value to the improvement efforts and storytelling of institutions.

Access to learning was referenced by our participants and in accreditation standards. Student affairs exists as a profession to promote learning and development of the whole student and to support inclusivity while recognizing and supporting diverse developmental pathways (ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d). Thus, student affairs assists in both transforming and facilitating equitable access to and success through higher education. We understand that a key reason to assess programs and learning is to advance equity and equitable opportunities for high achievement (Bresciani Ludvik, 2019; Henning et al., 2023). If assessment is to evolve to be responsive to both accreditors and equity purposes, leaders require a chance to re-author and remix (Order et al., 2017) their assessment practices, use data for improved processes, and report how those outcomes fulfill accreditation standards. The professionals we interviewed reported making (or helping leadership make) changes in programs that were intended to promote equity, transparency, and access to education. While not a major theme of our reflection data, we do see the need to recognize that even without naming equity as a goal of accreditation, the purpose of equity in student affairs assessment remains salient and was evident in some of the standard changes. Equity and access purposes align with the fact that social justice outcomes are foundational for the field of student affairs (French & Kniess, 2023; ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d). Leaders and assessment professionals working in the field, through both daily practice and longer accreditation cycles, have a responsibility to regularly reexamine and clarify institutional practices and policies and use evidence and data to improve outcomes for students. We assert that equity in assessment and in practice remain a foremost priority, despite accreditors leaving specificity of equity goals up to each institution.

Collective Responsibility for Student Success

In our document analysis, we observed major changes to accreditation standards in two recent update periods (2010-2020 and 2020-present). In these cases, the terms “student success,” “co-curricular,” or “student affairs” do not appear. The lack of inclusion of these terms, we believe, reflects institutional equity efforts to remove silos of practice and increase access to support for students. We also know that student affairs, as a field, builds on and combines the best of socio-cultural, diversifying, and critical and post-structural development theories (Renn & Reason, 2021). These findings and the trajectory of student affairs results in a possible future where student affairs work is no longer bound to specific units, activities, or programs but becomes more integrated with and focused on holistic student outcomes across the institution. We also observed that some of the accreditation changes reflect a reality that students do not move through their collegiate experience in any kind of silo (see Museus, 2021). A renewed opportunity emerges for student affairs to engage in praxis with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals.

The way we organize our work may look different at times, which could yield professional identity instability. As training programs and leaders adapt to changes, however, it is possible for a future state to be more effective for students. From a praxis standpoint (Green et al., 2022), we reflected on these changes and our work as assessment professionals for student affairs areas. We notice that a generation of student affairs professionals were trained with a clear understanding of a division between academic and student affairs and that our attendant professional identities developed around that understanding. The current accreditation changes catalyzed a palpable identity shift in at least one of us. While a challenging shift, it is ultimately reassuring to see accreditors adopt approaches that are holistic and possibly more inclusive of the personal, social, developmental, and emotional needs that drive student success, combined with academic and intellectual needs of students.

Practitioner reflections from this study yielded some common considerations about interpreting accreditation language, evidence driving change, and a spectrum of assessment purposes ranging from improvement to compliance. These considerations are intertwined and co-informing in an assessment cycle. In ideal situations, assessment and divisional leaders actively interpret and share updates to accreditation standards. Leaders interpret those and other data to create and drive priorities in context. Programs, services, data collection, and assessments follow. Therefore, the ways professionals use and interpret accreditation data should inform assessment cycles (Culp & Dungy, 2012). Analyses and decisions close the assessment loop and data are stored to inform later reporting requirements.

Future Questions and Research

Our investigation led us to more questions than we had means to address. We raise them here because, as practitioners, our goal is to engage in community discussions and scholarship to develop new practices, and eventually new standards:

1. Given recent legislative changes, we wondered: Are accreditors' changes in standards a reflection of institutions' ability to “shop around”? What implications do state/regional politics or agendas (e.g., as seen in Florida; Whitford, 2022) have on an institution’s choice of accreditor (or vice versa)? What do these changes look like for structures across campus?
2. How are standards becoming more alike (or dissimilar) across accreditors? How does this affect student affairs work
3. What is the difference for practitioners between the ideas of service-driven student affairs and outcomes-driven student affairs?
4. How might student affairs and assessment leaders coordinate and collaborate differently to reflect a desired seamless student experience?
5. How do accreditation agencies interpret the field and idea of student affairs work? What does that mean for student affairs’ identity?
6. How will certification in student affairs intersect with accreditation standards?
7. Given recent legislative movements to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) positions, departments, and/or activities (e.g., Bryand & Appleby, 2024), how do universities and student affairs professionals incorporate a more holistic approach to programs and processes that ensure student success?

Conclusion

In describing accreditation changes in both documents and lived experiences, practitioners and scholars are called to pay closer attention to the accreditation landscape and its impact on student affairs on our campuses. Accreditation standards are reflecting broad practices of de-siloing specializations, data-driven changes to practice, and increased technology support. Those changes are, in turn, driving different functional arrangements of student affairs. How practitioners interpret changes and remain nimble with their work is a key thread in this investigation, analyses, and reflective conversations. We continue to call for student affairs leaders to be “in the know” about accreditation and accreditation standards, as practitioners rely on them to know it. For student affairs professionals, social justice and DEI work remains a priority in practice (see ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d), but without additional recognition in standards, may become less of a priority. This makes it even more important for student affairs leaders to reflect the standards of their campus and be “at the accreditation table.” Implications for student affairs and other professionals include new integrations with other units such as enrollment, workforce, budget, and economic development.

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Appendix
Interview Questions

1. We have a working assumption that institutional priorities translate to student affairs work. How do institutional priorities/needs translate into your daily work as a Student Affairs (assessment) professional?

2. What if anything has changed on your campus with regard to what it takes for "student success" in 2024?
    a. In your opinion, who "owns" student success? How does that work in practice? How should that work?

3. How do you feel student affairs fits in university accreditation efforts? Do you feel that has changed in the last 5-10 years?

4. What was the nature of student affairs participation in your last accreditation cycle/report/visit? How was SA engaged in the process?
    a. In your opinion, have tasks of student affairs changed related to accreditation? If so, how?

5. Did the most recent accreditation findings inform student affairs assessment practices? SA leadership decision making or resource allocations? Anything else? (note these should be formal changes)
    a. How has this affected your work?

6. How (if at all) have campus efforts of student affairs shifted in the context of accreditation in the past few years? (note these would be the more informal changes)
    a. How has this affected your work?

7. In your opinion, what are ways student affairs might engage with academic affairs and accrediting bodies to ensure coordination and alignment with the overall student success goals?

8. What is your sense of specific accreditation standards changes in the past five or so years?
    a. If you sense there has been a change, how would you characterize those changes? (e.g., more effective?)
    b. In your opinion, what implications do state/regional politics or agendas (e.g., as seen in Florida) have on an institution's choice of accreditor (or vice versa)

9. Is there anything we didn't ask that you'd like to discuss?

The Evolution of the CAS Standards

Forty-Five Years of Collaboration and Consensus

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Abstract: This article traces the evolution of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) over its forty-five-year history, emphasizing its pivotal role in promulgating professional standards for student-focused programs and services in higher education. Founded in 1979, CAS has grown from 13 to 43 member associations, expanded its portfolio from 17 to 51 functional area standards, and released 11 editions of the *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education* (commonly known as the "CAS Blue Book"). The article examines CAS's unwavering commitment to collaboration, consensus, and self-assessment, underscoring its enduring mission to enhance professional practice while addressing the evolving needs, challenges, and opportunities in the field.

Keywords: professional standards, self-assessment, CAS standards, collaboration, consensus, assessment, higher education, student affairs, student services, program review

Established in 1979, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) emerged from a conversation among professional associations to address a pressing need within the expanding student affairs profession. This article explores the evolution of the CAS standards, examining how the organization has upheld its foundational values while adapting to changes in the field. From its inception with 13 member associations, CAS has grown significantly, now comprising 43 associations. The first edition of the "CAS Blue Book" featured 17 functional areas, including preparation standards. Today, the 11th version (2024) encompasses 51 functional area standards, with additional cross-functional materials available, reflecting the organization's ongoing commitment to guiding and enhancing the quality of student-focused practice in higher education.

The Origins and the Case for the CAS Standards

The 1950s-60s saw rapid expansion in U.S. higher education as factors including the GI Bill, the women's movement, and Civil Rights legislation led to larger enrollments and increasing diversity on college campuses. Student services and student affairs programs were expanded to meet the growing needs, and a number of graduate programs were established to prepare entry-level professionals to enter the field of student affairs. Although the field was growing, there was no agreed-upon curriculum or standards reflecting consensus about what graduates should be expected to know or be able to do. An initial effort had begun in the late 1960s when the Council of Student Personnel Associations in Higher Education (COSPA), comprising ten student affairs associations, drafted the first *Guidelines for Graduate Programs in the Preparation of Student Personnel Workers in Higher Education*, dated March 5, 1967 (CAS, 2023). Despite this initial work to establish standards for graduate education, COSPA dissolved in 1976, leaving these early discussions with only preliminary standards. As Sandeen (1982) noted, scholars at that time were actively discussing the importance and role of standards in student affairs. A key strength of the evolving student affairs field was the ability to identify needs on campus and exert collaborative leadership in developing and implementing services to address them (Sandeen, 1982). A noted challenge at that time was that student affairs programs were often evaluated during the accreditation process by individuals unfamiliar with the field and its standards. According to Sandeen (1982), this was partly due to a lack of advocacy for involvement in the accreditation process by student affairs professionals, as well as the failure to develop and implement comprehensive professional standards within the field. Miller (1984) asserted that the quality of a student's educational experience is closely tied to the effectiveness of the student services and developmental programs available, which are essential resources for student success. It follows that professional standards, when properly developed, can serve as critical benchmarks for excellence, guiding both program development and institutional accreditation in student affairs (Miller, 1984). Therefore, a key group of professional organizations and professionals at the time realized that it was vital for the profession to continue the work of COSPA to establish and maintain its own standards to ensure that student services could be evaluated, both by campus professionals and by accreditation teams and by criteria that reflected the values and goals of the field, rather than having external forces dictate these measures.

During the 1960s-1970s, others concerned with the graduate education of counselors and other helping professionals established counselor education standards and explored the possibilities for accrediting graduate academic programs (CACREP, 2019). A moving force in this effort was the Association of Counselor Educators and Supervisors (ACES), a division of the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), now called the American Counseling Association (ACA). In 1978, ACES published a set of professional standards to accredit counseling and personnel services education programs. APGA recognized ACES as its official counselor education accrediting body and moved to establish an inter-association committee to guide counselor education program accreditation activity and the review and revision of the ACES/APGA preparation standards. In response to this initiative, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) established an ad hoc Preparation Standards Drafting Committee to create a set of standards designed to focus on the special concerns of student affairs graduate education (CAS, 2023, p. 3).

The Beginning (1979-1986)

In March of 1979, the ACPA Executive Council charged this Professional Standards Drafting Committee to involve as many other professional associations as possible to collaborate in the development and dissemination of professional standards (ACPA, 1986). NASPA and ACPA, as the two primary associations for student affairs, decided to co-sponsor a meeting of professional association representatives. At this meeting in June 1979, Ted Miller (ACPA) and Katherine Hunter (NASPA) were asked to co-chair an interassociational Conference on

Student Development and Services Accreditation Issues in October 1979. The focus was to discuss a profession-wide response to the need for standards, with operational practice and professional preparation standards as the two most important areas for future consideration.

Thirteen professional associations were in attendance: American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), American College Personnel Association (ACPA), American Association of Counseling and Development (AACD), College Placement Council (CPC), National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), Association of College Unions-International (ACU-I), National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), National Association of Personnel Workers (NAPW), National Association for Women Deans, Administrations and Counselors (NAWDAC), National Council on Student Development (NCSD), National Entertainment and Campus Activities Association (NECAA), National Orientation Directors Association (NODA), and the Southern College Personnel Association (SCPA, now SACSA). The Council on Post-Secondary Accreditation (COPA) and The American Council on Education (ACE) sent observers. The participants of the Interassociational Conference agreed on the need for the creation of comprehensive, profession-wide statements of professional standards. The representatives invited all student affairs-related professional associations to establish a Council for the Advancement of Standards for Student Services/Development Programs (CAS), which would pursue the development of professional standards in a collaborative manner, potentially for accreditation purposes (ACPA, 1986). From these initial conversations, two important initiatives emerged. One was the development of specialized accreditation for counseling and related preparation programs; this became the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), created in 1981 to accredit graduate programs in counseling and related fields, including student development/college counseling. The other initiative adopted the philosophy of self-assessment, based on the belief that campus professionals themselves were best equipped to assess their programs and services, provided they had good tools to do so.

With Ted Miller as the Acting Chairperson of the Council, “In 1980, CAS was chartered as a non-profit corporation for the purpose of developing written professional standards, disseminating those standards to the profession at-large, and aiding in the implementation of the standards” (ACPA, 1986, p. 1). The expectation was that student services/student development opportunities for students in higher education would be enhanced. CAS pursued three goals: 1) establish, adopt, and disseminate two types of standards and guidelines – programs/services and professional preparation; 2) assist professionals and institutions in their utilization and implementation; and 3) establish a system of regular evaluation (CAS, 1986). CAS was a “direct outgrowth of the awareness on the part of many professionals and their associations that the field of student affairs lacked both a clear and consistent definition of its function and a set of definitive guidelines for its practice” (ACPA, 1986, p. 2).

From the beginning, the CAS approach was characterized by an intentional, deliberate process, designed to ensure input from both experts and practitioners from a broad array of functional areas. The goal was to create standards that emphasized collaboration and that reflected an understanding of working relationships across campus units and functions. As CAS began its work, the initial process for developing the standards involved multiple steps (ACPA, 1986):

1. Identify needed functional areas for standards.
2. Collect existing standards statements from member associations.
3. Unify the statements and submit to the executive committee.
4. Review and comment on the statements by the Council Directors.
5. Final editing by the Executive Committee.
6. Widely circulate to member associations for review and comment.
7. Vote on each statement by the Council.
8. Submit to nationally recognized experts for further evaluation.
9. Amend as needed and present for adoption.

In 1981, the CAS Executive Committee appointed draft managers to begin unifying written statements that had been submitted by each of the individual associations. CAS leadership learned that this was a complex process requiring considerable time and patience. “The collaborative approach used to create these standards and guidelines reflects a profession-wide determination to establish criteria to guide the professional practice and preparation of student services, student affairs, and student development program personnel in post-secondary institutions of higher learning” (CAS, 1986, p. ix). CAS received reviews and recommendations from at least 1000 practitioners who read drafts and provided comments at various points in the process (CAS, 1986). CAS also recognized the importance of keeping member associations updated and informed throughout the development process. “The development of the CAS Standards and Guidelines [was], indeed, a profession-wide collaboration” (CAS, 1986, p. ix).

As a result of those collaborative efforts, in July of 1985, CAS adopted its first set of General Standards, comprised of 13 parts: Mission; Program; Leadership and Management; Organization and Administration; Human Resources; Funding; Facilities; Legal Responsibilities; Equal Opportunity, Access, and Affirmative Action; Campus and Community Relations; Multicultural Programs and Services; Ethics; and Evaluation (CAS, 1986). These General Standards formed the framework on which standards for functional areas were then built. They subsequently developed 16 sets of functional area standards and guidelines as well as preparation program standards (see the Appendix). The American College Testing Program (ACT) agreed to publish the *CAS Standards and Guidelines for Student Services/Development Programs* and disseminate two copies to every college and university in the United States. In the Foreword, Jim Vickery, President of the University of Montevallo, stated: “Thereby might *all* college and university presidents come to appreciate even more than many of them now do the ‘extras’ inherent in the cocurricular activities of student services/student development personnel!” (CAS, 1986, p. vii).

The CAS Standards

From the outset, CAS identified fundamental beliefs about the role and application of the Standards, and these principles continue to be relevant today. The CAS standards outline the minimum essential elements expected of institutions and their student services/student development programs. These standards describe the indispensable aspects of practice, but they are not designed to represent ideal or best practices; instead, by employing a collaborative approach gathering a wide range of perspectives, CAS's intent was to codify and articulate existing good practice. "The CAS Standards were constructed to represent the minimum criteria that every institution and its programs should, with the application of adequate effort, be expected to meet over time" (CAS, 1997, p. 3). They are designed to be applicable to all institutions, regardless of size, character, location, or student type, but must be interpreted in the context of each institution's unique characteristics.

The CAS standards consist of both general standards that apply across all functional areas and specialty standards tailored to specific functional areas. A functional area is defined as a "distinct grouping of activities, programs, and services within higher education that can be differentiated from other groups by its focus, mission, purpose, policies, practices, budget, body of literature, professional interests and backgrounds of its practitioners" (CAS, 2023, p. 18). To distinguish between essential and recommended practices, the standards use bold print for requirements (using "must") and lighter type for guidelines (using "should" or "may"). Guidelines are supplementary, offering additional criteria, examples, amplifications, and interpretations that clarify and elaborate on the standards to enhance program quality. By providing this dual structure of standards and guidelines, CAS ensures that the framework can be used effectively by programs at various scales or stages of development, accommodating both newer and more established institutions. From the outset, the standards have undergone regular review to maintain relevance and reflect current professional consensus, thus supporting consistency and quality across the higher education landscape.

Integration of the Standards in Practice (1987-1999)

The 1980s-90s marked a period of significant transformation in U.S. higher education, characterized by growing demands for accountability and calls for improvement from the government and the public (Mann et al., 1991). During this time, CAS became well-established, emerging as a key framework for guiding and enhancing student affairs practices. Researchers began to investigate the utility and use of the CAS Standards (e.g., Bryan & Mullendore, 1991; Mann et al., 1991). While chief student affairs officers (CSAOs) may not have always directly attributed institutional changes to CAS, the underlying principles of the standards significantly shaped practices across campuses (Mann et al., 1991). Institutions utilized the standards to implement staff development initiatives, improve programs, emphasize the role of student affairs professionals as educators, and expand services such as student volunteer and (as they were called at the time) minority programs. These examples illustrate how the CAS standards played a role in institutional initiatives, self-study, and evaluation, providing a structured approach to assess and improve student affairs programs (Bryan & Mullendore, 1991).

The development and continued refinement of the CAS standards were seen as driven by input from various higher education institutions and professional associations, ensuring that they remained relevant and practical. This collaborative process contributed to the recognition of CAS as “one of the greatest achievements of our profession [representing] an excellent set of tools to develop, expand, explain, and defend important campus services” (Bryan & Mullendore, 1991, p. 30). The standards also served as a valuable resource for institutional planning by providing a framework for justifying programmatic needs and driving improvements. Departments used CAS to support necessary changes and to justify proposed enhancements to their programs (Bryan & Mullendore, 1991). In addition, the standards played an educational role, helping student affairs staff communicate the value and impact of their programs to faculty, administrators, trustees, and students. When institutions actively operationalized the CAS standards, they benefited from improved program development, accreditation preparation, staff development, and increased budgetary and political leverage. Not implementing the standards was seen as a disservice to the institution and its student affairs division, as it overlooked the opportunities for enhancing the quality and credibility of campus programs (Bryan & Mullendore, 1991).

In 1988, CAS released the Self-Assessment Guides (SAGs) and an accompanying training manual for using them. Recognizing a need to assist practitioners in using the standards in self-assessment, CAS translated the functional area standards and guidelines into a self-study format so programs could more readily assess compliance with the standards, gauge their strengths and weaknesses, plan for improvement, and prepare for external review (CAS, 1988). These materials identified eight recommended steps in the self-study process:

1. Staff members must determine the type of self-study and who will be involved.
2. Staff members need to determine if any of the guidelines will be used to function as standards for the self-study.
3. Carefully examine the standards collectively before making individual or group judgments.
4. Identify and summarize evaluative evidence.
5. Describe discrepancies between assessment criteria and program practice.
6. Delineate required corrective action.
7. Recommend special actions for program enhancement.
8. Prepare a statement of overall action.

Users were encouraged to create committees with representation from within and outside the area being assessed, to develop consensus throughout the process, and to engage in discussion to determine a group perspective.

By 1992, it became clear that the CAS approach was valued by student-oriented areas beyond those traditionally considered to be “student services/development” programs. In recognition of the broader scope of member associations, CAS changed its name to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (still using the CAS abbreviation).

The Value of CAS

In 1997, the second edition of *The Book of Professional Standards for Higher Education*, commonly called the “CAS Blue Book” was released by CAS, marking a significant update aimed at better serving as an educational tool and resource. In the “President's Letter to the Profession,” Phyllis Mable reiterated key points regarding the value of the CAS standards, highlighting their role in guiding program effectiveness, supporting program development and assessment, facilitating self-studies, preparing for accreditation, advancing staff development, enhancing student learning, and fostering accountability (CAS, 1997). Mable emphasized that "the CAS Standards clearly challenge practitioners and provide support for their efforts both to enhance institutional missions and to serve students by providing systematic opportunities for growth that require creative and critical thinking, along with smart working, and yield slow, steady, and stable progress" (CAS, 1997, p. v).

In the “Prologue,” Publications Editor Ted Miller emphasized the mission and impact of CAS, which was guided by six foundational mission-drive purpose statements reflected by profession-wide consensus:

1. To establish, adopt, and disseminate unified and timely professional standards for student services, student development programs, academic support services, and related higher education programs and services.
2. To promote the assessment and improvement of higher education services and programs through self-study, evaluation, and the use of CAS standards.
3. To establish, adopt, and disseminate unified and timely professional preparation standards for the education of student affairs practitioners.
4. To promote the assessment and improvement of professional preparation programs for student affairs practitioners through self-study, evaluation, and the use of CAS standards.
5. To advance the use and importance of standards among professional practitioners and educators in higher education.
6. To promote inter-association efforts to address the issues of quality assurance, student learning, and professional integrity in higher education. (CAS, 1997, pp. 1-2)

Miller reiterated CAS’s role in establishing profession-wide standards that might not have been achieved otherwise, underscoring the importance of involvement from professional organizations to represent the values and interests of practitioners in student affairs and other areas focused on student support and success. He also highlighted the utility of CAS for program development, self-study, and staff development, and affirmed the organization’s stance on self-regulation as the preferred approach to ensuring program quality and effectiveness. Miller clarified that CAS’s goal was not to “accredit, certify, or otherwise sanction professional student support service practices or programs” (CAS, 1997, p. 4), but rather to provide a framework for continuous improvement through the adoption of its standards.

Second Edition Revisions and Enhancements

This 1997 second edition not only reaffirmed the mission, purpose, and utility of CAS but also significantly expanded its content. This update included revisions to all existing functional area standards and guidelines, the introduction of seven new functional areas, and the renaming of five areas to better reflect evolving practices (see the Appendix). The

General Standards retained their 14-part structure, but each part underwent changes in terminology and content to reflect advancements in the field:

- "Leadership and Management" became "Leadership"
- "Organization and Administration" was renamed "Organization and Management"
- "Funding" shifted to "Financial Resources"
- "Facilities" expanded to "Facilities, Technology, and Equipment"
- "Multicultural Programs and Services" was updated to "Diversity"
- "Evaluation" evolved into "Assessment and Evaluation"

These updates mirrored the growth in student affairs practice, particularly in assessment. For instance, *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners* by Upcraft and Schuh (1996) became a foundational text in the field, providing a practical guide for implementing assessment. In the second edition, the CAS General Standards responded to this development by broadening the assessment-related statements. Reflecting CAS's emergence in the field, Upcraft and Schuh's chapter on measuring program effectiveness using professional standards offered details on the CAS standards and guidelines and the self-study process (Henning & Bentrim, 2022).

The 1997 second edition also introduced significant enhancements, including new contextual statements for each set of functional area standards; intended especially for those new to a functional area, these provided historical context, an overview of current practice, and resources for each area. A glossary of terms was also added to the book to enhance clarity. Perhaps the most important addition, though, was the articulation of guiding principles for the work of CAS. They "were derived from the theories and conceptual models in human development, learning, and administrators, student development educators, and student support service providers" (CAS, 1997, p. 7) and articulated the assumptions underlying the standards. These principles addressed students and their institutions; diversity and multiculturalism; organization, leadership, and human resources; health engendering environments; and ethical considerations. Foundational to these principles is a consistent set of values that guide the standards across various functional areas, ensuring coherence over time despite periodic reviews and revisions. The CAS standards, inherently value-driven, reflect these principles by integrating insights from historical documents and theoretical frameworks that have shaped the field (CAS, 1997). However, it should be noted that these principles primarily reflected American cultural values, which can impede their relevance and applicability in non-Western contexts.

Growth and Development (2000-2014)

This period of CAS history saw a proliferation of research on the standards, calls to action, and a new focus on student learning outcomes. Five new editions of the CAS Blue Book were released and the number of functional area standards grew to 43, with 25 revised sets of standards (see the Appendix). This was a remarkable accomplishment, given that the first two editions took nearly 10 years each to produce. Additionally, the consortium expanded to comprise 42 member associations. The CAS portfolio expanded as well, continuing to broaden beyond traditional student affairs areas to include, for example, health promotion, auxiliary services, and campus police and security programs.

Each edition of the Blue Book began with letters from the President and from the Editor; a review of those messages reflects both the consistent focus of the work of CAS and the continuously evolving landscape of higher education. In the 2001 "CAS President's Letter to the Profession," Don Creamer wrote:

> The story of CAS is told in this book. It is a story of love and pride of professionals for their work and their commitment to ensuring that maximum student learning and personal development is available to every student of American and Canadian higher education. It is a story of extraordinary collaboration among individuals who represent their professional associations and educational specialties to produce usable yardsticks by which professional programs and services can be judged. It is also a story of a remarkable alternative to external accreditation known as the CAS Approach. (p. v).

In the "Editor's Note," Miller (2001) reiterated his assertion that the CAS standards represented one of the most significant projects in the history of student affairs. He further described how CAS has played a significant role in advancing professional practice by providing standards that guide the development of student affairs programs, complementing the expanding body of professional knowledge and helping unify the efforts of higher education associations (CAS, 2001). In the following edition, in 2003, Miller reiterated that the CAS standards are living documents and will shift over time as student affairs programs and services evolve (CAS, 2003). Both Arminio in "CAS President's Letter to the Profession" and Dean in the "Editor's Note," reminded users in the 6th edition (2006) about the tedious yet important process of approving standards through a consensus model, which sometimes meant examining each standard line by line until all representatives agreed (CAS, 2006).

Key changes were introduced to the *CAS Blue Book* in 2006 and 2009, significantly expanding its scope. The 2006 edition added two important documents. The first, *CAS Characteristics of Individual Excellence for Professional Practice in Higher Education*, aimed to establish clear and agreed-upon traits expected of student affairs professionals, serving as a guide for both new and seasoned practitioners (CAS, 2006). The second addition was the *CAS Statement of Shared Ethical Principles*, which outlined the ethical standards shared across member associations. Both documents were developed by project committees within CAS, reflecting CAS's commitment to providing materials to help inform and broaden understanding of what constitutes good professional practice. In 2009, the General Standards expanded to 14 parts, with the addition of a new stand-alone section, Technology. This change acknowledged the growing impact of digital innovations on higher education, especially as the Millennial generation—accustomed to the internet, mobile phones, and social media—began to enroll in colleges and universities (Oblinger, 2003). Coleman et al. (2006) emphasized the need for further discussions on how technology would influence student affairs' foundational principles and the role of practitioners in effectively integrating these advancements.

Research on CAS

The establishment of CAS standards was crucial in the context of rising demands for accountability in higher education during the late 20th century. As government agencies and the public increasingly sought proof of educational quality, standards for student affairs became a timely tool to guide assessment and accreditation efforts. The core goal of CAS was to promote quality practices through consensus-based standards and guidelines, representing excellence in various functional areas in student affairs.

At the heart of CAS is the belief that quality educational practices can be achieved through self-assessment and self-regulation. This philosophy has informed the use of standards in diverse ways, including program and staff development, continuous improvement efforts, and self-studies to prepare for institutional accreditation. CAS standards provide a structured approach to planning, evaluating programs, advocating for institutional support, and offering a framework for ethical practice (Arminio & Gochenauer, 2004).

However, for these standards to be truly effective, two conditions must be met: practitioners must recognize them as key indicators of professional practice and professionals must possess the skills and knowledge necessary to implement the activities mandated by the standards (Cooper & Saunders, 2000). Arminio & Gochenauer (2004) highlighted the need for stronger advocacy for data-driven decision-making to enhance educational quality. Komives & Arminio (2011) believed that the greatest challenge for CAS was the promulgation of standards as they were still not fully integrated into preparation programs or practice.

Creamer (2003) argued that despite evidence of widespread use of the CAS standards, there was still inconclusive evidence that CAS standards led to improved educational practices or quality. He offered several CAS-related research questions that he challenged practitioners and graduate students to explore:

1. What is the level and use of CAS standards and guidelines by functional area, institutional type, and geographical region?
2. What is the type and frequency of use of CAS standards and guidelines by educational practitioners in student and academic affairs?
3. How does the use of CAS standards and guidelines shape professional practice?
4. What is the role of CAS standards and guidelines in shaping educational programs and services?
5. How does professional behavior influence student learning and development? (Creamer, 2003)

Some researchers responded to the call and investigated these questions. Arminio & Gochenauer (2004) explored who used CAS, how and why the standards were used, and whether they helped enhance student learning. Functional areas such as student conduct programs (Tschepikow et al., 2010), collegiate recreation programs (Young et al., 2014), academic advising (Keeling, 2010; Miller, 2012); assessment (Dean, 2013), and career services (Barbour, 2010) have been explored. Research has been conducted on professional practice (Dean & Jones, 2014), integrity (Komives & Arminio 2011), and preparation programs (Liddell et al., 2014; Wilson & Meyer, 2011; Young & Dean, 2015;

Young & Janosik, 2007). These studies vary in focus and design, and although some research has found positive effects of using CAS, Creamer's (2003) assertion that there is still insufficient evidence remains true.

Student Learning and Development Outcomes

As a new generation of students began their higher education journeys, colleges and universities faced increasing accountability demands, particularly regarding graduates' skills and knowledge to become engaged citizens. *Learning Reconsidered* (2004) advocated for an integrated approach to learning, emphasizing the development of the whole student and supporting a holistic learning process that extended beyond the classroom. Schuh and Gansemer-Topf (2010) noted that "student learning is not the result of discrete experiences but rather the product of many different kinds of experiences in and outside the classroom over an extended period of time" (p. 8).

In response to the growing emphasis on measuring learning outcomes in student affairs, CAS incorporated a stronger focus on student learning and development outcomes in 2003. The General Standards were expanded to include 16 outcome domains: Intellectual Growth, Effective Communication, Enhanced Self-Esteem, Realistic Self-Appraisal, Clarified Values, Career Choices, Leadership Development, Healthy Behavior, Meaningful Interpersonal Relationships, Independence, Collaboration, Social Responsibility, Satisfying and Productive Lifestyles, Appreciating Diversity, Spiritual Awareness, and Personal and Educational Goals (CAS, 2003). To further support these efforts, CAS introduced *Frameworks for Assessing Learning and Development Outcomes* (FALDOs) in 2006. This companion to the 6th edition of the CAS Blue Book provided strategies for assessing student outcomes based on the 16 domains, offering "insight into the theoretical constructs of each domain, relevant variables, assessment examples, and information about assessment, evaluation, and research tools, as well as additional resources" (CAS, 2006, p. 5).

Around CAS's 30th anniversary, a collaborative effort involving CAS directors, authors of *Learning Reconsidered 2*, practitioners, and student affairs faculty led to a revision of the student learning outcomes. This group reviewed multiple outcomes statements being used in the field and considered the CAS standards and guiding principles. The result was a revised framework that included six domains: Knowledge Acquisition, Construction, Integration, and Application; Cognitive Complexity; Intrapersonal Development; Interpersonal Competence; Humanitarianism and Civic Engagement; and Practical Competence (CAS, 2009). The 7th edition (2009) introduced a contextual statement on student learning and development, along with a detailed chart outlining domains, dimensions, and sample outcomes. The General Standards were updated to clearly emphasize student learning, stating:

- The formal education of students, consisting of the curriculum and the co-curriculum, must promote student learning and development outcomes that are purposeful and holistic that prepare students for satisfying and productive lifestyles, work, and civic participation.

- Programs and services must assess relevant and desirable student learning and development outcomes and provide evidence of their impact on student learning and development. (CAS, 2009, p. 31)

Maturation and Transformation (2015-2024)

After 35 years, CAS continued not only to grow but also to mature and transform. The number of functional area standards expanded to 51, with 16 standards renamed and nearly all standards (48) undergoing significant revisions (see the Appendix). References to CAS could be found in nearly every major student affairs assessment text (e.g., Henning et al., 2023; Henning & Roberts, 2023; Schuh et al., 2016; Wise & Davenport, 2016) and in key resources such as National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment and Student Affairs Assessment Leaders. The release of *Using the CAS Professional Standards: Diverse Examples of Practice* (Gulley et al., 2017) marked a significant milestone by dedicating an entire text to practical examples demonstrating the application of CAS standards. CAS also significantly expanded its resources beyond the CAS Blue Book, with the goals of increasing awareness of CAS and assisting practitioners in using the materials. Though not discussed in detail here, these resources include the second edition of the FALDOs, cross-functional and multi-functional frameworks, resource papers on CAS in practice, and graduate student and faculty resource packets. Further information is available at https://www.cas.edu.

The CAS Blue Book greatly expanded its content as well. The General Standards underwent several significant revisions, reflected in the 9th, 10th, and 11th versions. It should be noted that the revision schedule for the General Standards ramped up considerably during this period, with updates occurring every three to four years, significantly more frequently than in the first decades of CAS. Changes addressed the growth in online learning, issues of access and accountability, budget planning (CAS, 2015); expanded learning, development, and success outcomes standards and alignment with the assessment cycle (CAS, 2019); and offered an increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as indigenous and international perspectives (CAS, 2023). Increased numbers of external subject-area experts were involved in the revision processes, further honing the necessary standards for each part (CAS, 2019). The *CAS Student Learning and Development Outcomes Contextual Statement* was enhanced with a chart demonstrating the alignment with other nationally recognized outcome frameworks (CAS, 2015). The introductory information of the CAS Blue Book was revised and included two new chapters: *The Case for CAS*, including fundamental information about the standards, review of the guiding principles, characteristics of CAS work, and current issues, and *Putting CAS to Work*, a detailed review of how to use CAS, including the steps in the self-assessment process (CAS, 2015).

In both 2015 and 2023, the self-assessment process steps were revised and refined to better support ongoing improvement and align with evolving assessment practices. The 2015 revisions to the self-assessment process introduced additional preparatory steps focused on planning, which included ensuring stakeholder buy-in and support, as well as explicitly identifying the intended outcomes of the study. Furthermore, in 2023, greater emphasis was placed on the importance of continuous improvement, reflecting the evolving field of assessment. The updated steps are as follows: plan the process; assemble and educate the self-assessment team; identify, collect, and organize evidence; conduct and interpret ratings using evaluative evidence; develop an action plan; prepare a report; and implement improvements. The Self-Assessment Guides were updated to better mirror current accreditation processes, in which criteria had shifted from a focus on discrete inputs (e.g., number of programs, residence hall capacity) to a focus on outcomes, locally defined and assessed (CAS, 2023).

Guiding Principles and CAS General Standards Format

In addition to updating the guidance for implementing self-assessments, CAS also reviewed and reconsidered some of its fundamental elements. For instance, CAS's guiding principles, initially articulated in 1997, encompassed sixteen statements across five principles that were developed based on foundational theories and conceptual frameworks in human development and the practices of student affairs educators and professionals (CAS, 1997). These principles primarily referenced seminal documents, including the *Student Personnel Point of View* (1938 & 1949) and the *Student Learning Imperative* (1996), and they were intended to demonstrate the core philosophical beliefs that informed the development of the standards. In 2019, CAS updated these principles to incorporate more recent student development research (Table 1). At the same time, the General Standards were reorganized into twelve parts, reordered, and grouped to reflect their alignment with these foundational principles (Table 1).

In the CAS 2019 Blue Book, a *CAS Standards Parts Definitions* document was added, providing definitions and descriptions for each of the twelve parts, intended to help users understand the focus and purpose of each part. This document also included an outline of the subsections within each part, reflecting a major revision to the organization of the General Standards and helping to streamline and clarify their structure (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Excerpt from CAS Standards and Guidelines Parts Definitions* (CAS, 2019, p. 20)

Part 1. Mission

This section identifies the purpose and essential characteristics of the functional area. It may also provide guidance on themes that are important to include in a mission statement for the functional area. Guidelines in this section may provide insight into how the functional area's scope varies depending on institutional type or context. This section does not include details of specific program elements and/or services provided by the functional area.

1.1 Programs and Services Mission

1.2 Mission Statement

Part 2. Program and Services

This section explains how the functional area is structured and what it does. It further outlines programs, services, and/or resources provided by the functional area, including pivotal aspects of the function's performance.

2.1 Program and Services Goals

2.2 Program Information and Services

2.3 Program Structure and Framework

2.4 Program Design

Table 1. *Overview of the Updated Guiding Principles (CAS, 2019)*

Guiding Principle	Rationale	Research Support	Alignment of General Standards with Guiding Principles
Students and Their Environments	"The whole student is shaped by environments that provide learning opportunities reflective of society and diversity, with students having ultimate responsibility for learning" (CAS, 2019, p. 4)	Abes et al. (2007) Astin (1993) Miller & Prince (1976) Strange & Banning (2015) Tinto (1987)	Part 1. Mission Part 2. Programs and Services Part 3. Student Learning, Development, and Success Part 4. Assessment
Advocating for Diverse, Equitable, and Inclusive Communities	"Institutions embracing diversity, equity, inclusion and eliminating barriers with respect for differences and focused on culturally responsible communities" (CAS, 2019, p. 4).	ACPA & NASPA (2015) Jenkins & Walton (2008) Jones (2008) Kinzie & Mulholland (2008) Museus & Smith (2016) Quaye et al. (2008) Strayhorn (2012)	Part 5. Access, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice
Organization, Leadership, and Human Resources	"Quality leaders continuously challenge themselves for the betterment of the organization, with success directly correlated to clarity of mission and willingness to see through multiple lenses" (CAS, 2019, p. 4)	ACPA & NASPA (2015) Bolman & Deal (2017) Cross (1981) Manning (2013)	Part 6. Leadership Part 7. Human Resources Part 8. Collaboration and Communication
Ethical Considerations	"Educators exhibit impeccable ethical behavior in professional and personal life" (CAS, 2019, p. 4)	ACPA & NASPA (2015) CAS (2006)	Part 9. Ethics, Law, and Policy
Learning-Conducive Structures, Resources, and Systems	"Student learning and development flourish when structures, resources, and systems are employed intentionally to create environments that provide students with appropriate challenge and necessary support" (CAS, 2019, p. 4).	ACPA (1996) Strange & Banning (2015)	Part 10. Financial Resources Part 11. Technology Part 12. Facilities and Infrastructure

Figure 2 illustrates how the outlines introduced in the Parts Definitions section (shown above in Figure 1) are utilized as headings in the General Standards, followed by the related standards statements. As noted earlier, these General Standards appear verbatim in and form the framework for all functional area standards. Additional standards specific to the functional area are then added to detail good practice in that area (Figure 3). Figure 3 expands on this by demonstrating how the structure is applied in functional areas, using the Assessment Services Standards as an example.

Figure 2

Excerpt from the CAS General Standards (CAS, 2019, p. 26)

> ▶ **Guiding Principle:**
> Students and Their Environments
>
> **Part 1. Mission**
>
> *1.1 Programs and Services Mission*
>
> **The functional area must develop and define its mission.**
>
> **The functional area mission must be consistent with the mission of the department, college, division, institution, and applicable professional standards.**
>
> **The functional area mission must be appropriate for the institution's students, designated clients, and other constituents.**
>
> **Whether centralized or decentralized in its administration, the functional area must advance its mission.**
>
> *1.2 Mission Statement*
>
> **The functional area must implement, disseminate, regularly review, and update its mission statement.**
>
> **Mission statements must reference student learning, development, and success.**

Figure 3

Excerpt from the Assessment Services Standards (CAS, 2019, p. 53)

> ▶ **Guiding Principle:**
> Students and Their Environments
>
> **Part 1. Mission**
>
> *1.1 Programs and Services Mission*
>
> **The mission of Assessment Services (AS) is to develop and implement a comprehensive assessment program that increases knowledge about students and the educational environment and leads efforts in continuous improvement and data-driven decision making.**
>
> **Central to this mission, AS must collaborate and consult with institutional leadership, individuals, and departments essential to the success of students.**
>
> **AS must develop and define its mission.**
>
> **The AS mission must be consistent with the mission of the department, college, division, institution, and applicable professional standards.**
>
> **The AS mission must be appropriate for the institution's students, designated clients, and other constituents.**
>
> **Whether centralized or decentralized in its administration, AS must advance its mission.**
>
> *1.2 Mission Statement*
>
> **AS must implement, disseminate, regularly review, and update its mission statement.**
>
> **Mission statements must reference student learning, development, and success.**

This structure—highlighting the relevant Guiding Principle and incorporating the parts and section headings from the General Standards—ensures consistency across all functional area standards. This uniform approach aids users in comprehending and effectively applying the standards in various contexts.

Legacy, Change, and the Current CAS Standards

Reflecting on the original General Standards, it is remarkable to see the legacy and impact of the initial framework. Although some wording has evolved, most parts' names remain unchanged, with the major additions being Student Learning, Development, and Success and Technology (both of which received attention in the original document, but were contained in other sections), reflecting areas of significant growth in student affairs. This consistency demonstrates the thoughtful and intentional work of the original CAS Council. The Standards continue to be hallmarks of good practice in higher education, with their enduring structure underscoring the depth, breadth, and quality of CAS's contributions to the field.

Additionally, in a recent review of the Student Learning and Development Domains and Dimensions, expert practitioners, scholars, and faculty in higher education and student affairs contributed to updating the dimensions within these domains. The revisions include new focus areas such as adaptability, identity exploration and development, teamwork, understanding and embracing intercultural and human differences, career readiness, and maintaining health and well-being (CAS, 2023). Although the changes to the learning and development outcomes were not drastic, they underscore CAS's commitment to continuously gathering collective expertise and ensuring that its standards remain grounded in and reflective of current practices in the field.

Significant changes were introduced in the 2023 edition of the CAS Blue Book; a major modification is that successive revisions are now referred to as 'versions' to reflect the shift to a fully digital format. With the rapid evolution of CAS and the adoption of new technology, the organization can now update the publication more frequently rather than waiting several years to produce a new publication. This change allows for timely inclusion of new standards, such as the recently introduced ‘Campus Stores’ and ‘Basic Needs,’ which brings the total number of functional area standards to 52 (CAS News & Notes, 2024).

The Future

As CAS approaches its 50th anniversary, it is an opportune time to write about its history, mission, and purpose, and consider how its practices have remained aligned with these foundations. When CAS was first established, it addressed a significant gap in student affairs by providing much-needed standards for practice, based on consensus from professional organizations representing a wide range of functional areas. Over time, the General Standards have expanded significantly—from around 30 original "must" statements to approximately 250 in the current version. The latest publication, while now digital, spans over 1,100 pages compared to the original 109 pages.

The field of student affairs has certainly evolved, and student support services have expanded throughout higher education; CAS has continually adapted in response. Nonetheless, there remain areas for further exploration, particularly the questions posed by Creamer (2003), which continue to be largely unaddressed in the literature. In 2004, Arminio and Gochenauer identified the need to better market and disseminate the CAS standards to a wider audience of professionals. This observation remains relevant today, as CAS works to expand training opportunities, explore additional ways to support users, and enhance its online and social media presence to increase visibility and accessibility (CAS, 2023).

CAS has survived and served higher education for nearly a half-century. It has done so through the commitment of professional associations to the idea of collaboration and the value of shared standards and through the dedication of representatives from those organizations to accomplish the work of coming to consensus about what good practice means in our work. As this important milestone approaches, it is evident that the impact of CAS on student affairs and higher education is profound. CAS (2023) aptly states that “the articulation and application of these standards have empowered professionals to create quality programs and services that support and ultimately lead to student learning, success, and development" (p. 13). The organization's ongoing focus on the promulgation of standards and quality assurance demonstrates its commitment to continuous growth and adaptation in an ever-changing landscape. The CAS founders had a vision and a belief that given the right materials, professionals would employ them to conduct rigorous self-assessment to improve programs and services and, ultimately, to foster positive outcomes for students. While the work is never done, nearly 50 years of facilitating collaboration, conversation, and consensus across professional perspectives has resulted in a valuable professional resource that is solidly grounded, regularly updated, and intentionally reflective of what it looks like to engage in good practice for the benefit of our students, our colleagues, and our institutions.

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Appendix
Timeline and Overview of Changes to the *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education*

This table complements the article *The Evolution of the CAS Standards: Forty-Five Years of Collaboration and Consensus* by providing an at-a-glance summary of changes to the CAS standards over the last forty-five years. It outlines the number of standards in each edition, when new functional area standards were introduced, name changes to existing standards, and highlights of key revisions. Further context and detailed explanations of these updates can be found in the main article.

Year and Edition*	Number of Standards	New Functional Area Standards	Name Changes (*with former name*)	Key Changes
1986	16	1. Academic Advising 2. Career Planning and Placement 3. College Unions 4. Commuter Student Programs 5. Counseling Services 6. Disabled Student Services 7. Fraternity and Sorority Advising 8. Housing and Residential Life Programs 9. Judicial Programs and Services 10. Learning Assistance Programs 11. Minority Student Programs and 12. Recreational Sports 13. Religious Programs and Services 14. Research and Evaluation 15. Student Activities 16. Student Orientation 17. Preparation Standards and Guidelines at the Master's Degree Level for Student Services/Development Professional in Postsecondary Education		

Year and Edition*	Number of Standards	New Functional Area Standards	Name Changes (*with former name*)	Key Changes
1997	24	1. Admission Programs 2. Alcohol and Other Drug Programs 3. Financial Aid Programs 4. International Student Programs and Services 5. Registrar Programs and Services 6. Student Leadership Programs 7. Women Student Programs and Services	• Campus Activities o *Student Activities* • Counseling Programs o *Counseling Services* • Disability Support Services o *Disabled Student Services* • Outcomes Assessment and Program Evaluation o *Research and Evaluation* • Masters Level Student Affairs Administration Preparation Programs o *Preparation Standards and Guidelines at the Master's Degree Level for Student Services/Development Professional in Postsecondary Education*	• All previous functional area standards and guidelines were revised and updated • *The Context* was written to describe the fundamental principles of the CAS Standards, the steps of a self-study process, and the history, role, and function of CAS. • This marked the first time *Contextual Statements* introduced the functional area standards and guidelines • Added *Glossary of Terms*
1999	25	1. TRIO and Other Educational Opportunity Programs		• 2 revised standards
2001 (2nd revised ed.)	29	1. Campus Information and Visitor Services 2. College Health Programs 3. Educational Services for Distance Learners 4. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Programs and Services	• Career Services o *Career Planning and Placement*	• 1 revised standard

Year and Edition*	Number of Standards	New Functional Area Standards	Name Changes (*with former name*)	Key Changes
2003 (3rd ed.)	30	1. Conference and Event Programs	• Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Programs o *Alcohol and Other Drug Programs* • Orientation Programs o *Student Orientation Programs* • Leadership Programs o *Student Leadership Programs*	• 3 revised standards • General Standards revision included new emphasis on student learning and development; Program section included 16 student learning and development outcome domains. • The *CAS General Standards* were again included; they were excluded from the printed book in 1997 & 1999.
2006 (6th ed.)	35	1. College Honor Societies 2. Education Abroad 3. Health Promotion 4. Internships 5. Service-Learning	• Campus Religious and/or Spiritual Programs o *Religious Programs* • Clinical Health o *College Health Programs* • Distance Education Programs o *Educational Services for Distance Learners* • Multicultural Student Programs o *Minority Student Programs and Services* • Student Conduct o *Judicial Programs and Services*	• 9 revised standards • Two new documents were introduced – *CAS Characteristics of Individual Excellence* and the *CAS Statement of Shared Ethical Principles*. • Since this was the 6th iteration of the “CAS Blue Book” – the edition count was updated to reflect that.

Year and Edition*	Number of Standards	New Functional Area Standards	Name Changes (*with former name*)	Key Changes
2009 (7th ed.)	40	1. Adult Learner Programs 2. Auxiliary Services 3. Dining Services 4. Graduate and Professional Student Programs 5. Undergraduate Research Programs	• Assessment Services o *Outcome Assessment and Program Evaluation*	• 9 revised standards • The 16-student learning and development outcomes, with slight wording revisions, were grouped into six broad categories called domains. • *CAS Learning and Development Outcomes* added as a chapter with a contextual statement and detailed chart that included domains, dimensions, and examples of outcomes. • The number of General Standards parts expanded to 14, with Technology as a new standalone part.
2012 (8th ed.)	43	1. Campus Police and Security Programs 2. Parent and Family Programs 3. Sexual Assault and Relationship Violence Prevention Programs 4. Transfer Student Programs 5. Veterans and Military Programs and Services	• Undergraduate Admissions o *Admission Programs and Services*	• 7 revised standards • The General Standards were revised to align with ACPA/NASPA competencies. • Distance Education as a stand-alone functional area was removed and embedded into the General Standards. • The General Standards sections were reduced to 12 by combining parts where common or related items existed (Equity and Access and Diversity combined into one part; Organization and Management and Leadership combined into Organization and Leadership)

Year and Edition*	Number of Standards	New Functional Area Standards	Name Changes (*with former name*)	Key Changes
2015 (9th ed.)	44		• Alcohol and Other Drug Programs o *Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Programs* • Civic Engagement and Service-Learning Programs o *Service-Learning* • Sexual Violence-Related Programs and Services o *Sexual Assault and Relationship Violence Prevention Programs* • Women's and Gender Programs and Services o *Women Student Programs & Services*	• 12 revised standards • Financial Aid was added back; it was omitted from the 2012 edition as it had not been revised in many years • Introductory chapters were revised and included two new chapters, *The Case for CAS* and *Putting CAS to Work* • Updated the *CAS Learning and Development Outcomes Contextual Statement* to include a chart demonstrating alignment with other national recognized outcome frameworks. • General Standards revisions addressed growth in online learning, issues of access and accountability, and budget planning. • The steps in the self-assessment process introduced additional preparatory steps focused on planning, ensuring stakeholder buy-in, and explicitly identifying the intended outcomes of the study. • *CAS Blue Book* available both in print and as an eBook

Year and Edition*	Number of Standards	New Functional Area Standards	Name Changes (*with former name*)	Key Changes
2019 (10th ed.)	46	1. Case Management Services 2. Student Media Programs 3. Testing Programs and Services	• Campus Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Programs o *Campus Religious and/or Spiritual Programs* • Collegiate Recreation Programs o *Recreational Sports* • Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+ Programs and Services o *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Programs and Services* • Post-Traditional and Commuter Student Programs and Services o *Transfer Student Programs; Adult Learner Programs* • TRIO and College Access Programs o *TRIO and Other Educational Opportunity Programs* • Veterans and Military-Connected Programs and Services o *Veterans and Military Programs and Services*	• 21 revised standards • Updated the Underlying Fundamental Principles (e.g. students and their environments; advocating for diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities; and learning-conducive structures, resources, and systems. • General Standards revisions addressed expanding learning, development, and success outcomes and alignment with the assessment cycle. • General Standards were reorganized into twelve parts, reordered, and grouped to reflect their alignment with these foundational principles. • *CAS Standards Parts Definition* document was added, providing detailed definitions for each of the twelve parts. This document also included an outline of the subsections within each part, reflecting a major revision to the organization of the General Standards and helping to streamline and clarify their structure. • Student Learning, Development, and Success was added as a standalone part in the General Standards. • *CAS Characteristics of Individual Excellence* and *CAS Statement of Shared Ethical Principles* moved exclusively to the website

Year and Edition*	Number of Standards	New Functional Area Standards	Name Changes (*with former name*)	Key Changes
2023 (Version 11)	50	1. Campus Credential Programs and Services 2. eSports Programs 3. Indigenous Student Affairs 4. Sustainability Programs	• Campus Police and Public Safety o *Campus Police and Security Programs* • College Unions: Programs, Services, & Community Center o *College Unions* • Collegiate Information and Visitor Services o *Campus Information and Visitor Services* • Leadership Education and Development o *Student Leadership Programs* • Master's Level Higher Education and Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs o *Masters Level Student Affairs Administration Preparation Programs* • New Student Orientation Programs o *Student Orientation Programs*	• 15 revised standards • The CAS Blue Book moved to a fully digital format to allow CAS to update the publication more frequently and to allow for timely inclusion of new standards. • Added *Understanding Aspects of Identity in the CAS Standards* to the front matter of the Book. • General Standards revisions offered an increased focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion with additions related to international and indigenous voices, as well as program theory and implementation fidelity, culture of assessment, and the difference between learning and program outcomes. • Contributors and expert information included for standards as well as contextual statements. • The self-assessment steps updated as follows: plan the process; assemble and educate the team; identify, collect, and organize evidence; conduct and interpret ratings; develop an action plan; prepare a report; and implement improvements.
2024 (Version 11.1)	51	1. Campus Stores		

* The numbering system has changed over time, and the table reflects the original labeling used at the time of publication.

Contributions of Leading Student Affairs Assessment Associations and Organizations

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Abstract: Professional organizations have historically and currently played a foundational role in advancing and supporting the field of student affairs assessment through setting standards, professional development, and creating spaces for communities of practice. This article examines the contributions of key student affairs organizations by (a) highlighting their unique efforts to provide professional support and resource dissemination, (b) addressing contemporary challenges collaboratively, (c) advancing the field through strategic partnerships and research, and (d) a call to action to continue to lead in the field and sustain impactful assessment and professional practices.

Keywords: professional organizations, student affairs assessment

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As institutions work to understand and enhance student learning, development, and overall success, the need for assessment is more important than ever in the cocurricular space (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Henning & Roberts, 2016; Levy & Jankowski, 2024). The individual and collective contributions of leading professional associations in the field of student affairs assessment support and advance the profession. Professional associations such as the ACPA Commission on Assessment & Evaluation (ACPA CAE), Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE), NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community (NASPA AER KC), and Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL), as well as the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), a consortium of over 40 professional associations, play essential roles in promoting the importance of assessment within the co-curricular experience. These organizations offer resources, provide professional development opportunities, and create a sense of community that empower assessment professionals to implement effective assessment strategies.

Role of Professional Organizations and Associations[1]

To understand the foundational role these professional associations provide, it is important to recognize their core functions in serving both the profession and its members. These organizations advance a field through functions including setting standards, generating and disseminating specialized knowledge, and advocating for practitioners. Associations support members primarily through professional development, networking opportunities, identity development, and job support. This section will explore these organizations' main purposes and how ACPA CAE, AALHE, NASPA AER KC, SAAL, and CAS fulfill these roles.

Supporting a Profession

Bloland (1997) and Farndale and Brewster (2005) argued that associations professionalize a field and their members through activities, providing legitimacy to their industry and the public by communicating practitioner expertise in a certain area. Pemberton (1994) added that associations differentiate a profession from related fields and establish a profession’s unique position in a broader field. A defining characteristic of a profession is its body of knowledge (Otto, 2018; Lee, 2018), also referred to as a body of theory (Greenwood, 1957; Saks, 2012), representing specialized knowledge in a discipline. Professional associations support this literature base by offering research grants (Evans et al., 2016; Zoloth, 2023), publishing scholarship (Bloland, 1997; Merton, 1958; Pemberton, 1994) and sharing this knowledge through various media (Escoffery et al., 2015; Rego & Varanda, 2010; Thomas et al., 2012). Henczel and Macauley (2013) suggested that not only do associations develop this knowledge base but they also safeguard this specialized knowledge through controlled dissemination (e.g., refereed journals). While ACPA and NASPA have special interest groups for assessment, SAAL has focused solely on student affairs assessment. ACPA CAE and NASPA AER KC contribute to and propagate the specialized body of knowledge in student affairs assessment to general practitioners through conferences, workshops, webinars, and other resources, while SAAL hosts monthly Structured Conversations.

[1] ChatGPT was used to help identify and summarize some of the sources in this section (Open AI, 2024a, 2024c).

Setting standards is another way that professional associations professionalize a field. Janosik et al. (2006) contended that professional associations have an ethical obligation to ensure that practitioners are appropriately qualified. Creating and advancing standards of excellence (Biblarz et al., 1975; Henczel & Macauley, 2013; Merton, 1957) and ethical codes (Bloland, 1997; Rego & Varanda, 2010) are ways to accomplish this (Pemberton, 1994). Some organizations enforce these standards through certification and licensure, attained by professionals through training and education (Rego & Varanda, 2010). Through this process, associations can certify that practitioners hold the field's specialized knowledge (Henczel & Macauley, 2013) and credential those individuals (Benton et al., 2017) through competency-based assessment (Thomas et al., 2012). In a series of documents, ACPA and NASPA articulated student affairs assessment standards. In 2006, the NASPA AER KC utilized the findings from an assessment competencies and training needs survey to develop a 20-topic assessment curriculum framework to guide professional development (Henning & Bentrim, 2022). In 2006, ACPA's Commission for Assessment for Student Development (now Commission for Assessment and Evaluation) published the Assessment, Skills, and Knowledge (ASK) Standards outlining 13 standards for student affairs assessment (ACPA, 2006). In 2010, ACPA and NASPA jointly developed sets of professional competencies for student affairs practitioners in multiple functional areas; one competency area was assessment, evaluation, and research. A revised version of the competencies was published in 2015, and at the time of this writing, they are being reviewed and updated.

CAS may be the most well-known organization promulgating standards in student affairs. The CAS Standards include both General Standards and standards specific to student affairs assessment. The CAS General Standards includes a section centering assessment structured in a manner that mirrors the assessment cycle. In 1986, CAS published a set of standards specific to research and evaluation, which is now called Assessment Programs.

Associations advance a profession in a number of additional ways. They foster prestige (Henczel & Macauley, 2013) and enhance the status and image of practitioners in a field (Bloland, 1997; Pemberton, 1994; Rego & Varanda, 2010). Advocacy is another function of professional associations (Benton et al., 2017), including keeping members informed of important issues and trends, and in some cases, lobbying government officials (Rego & Varanda, 2010; Henczel & Macauley, 2013) and influencing policy (Biblarz et al., 1975). Additionally, associations advance their respective profession by facilitating innovation (Henczel & Macauley, 2013; Thomas et al., 2012) through conferences, meetings, and journals (Rego & Varanda, 2010).

Supporting Members

These organizations provide a structured environment where practitioners can develop specialized skills, knowledge, and competencies (Benton et al., 2017; Biblarz et al., 1975; DePrisco, 2023; Janosik et al., 2006; Merton, 1957) through education in various formats, including conferences, webinars, and seminars (Evans et al., 2016; Kim, 2018; Pemberton, 1994). Professional education is the primary purpose of ACPA and NASPA (Schrank & Young, 1987), which they provide through conferences, institutes, webinars, magazines, journals, and other resources and services. Additionally, these organizations provide space (physical and virtual) for members to exchange ideas and experiences which enriches the collective expertise in the field.

Networking with others in the field to share ideas and connect is a key benefit of membership in a professional association (DePrisco, 2023; Henczel & Macauley, 2013; Zoloth, 2023). Interacting with professionals with common interests facilitates community and support (Chernow et al., 2003; Hayes & Gabhart, 1991; Rego & Varanda, 2010) and a sense of belonging (Benton et al., 2017). The ACPA CAE and NASPA AER KC are examples of assessment-related communities of practice within larger professional organizations.

Finally, professional associations construct a cultural identity for the field (Rego & Varanda, 2010) and a professional identity for practitioners (Benton et al., 2017; Chernow et al., 2003; Farndale & Brewster, 2005). These groups create shared norms that practitioners adopt, helping to create a collective understanding of what it means to be part of the profession (Benton et al., 2017; Chernow et al., 2003; Farndale & Brewster, 2005). As members engage with these organizations, they internalize the professional standards and cultural ethos promoted by the organization. This process serves both as a socialization mechanism and a reinforcement of the identity the organization seeks to cultivate. By repeatedly exposing their members to values, attitudes, and behaviors, professional organizations solidify not only a sense of individual identity, but also a larger cultural identity that reflects the collective professional community (Henczel & Macauley, 2013).

Professional associations serve a foundational role in advancing the field and supporting their members in numerous ways. By setting standards, generating and sharing knowledge and expertise, and advocating for the advancement of the field, these organizations professionalize the field. They offer professional development, networking, and identity formation, which encourage a sense of belonging and professionalism among their members. ACPA CAE, NASPA AER KC, CAS, and SAAL can continue to serve this role by providing resources, mentoring, and professional development opportunities. These organizations offer services and resources that specifically advance the field by promoting a culture of continuous improvement within student affairs, making sure assessment practices continue to evolve and contribute to student success.

Student Affairs Assessment Organizations

ACPA CAE and NASPA AER KC provide frameworks, mentoring, coaching, and guidelines that help practitioners develop and refine their assessment practices. Their publications and training opportunities help foster a culture of evidence-based decision-making within student affairs. Similarly, AALHE focuses on advancing assessment through research; publication; and innovation; creating community for its members; and advocating for academic and student affairs assessment synergy in service of student learning and success. By facilitating dialogue and knowledge sharing among professionals, AALHE contributes to the continuous improvement of assessment practices and overall effectiveness of higher education. CAS, with its longstanding history of establishing standards in higher education, collaborates closely with its over 40 member organizations to ensure alignment and consistency in functional area standards that influence assessment practices across institutions. SAAL, known for its professional community created through its responsive and engaging listserv, offers an extensive repository of resources, including structured conversations (recurring webinars), blogs, and an open online course on student affairs assessment. A recent collaboration with CAS amplifies how partnerships allow SAAL to enhance the support available to assessment professionals, providing tailored professional development and access to expert consultations.

These associations play essential roles in supporting the structures and processes used to ensure effective student affairs assessment and support their members. This article provides an overview of how these organizations advocate for and support assessment professionals and explores the contributions of these student affairs assessment organizations, examining key initiatives, programs, resources, and the impact they have on the student affairs assessment community.

ACPA Commission on Assessment and Evaluation (CAE)

The ACPA Commission on Assessment and Evaluation (CAE) was founded in 1961 as the Commission for Research and Evaluation in Student Personnel Work, one of the first eleven functional areas recognized by ACPA (Mitchell & Dixon, 2022). CAE has since evolved to its current mission of promoting assessment skills and knowledge that facilitate and support student learning, development, and effective student affairs practice. As an entity group within ACPA, CAE provides a valuable resource for ACPA members and to student affairs practitioners broadly to strengthen their assessment practice through professional development offerings and educational materials.

CAE's hallmark program is the annual Student Affairs Assessment Institute, offering a guided training experience for staff in a structured curricular format. In 2023, the Institute celebrated its 20th anniversary and established new tracks reflecting the need for foundational skill development while recognizing the ongoing growth of assessment at the divisional level. Informed by the ACPA Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization, the Institute also strives to center an equity-focused lens in its curriculum and invited speakers.

CAE also provides other educational opportunities throughout the year, including webinars about exemplary assessment practices or building a career in student affairs assessment. Webinars in 2024 included accessing a career in student affairs assessment through non-traditional pathways, publishing in assessment, and strategies for understanding institutional assessment culture. In 2023, the commission launched its mentorship program for professionals interested in working in higher education assessment. The program aims to build a pathway for emerging professionals to build their assessment knowledge while extending their network. As an association, ACPA also provides important scholarly contributions to the field via the *Journal of College Student Development* and the *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies* (ACPA-College Student Educators International & NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2015). CAE provides recommendations and representatives to these initiatives when requested.

Major Publications and Resources

CAE regularly undertakes projects to support advancement of higher education assessment, such as developing the *Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards* (ACPA, 2006) to articulate the areas of content knowledge, skill and dispositions that student affairs professionals need to assess the degree to which students are mastering learning and development outcomes. The *ASK Standards* can either be used to supplement other competencies (e.g., *ACPA/NASPA Professional Competencies*) or as a standalone resource to guide development of student affairs assessment professional competency. Most recently, the commission led the Higher Education Assessment Syllabi Project, which analyzed over 100 syllabi from higher education and student affairs assessment courses. This project benchmarked the state of graduate assessment education, as well as provided suggestions for future direction of coursework and student affairs assessment. CAE is currently working to disseminate findings and suggest next steps for faculty and affiliated professional organizations (Rehr et al., 2024).

Another goal of the commission is to maximize ACPA experiences for members interested in assessment. Through a rigorous program proposal review process, CAE endorses programs at the ACPA Annual Convention that incorporate exemplary contributions to the broader field, strongly integrate ACPA's *Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization* (2019), and explore the intersections of assessment with other student affairs functional areas. CAE provides communication about initiatives, projects, and opportunities to ACPA members and student affairs professionals through a monthly newsletter and social media (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook). The commission also maintains a YouTube page with recordings of webinars that is accessible to the broader student affairs community.

Impact on the Student Affairs Assessment Community

Central to the commission's work is the advancement of assessment skills, knowledge, research, and practice not only to strengthen student learning and development but also to champion best practices in student affairs assessment. The commission achieves this in four distinct ways:

1. CAE provides educational opportunities for student affairs practitioners engaging in assessment through different contexts (e.g., program assessment vs. divisional strategic planning) and with different levels of expertise.
2. For those with an interest in student affairs assessment, CAE provides practitioners with pathways to build their skills and supports identification of leadership opportunities within the field.
3. As an entity group within ACPA, CAE is well-positioned to link student affairs assessment practitioners and faculty in higher education and student affairs programs, as well as to encourage student affairs practitioners broadly to incorporate assessment into their practice.
4. CAE ensures that ACPA is represented across the assessment space, such as nominating representatives to the CAS Advisory Committee and the Grand Challenges in Assessment Project.

Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE)

The Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) was founded in 2009, and initially based at the University of Kentucky following closure of the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) in 2005. Sensing a void in online resources and opportunities for meaningful assessment-focused interaction both in-person and online, the AALHE Founding Board of Directors sought to build on the AAHE foundation. AALHE is the national membership community of assessment professionals who promote, advocate for, inform, and lead ethical and equity-minded assessment practices in higher education. The Association serves as a central assessment resource that empowers its members to cultivate and improve student learning and institutional quality. Through publications and events such as webinars, AALHE also facilitates scholarship and professional development, generates knowledge and resources, and provides networking and idea-sharing opportunities.

AALHE's annual conference provides an opportunity for in-person networking, collaboration, and engagement in idea-sharing. In 2011 AALHE hosted its first conference in Lexington, KY, and has continued to host conferences across the country since then.

Major Publications and Resources

As mentioned previously, the AALHE annual conference is a key resource for building community and engaging in idea-sharing. The member-led Member Engagement Committee is integral in this community building, coordinating elements such as new attendee welcome events and a literal welcome wagon.

AALHE also offers a variety of online professional development opportunities throughout the year, organized by member-led committees. These opportunities have included initiatives such as a book club, now known as Sharing Professional Assessment Reading and Knowledge (SPARK), which focuses on discussion and engagement, and the Assessment Learning Exchange (ALE), where assessment practitioners at all levels can engage in discussions on topics such as equitable assessment reporting and fostering partnerships with faculty members. Webinars and other virtual professional development activities are also offered, sometimes available to non-members, with a focus on improving assessment practices in higher education and enhancing the skills of assessment professionals. Past topics have included the foundations of assessment, effective committee leadership, and the RARE model (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019).

AALHE also publishes three main resources. These include *Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning*, a peer-reviewed research journal focused on student learning assessment in higher education for professional development and the advancement of knowledge through scholarship; *Emerging Dialogues*, which publishes articles addressing the challenges faced by higher education professionals; and *Conference Proceedings*, a compilation of articles based on presentations from AALHE conferences.

Lastly, AALHE offers a members-only newsletter and inventory of assessment-related resources. The ASSESS listserv (https://www.aalhe.org/assess-listserv) is housed at the University of Kentucky, shares roots with AALHE, and is included as a resource on the AALHE website.

Impact on the Student Affairs Assessment Community

There are numerous opportunities for leadership and service within AALHE, thanks to its eight standing committees and Board of Directors. The organization values leadership from many areas of assessment, as evidenced in 2023-2024 when AALHE was led by its first President from the student affairs assessment field.

AALHE emphasizes knowledge sharing across the institution, though most members have historically come from academic-focused areas. With changes in budgets and staffing, many assessment professionals are now involved in both curricular and co-curricular assessment. As a result, there is growing interest in learning about co-curricular assessment and collaborating with those who handle such responsibilities.

The organization also fosters community building by supporting collaboration and the exchange of ideas among student affairs professionals. This helps to enhance the quality and impact of assessment work and promotes collaboration between student affairs and academic-focused areas.

Finally, AALHE's resources and publications have also played a key role in shaping best practices in student affairs assessment, ensuring that these efforts align with institutional goals and effectively support student learning outcomes.

NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community (AER KC)

NASPA's Assessment, Evaluation, & Research Knowledge Community (AER KC) was created in 2005, and now has one of the largest memberships of NASPA's 36 knowledge communities. The AER KC encourages and supports student affairs professionals as they assess learning, evaluate programs, and conduct research. By providing quality education and networking opportunities, the AER KC promotes continuous improvement and best practices within student affairs.

The AER KC serves the field of student affairs assessment through its ability to collaborate across functional areas while focusing on and promoting assessment practices. The AER KC works closely with other knowledge communities and NASPA regions to advocate and prioritize the use of assessment in their work. The work of the AER KC helps practitioners investigate the impact they have at their institution. Members of the community are able to access a variety of resources and services that can help build their assessment knowledge and skills.

The AER KC plays a key role in NASPA's Assessment, Planning & Data Analytics (APDA) Conference, including service on the planning and session review committees, and consistently providing a variety of sessions. Informed by participation of AER KC members, the planning and session review committees discuss the competencies needed now and in the future to effectively conduct student affairs assessment and then curate an APDA curriculum that meets the needs for foundational, intermediate, and advanced practitioners. The conference offers a variety of resources to professionals who are new to assessment through opportunities such as an Assessment 101 introductory workshop.

At the 2024 APDA Conference, Assessment 101 was a sold out full-day workshop, established as a recurring offering at both APDA and the Annual Conference. There were also 21 general sessions, including a variety presented by AER KC leaders, covering survey question design, assessment planning, accreditation, and politics in student affairs assessment. AER KC leaders also hosted an APDA networking session. The networking session offered an informal opportunity to build connections, discuss common challenges, and share insights.

A variety of other initiatives are currently being planned and developed. A grant program is being established to provide financial support to professionals and/or graduate students who are developing promising assessment practices in the classroom or co-curricular space. These practices are meant to be conducted in the near future to test innovative assessment methods that can be shared with the community.

Conversations are being planned with authors who have recently published journal articles that are relevant to the field of student affairs assessment. These conversations are designed to examine the choices researchers are making in the design of their assessment, to explore the results and their applicability to other institutions, and to strengthen the connection between practitioners and scholars.

Major Publications and Resources

The AER KC connects with members through its LinkedIn Group posts, as well as the occasional email to all members or region-specific membership. The AER KC hosts a variety of online learning opportunities, including sessions for NASPA's Virtual Conference, instructional webinars, and more conversational virtual meetings, such as a recent "water cooler" conversation with the Wellness and Health Promotion KC to discuss the effective assessment of health promotion in higher education. The knowledge community is also facilitating conversations with student affairs leaders such as the NASPA president and incoming board chair in an effort to understand the importance of assessment in leadership positions, and the role assessment professions play in supporting the vice president of student affairs and other campus leaders. The KC will also be hosting discussions with professionals serving in director of assessment roles exploring best practices for assessment of student affairs and running student affairs assessment departments.

The AER KC also contributes an article to the biannual *NASPA Knowledge Community Publication*. The publication is a collection of articles from each of the knowledge communities that highlights their perspectives and insights on the field. The latest AER KC article focused on working with data in the current political environment. This timely article provided resources and suggestions for overcoming common challenges facing the field of student affairs assessment.

Impact on the Student Affairs Assessment Community

The educational workshops and conference opportunities detailed above support pathways into AER, skill-building, and advancement of career pathways within and beyond AER-specific roles. Sessions presented at conferences also provide an opportunity to describe innovative approaches to assessment challenges, and to see the use of assessment findings in practice. Professionals who participate in these conferences share ideas that improve the student experience, learn about opportunities to make the most of available resources, and adapt to the changing higher education landscape.

Through nurturing partnerships with other assessment organizations, and with other knowledge communities, the AER KC has facilitated professional connections essential to AER practitioners. The AER KC has also developed regionally based communities that communicate and organize engagement opportunities within their region to adapt to the needs of the region and address specific challenges within the region.

The AER KC also develops practitioner-scholars. Some areas of focus have included support for emerging scholars through a coaching program, advocacy to develop strategic planning competency in the field, and research on current trends (such as the syllabi and listserv projects).

Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL)

As an organization, Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) offers a variety of opportunities focused on helping assessment professionals develop skills and knowledge. Specifically, SAAL furthers its values in assessment work: curiosity, community, equity, and responsibility. SAAL promotes approaching assessment with a curious mind and being accountable to the shared responsibility to engage in the work, as well as act on the results. In providing resources which are accessible and promote equity, SAAL reinforces and benefits from a community of practitioners and practice around student affairs assessment.

Values and key initiatives are furthered by the programs SAAL offers, including its listserv, structured conversations, blogs, resource repository, and an open online course, *Applying and Leading Assessment in Student Affairs*, which is praised by participants for its practical application and successful completion rates for a MOOC. In addition to professional development programming, SAAL engages in collaborative partnerships with organizations like CAS. This collaboration provides members with professional development resources related to CAS products, access to consultations with CAS experts, and discounted subscriptions with the ultimate goal to enhance continuous improvement. These partnerships ensure SAAL members have access to a wealth of resources and expertise.

SAAL is also committed to understanding and addressing the needs of student affairs assessment professionals. The Research On and Advancing Knowledge of the Profession Committee conducts regular needs assessments to gather information about what its members need, as well as recommendations for SAAL. This proactive approach enables SAAL to customize its professional development effectively, guaranteeing that its programs and resources are aligned with the current demands of professionals. This process guides

SAAL's future research agenda, making the process continuously responsive to emerging needs.

SAAL Support and Resources

SAAL maintains a comprehensive repository of assessment resources, including foundational assessment frameworks and literature, assessment planning and strategies materials, training and development resources, equity-centered assessment examples, methodological support, organizational structures to build a culture of assessment, and useful websites, all to support student affairs assessment practitioners in their work. This repository serves as a tool for student affairs professionals seeking to enhance their assessment practices. SAAL creates a community of practice through various platforms such as an active and supportive listserv, monthly structured conversations, "In Case You Missed It" emails, and blogs. These mediums enable members to share best practices, ask questions, discuss challenges, and collaborate on solutions, thereby enhancing collective knowledge and fostering professional growth within the field.

Historically, SAAL has produced and disseminated a variety of publications, including research articles, case studies, and practical guides through the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact* (*JSAIII*). These publications advance the field of student affairs assessment by providing actionable strategies for practitioners. SAAL's focus on research and publications has significantly contributed to the body of knowledge in student affairs assessment, offering valuable strategies and guidance for practitioners and advancing the field as a whole.

Impact on the Student Affairs Assessment Community

Through its professional development programs and resources, SAAL has significantly contributed to the upskilling of student affairs assessment professionals. SAAL support has enabled practitioners to conduct more impactful assessments on their campus by sharing knowledge. By providing targeted training and resources, SAAL assures its members are well equipped with the latest skills and knowledge necessary for high-quality assessment practices. The open course, along with the adoption of CAS standards, have helped institutions align their assessment efforts with best practices in the field and created reputable resources. Numerous SAAL members have indicated sharing assessment frameworks and strategies through the course and collaborative efforts have further advanced the quality of assessment work.

By fostering a community of practice, SAAL has created a strong network of professionals who support each other, share knowledge, and collaborate on assessment projects. This network significantly strengthens the overall capacity of the student affairs assessment community, enabling it to effectively respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. For instance, during the impacts of COVID-19 and recurring social injustices and unrest, SAAL played a role in creating a sense of community and sharing timely resources. SAAL has consistently engaged in national conversations and pressing political issues, stepping forward to share expertise, perspectives, and to create a space for meaningful dialogue. This proactive approach ensures that SAAL remains a supportive community, advocating, and leading within the field as well as continually advancing the profession through collective action and shared wisdom.

SAAL nurtures a compassionate community by placing the human experience at the heart of its vision. Through active engagement and meaningful collaboration, SAAL members are empowered to leverage their collective expertise to address complex issues and drive continuous improvement in assessment practices. This human-centered approach ensures that the work of assessment is not just about metrics and outcomes, but also about the people involved, both the professionals dedicated to this work and the students whose experiences they strive to enhance. SAAL members consistently report a deep sense of trust and reliance on the community for support, which significantly enhances the organization's role in promoting the wellbeing of its members. This network becomes more than just a professional resource; it transforms into a community where members can find solidarity, encouragement, and understanding amidst the challenges they face. By centering the human aspect in these conversations, SAAL not only advances the field but also ensures that the voices, experiences, and wellbeing of its members remain at the forefront of its advocacy efforts.

This commitment to human-centered practice is what makes SAAL a unique and invaluable community within the student affairs landscape. By providing its members with the tools and knowledge at no cost, SAAL enables its members to succeed while supporting this professional community. Its collaborative efforts, professional development opportunities, and focus on community engagement and research have had a substantial positive impact on the field.

Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS)[2]

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was founded in 1979 with the purpose of promoting standards for good practice in the field of student affairs and services within higher education. Its inception was motivated by the growing need for a structured and informed approach to enhance and provide guidance in the form of proposed shared standards for good practice in the work of student affairs professionals and to ensure the quality and consistency of student support programs and services across institutions. CAS was not founded as an accrediting organization, and it remains committed to self-study for the purpose of improving programs though institutions may use results for their regional accreditation processes (Council for the Advancement of Standards, n.d.; Drechsler Sharp, 2017; Gordon, 2016).

The founding of CAS was spearheaded by representatives from seven professional associations within the student services domain, most notably launched in partnership between ACPA and NASPA, reflecting a broad consensus among stakeholders about the importance of establishing a common set of standards across all functional areas while bringing forth unique attributes of diverse programs and services ranging across different functional areas. In 1986, the first “bluebook” was published, presenting sets of 16 functional area standards. In 2024, there are 52 functional area standards, including areas

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[2] ChatGPT was used to help write the history of CAS in this section (OpenAI, 2024b).

such as case management, e-sports, and sustainability - areas that were not in place when CAS first launched (Council for the Advancement of Standards, n.d.).

Initially, the organization's primary goal was to develop a unified set of standards that could be applied across various functional areas in higher education, such as academic advising, campus activities, and residence life. Over the years, the standards have evolved to encompass a wide range of services and functions within student affairs, recognizing the diverse needs of students and the changing landscape of higher education (Gordon, 2016). CAS standards are designed to provide a framework for institutions to assess and improve their programs, thus enhancing the overall student experience and contributing to student learning, development and success (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2024).

The modern purpose of CAS extends beyond developing and promoting professional standards; the consortium plays a vital role in the professional development of student affairs practitioners by providing resources, tools, and guidelines for implementing the standards effectively (Drechsler Sharp, 2017). CAS works collaboratively with over 40 professional associations, each representing different areas of student services, to ensure that the standards are comprehensive, relevant, and adaptable to various institutional contexts. This collaboration not only strengthens the standards but also fosters a sense of community and shared responsibility among professionals in the field (Council for the Advancement of Standards, n.d.).

CAS operates through a Council of Representatives with up to two individuals representing each member association, allowing for an interdisciplinary approach to standards development and attending to the diverse program implementation and self-study needs of the diverse functional areas including student affairs assessment as a functional area. CAS uses a governing board and a network of committees that oversee the development, review, and revision of standards. This inclusive and collaborative structure allows CAS to remain responsive to emerging trends and challenges in higher education. The organization also provides regular training and professional development workshops, typically at member association conferences and through webinars and social media platforms to help institutions and practitioners implement the standards effectively (Council for the Advancement of Standards, n.d.).

A key aspect of CAS's work is the development of standards for professional practice, which are grounded in empirical research and commonly understood good practices. These standards serve as benchmarks for evaluating the effectiveness of student services and programs, providing a basis for self-assessment and continuous improvement (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2024). As a result of using the Standards, functional areas within student services divisions across diverse institutional types are able to create and implement high quality programs and services, assess their implementation, and then determine ways to better align the operations of the functional area with the specific area standards (Wells, 2017). By adhering to these standards, institutions can ensure that their services meet the needs of their students and contribute to their overall development and success. The standards also serve as a tool for accountability, helping institutions demonstrate the value and impact of their student affairs programs to stakeholders, including students, parents, and accrediting bodies (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2024).

Current offerings for assessment professionals that support the implementation of CAS Standards include the 11th edition of the *CAS Professional Standards for Higher Education* (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2024), self-assessment guides to inform the self-study and program review initiatives of divisions of student services, webinars, conference presentations, resource papers, blogs, and partnerships with member associations to provide timely responses to questions CAS users may have to effectively use the Standards (Council for the Advancement of Standards, n.d.).

Advancing Student Affairs Assessment Through Collaboration

These organizations are actively working towards advancing the field of student affairs assessment through intentional alignment. By engaging in collective research, these associations have identified emerging trends to improve support for student affairs professionals. Their collaborative scholarship has resulted in co-authored papers, conference presentations, and disseminating valuable findings. Networking opportunities through these initiatives have facilitated professional connections. These collaborative efforts help the organizations better understand and support colleagues engaged in student affairs assessment through their collective expertise. This section reviews seven key areas in which these student affairs associations and organizations are working intentionally and collaboratively with one another.

Syllabi Project

A collective, past project was the Syllabi Project, whose main goal was to understand how assessment is taught in Higher Education Student Affairs (HESA) graduate programs and identify trends across these courses. Representatives from ACPA CAE, NASPA AER KC, and SAAL collaborated to collect and analyze over 100 assessment syllabi from HESA graduate programs nationwide. Findings from this study can be found in *What's Next in Student Affairs Assessment? Insights from Current Graduate Education Practices* (ACPA et al., 2024). There was a strong emphasis on assessment design and data collection within graduate courses. However, the consistent application of ASK professional standards and NASPA/ACPA professional competencies was often unclear in these courses. The study also highlighted three areas: (a) institutional contexts, (b) the politics of assessment, and (c) equity-centered assessment methodologies, as well as a tendency for some programs to heavily emphasize either program evaluation or research over assessment. These findings have been helpful in shaping the future direction of student affairs assessment education and can be more deeply explored in *JSAIII* (Rehr et al., 2024).

Listserv Project

These many student affairs assessment associations and organizations are engaged in several collaborative projects to advance the field of student affairs assessment. One such initiative is the Listserv Project, which continues the research of Biddix, Collom, and Roberts (2010). The goal is to analyze SAAL listserv posts from 2020 to 2024 to identify popular topics and trends. The results will be shared via a SAAL blog post, presentations at

ACPA and NASPA conferences, and a submission to *JSAIII*. Additionally, a process will be developed to replicate this analysis several times per year to provide regular updates on trends. Results will guide professional development topics in which members may be most interested and used by these associations and organizations to drive timely support for its members.

Career Development Pathways

Another collaborative initiative, the Career Development Pathways project, focuses on creating synergy across these student affairs associations and organizations by outlining and visually mapping career pathways for professionals in student affairs assessment. This collaboration's goals are to (a) provide clarity and guidance to help professionals navigate the diverse associations and organizations and (b) identify the most suitable opportunities for involvement. By addressing the overlaps and intersections between different organizations, the goal is to eliminate confusion and uncertainty among members about how to engage effectively. The tangible outcome will be an interactive visual map or dashboard to help student affairs assessment professionals find their niche but be intentional about community building. This visual tool can help members of the various organizations maximize their contributions and professional growth within the field of student affairs assessment.

Leveraging Resources

Since 2024, CAS has been investing in SAAL by supporting its administration through funding the Operations Coordinator position, which has significantly enhanced organizational efficiency. This can serve as a framework for how student affairs assessment associations and organizations can strategically support one another as well as leverage resources to promote their sustainability. Supporting each other's administrative functions, such as staffing, technology, or conference planning, can improve the sustainability of student affairs assessment organizations. By pooling resources, organizations can invest in common goals like research, professional development, or certification programs, ensuring long-term impact without overburdening individual entities. Leveraging resources can also contribute to the creation of a community of practice among student affairs assessment professionals. SAAL and CAS, through their partnership, is just one of many examples that can serve as leaders in this effort by facilitating regular exchanges of ideas, case studies, and research on assessment trends across higher education, thus fostering continuous improvement within the field.

Looking forward, there is significant potential for student affairs assessment organizations to set long-term goals for collective impact. By strategically collaborating on conferences, research initiatives, and the development of assessment standards, these organizations can collectively shape the future of student affairs assessment, ensuring the field continues to evolve in response to the changing needs of students and institutions.

Sharing Expertise

The 2024 AALHE Conference introduced the idea of a new co-curricular assessment track. Although this concept is still in the planning stages for the 2025 Conference, this has great potential to enhance the conference experience by providing additional opportunities for learning and engagement outside the traditional curricular framework. By incorporating this new track, there would be deeper collaboration with and innovation in student affairs assessment within AALHE. ACPA's CAE, NASPA's AER KC, SAAL, and AALHE can work together to co-develop the new co-curricular assessment track for the 2025 AALHE Conference. These organizations could pool their collective knowledge and expertise to design sessions that emphasize best practices, emerging trends, and innovative approaches to co-curricular assessment. By doing so, they would enhance both the scope and depth of content offered to attendees, ensuring that professionals working in both curricular and co-curricular areas gain valuable insights.

Conference Presentations

At the 2024 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis, one of the oldest assessment conferences, a joint panel keynote panel, "*The Student Success Landscape: A Conversation and Call to Action Exploring Landscape Trends and Support for Data-Informed Student Success*" featured ACPA CAE, NASPA AER KC, and SAAL representatives. This session addressed the increasing scrutiny on the value of higher education and the challenge institutions face in telling data informed stories of student outcomes and success. Panelists discussed landscape trends and barriers related to student success. Each organization shared how they are helping student affairs professionals use assessment to shape data stories around student success.

Supportive Spaces

In response to the ongoing challenges faced by colleagues in states where Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts are under attack, SAAL has reaffirmed its commitment to support and stand in solidarity with those affected. Last fall, SAAL created a safe virtual space for student affairs assessment professionals in DEI oppressive states to express their concerns and share their experiences. These discussions have provided valuable connections with the unique difficulties faced by our colleagues, allowing their voices to be heard and acknowledged. The courage and honesty of participants have been admirable, and SAAL continues to try to support these colleagues in collaboration with the other student affairs assessment organizations. With the help of CAS and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), SAAL has facilitated meaningful conversations and provided much needed support. The collective priority is student affairs assessment professionals' wellbeing and professional development, and providing the necessary resources and support to help them thrive in this politically tough environment. SAAL has taken this model to the other student affairs associations and organizations to garner their support and assistance. SAAL remains committed to its mission to uphold equity and support within the student affairs assessment community. Future conversations will be hosted with other colleagues in the field.

Research Internship

Research internships are also being explored as an additional collaborative initiative. The goals of the internship would be to provide experiential learning opportunities for student affairs assessment professionals to evaluate and assess the impact of communities of practice in student affairs assessment. Interns would gain hands on experience in data analysis and assessment methodologies, focusing on three key activities: (a) data analysis, where interns would explore and analyze data collected by ACPA CAE, AALHE, CAS, NASPA AER KC, and SAAL to identify trends relevant to student affairs professionals; (b) impact assessment, where interns would evaluate the effectiveness of these communities in advancing professional development and performance; and (c) trend analysis, where interns would examine data from various organizations to explore patterns that can inform future practices, policies, and strategies in student affairs organizations.

Cross-Organization Workshops, Webinars, and Blogs

Launching a collaborative webinar and blog series on key topics in student affairs assessment is another idea in its SAAL infancy. This series would leverage the expertise of various associations to provide thoughts and discussions, enhancing professional development and community engagement. This holds significant potential for advancing the field and providing valuable learning experiences for student affairs assessment professionals. By organizing joint workshops and panels, these organizations can offer diverse perspectives on assessment methodologies, tools, and standards. For instance, CAS could lead discussions on the integration of their established standards with co-curricular assessment practices, while others could share research insights on how assessment impacts student outcomes. Bringing these different voices together would encourage interdisciplinary learning and foster a culture of shared expertise among conference participants.

Supporting The Future of Student Affairs Assessment

Higher education is constantly undergoing transformation, driven by factors such as technological advancements, shifting demographics, and changing societal expectations (Popal & Negussie, 2024). These changes bring about several challenges for student affairs assessment professionals in the future. Outlined below are the contemporary challenges and anticipated trends which are critical to address in order to be well positioned for the future.

Contemporary Challenges in Student Affairs Assessment

Navigating higher education in a rapidly changing world requires institutions to continuously adapt to new educational paradigms and technologies, necessitating updated assessment practices and frameworks, a situation which does not differ drastically from prior years (Banta & Palomba, 2015). There is still an increasing demand for accountability and transparency, forcing higher education institutions to demonstrate their effectiveness and impact through clear and robust assessment practices (EDUCAUSE, 2024; Henning & Roberts, 2016). This trend emphasizes the need to continue to develop updated assessment frameworks that can respond to these evolving demands.

The scope of student affairs assessment has also grown to encompass more advanced methodological tools and diverse applications to institutional goals (Henning & Roberts, 2016). While methods such as surveys and focus groups have long been standard tools of student affairs assessment, practitioners are increasingly incorporating big data, advanced statistical analysis, and longitudinal designs (Ro et al., 2017). While these tools may generate information that was previously unattainable, they require additional expertise, such as management of large datasets (Picciano, 2012). Simultaneously, accreditors have increasingly incorporated co-curricular learning into standards, often requiring student affairs professionals to use new technology, partner with academic affairs, and engage in more systematic data collection (Levy et al., 2018). Both factors contribute to increasing complexity for student affairs professionals engaging with assessment, including in an "other duties as assigned" capacity (Levy & Jankowski, 2024), necessitating further training and development.

The ongoing political and policy shifts, particularly those affecting DEI initiatives, pose significant challenges for higher education. Recent legislative changes and court rulings have placed constraints on traditional DEI efforts, necessitating innovative and restorative approaches to maintain and advance these critical support services often affecting student affairs programs disproportionately (Reddick, 2024). What we know from previous research is that the lack of DEI efforts can undermine the stability and support for higher education institutions, affecting their ability to maintain effective assessment programs (Davis & Brown, 2019). These challenges require institutions to reframe their strategies to ensure DEI efforts remain aligned with institutional missions despite political and external pressures. Demographic changes will continue to impact diversity, which will require higher education institutions to adopt more inclusive educational strategies and shape campus environments to effectively address students' needs while navigating the complexities of maintaining DEI programs under challenging political climates (Johnson & Williams, 2021; Wolbring & Nguyen, 2023). Thus, an authentic approach is required to foster inclusive environments in educational and professional settings, emphasizing the need for DEI policies to address historical and systemic inequities, improve support systems for marginalized groups, and move beyond tokenistic practices (Montoya, 2024).

Professional associations such as ACPA CAE, AALHE, CAS, NASPA AER KC, and SAAL play a critical role in helping student affairs assessment professionals navigate contemporary challenges, including equity and mental health, by offering resources, professional development, and collaborative spaces (Davis & Brown, 2019; Jankowski & Bheda, 2022). These organizations promote data-driven decision-making and support the integration of wellbeing and equity into assessment frameworks (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2024). Through initiatives like SAAL's webinars and open course, ACPA CAE's Student Affairs Assessment Institute,, NASPA AER KC's Assessment, Planning, and Data Analytics Conference, and AALHE's Annual Conference, they provide essential skill building and networking opportunities for both new and experienced professionals in the field.

Anticipated Trends in Student Affairs Assessment

The landscape of student affairs assessment will increasingly continue to be shaped by advancements in data analytics and technology. Institutions are prioritizing the development of data governance frameworks and the integration of advanced analytics tools, including machine learning and AI-powered analysis, to gain more holistic knowledge into student experiences and outcomes. This trend is driven by the need for more precise measurements of student development and institutional effectiveness, which can support informed decision-making and strategic planning across campuses

(EDUCAUSE, 2024). Data governance frameworks in this context are critical as they ensure the quality, privacy, integrity, security, and ethical use of reliable data while promoting consistency and well-supported conclusions across institutions.

The future of student affairs will increasingly rely on the development of enhanced data sharing and the seamless sharing of data across campuses (e.g., data lakes, etc.). Data lakes, which store vast amounts of raw data in its native format, enable institutions to integrate and analyze diverse data sources more effectively. This capability will enhance the ability to gain more holistic information into student experiences and outcomes, ultimately driving more informed decision-making and strategic planning across campuses (Parnell et al., 2018). As new methodologies and technologies emerge, student affairs assessment practices will continue to evolve. The success of student affairs assessment heavily relies on the continuous growth and development of assessment professionals and student affairs in general. These advancements are expected to lead to more sophisticated and effective assessment techniques, allowing institutions to better assess student learning and development outcomes in a dynamic educational environment (NASPA, 2022). Establishing clear data governance will ensure that institutions remain aligned with these technological advancements while maintaining ethical standards.

The need for professional preparation and development is highlighted by the evolving demands of the field, requiring student affairs professionals to acquire both specialist and generalist knowledge to navigate their expanding roles. This includes enhancing their skills in leveraging technology and data analytics, as well as addressing issues related to equity and inclusion within their work (NASPA, 2022). In this context, ongoing professional development and career advancement opportunities will become increasingly important for assessment professionals (Henning & Roberts, 2016; Levy & Jankowski, 2024).

There will also be a growing emphasis on the wellbeing of student affairs professionals, recognizing their role in supporting student success (Jankowski & Bheda, 2022). This shift reflects a broader cultural change within higher education, where mental health is now viewed as equally important as physical health, and is essential for a supportive and productive work environment (EDUCAUSE, 2024; NASPA, 2022).

Equity in student affairs assessment is also a growing priority, with institutions using data-driven strategies to reduce disparities and support student success (EDUCAUSE, 2024). As DEI initiatives face challenges in certain states, institutions must continue to uphold inclusive practices while navigating restrictive policies (Reddick, 2024), ensuring equity remains central to their mission. By embracing these strategies and adapting to the evolving landscape, institutions can ensure that wellbeing and equity remain central to their mission, supporting a more just educational environment for all.

The Role of Student Affairs Assessment Organizations in the Future

To address the future opportunities in student affairs assessment, several strategic recommendations are proposed. These strategies will enable assessment professionals to navigate the complexities of their work and capitalize on emerging trends, all while enhancing the support and leadership provided by leading student affairs assessment professional associations and organizations.

Strategic Student Affairs Assessment Organization Synergy

Enhancing collaboration among professional associations and organizations is a key strategy to foster more cohesive and impactful assessment practices. By working together, these organizations can share resources and best practices, creating a unified approach to student affairs assessment. This collaborative effort can lead to the development of more effective assessment frameworks, networking and support, ultimately benefiting students and institutions alike (Levy & Jankowski, 2024). Establishing the Consortium of Organizations for Student Affairs Assessment (COSAA) composed of ACPA CAE, AALHE, CAS, NASPA AER KC, and SAAL can further improve accountability and strategic alignment within the field. This consortium will support working intentionally and strategically to advance the practice of student affairs assessment. The mission of the consortium is to align the efforts of student affairs assessment associations and organizations to advance the practice of assessment and enhance support, learning, development, and community. Through the alignment of efforts, the Consortium aims to develop a unified strategy for student affairs assessment, ensuring that our combined initiatives effectively address the evolving needs of both student affairs assessment professionals and the institutions they serve. By holding each other accountable and aligning their missions, these organizations can collectively drive progress and innovation.

Advancing Professional Expertise

Developing professional development programs is essential for assessment professionals to remain current with effective assessment practices and emerging trends. It can also support student affairs assessment professionals in navigating challenges and finding solutions. Offering extensive training opportunities can help these professionals stay ahead of changes. Developing resources that are inclusive can support a diverse range of assessment professionals and institutions and support an environment of continuous learning and improvement (NASPA, 2024).

ACPA CAE can provide professional development opportunities, resources, and a platform for sharing resources. It can help professionals stay current with emerging trends with their focus on equity and can guide practitioners in how to integrate equitable assessment practices to impact the support of students. ACPA CAE's emphasis on career development can also help assessment professionals advance in their careers and enhance their assessment and leadership skills.

AALHE can provide valuable resources and networking opportunities for professionals to collaborate and share assessment strategies at their annual conference. By emphasizing the importance of data driven decision making, AALHE can help colleagues and institutions leverage data on student development and institutional effectiveness.

CAS sets important benchmarks for quality in higher education through their professional standards. By establishing and promoting standards for assessment practices, CAS can help institutions maintain high levels of effectiveness and accountability. By adhering to these standards, institutions can create assessment frameworks that foster continuous improvement and student success.

The NASPA AER KC can support forums for professionals to discuss and explore assessment frameworks, tools, and community connection. Its focus on enhancing the wellbeing of student affairs professionals aligns with the growing recognition of the importance of supporting those who support students. The NASPA AER KC can help practitioners stay connected and work within the community to address changes that arise. As part of NASPA, the AER KC is also positioned to advance assessment competencies of student affairs professionals across functional areas and levels, such as improving strategic planning skills for those in leadership roles.

Finally, SAAL can support the future of student affairs assessment by supporting a community of practice that values collaboration and continuous learning. SAAL's community model emphasizes the collective effort needed to achieve success in assessment practices. By facilitating connections among professionals, SAAL can help build support networks that help build capacity for institutions to implement effective assessment strategies. SAAL's commitment to its open course and focus on creating a repository of assessment practices can provide valuable resources for institutions and individuals looking to improve their assessment practices.

Call to Action

Student affairs assessment is positioned for significant advancement through strategic collaborations, innovative assessment methodologies, and a commitment to equity and inclusion. The collective efforts of organizations such as ACPA CAE, AALHE, CAS, NASPA AER KC, and SAAL are key in driving these advancements as well as navigating the future of higher education. By enhancing professional development, leveraging collective expertise, advocating for necessary resources, and creating strong connections with higher education institutions, these organizations are leading with effective and impactful assessment practices.

Student affairs assessment professionals help shape the educational experiences and outcomes of students. The work they do is not only about measuring success but also about driving continuous improvement and fostering an inclusive and supportive environment for all students. We urge the higher education community to embrace this collaborative spirit and actively participate in the ongoing efforts to advance student affairs assessment. Whether you are an assessment professional, an educator, a senior administrator, a policymaker, or a supporter of higher education, your involvement and support are critical to our future.

Together, we can create a community that empowers student affairs professionals, enhances institutional effectiveness, and ultimately, leads to better outcomes for students. Let us commit to continuous learning, sharing of resources, expertise, talent, and advocating for the support needed to sustain and grow the field of student affairs assessment. Organizations such as ACPA CAE, AALHE, CAS, NASPA AER KC, and SAAL will support the advancement of student affairs assessment practices. By providing professional development opportunities, resources, and platforms for collaboration, these organizations can help practitioners stay current with trends. Through their collective efforts, these organizations can help shape the future of student affairs assessment, promoting a culture of continuous improvement and excellence in higher education.

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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

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).

Discussion of Findings

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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Professional Development in Equity-Centered Outcomes Assessment
The Utility of a Meta-Assessment Rubric

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Abstract: Core skillsets for student affairs educators have been articulated in several professional standards. However, the expected assessment skillset is not always addressed in graduate programs; in turn, many student affairs educators feel unprepared to engage in outcomes assessment. Our study showcases the utility of a new equity-centered meta-assessment rubric to provide needed assessment training to student affairs educators. Results support the use of this rubric to advance equitable assessment and programming on college campuses.

Keywords: outcomes assessment, equity in assessment, professional development in assessment

For decades, emphasis on accountability and improvement within higher education has steadily grown (Ewell, 2009). With the rising cost of a college education, assessment practices to demonstrate the value of a degree have gained considerable attention. Student affairs educators are particularly scrutinized in this regard, as their contributions to student learning and development are frequently questioned (Biddix et al., 2020; Rincón & Castillo-Montoya, 2018). As a result, the expectations for student affairs educators have grown, with increasing demands for professionals to engage in high-quality assessment practices to prove the value of student affairs programming to enhance student learning and development (Wawrzynski et al., 2015).

Professional Expectations Related to Outcomes Assessment

Student affairs educators are expected to demonstrate a wide range of competencies. These expectations are elucidated via professional standards (Finney & Horst, 2019a, 2019b). There are three main sets of standards for the profession. Two of these sets are personal competency standards: the Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards (American College Personnel Association, 2006), and the ACPA-NASPA Competencies (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015). The third set is program-focused from the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, 2023).

The ASK Standards (American College Personnel Association, 2006) was the first set of standards developed to articulate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to measure student learning and development outcomes. Specifically, the ASK Standards detail the knowledge and skills that all student affairs educators should have related to assessment, regardless of functional area. The ACPA-NASPA Competencies (American College Personnel Association & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015) also reflect core competencies expected of student affairs educators regardless of functional area; however, they are much broader than the ASK Standards. One of these ACPA-NASPA competencies is Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER), which focuses "…on the ability to design, conduct, critique, and use various AER methodologies and the results obtained from them, to utilize AER processes and their results to inform practice, and to shape the political and ethical climate surrounding AER processes and uses in higher education" (p. 12). The AER competency enhances the ASK Standards by providing developmental levels of personal competency (foundational, intermediate, advanced).

The CAS Standards (2023) contain a set of General Standards that highlight the essential components of quality student affairs programs and services. Thus, these standards are often used for program reviews. One component of the General Standards is Part 4: Assessment. CAS's communication of the aspects of high-quality outcomes assessment (including the newly added elements of program theory and implementation fidelity) relays the expectation that professionals will be able to effectively design, implement, assess, and improve programming in higher education.

Each of the standards explicitly outlines the expectation that student affairs educators enter the workforce with a strong background and skills in program development, program assessment, and use of results for programmatic improvement. Put simply in the words of Wawrzynski et al. (2015), "…assessment should be a familiar term to new student affairs professionals" (p. 121).

In addition to these expectations regarding assessment, student affairs educators are also expected to be knowledgeable with respect to equity and inclusion (West & Henning, 2023). Both the CAS Standards (2023) and the ACPA-NASPA Competencies (2015) incorporate general (i.e., not assessment-specific) competency areas pertaining to equity (i.e., Part 5 of the CAS General Standards: Access, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice; ACPA-NASPA Social Justice and Inclusion Competency). Moreover, the ASK Standards (2006) highlight important factors of equity-minded assessment, including reviewing measures for accessibility and data disaggregation.

Additionally, CAS (2023) includes standards related to graduate program curriculum called "Master's Level Higher Education and Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs."

> Subpart 5b.5 - Assessment, evaluation, and research (CAS, 2023, p. 720)
>
> Program curriculum must include the study of assessment, evaluation, and research that centers on evidence-based practice to further accountability and continuous improvement. Content must include assessment planning and design; outcome development; qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, and critical data collection and analysis methods; measurement of learning processes and outcomes;

> assessment of environments and organizations; measurement of program and environment effectiveness; effective reporting; critiques of published studies; integration of social justice; and assessment and change management strategies.
>
> Program content must include opportunities for graduates to learn how to critique a study or evaluation and be able to design, conduct, and report on a sound research study, assessment study, or program evaluation, all grounded in the appropriate literature to improve professional practice and student learning.
>
> Content must include information regarding research ethics and legal implications of research, including the necessity of adhering to a human subjects review.

These curricular standards intertwine assessment and equity. Thus, upon reading these "must" statements expected of graduate curriculum, one would believe student affairs educators would have skills in evidence-based programming, outcomes assessment, and use of results for improvement, all with an equity frame. However, in a review of 111 syllabi from assessment/evaluation courses within student affairs graduate programs, a "limited" alignment with professional standards was observed (ACPA et al., 2024). Notably, only 1.8% of syllabi had a primary theme of equity-centered assessment, indicating a clear discrepancy between expectations set by professional standards and current practice in graduate-level programs.

Lack of Assessment Skills Among Student Affairs Educators

Concerns about assessment-related competencies are further fueled by the finding that many student affairs educators enter the workforce lacking assessment skills (Cooper et al., 2016; Hoffman, 2015). For example, in a recent mixed-methods study examining the perceptions of students in a student affairs graduate program, 30.43% of students reported they did not learn how to "evaluate research," a skill needed to inform programming decisions (Wright-Mair et al., 2022). Additionally, 47.83% of respondents indicated they did not learn how to "understand statistics," and 34.78% indicated they did not learn how to "communicate results," both necessary skills to use assessment data for improvement. In a recent survey (Dean & Langham, 2022), 61% of leadership personnel strongly agreed that they expected new hires to have skills in assessment; however, nearly one-third of respondents indicated that new hires were not adequately prepared with these skills.

Lack of Training in Student Affairs Graduate Programs

One reason student affairs educators may lack assessment skills is insufficient training in graduate programs. Research indicates that Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) or College Student Personnel Administration (CSPA) programs often fall short in preparing students for the practical demands of assessment-related work (e.g., Marsden & Eckert, 2018). A survey of entry-level student affairs professionals found that only 24% of respondents reported having a required assessment course in their graduate training program (Dean & Langham, 2022). Additionally, respondents noted that their graduate programs provided minimal coverage of the assessment-related knowledge and skills outlined in the professional standards. In a second study (Wright-Mair et al., 2022), students noted that course sequencing in their graduate training contributed to their perceived preparedness to engage in scholarly activity. Specifically, students were often allowed to enroll in courses without having mastered essential foundational research skills, rendering them incapable of conducting an empirical project. Also, despite the documented benefits of hands-on assessment experiences for learning and valuing assessment (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Rincón & Castillo-Montoya, 2018), opportunities for such experiences during graduate studies remain limited (Wright-Mair et al., 2022). As Wawrzynski et al. (2015) noted, one of the barriers preventing student affairs educators from conducting assessment is that they are simply not trained to “do” assessment (p. 127). This lack of training is particularly concerning given that first-time, full-time staff from these graduate training programs comprise 15% to 20% of the student affairs workforce (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008).

Although resources on assessment are available (e.g., professional standards, Student Affairs Assessment Leaders massive open online course), the integration of these resources into graduate programs appears to be somewhat limited (Dean & Langham, 2022; Rincón & Castillo-Montoya, 2018). Several factors may contribute to this inefficient use of available resources. First, graduate training programs often prioritize theoretical knowledge over practical skills, leaving students with insufficient experience in conducting real-world assessment applications (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). In addition, there is often a lack of emphasis on navigating institutional politics (e.g., graduate students learn about student affairs “best practice,” but not about what to do when institutions resist or do not adhere to “best practice”), which can result in a disconnect between what is taught and what is experienced in professional practice (Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008). Thus, training is insufficient for professionals to meet expectations, leaving student affairs educators underprepared to contribute meaningfully to evidence-based programming, outcomes assessment, and use of assessment results for program improvement.

Need for Professional Development in Equity-Centered Programming and Assessment

Given that CSPA/HESA graduate programs inconsistently train student affairs educators regarding assessment practices, “on the job” professional development is needed to ensure proper training. As noted by Biddix et al. (2020), some professional staff’s only experience with assessment comes from “other duties as assigned” in their job description, without any foundation in the field (p. 168). Thus, supplemental training experiences are necessary to bring new-hires up to speed regarding high quality assessment processes. However, supplemental training in assessment and equity have traditionally been siloed (Henning & Lundquist, 2018). Yet, without training on how to integrate equity and assessment, it is unrealistic to expect student affairs educators to routinely engage in equity-centered assessment practice. Equity-centered assessment aims to “...foster equity, address issues of oppression and privilege, improve student learning, and reshape systems and structures influencing the environments in which students learn” (Heiser et al., 2023). Heiser and colleagues (2023) identified six key characteristics of equity-centered assessment: (a) clarity of purpose and goals, (b) epistemological considerations, (c) recognition and reification of power structures, (d) thoughtful methodological choices, (e) centering student voices, and (f) reflexivity and positionality. Designing assessment efforts with these six characteristics requires guidance and practice.

These issues of lack of experience and competency in programming and assessment were ever-present on our campus. For years, our institution struggled with lack of training of student affairs educators in both evidence-based programming and outcomes assessment. Moreover, there was almost a complete lack of awareness of equity-centered programming and assessment. Thus, high-quality professional development experiences were urgently needed to enhance student affairs educators' proficiency and confidence in equity-centered programming and assessment. We believed this need could be best addressed using a meta-assessment frame, which fulfills the division's goals regarding a culture of evidence and continuous improvement. Specifically, the simple presence of a meta-assessment rubric (described below) communicates the institutions' commitment to evidence-based programming, outcomes assessment, and use of results for improvement. Embedding the rubric into any discussions related to programming and impact on student learning reminds professionals that this resource can guide their work. As noted by Biddix et al. (2020), as assessment is more routinely ingrained into student affairs practice, systems should be put in place to handle the increased demand. Thus, we knew that pursuing a meta-assessment process at our institution would require the creation of associated professional development.

Meta-Assessment Rubric to Guide Professional Development

Meta-assessment evaluates the quality of the assessment process itself (e.g., Fulcher & Good, 2013). Emerging from evaluation literature (Ory, 1992), meta-assessment addresses the growing emphasis on outcomes assessment in higher education by explicitly showcasing the aspects of high-quality assessment processes. Implementing a meta-assessment process typically involves creating a rubric to specify high-quality assessment practices. Ratings from meta-assessment rubrics provide evidence of engagement in the assessment process for accreditation purposes and help administrators identify programs with demonstrated impact versus those with uncertain effectiveness (McDonald, 2010). Moreover, meta-assessment rubrics are valuable for continuous improvement, as they can prompt enhancements to the assessment process or to educational programming (Fulcher et al., 2016).

An additional use of meta-assessment rubrics is for professional development. Meta-assessment rubrics clearly communicate assessment expectations and processes, which is especially important when professionals view assessment as unknown, unexpected, or different from what they perceive as student affairs practice (Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Clear, explicit expectations regarding assessment are also essential given the high turnover of student affairs educators. For example, Bichsel et al. (2023) found that 39% of student affairs educators might seek other employment within the next year. When experienced professionals leave, training for newcomers becomes essential. A meta-assessment rubric offers an efficient way to introduce student affairs educators to the assessment process and best practices. Moreover, training can be designed to align directly with specific aspects of the rubric. With this in mind, we set out to design such a training.

Purpose of the Current Study

The purpose of this study was to empirically evaluate the effectiveness of a professional development session to increase skills related to equity-centered programming and assessment. The evaluation was conducted using a Generalizability study (G-study) to assess the impact of the training. We analyzed assessment report ratings provided by participants using a new meta-assessment rubric specifically designed for student affairs educators.

Materials and Methods

Open Education Resources (OER)

There were three available resources that we used to create and evaluate our professional development in equitable assessment practice: a meta-assessment rubric for program improvement, mock reports, and equity resources. Fortunately, all resources were free and easily accessible to us (and anyone) via an OER Commons website (Finney et al., 2024).

The Student Affairs Assessment Improvement Rubric (SAAIR)

The SAAIR, created by a team of student affairs educators and assessment consultants, supports the goal of continuous improvement (Finney et al., 2024). Containing eight criteria directly aligned with the outcomes assessment cycle (Student Learning & Development Outcomes, Program Theory, Outcome Measures, Implementation Fidelity, Collecting Outcomes Data, Data Analysis, Reporting Results, and Use of Results for Improvement), the rubric was built to operationalize what the creators defined as high-quality assessment practice. Notably, the rubric was designed to align with student affairs professional standards (e.g., ACPA-NASPA Competencies, CAS Standards). As a result, it can serve as a pedagogical tool for professionals, addressing the lack of formal training in assessment. Further, the rubric has an explicit focus on equity. That is, while each criterion of the rubric (e.g., Student Learning & Development Outcomes) has varying sub-criteria, there is an ever-present equity sub-criterion. We found the verbiage included in these equity sub-criteria to be clear, allowing us to incorporate and train student affairs educators on equity-centered actions.

Mock Reports

The OER website that houses the SAAIR provides additional support, including three “mock” assessment reports of varying quality. The three reports align directly with the three levels of development showcased in the rubric: developing, proficient, and exemplary. These reports provide examples of assessment write-ups based on hypothetical, but realistic, student affairs programming. We were able to use the SAAIR to rate the mock reports and create associated keys. These keys were later used in our professional development training.

Equity in Assessment Resource

Lastly, the OER website contains a document of examples of equity-centered actions and associated text. The resource aligns with Heiser and colleagues (2023) six key characteristics of equity-centered assessment. Examples of equity considerations were provided for each criterion of the SAAIR at varying levels of quality (developing, proficient, exemplary). The example text reflected hypothetical but realistic programming within a division of student affairs. We used this resource as one of the main components of our division-wide professional development, described below.

We believed this set of assessment-related supports could efficiently assist our student affairs division in their quality improvement process. Likewise, these resources would expose and advance considerations regarding how to apply an equity lens when engaging in program improvement efforts. Thus, use of these resources should increase the odds that all students benefit from equitable high-impact programming on our college campuses.

Division-Wide Professional Development on Equity-Centered Assessment

To facilitate engagement in equity-centered assessment practice, it was imperative that professionals (a) could distinguish between the various components of the assessment process and how equity could be considered, (b) could discuss examples of equity considerations that ranged from developing to exemplary, (c) could apply the rubric to assessment reports to identify areas of confusion, and (d) could provide colleagues feedback to improve equity-centered assessment. Thus, we designed a rigorous, interactive three-day professional development for student affairs educators on our campus that was directly aligned with these four outcomes.

Participants and Procedures

All student affairs educators were invited to the May 2024 professional development. Ten student affairs educators representing a variety of offices on campus participated in the professional development. Five of the thirteen Student Affairs offices at our institution were represented at the training (38.46%). Specifically, participants represented the following offices: Dean of Students (1 participant), University Recreation (2 participants), Office of Student Accountability and Restorative Practices (3 participants), University Career Center (2 participants), Student Affairs Technical Services (2 participants). These individuals were released from daily activities in the division to focus on building their skills in equity-centered assessment with the goal of applying these new skills in their offices the next academic year.

The three 9-hour days were structured as follows. First, we started with the basics. Given some student affairs educators were new to assessment practice, several hours during Day 1 were used to frame the “what,” “why,” and “how” of outcomes assessment. Specifically, facilitators spent about two hours articulating the professional standards related to outcomes assessment, how assessment moves the division from a culture of good intentions to a culture of evidence (Culp & Dungy, 2012), and why equity must be integrated into assessment practice.

Then, facilitators walked through each criterion of the SAAIR (e.g., writing student learning and development outcomes, collecting implementation fidelity data), a process that took the remainder of Day 1 (about 5 hours) and the first half of Day 2 (about 3 hours). Facilitators first introduced a criterion of the rubric, walking through the various sub-criteria and discussing how each sub-criterion changed across the levels of development (developing, proficient, exemplary) (about 20 minutes). Facilitators then provided example text that educators rated for quality using the rubric (about 30 minutes). The example text provided was adapted from the equity resource available from the OER website. After educators completed their individual ratings, facilitators demonstrated how they used the rubric to provide ratings of the text for quality (about 30 minutes). Facilitators also modeled how to provide written feedback that both supported these ratings and encouraged continued practice in equity-centered assessment. Throughout this process, student affairs educators and facilitators engaged in discussion regarding discrepancies in ratings, if applicable. Importantly, ratings given by facilitators were not introduced as the “correct” answer, but rather just an example of the facilitator’s perspective.

Next, the three mock reports on the OER website were rated by the ten participants. Student affairs educators were provided time to individually rate and provide constructive qualitative feedback during the second half of Day 2 and the entirety of Day 3 of the professional development. Professionals were prepared for this independent rating task, given the training on the rubric that they received on Days 1 and 2. Once independent ratings were provided to facilitators, participants were allowed to discuss their ratings with a partner and come to a conclusive, final rating via an adjudication process.

Generalizability Study (G-Study)

To assess the effectiveness of the three-day professional development, a generalizability study (G-study) was conducted. This analysis provides the consistency of ratings across the participants and reveals whether the variability observed in ratings was due to the quality of the report (which is desired) versus the harshness of the rater (not desired) or sub-criteria (not desired). The following analyses were completed using the individual pre-adjudicated ratings. It was necessary to ensure the independence of the ratings when conducting this type of analysis.

A G-study provides reliability-like coefficients (e.g., G-Coefficient, Phi Coefficient). These coefficients are analogous to coefficients more commonly used in classical test theory, such as Cronbach’s coefficient alpha or KR-21 (Shavelson & Webb, 1991). In addition, a G-study partitions the variance of scores into variation due to the object of measurement (in this case, the mock report) as well as due to raters, rubric sub-criteria, their interactions, and error.

For the purpose of this analysis, all three mock assessment reports were rated by all raters on all sub-criteria. In other words, all reports were crossed with all raters and all sub-criteria, a very robust design. Note, ratings from 3 of the 10 raters were not included in the analyses due to not having provided ratings for every sub-criterion for every report. A small number of raters (typically 2 to 5) is often sufficient for G-studies, as increasing the number of raters does not significantly improve results when the rubric is well-defined, and raters are well-trained (Brennan, 2000). In fact, previous research has shown that differences in reliability estimates were negligible across 2, 4, 5, and 8 raters (Monteiro et al., 2019). Although we could have employed a few raters to evaluate the rubric and training, we allowed all participants to serve as raters because the activity of rating was part of the professional development (i.e., rating and providing feedback builds skills in evaluating assessment processes).

All effects (mock report, rater, sub-criteria, interactions) were treated as random. Treating the rater effect as random means that raters have been theoretically sampled from a universe of possible raters (i.e., universe of possible student affairs educators). Treating the sub-criteria effects as random means that the sub-criteria were sampled from a universe of possible sub-criteria that represent different parts of the assessment process. Treating the mock reports as random means that the mock reports were sampled from a universe of possible mock reports that represent the various levels of development associated with the rubric (i.e., developing, proficient, exemplary).

Key Matching

In addition to the consistency of ratings, we also evaluated how well the scores from the raters matched the scores we generated as the "keys" for each mock report. We conducted a key-matching analysis to uncover the percentage of raters who exactly matched the key, exactly matched or were no more than 0.5 points off from the key, and exactly matched or were no more than 1 point off from the key. Our goal in executing the key matching analysis was to uncover which sub-criteria proved most difficult to rate. We expected a number of raters to not exactly match with the key, as is common in any application of a rubric. In fact, the requirement to adjudicate ratings with a partner was necessary given expected deviations of some raters from the key. Our goal when evaluating the match between the average independent ratings and the key was to evaluate if the training resulted in about 70% of the ratings being within 0.5 point of the key and over 80% being within 1 point of the key. In turn, there would be a small percentage of ratings (20% to 30%) that would likely be adjusted to better align with the key during the adjudication process. Moreover, by examining the match between the average individual ratings and the key, we could identify areas of confusion that necessitated further professional development.

Results

G-Study

The reliability-like coefficient from the G-study is the Phi Coefficient. Phi ranges from 0 to 1. Our G-study resulted in a Phi Coefficient equal to 0.97, which is very high.

The program (mock report) variance (true score variance) tells us how much program report scores systematically differed from one another. We wanted this value to be high (see Table 1). The program report variance accounted for 37.2% of the total variance in scores, which is moderately high. Further, we wanted the variance due to raters to be low. The results indicated that this was the case for our analysis, with rater variance being only a mere 0.4%. That is, certain raters were not consistently more harsh or lenient in their ratings compared to other raters, which was a welcomed finding of our training.

There was some variance due to rubric sub-criterion (19.6%). This variability was not surprising, given that some sub-criteria (i.e., equity-centered sub-criteria) were typically lower than others, regardless of mock report or rater.

Table 1. *Variance Components from G-Study with Interpretations*

Component (GENOVA Symbol)	Variance	Percent of Variance	Interpretation
P	0.533	37.2%	Variance due to different quality of program reports. Desirable for this percentage of variance to be high. Interpretation: 37.2% of the variance in scores was due to true score variance. Reports consistently rank ordered due to quality (exemplary, proficient, and developing), which is desirable.
R	0.006	0.4%	Variance due to rater harshness. Desirable for this percentage of variance to be low. Interpretation: only 0.4% of the variance was due to rater. It does not appear that some raters were consistently more harsh than other raters.
C	0.282	19.6%	Variance due to differences in scores depending on sub-criteria. Desirable for this percentage of variance to be low. Interpretation: 19.6% of the variance was due to sub-criterion. Some sub-criteria were rated lower or higher, on average, than other sub-criteria, regardless of rater or report.
PR	0.004	0.3%	Variance due to the interaction between program report and rater. Desirable for this percentage of variance to be low. Interpretation: only 0.3% of the variance was due to the interaction between report and rater.
PC	0.125	8.7%	Variance due to the interaction between program report and sub-criteria (i.e., do report scores change depending on the criteria). Desirable for this percentage of variance to be low. Interpretation: 8.7% of the variance in scores was due to different reports having different scores for different criteria.
RC	-0.033	0%	Variance due to the interaction between raters and sub-criteria. Desirable for this percentage of variance to be low (i.e., raters are not particularly harsh depending on the criteria). Interpretation: 0% of the variation in scores was due to different raters rating sub-criteria differently.
PRC	0.518	36.1%	Error

Note. Analyses were conducted using GENOVA Version 3.1, which uses Ordinary Least Squares estimation rather than Maximum Likelihood estimation. Therefore, variances that are negative and small can be interpreted as 0.

Key Matching

Overall, average ratings aligned with the key created for each mock report, indicating that raters were generally well-calibrated. Table 2 shows the percentage of ratings that (a) match the key perfectly, (b) match the key or are at most 0.5 points off from the key, and (c) match the key or are at most 1 point off from the key. Despite some variability across the 3 mock reports, about half of the raters (56%, 58%, and 54%) exactly matched the exemplary, proficient, and developing keys (respectively). A higher percentage of raters (67%, 71%, and 68%) were within 0.5 of the keys. Finally, most raters (82%, 87%, and 91%) were within 1 point of the keys.

Table 2. *Key Matching Results*

Rater	Prime for Life (Exemplary)	Peer 2 Peer (Proficient)	Service Learning (Developing)	Average Rater Match with Key
Exact Match				
1	61%	61%	55%	59%
2	58%	36%	45%	46%
3	45%	55%	48%	49%
4	58%	61%	55%	58%
5	67%	64%	58%	63%
6	58%	70%	58%	62%
7	48%	64%	58%	57%
Average Match	56%	58%	54%	
Exact or Within 0.5 Match				
1	70%	73%	76%	73%
2	64%	58%	61%	61%
3	64%	64%	61%	63%
4	67%	73%	67%	69%
5	76%	85%	70%	77%
6	73%	79%	67%	73%
7	55%	70%	73%	66%
Average Match	67%	71%	68%	
Exact, Within 0.5, or Within 1 Match				
1	76%	85%	94%	85%
2	88%	79%	79%	82%
3	85%	82%	94%	87%
4	79%	82%	88%	83%
5	91%	97%	91%	93%
6	88%	97%	97%	94%
7	70%	85%	94%	83%
Average Match	82%	87%	91%	

Note. Percentages were concatenated across rubric sub-criteria. For example, in the Exact Match section, 61% of Rater 1's sub-criteria ratings for the exemplary report matched the key exactly. On average, across raters, 56% of ratings exactly matched the key for the exemplary report. Across mock reports, Rater 1 matched the key exactly 59% of the time.

Figure 1 shows the average ratings across raters for the exemplary mock report by sub-criterion, along with the key. In general, there were many instances where the key and average participant ratings aligned. However, large (>1 point) discrepancies occurred for the following sub-criteria: malleable, measure development, use of results, comparison to previous findings, and assessment improvement. In addition, two equity-centered sub-criteria (equity concerns regarding programming; equity concerns related to data analysis) deviated from the key by more than 1 point, on average. Despite discrepancies, the pattern of ratings generally aligned with the exemplary key, with 20 sub-criteria having average ratings within 0.5 of the key.

Figure 1. *Exemplary Report: Average Ratings with Key*

Figure 2 shows the average proficient mock report ratings by sub-criterion, along with the key. Overall, average participant ratings aligned with the proficient key. However, large (>1 point) discrepancies occurred for the measure development and program improvement sub-criteria. Ratings across all other sub-criteria were within 1 point of the key, and 24 sub-criteria had average ratings within 0.5 of the key.

Figure 2. *Proficient Report: Average Ratings with Key*

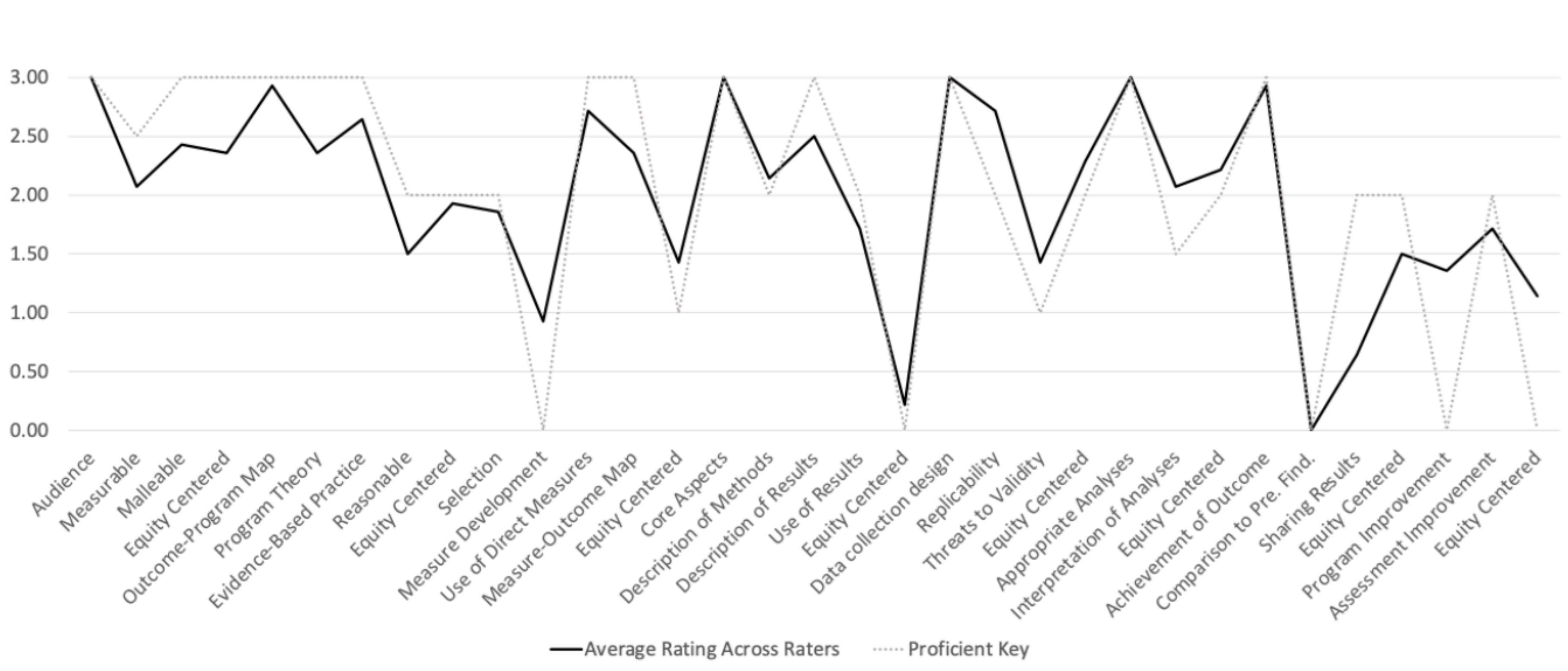
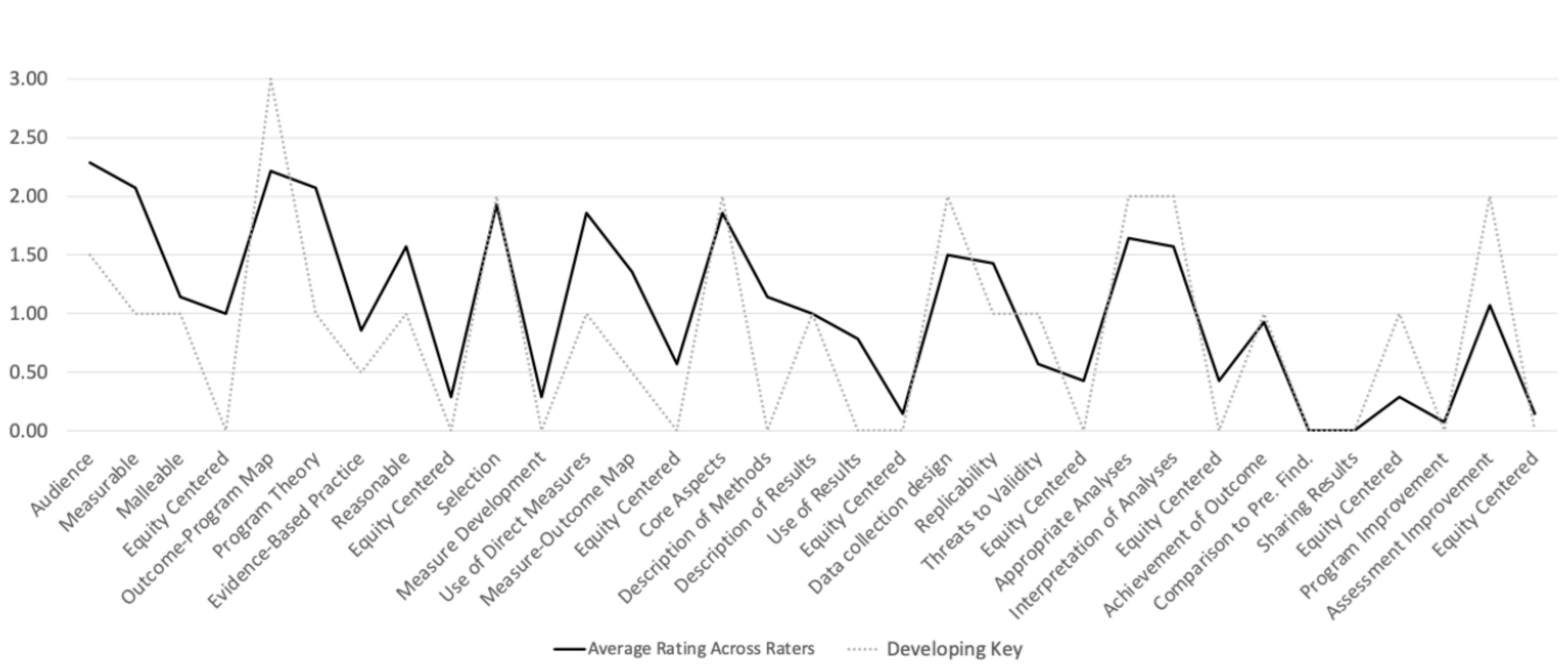


Figure 3 shows the average developing mock report ratings by sub-criterion, along with the key. The match to the key for the equity-centered sub-criteria was satisfactory, although some instances of non-negligible (i.e., >1 point) discrepancies are present for the following sub-criteria: measurable, the first equity-centered sub-criterion (equity concerns related to student learning and development outcomes), program theory, use of direct measures, and description of methods. Ratings across all other sub-criteria were within 1 point of the key, and 16 sub-criteria had average ratings within 0.5 of the key.

Figure 3. *Developing Report: Average Ratings with Key*



Across all mock reports, there were no sub-criteria that consistently deviated from the key by more than one point. However, the average ratings for the measure development sub-criterion were off by more than 1 point for two of the mock report keys (exemplary and proficient), indicating a need for stronger training on measurement development in future professional development workshops. In addition, all other sub-criterion with non-negligible deviations from their respective keys will be investigated to determine how to minimize these discrepancies in the future, resulting in better calibrations between participants' ratings and keys.

Discussion

We used a newly developed meta-assessment rubric, mock reports, and equity resources to advance the professional development of student affairs educators in equitable programming and assessment. Results of our G-study and key-matching analysis indicated that student affairs educators can distinguish between quality levels of equitable programming and assessment practices. The high consistency of ratings across student affairs educators supports the clarity and utility of the rubric, along with its support materials (e.g., mock reports, equity-centered resources).

Addressing Lack of Training in Assessment via Professional Development

Our training implementing these free OER materials effectively addressed a need on our campus for professional development in equity-centered programming and assessment. In addition to being effective, the accessibility of the online resources enabled us to create the training in just a few months. We found that three days of training was ample to articulate the need and scope of equity-centered assessment and engage in hands-on practice of using the rubric to identify varying quality of programming and assessment processes.

Although the OER resources are free to download, we recognize that there are costs associated with implementing a professional development training (e.g., reserving space to hold the training, providing lunch for participants, hiring experts to facilitate the training if necessary). Despite these costs, we enthusiastically encourage others to apply these resources on their campus. Moreover, our team believes the resources employed in our professional development training are versatile and can effectively support applications beyond traditional in-person full-day professional development contexts. For example, professionals could develop online materials aligned with the OER resources, thereby enhancing accessibility for individuals unable to afford, attend, or implement professional development training in person. Moreover, the training could be spread over a semester or a year (e.g., a couple hours every first Friday of the month) if full days cannot be allotted. In short, although we created and evaluated a three-day, in-person, bootcamp style of professional development, we believe the resources support adapting this training to be virtual and distributed over time.

Further, it may be that some institutions do not use the resources to offer a formal professional development opportunity for the division. Instead, consider models such as the Multilevel Assessment Process (MAP; Strine-Patterson, 2022), where departmental or divisional leaders could utilize the resources to facilitate strategic planning endeavors. For example, once a student affairs division has identified equity-centered assessment as a priority (which guides the division's purpose and improvement efforts), leadership personnel could create priority assessment teams who serve to explicate and ultimately achieve assessment-related goals aligned with the priority (Strine-Patterson, 2022). These smaller assessment teams could use the OER resources to support assessment efforts at any step of their process.

Following the logic of MAP, leadership should be included in the training focused on equity-centered assessment, so they understand its scope and the resources necessary to support such work. Although division-level leaders (e.g. AVPs, VP) did not participate in our professional development, we strongly encourage others implementing this type of training to include these leaders. Upper administrators play a crucial role in shaping how assessment is perceived and valued by their staff. Thus, upper administrators should reflect on how their discussions and practices in assessment impact their staff (Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Outcomes assessment is often framed as a way to address accountability mandates (e.g., Bresciani, 2011), which may be a "turn-off." Perceiving assessment as a tool to improve programming offered to students and to promote social justice on campus may prompt student affairs educators to regard assessment as a high-impact institutional practice, in turn decreasing resistance or lack of value that some student affairs educators perceive (Henning & Lundquist, 2022; Seagraves & Dean, 2010). This meta-assessment rubric and training could efficiently communicate that messaging to a division, especially if leadership experiences the training.

Addressing Inconsistent Training in Graduate Programs

In addition to the rubric and support resources being used to (re)train current student affairs educators, we argue that HESA or CSPA graduate programs could incorporate these materials into formal training to address the inconsistency in coursework across graduate programs (Dean & Langham, 2022). We believe that courses focused on designing programming could greatly benefit from the rubric and its focus on articulating program theory (Finney & Buchanan, 2021; Pope et al., 2019, 2023) and implementation fidelity (Finney et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2019) with equity implications overtly showcased. We envision courses focused on outcomes assessment, data-based decision making, or use of results for improvement could greatly benefit from demonstrating the various levels of high-quality assessment practice (exemplary, proficient, developing), which directly informs claims one can make about the effectiveness of programming.

We envision a couple of ways that instructors could use the resources. First, the three-day training could be directly incorporated into a class. Of course, the training would need to be distributed across class meetings, the ratings of reports could be completed as assignments (in class or outside of class), and this would not consume the semester-long course but rather a portion of the course even if implemented fully. Second, instructors may decide to simply use the rubric to frame the assessment process and use the mock reports to showcase high-quality practice rather than using the resources to formally train students to evaluate assessment practice. This second option has been used on our campus in two courses.

Moreover, the explicit link between the rubric and student affairs professional standards (ACPA-ASK Standards, ACPA-NASPA Competencies, CAS Standards) exposes students to the expectations from their profession. The rubric provides overt “moves” a student affairs educator could make to meet the standards related to assessment, programming, and equity. We imagine this will be empowering to graduate students, as they realize they are developing the competencies that will allow them to meet the standards of the field. This feeling would counter current perceptions of being unprepared in these domains (Wright-Mair et al., 2022). The rubric can help HESA instructors align their courses with national standards, something HESA faculty noted was important when constructing their formal courses (Hunter, 2024).

Conclusion

As the field works to professionalize assessment in student affairs, we need to continue to create and rigorously evaluate training materials for assessment-related professional development opportunities. Moreover, we believe these materials can and should purposefully integrate expected competencies (e.g., assessment and equity). Further, we believe the greatest positive impact on the development of student affairs educators is to share effective professional development materials freely so individuals can return to them as needed. It is our hope that future implementations of these materials expand their effectiveness, and that any new resources are shared freely. Increasing the value and engagement in equitable programming and assessment takes practice. Let’s commit to offering high-quality experiences to our colleagues, new and seasoned, in order to move from a “culture of good intentions” toward a “culture of evidence” (Culp & Dungy, 2012).

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The Call for Student Affairs Assessment Professionals and Units

And Other Strategies for Improving Assessment in Student Affairs

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Abstract: This article explores deeper roots for assessment within student affairs to find historical context that influences our current efforts and expectations. Reflecting on these efforts, the authors identify persistent challenges to meet the calls for assessment in student affairs. This article proposes strategies for improving assessment in student affairs.

Keywords: student affairs assessment, assessment, evaluation, measurement, improvement

Assessment in student affairs has three main goals In alignment with the field's focus of improvement and accountability: (a) improving students' experiences, learning and development, wellbeing, and success, (b) improving business needs, including employee wellbeing and operations, and (c) being accountable to students, families, and taxpayers that student affairs is a good steward of resources. This article examines the field is able to achieve these goals by following the principles of an effective assessment cycle. First, the authors dig into the field's deeper roots to understand the context in which strategies have been implemented to advance assessment in student affairs. Then, it reflects on the evidence to identify persistent challenges. Finally, this article provides strategies for improving assessment in student affairs related to terminology, expectations, and staffing.

Exploring the Deeper Roots of Assessment in Student Affairs

It is often acknowledged that assessment in student affairs has deep roots that begin with *The Student Personnel Point of View* (*SPPV*) published by the American Council on Education (ACE, 1937; e.g., Hanson, 1991). Similar to bamboo, which spends years establishing roots before finally breaking ground, the roots of assessment in student affairs developed over decades before Upcraft and Schuh (1996), who are credited with beginning "to blossom the sub-field" (Henning, 2016, p. 4) of assessment in student affairs. Yet significant contributions predate Upcraft and Schuh's publication. A closer examination of the 1980s and early 1990s reveals substantial writings that contribute to assessment in student affairs and continue to shape assessment practices today.

1980s—Moving from a Culture of Improvement and Accountability to Justification

Around the beginning of the 1980s, two significant efforts began shaping assessment in student affairs. First, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was founded in 1979, responding to a desire for standards of practice and graduate-level education that "reflected the values and goals of the field, rather than having external forces dictate these measures" (Wells & Dean, 2024, p. 30). In 1985, CAS adopted its first set of standards and guidelines, which embedded "Evaluation" as the last set of standards, and the organization has included assessment-related standards since (Wells & Dean, 2024). The second significant effort was the publication of a comprehensive textbook for the field of student affairs, *Student Services: A Handbook for the Profession* (Delworth & Hanson, 1980). This seminal textbook became a foundational series for the field, widely used in many Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) graduate preparation programs.

Notably, the first edition of *Student Services* featured a chapter on "Assessment and Evaluation" (Lenning, 1980), which provides a glimpse into how professionals viewed assessment during that time. This chapter introduced key concepts, reviewed various models, and offered practical recommendations for engaging in assessment. Drawing from evaluation literature outside of the student affairs field (Owens & Evans, 1977; Stake, 1973), Lenning (1980) outlined 16 "skills and competencies needed" (p. 258), such as to:

- "identify the purposes and audiences for one's evaluation" (p. 259),
- "describe resources and processes to be used in achieving one's objectives" (p. 259),
- "identify available resources for conducting the evaluation" (p. 259),
- "establish and apply criteria for the selection of an evaluation specialist" (p. 259), and
- "apply various types of evaluation findings" (p. 260).

Lenning emphasized that student affairs practitioners "need to know enough about statistics [to] communicate with a statistics expert when needed" (p. 260), and they also need "to appropriately interpret and apply any statistical data that are gathered" (p. 260).

These comments indicate that while Lenning (1980) believed practitioners should be engaged in the process, he did not think they needed to know how to perform advanced measurement and statistical analyses. This sentiment persisted in the second edition of *Student Services* (Lenning, 1989), showcasing that Lenning and others during this time recognized that measurement and statistical analysis were outside the scope of student affairs practitioners' responsibilities. The chapter laid an early foundation for the need to integrate multiple types of expertise and positions to advance assessment in student affairs. Lenning concludes the chapter with "if assessment and evaluation activities are well-planned and spaced appropriately, such activities can contribute greatly to program improvement, support, and accountability" (p. 261), which ties assessment with improvement and accountability as early as 1980.

However, by the mid-1980s, the tone surrounding accountability started to shift. Publications began to stress the urgency of assessment, warning that "if we are to survive through the next century... it is imperative that we support research and evaluation that examines our services and programs and what impact they have on students" (Brown, 1986, p. 195 as cited in Abler & Sedlacek, 1986). This change mirrored broader societal changes in higher education under the Reagan Administration from 1981–1989. Reagan's legacy towards public education has been described as "demagogically fann[ing] discontent with public education... bash[ing] educators and slash[ing] education spending ...[and leaving] the nation's educators dispirited and demoralized" (Clabaugh, 2004, p. 259). This criticism combined with reduced funding likely drove the field from a *culture of improvement and accountability*, with proactive intentions, to a reactive *culture of justification*. This may have been when the association between assessment and threats began, fostering anxiety, fear, and ultimately resistance by student affairs practitioners.

1990s—Learning and Measurement

In response to the culture of justification, the 1990s saw two significant developments. First, a number of declarations emphasized that student affairs contributes to the educational mission through co-curricular learning experiences. Second, this decade witnessed substantial publication efforts focused on teaching assessment as measurement, to equip practitioners with the skills of collecting data that would justify the work.

Student Learning Through Co-Curricular Experiences

During the 1990s and early 2000s the field published multiple articles, books, and philosophical statements that emphasize student affairs' contributions to student learning. This era challenged the field to focus on its contribution to the educational mission, positioning student learning as its central responsibility. It became clear that supporting students' basic needs and wellbeing to enable academic persistence was not enough.

In 1991 Erwin published *Assessing Student Learning and Development*, which was "designed for higher education faculty, student affairs professionals, and administrators" (p. xv) to approach the assessment process for "higher order reasoning and affective development outcomes of education, in addition to knowledge outcomes" (p. xvi). Through his holistic lens, he elevated student affairs professionals as educators alongside faculty.

The call for reimagining the educational mission gained more momentum with Barr and Tagg's influential article in 1995, which addressed all college educators, including instructional faculty and student affairs professionals. They described and argued for a paradigm shift in higher education stating: "the paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists *to provide instruction*. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an instruction that exists *to produce learning*" (p. 13). Shortly after, professional organizations authored philosophical statements that further defined the fields' educational contributions, included *The Student Learning Imperative* (American College Student Educators International [ACPA], 1996), *Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning* (American Association for Higher Education et al., 1998), and *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-wide Focus on the Student Experience* (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). These documents emphasized collaboration across campus and framed student learning as a shared, holistic endeavor.

Teaching Practitioners Measurement

The 1990s also brought a renewed and surging interest in assessment efforts, as evidenced by numerous publications, including textbooks such as *Assessing Student*

Learning and Development (Erwin, 1991), *Puzzles and Pieces in Wonderland: The Promise and Practice of Student Affairs Research* (Beeler & Hunter, 1991), *Assessment in Student Affairs* (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996), and *Student Affairs Research, Evaluation, and Assessment* (Malaney, 1999). These titles illustrate a conflation of the terms assessment, evaluation, and research, a trend also reflected in the evolving chapter title in *Student Services*. Initially named “Assessment and Evaluation” in the first and second editions (Lenning, 1980, 1989), the title was revised to “Assessment, Evaluation, and Research” in the third edition (Erwin, 1996). This shift suggests a field-wide response to the growing demand for justification with measurement emerging as the centerpiece. Distinguishing the purposes of assessment, evaluation, and research became less relevant; measurement was needed to produce data that would justify the field. The emphasis transitioned from *why* to *how*.

Publications during this time were designed to equip student affairs practitioners with measurement skills, a task previously encouraged to be done in partnership with measurement experts in the 1980s. For example, in the NASPA edited monograph, *Puzzles and Pieces in Wonderland* (Beeler & Hunter, 1991), student affairs practitioners were told they must “assume new roles on campus. [To] lead in conceptualizing, planning, coordinating, conducting, and disseminating our assessment efforts” (Hanson, 1991, p. 82). Similarly, the third edition of *Student Services* urged practitioners to integrate measurement, research, theory development, and assessment into their roles (Erwin, 1996). In fact 57% of the chapter’s pages were devoted specifically to measurement, delving into both quantitative and qualitative methods. These texts made practitioners’ responsibility for measurement evident.

To us–the authors, this shift of expecting student affairs practitioners to measure during a culture of justification is no surprise. In our experience in the field of student affairs, when higher education is in crisis and asks *how*, the answer is student affairs and its people, regardless of their prior education or experience. Said plainly, when a crisis strikes, the student affairs army is called, and we answer the call. Examples of this are plentiful. After a mass shooting on campus, we personally know professionals in career services who shifted their entire job to a social work-like focus supporting the victims and their families for the remainder of the semester. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we know student affairs professionals with no medical background who managed campus testing centers for COVID as if they were healthcare administrators. During a natural disaster, we know student affairs professionals that opened and staffed dining facilities, convocation centers, and student unions to feed and provide shelter to students, faculty, staff, and community members who lost everything, because it was days before experts like the Red Cross could arrive. So when there was a crisis to justify our field, student affairs practitioners were similarly called upon to take responsibility for measurement. It’s a pattern. We answer the call because there’s a need. It’s in our professional ethos.

2000s to Present—Attempts to Meet Calls for Assessment in Student Affairs

Student affairs practitioners put forth momentous effort to answer the call for assessment in alignment with their professional ethos. Professional organizations sought to communicate the expectations, faculty and professional organizations aimed to educate graduate students and practitioners, and graduate students and practitioners worked to integrate assessment into their practice. The student affairs army was galvanized.

These well-intended efforts unfolded against a heightened culture of justification that was driven by national and global events. For example, the Great Recession prompted some organizations to provide guidance on how institutions should approach cutting budgets (e.g., Eduventures, 2009), calling for university leaders to consider using the winter term to "begin targeted actions to eliminate, reduce, and combine programs that do not meet standards" (p. 2). Scholars positioned the *why* of assessment in a similar tone—data collected through assessment is needed to ensure that a case can be made for not cutting student affairs programs and services (e.g., Blimling, 2013; Elkins, 2015). These fear- and justification-driven narratives echoed those in the mid-1980s (e.g., Brown, 1986).

In response to all of this pressure, there were significant efforts to advance assessment in student affairs. This section will review four significant efforts: (a) professional standards and competencies, (b) higher education and student affairs (HESA) graduate preparation programs, (c) hiring individuals to coordinate assessment in student affairs, and (d) professional development; the section will close with reflections on these attempts.

Professional Standards and Competencies

Student affairs practitioners are expected to demonstrate a wide range of competencies in their practice, which are communicated in professional standards (Finney & Horst, 2019a, 2019b). All of these standards address assessment. The most widely utilized standards and competencies were developed by the three professional organizations: ACPA, NASPA, and CAS. The ACPA Commission on Assessment and Evaluation (CAE) developed the *Assessment Skills and Knowledge Content Standards for Student Affairs Practitioners and Scholars* (i.e., *ASK Standards*; ACPA CAE, 2006), and ACPA and NASPA partnered to publish the *Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators* (i.e., *ACPA/NASPA Competencies*; ACPA & NASPA, 2010, 2015). ACPA and NASPA focused on standards and competencies for student affairs professionals. CAS created functional area standards, addressing what a department, or unit, needs to do to be successful; these are known as *CAS Standards* (2023). This section will review each and how they attempt to guide practitioners in meeting the call for assessment in student affairs.

ASK Standards. In response to an "increased interest in fiscal and learning accountability in higher education" and a lack of consensus regarding the necessary knowledge and skills for student affairs assessment, ACPA's Commission on Assessment for Student Development (CASD; now known as the Commission for Assessment and Evaluation [CAE]) introduced the *ASK Standards* in 2006. These standards were developed to guide student affairs practitioners on what they "need to know in order to do assessment" (ACPA CASD, 2006, p. 3). In many ways, the *ASK Standards* intersect the two efforts that evolved during the 1990s by framing assessment as focusing on student learning outcomes and measurement. In fact, the standards specify advanced statistical and measurement expertise to be "among the necessary responsibilities of student affairs professionals" (p. 2). This included "sample size estimation, variance estimation, confidence intervals, ratio and regression estimation, and appropriate analytic responses to non-responses and missing data" (p. 7), and the "ability to analyze and interpret data using the appropriate univariate and multivariate statistical techniques" (p. 8). By articulating the knowledge and skills needed for assessment, the *ASK Standards* sought to mobilize student affairs practitioners to embed assessment into their daily practice. The *ASK Standards* have not been updated, likely due to the emergence of the *ACPA/NASPA Competencies*.

ACPA/NASPA Competencies. In 2009, ACPA, NASPA, and CAS, began to collaborate on developing the *ACPA/NASPA Competencies* (ACPA & NASPA, 2015), which outlined 10 areas of professional practice in student affairs—one of which was assessment. Each competency was defined by three levels of ability: foundational, intermediate, and advanced (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The intent of the competency task forces was to emphasize that all student affairs educators should demonstrate foundational knowledge, skills, and dispositions across the competency areas (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). The competencies remain relevant to the field and how we define and approach assessment work, because they are updated to reflect the evolving needs of the field; they underwent a revision in 2015 and the next expected update is in 2025.

Within the "Assessment, Evaluation, and Research" competency, foundational outcomes include the ability to "facilitate appropriate data collection for system/department-wide assessment and evaluation efforts using current technology and methods" (p. 20) and "assess the legitimacy, trustworthiness, and/or validity of studies of various methods and methodological designs (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative, theoretical perspective, epistemological approach)" (p. 20). Notably, the initial development of the competencies was informed by an ACPA publication, *Professional Competencies: A Report of the Steering Committee on Professional Competencies* (2007), which stated, "we are now moving towards the expectation that each student affairs professional be able to develop and conduct [their] own assessment" (p. 3). It underscored how the competencies represent a continuation of the field's commitment to building capacity for assessment.

CAS Standards. CAS has become a leading organization to help functional areas with their improvement efforts. Their standards suggest that effective assessment practice is achieved through the collective efforts of a functional area's staff. For example, the standards to "analyze and interpret data using appropriate methods" and "use data to demonstrate achievement" (CAS, 2023, p. 46) are an organizational responsibility, not an individual one. CAS Standards are a unique effort in the field to help meet the calls for assessment, because they provide an organizational lens to the work.

The current assessment standards "addresses the functional area's approach to assessment, including how it is conducted, analyzed, and used" (2023, p. 36). These standards are currently subdivided into the following:

- 4.1: Assessment Culture, Plans, and Processes
- 4.2: Goals, Outcomes, and Objectives
- 4.3: Implementing Strategies to Achieve Goals and Outcomes
- 4.4: Gathering Evidence and Data
- 4.5: Review and Interpreting Findings

- 4.6: Reporting Results and Implementing Improvement

This list demonstrates that CAS defines assessment as a process, encouraging practitioners to embrace assessment as a holistic activity integrating planning, gathering and reflecting on data, and improvement planning.

Regular updates are made to the CAS General Standards to reflect emerging thinking on best practices in the field. For example, after the publication of *Assessment in Student Affairs* (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996) "the CAS General Standards responded [...] by broadening the assessment-related statements" (Wells & Dean, 2024, p. 36). More recent revisions include the addition of "Assessment Culture" to the previously titled "Assessment Plans and Processes," signaling a recognition of the calls for cultivating widespread engagement in, and organizational commitment to, assessment. In the 2023 revisions CAS also refined language throughout the standards to "discern between student learning outcomes and program outcomes" (p. 42) and introduced standards regarding program theory and implementation fidelity. Since CAS Standards are regularly updated, it heavily influences the field in defining assessment practices and how to meet the call as a functional area.

HESA Graduate Program Preparation

Calls for standardizing graduate-level curriculum for HESA preparation programs are long standing. In fact, CAS was established in part to respond to these calls and has a long history of providing master's level HESA program standards (Wells & Dean, 2024). These standards include expectations for the curriculum to include assessment and the growing need for student affairs educators to engage in this work. The CAS Standards and Guidelines for Master's Level HESA Professional Preparation Programs, last revised in 2019, states that "the curriculum of programs of study must include (a) foundational content areas, (b) professional content areas, and (c) supervised practice" (CAS, 2023, p. 787). The professional content areas are further divided into five subcategories: (a) student learning and identity/psychosocial development theories; (b) student characteristics and effects of higher education on students; (c) individual and group strategies; (d) organization, governance, and administration of HESA; and (e) assessment, evaluation, and research. While assessment, evaluation, and research is distinguished as its own professional content area, three other professional content areas use assessment-related terms, such as assessing, assessment, evaluate, evaluating, evaluation, or measurement (see Table 1). This demonstrates that the expectation for practitioners to engage in assessment efforts is woven throughout the curriculum, clearly communicating to rising student affairs practitioners that assessment is a part of their professional responsibilities.

Coordinating Assessment in Student Affairs

To mobilize and sustain assessment efforts in student affairs, some divisions began hiring full-time professionals to advance the work. The first documented instance of a centralized student affairs assessment specialist was in 1981 at the University of Texas at Arlington (Bresciani, 2023; Kayne, 2024; Moxley, 1988). Over the following decades, the number of these positions grew, reaching 40 institutions by 1999 (Malaney), and 123 after another 20 years (Student Affairs Assessment Leaders [SAAL], 2019). Despite this growth, there is mixed consensus about hiring such positions. For example, the original *Professional*

Table 1. *Professional Content Areas that Include Assessment-Related Words*

Professional Content Area	Standard
Subpart 5b.1 Student Learning and Identity/Psychosocial Development Theory	Programs must provide learning opportunities so graduates are able to use and critique appropriate theory to understand, support, and advocate for student learning and development by *assessing** needs and creating opportunities for learning and development.
Subpart 5b.2 Student Characteristics and Effects of Higher Education on Students	Programs must include content focused on how student learning and learning opportunities are influenced by student characteristics and by collegiate environments so that graduates can design and *evaluate* learning experiences for students.
Subpart 5b.3 Individual and Group Strategies	The program's curriculum must include content, techniques, and methods of advising, supporting, and helping, as well as skills for *assessin*g, designing, implementing, and *evaluating* developmentally appropriate strategies with individuals and organizations. Programs must include content for graduates to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to design and *evaluate* effective educational interventions for individuals and groups. The content must include ways for graduates to identify and appropriately refer students who need additional resources.
Subpart 5b.5 Assessment, Evaluation, and Research	Program curriculum must include the study of *assessment*, *evaluation*, and research that centers on evidence-based practice to [for] accountability and continuous improvement. Content must include *assessment* planning and design; outcome development; qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, and critical data collection and analysis methods; *measurement* of learning processes and outcomes; *assessment* of environments and organizations; *measurement* of program and environment effectiveness; effective reporting; critiques of published studies; integration of social justice; and *assessment* and change management strategies. Program content must include opportunities for graduates to learn how to critique a study or evaluation and be able to design, conduct, and report on a sound research study, *assessment* study, or program evaluation, all grounded in the appropriate literature to improve professional practice and student learning.

* emphasis added for assessment-related words appearing in this table

Competencies: A Report of the Steering Committee on Professional Competencies (ACPA, 2007) specifies that "the emphasis on the development of assessment skills within the field of student affairs eliminates the notion that the solution to accountability is simply hiring one student affairs professional to address assessment" (p. 3). Yet a year later, there were enough professionals with full-time jobs coordinating assessment in their division that SAAL was founded (Biddix et al., 2020; Elkins, 2015).

Regardless of consensus about hiring such a position, in 2013, Livingston and Zerulik wrote an article that described the "emerging role of assessment coordinators in student affairs divisions" (p. 15). They described the role as one to (a) create and manage assessment teams with representatives from each department in the division, (b) ensure assessment is a divisional priority among senior leaders, (c) provide professional development to build staff capacity for assessment, and (d) review and provide feedback on assessment projects and reports. These responsibilities can be summarized as capacity building, with a heavy focus on professional development, and project management, which is "planning, organizing, and directing the completion of specific projects" (Joubert, 2024). Divisional assessment teams played a key role by creating a captive audience for professional development and fostering accountability for assessment projects.

To support these full-time professionals, Yousey-Elsener, Bentrim, and Henning edited two editions of *Coordinating Student Affairs Assessment* (Henning et al., 2024; Yousey-Elsener et al., 2015) intended to "provide resources for those starting assessment offices or those newly appointed to student affairs assessment coordinator positions" (2015, p. xxiii). They argue that the "primary role of an assessment coordinator is to be a capacity builder–one who builds the assessment knowledge and skills capacity for a division of student affairs and ultimately allows staff members in the division to perform their own assessment" (Bentrim & Henning, 2015, p. 1). Capacity-building efforts remain a high priority for those coordinating assessment in student affairs, as evidenced by the most recent edition having an entire chapter devoted to it. This chapter, *Building Capacity, Talent, and Professional Development*, states that "it is valuable for every professional to build their assessment skills regardless of their functional area or role" (Kruchen-Spaulding & Cyr, 2024, p. 139).

Despite these growing resources, evidence suggests that centralized student affairs assessment positions remain uncommon. The same year that the 2019 SAAL Landscape Study found that 123 institutions employed full-time professionals to coordinate student affairs assessment, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) shared that there were 2,679 4-year degree granting institutions (NCES, 2022), which is where the vast majority, if not all, of these roles are employed. This means that only 4.6% of institutions were found to have full-time student affairs assessment professionals. Assuming this could be a low estimate due to a low response rate, the numbers are still bleak. If we assume a 50% response rate, then 9.2% of institutions employed full-time student affairs assessment professionals; this rate is similar to previous studies of student affairs research offices (e.g., Beeler & Oblander, 1989; Johnson & Steele, 1984). If we assume a 20% response rate, then it would have been 23.1% of institutions. Regardless, these numbers make it clear that divisions predominantly rely on student affairs practitioners for assessment efforts.

Professional Development

Since the early 2000s, the field has seen a significant increase in professional development opportunities to support practitioners wanting to learn and implement assessment efforts on their campus. Episodic and easy-to-access opportunities such as conferences, webinars, and massive open online courses (MOOCs) were developed (Kruchen-Spaulding & Cyr, 2024) by a host of professional organizations.

In-person conferences emerged as a major avenue for professional development. For example, the Assessment Institute in Indianapolis began in 2000, and now includes a dedicated track for student affairs programs and services (Biddix et al., 2020). A few years later, ACPA launched its first Student Affairs Assessment Institute in 2003 and NASPA debuted the Assessment and Retention Conference in 2004 (now the Assessment, Persistence, and Data Analytics Conference; Biddix et al., 2020). Virtual opportunities also became prominent as technology advanced. In 2016, SAAL created a monthly webinar series, called Structured Conversations (SAAL, n.d.-c), and a MOOC for Applying and Leading Assessment in Student Affairs (SAAL, n.d.-a), both of which still exist today.

Beyond conferences, resources such as the SAAL Blog (SAAL, n.d.-b) and the *Journal for Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact* (*JSAIII*; previously the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry*, n.d.) have emerged. Functional area professional associations have also contributed to these efforts through assessment committees, such as the Association of College Unions International's (ACUI) Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Program Team (ACUI, n.d.). These initiatives underscore the vast attempts to equip student affairs professionals to engage in assessment.

Persistent and Unintended Challenges

After four decades of efforts to emphasize the importance of assessment, persistent and unintended challenges endure. As the field approaches 45 years of calls to actualize assessment practices, we must pause to reflect on the evidence of these efforts. Despite continually educating student affairs professionals on basic assessment practices, increases in practitioners' comfort and proficiency with assessment remain limited. Today, student affairs practitioners continue to express "hesitation, fear, and indifference" towards the practice of assessment (Kayne, 2024, para. 1). Darby Roberts, a respected leader in the field, aptly notes that "fear is one of the biggest barriers to developing an assessment culture" (2024, p. 129). Evidence from the 2024 SAAL Landscape Survey underscores stagnation, with respondents indicating significant obstacles with inadequate training, insufficient data literacy, and a lack of colleagues' understanding of assessment (Brooks Nelson et al., 2024).

These persistent challenges seem like a constant–something that can only be resolved through more educational efforts to address practitioners' knowledge and skill gaps. But this historical review showed us that there may be different resolutions. For example, when we began our historical exploration, we did not anticipate finding literature that did not expect student affairs educators to possess strong skills in measurement (Lenning, 1980, 1989). This finding shocked us. It prompted us to wonder: how much of our current approach is shaped by being stretched too thin to pause, reflect, and determine whether these efforts are truly effective? Furthermore, how much is because we have done what is in our control rather than trying to influence change?

While this exploration of our roots is not exhaustive, it reveals essential missing context on why strategies were developed and underscores that today's challenges have persisted. If we are professionals committed to improvement and evidence-informed decisions, we must ask: Why aren't we further along? Why do successes feel so isolated? Why do practitioners remain hesitant, fearful, and indifferent? After reflection, we posit there are persistent and unintended challenges due to the language used in assessment efforts and the expectations of student affairs educators.

Language Used in Assessment Efforts

Our history reveals that language inconsistencies are one of the persistent challenges in advancing assessment in student affairs. Despite attempts to define and differentiate assessment-related terminology, clarity of these terms remains elusive. We argue that the field's lack of language consistency contributes to practitioners being confused, overwhelmed, and frustrated about assessment. The confusion around assessment language is not new. Others have noted that "the lack of a common language for [assessment] practice" (Timm et al., 2013, p. 3) can lead to confusion, which can "be frustrating and discouraging" (p. 3). Ardion (2018) highlights how first-generation students learning the jargon of higher education "sometimes [feel] nervous, insecure, overwhelmed, frustrated, and panicked" (p. 56) when faced with a lack of knowledge about specific terminology. Similarly, we believe student affairs educators likely experience negative emotional responses when faced with confusing assessment language. Strine-Patterson (2022) argues that the language we use "unintentionally disinvite[s] most student affairs professionals from engaging" (p. 62) in assessment efforts. Simplifying this language is a necessary next step to improve assessment in student affairs.

Measurement is the Common Tool for Assessment, Evaluation, and Research

Assessment, evaluation, and research have been closely linked since the 1990s, and though professionals have sought to clarify these terms (e.g., National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), n.d.-a; Rehr et al., 2024; SAAL, 2024b) confusion persists. We believe the coupling of these three words reflects that measurement (i.e., the methodological process) is their common foundation. In fact, Stitt-Bergh and colleagues (2018) argued that "the typical assessment model foregrounds methodological process above almost all other aspects" (p. 28), and we expand this argument to include that the methodological process overshadows all other aspects of assessment, evaluation, and research. Measurement is so paramount, Strine-Patterson (2022) further demonstrates that the word *assessment* is simultaneously used as a synonym for *measurement* and to reference the entire assessment cycle. She argues "if assessment is [...] equated to measurement, and leaders do not see [assessment] as a process for quality improvement efforts [...] then we will never realize continuous improvement and accountability" (p. 63). Learning that assessment, evaluation, and research were coupled together during the 90s when measurement became paramount, it appears these terms were used as synonyms, like assessment and measurement (Strine-Patterson, 2022), during a crisis to justify. Therefore, it is a worthwhile endeavor to review these terms and definitions to determine their continued utility (or not). This may allow the field to set down the unproductive debate about their differences and move towards clear and concise language.

Assessment and Evaluation. Let's start with where the field does seem to find consensus. Definitions of *evaluation* consistently use *judge* or *judgments* (e.g., CAS, 2023; Henning &

Roberts, 2016; Lenning, 1980; NILOA, n.d.-b; SAAL, 2024b). However, clarity dissipates when evaluation is compared to the traditional assessment cycle–particularly in the final step of "closing the loop," or the process of using data to make improvements (e.g., Finney et al., 2021; Henning & Roberts, 2016, Stitt-Bergh et al., 2018; Suskie, 2009; Yousey-Elsener, 2013). The process of deciding what improvements to make inherently requires making judgments based on the measurement results. This leaves us to conclude that evaluation is not a separate process, but simply a substep of the traditional assessment cycle.

We are not the first authors to make this observation. Bresciani (2010a) noted at least one other author "considers evaluation as part of the assessment process" (p. 321; i.e., Suskie, 2004). The *ASK Companion Guide* (Timm et al., 2013) states that "evaluation is presented as a construct within the assessment process and is no longer described as a stand-alone component" (p. 5). With the goal of making assessment-related terminology more clear and concise, we recommend using evaluation exclusively to describe the final step in the assessment cycle rather than presenting it as a distinct process.

Some may argue that evaluative judgments, such as those made by external reviewers during a department review process, are separate from the assessment process, necessitating keeping the term evaluation in our professional lexicon. However, we contend that such judgements are not separate processes. Implementing external reviewer recommendations is not mandatory; instead their evaluations are a data point for student affairs professionals to incorporate into their assessment process.

While eliminating the use of *evaluation* seems like a straightforward way to simplify language, the debate to elevate evaluation alongside assessment persists, adding to the confusion. For example, in the recent *CAS General Standards Contextual Statement* (2023), the authors share updates to the assessment section, including adding "evaluation to the title" (CAS, 2023, p. 42) to reflect that assessment is not "merely the collection of data to describe how a program or service is functioning" (p. 42). Ultimately, this title change was not implemented, and a reference to this near change in the introduction was missed (L. Crain, personal communication, September 7, 2023). National leaders involved in the revisions of the CAS Standards also influence other national organizations that continue to define assessment and evaluation as separate, but clearly related, constructs. For instance, NILOA includes "evaluates" (p. 1, NILOA, n.d.-a) in their definition of assessment and "assessments" in their definition of evaluation, which reads, in part, as "using collected information (assessments) to make informed decisions" (p. 2, NILOA, n.d.-a). This lack of clarity is long standing, as Bresciani (2010a) noted nearly 15 years ago, concluding that "definitions [of assessment and evaluation] do vary in their meaning and thus "confusion" is present for some" (p. 322). However, this confusion is not inevitable.

During the 2024 SAAL Open Course, the long-time course manager and instructor, Joseph (Joe) Levy, alludes to the importance of not using assessment and evaluation to define each other (SAAL, 2024b). Yet, efforts to clarify these terms have often resulted in only minor modifications to definitions with no uniform attempt to simplify the language. Historically, the field has approached student affairs practitioners from a deficit-based perspective (due to their lack of understanding) and subsequently provided them glossaries or lists of terms that distinguish constructs (e.g., assessment and evaluation) but rely on circular definitions. Adopting an asset-based perspective requires the field to simplify our language. Instead of elevating evaluation as a separate process, it should be relegated to the last step of the assessment cycle. This approach would reduce confusion and shift the focus from blaming student affairs educators to addressing the root cause of the field's linguistic complexity.

Assessment and Research. Research and assessment are often discussed together due to their shared reliance on measurement. At times, the field has approached these terms as synonymous. For instance, the initial professional competencies report, observed the recent "publication of a plethora of assessment books" (ACPA, 2007, p. 3), citing titles such as *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Creswell, 2003), and *Qualitative Research: A Personal Skills Approach* (Shank, 2002) alongside assessment texts such as *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners* (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Despite this coupling, there is broad consensus that assessment and research serve distinct purposes (Marsden & Ekert, 2018).

Research is defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in Title 45 (2023) as "a systemic investigation…designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (p. 137). Similarly student affairs literature highlights research's emphasis on generalizability and measurement, noting that data collection is central to its purpose (e.g., Henning & Roberts, 2016; Timm et al., 2013). Across definitions, research is consistently framed as the pursuit of generalizable truths applicable across multiple contexts.

Conversely, *assessment* is typically defined as using evidence for the purpose of accountability and improvement at an institution (Lenning, 1980; Ewell, 2009; Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). Strine-Patterson (2022) further argued that "assessment is a leadership process" (p. 64) for "quality improvement efforts and sharing impact stories regarding student experiences, learning and development, wellbeing, and success" (personal communication, October 17, 2024). Ultimately, assessment is local in context, concerned with a campus, which underscores the distinction between assessment and research.

While the distinction in purpose between assessment and research is clear and consistent, their shared methodological tools often blur these boundaries. This overlap invites confusion (Bresciani, 2010b), necessitating a deliberate effort to disentangle the methodological process from assessment.

Assessment and Measurement. While the field has attempted to clarify the relationship between measurement and assessment, these efforts often fall short of providing the needed precision. To give one example, *Assessment in Practice: A Companion to the ASK Standards* (i.e., *ASK Standards Companion*; Timm et al., 2013) includes a glossary of terms, such as (a) *assessment*, (b) *assessment cycle*, (c) *assessment plan*, (d) *measure or assessment measure*, (e) *measures*, and (f) *pre-post test/assessment.* Unfortunately, some of these definitions further blur the distinctions. For example, the glossary defines *measure* as “instruments, devices, or methods that provide data” (p. 87) and *pre-post test/assessment* as “administering the same assessment before and after a program, service, training, etc.” (p. 87). This raises the logical question: What differentiates a measure used before and after an experience from a pre-post test/assessment? Greater clarity could have been achieved by using consistent terminology, such as *measure* rather than *assessment* in the term and definition of pre-post test/assessment. This is only one example of many that exemplify two larger issues: (a) definitions generally do not provide intended clarity, and (b) the field uses “assessment as a synonym for the methodological process” (Strine-Patterson, 2022, p. 62), which exacerbates confusion.

To further explore how the field explicitly and implicitly equates assessment with measurement, we explored how HESA graduate programs teach assessment. The recent “Syllabi Project” conducted by the ACPA CAE; NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community (AERKC); and SAAL analyzed HESA assessment course syllabi across master’s and doctoral programs. Their findings revealed a “lack of a clear student affairs assessment curriculum” (ACPA CAE et al., 2024, p. 4) across graduate preparation programs. However, the report also highlighted that assessment courses have a clear “prioritization of technical knowledge” (Rehr et al., 2024, p. 95) with “nearly two-thirds of syllabi (64%) ha[ving] a specific focus on [measurement] methods [and] the vast majority (93%) incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods” (ACPA CAE et al., 2024, p. 6). These results suggest that “instructors clearly value [measurement] design and data collection” (Rehr et al., 2024, p. 95) over the broader scope of assessment.

Notably, only 5.4% of identifiable learning outcomes on course syllabi indicated that students would learn to articulate learning and development outcomes as a result of the course (ACPA CAE et al., 2024). Since assessment starts with articulating goals, objectives, and outcomes (e.g., Finney et al., 2021; Strine-Patterson, 2022; Suskie, 2009; Yousey-Elsener, 2013), courses that fail to teach this foundational skill cannot be deemed assessment courses. One logical conclusion is that some courses labeled as assessment courses are rebranded research methodology courses without curriculum changes, continuing to perpetuate the centrality of the methodological process in assessment.

We extended this inquiry by analyzing 14 foundational and heavily utilized HESA assessment texts from the past 50 years, including those identified by the Syllabi Project. Chapters and pages of these texts were thematically coded to determine the proportion of each text that addressed different aspects of the assessment cycle (i.e., planning, measurement, and using results) or other related topics. Results showed that nearly half of all pages were devoted to *measurement* (46.8%), and pages on *planning* (8.5%) and *use of results* (7.6%) were significantly less represented, despite their critical roles (see Table 2).

While methodological rigor is essential, these findings suggest its dominance in the literature minimizes other critical aspects of the assessment cycle. These findings mirror critiques of assessment efforts in HESA: that the methodological process overshadows defining goals, outcomes, and objectives; intentionally designing theory- and evidence-based strategies to achieve them; and using findings for improvement efforts

(Stitt-Bergh et al., 2018; Strine-Patterson, 2022). For a more detailed breakdown of the methods for this analysis and the list of texts examined, see the Appendix.

Our analysis also identified categories of integrated and special topics (5.7%) including "Post-Graduation Outcomes," and "Assessments in General Education, Co-Curricula, and Other Settings." Many of these special or integrated topics emphasize strategies and approaches to support collaborative measurement efforts. While these discussions are undoubtedly valuable, we have differentiated them from chapters aimed at teaching student affairs practitioners how to conduct measurement itself—what we have classified explicitly as "measurement" in our analysis.

To enhance clarity for general student affairs practitioners, we strongly recommend that leaders and practitioners stop using the term assessment as a synonym for measurement. Assessment is a holistic activity that, in its simplest form, integrates (a) planning, (b) the methodological process, and (c) using results for improvement efforts and storytelling. When assessment is reduced to the methodological process alone and disconnected from goals, objectives, and outcomes, then "student affairs professionals collect and celebrate any data. They focus on what they can easily measure rather than on what measures can inform their practice" (Strine-Patterson, 2022, p. 62). By intentionally using the term assessment to describe a holistic process, we can elevate the importance of planning, measurement, and using results as equally critical components of assessment efforts. This shift demands equal emphasis in textbooks, syllabi, and professional development, ensuring a more balanced and impactful approach to assessment in student affairs.

Formative and Summative Assessment

Naturally, we wondered if terminology exists that might help advance the work beyond our recommendations to reduce unnecessary terminology (i.e., evaluation) and consistently use existing terminology (i.e., assessment, measurement). Since student affairs works on the assessment process in the higher education environment, we were curious if we could learn from our Pre-Kindergarten–12th Grade (PK-12) colleagues about the assessment terminology used to clarify assessment efforts in their educational environment.

Since assessment in student affairs is largely guided by professional standards, we started by reviewing the professional standards for PK-12 education. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), through its Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (inTASC), created the Model Core Teaching Standards that "outlines what teachers should know and be able to do to ensure every PK-12 student reaches the goal of being ready to enter college or the workforce" (CCSSO, 2013, p. 3). Specifically, the assessment standard states, "The teacher understands and uses multiple methods of assessment to engage learners in their own growth, to monitor learner progress, and to guide the teacher's and learner's decision making" (p. 30). The first essential knowledge states that "The teacher understands the differences between formative and summative applications of assessment and knows how and when to use each" (p. 30), and the first performance states that "The teacher balances the use of formative and summative

Table 2. *Number and Percentage of Pages in HESA Assessment Textbooks by Category*

Category	#	%
Assessment Cycle Components		
Measurement	1,777	46.8
Planning	321	8.5
Use of Results	290	7.6
Other Assessment-Related Topics		
Introductions & Conclusions	468	12.3
Special & Integrated Topics	215	5.7
Research	186	4.9
Equity, Ethics, Integrity	167	4.4
Leading & Coordinating Assessment	118	3.1
Program Review, Professional Competencies & Accreditation	109	2.9
Effectiveness & Benchmarking	75	2.0
Collaboration with Faculty & Campus Partners	70	1.8
Total	3,796	1000

assessment as appropriate to support, verify, and document learning" (p. 30). Clearly, the PK-12 field is using the terms *formative* and *summative* to clarify their assessment efforts.

These terms are rarely defined or used in student affairs assessment-related professional development experiences and textbooks. For example, the SAAL Open Course (SAAL, 2024a) makes no mention of the distinction between formative and summative assessment. In the three most common assessment textbooks (ACPA CAE et al., 2024), formative and summative assessment are not included in terminology lists (see Henning & Roberts, 2024, p. 47–48; Schuh, et al., 2016, p. 4–8). While each of these texts may briefly mention formative and summative assessment elsewhere (e.g., Henning & Roberts, 2024, p. 87 & 309), the importance of distinguishing between formative and summative assessment for our work is not clear. The near absence of these terms sends a message to learners that the difference between formative and summative assessment is not critical to their understanding or engagement in assessment. Yet, we believe that using formative and summative assessment terminology in student affairs could be helpful to advance assessment efforts.

Formative Assessment. Lenning (1980) noted that formative assessment may be "a potentially more useful concept" (p. 234) for student affairs practitioners, because it is "designed to provide useful information during the conduct of a program, process, or learning experience that can be used to make changes as the program/experience proceeds" (Timm et al., 2013, p. 86). For example, in the PK-12 school setting a teacher may administer a weekly short quiz to identify which students need additional help (i.e., a change in the plan). For student affairs practitioners, formative assessment can inform the plan for current students to achieve engagement objectives, perception objectives, or learning and development outcomes (Strine-Patterson, 2022).

The reality is that student affairs practitioners engage in many types of formative assessment without thinking of it as assessment. For example, every division of student affairs has goals and outcomes related to students having good psychological wellbeing so that they are mentally able to engage in learning. Given this, practitioners regularly communicate about campus resources that support psychological wellbeing, such as the counseling center (e.g., during orientation and in residential community spaces). The intent is that students will learn there are resources for mental health and utilize those resources when needed. If a student affairs practitioner learns that a student is struggling with their mental health but feels stigmatized by using the counseling center, then the practitioner knows the plan needs to change for this individual student. The practitioner works to de-stigmatize using the counseling center and be alongside the student to schedule an appointment. This may take the practitioner multiple check-ins with a student. It may take walking the student over to the counseling center themselves. The point is, the practitioner will identify that the student in front of them needs a different plan to achieve the outcome, and they will change the plan. In this example, the practitioner uses formative assessment. Student affairs practitioners are experts at knowing when an individual student or groups of students needs a different plan, and they modify plans every day to meet students' needs using formative assessment.

Summative Assessment. Summative assessment is "designed to provide useful information at the culmination of a program, process, or student learning experience" (Timm et al., 2013, p. 87). In the PK-12 school setting, these are year-long learning outcomes for each grade that are measured in a state-mandated test or final exam (e.g., Advanced Placement). In student affairs, summative assessment is focused on the year-to-year trend data and community-level outcomes (Strine-Patterson, 2022), which in turn informs department and divisional improvement planning and storytelling.

Summative assessment is what field, division, and department leaders seek, and it stems from the culture of justification. Using the same example we used in formative assessment, the division wants to demonstrate that students who engage in mental health strategies (e.g. counseling) are more likely to achieve academic success and graduate than those that do not. They want to have year-to-year metrics on these outcomes so that they can demonstrate their contribution to the educational mission of the institution. Although they care about individual students, they trust student affairs practitioners to address individual needs. Field, division, and department leaders need macro-perspective, summative assessment to advance organizational improvement and storytelling to respond to external stakeholders, like the board of trustees.

Reflecting on assessment's deeper roots in student affairs, decades of messaging from leading professional organizations' standards, competencies, and guiding documents, which call for assessment as a means to justify—requiring summative assessment–seems to have resulted in the near absence of professional development and literature on formative assessment. For example, CAS General Standards state that functional areas are required to "use data to demonstrate achievement" (2023, p. 46). Similarly, the *ACPA/NASPA Competencies* for "Assessment, Evaluation, and Research" includes an intermediate skill to "determin[e] the institution's, the division's, or the unit's accomplishment of its missions/goals, re-allocation of resources, and advocacy for more resources" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 21). Most recently, NASPA released *The Compass Report: Charting the Future of Student Affairs* (2022) that outlined five imperatives for the field, and the first is to "*Strengthen data capacity and highlight evidence about the impact of holistic student support programs and activities,"* (p. 26):

> Faced with questions about whether the value of higher education justifies its cost, we must highlight how our work contributes to some of the biggest issues affecting students' persistence and completion outcomes [...] Student affairs professionals should be equipped to collect, analyze, and communicate the impact of data relevant [...] at each institution. (p. 26)

The use of summative assessment to inform future improvements is also included in some standards. For example, the "Student Learning & Development" competency indicates that practitioners should possess foundational skills to "assess teaching and learning, and incorporate results into future practice" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 31); "future" alludes to the next semester or academic year—for future cohorts and students. There is no corresponding foundational, intermediate, or advanced level that indicates student affairs professionals should be able to engage in assessment efforts for the current semester, and current cohorts and students. Together, the focus on justification and future improvement implicitly communicates that student affairs professionals need to engage in summative assessment, not formative.

This focus on summative assessment is so pervasive across higher education that the NILOA released a report on the *Grand Challenges in Assessment: Collective Issues in Need of Solutions* (Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020) in which "immediate improvements" is listed as one of the grand challenges, stating:

> Assessment findings should be used to direct immediate pedagogical improvements. Too often, assessment findings are not utilized to direct immediate pedagogical improvements, in part because the work of closing the loop in student learning outcomes assessment is too slow to benefit the [measured] students. (p. 6)

The lack of attention that student affairs gives to formative assessment was also reflected during a recent SAAL Structured Conversation, where Levy acknowledged the field's summative focus by stating, "[we] focus so much on helping the future students... We're [going to] make this change in hopes of this intervention being better for the next round of students" (SAAL, 2023a, 39:37). He went on to seemingly call for a reinvigoration of formative assessment, particularly within the equity-centered assessment context. In discussing the removal of barriers influencing student success, Levy noted "what about those students right now that are experiencing those barriers? ...[W]e can't ignore the now" (SAAL, 2023a, 39:57).

We recommend the field increase the usage of formative and summative assessment terminology to intentionally describe the work. Adding formative and summative assessment to student affairs' terminology is a promising way to help the field advance the work, in addition to our recommendations for reducing unnecessary terminology (e.g., evaluation) and consistently using existing terminology (e.g., assessment, measurement).

Expectations of Student Affairs Educators

Our historical review highlights a second persistent, and likely unintended, challenge to advancing assessment in student affairs. These well-intended efforts communicate an unrealistic expectation: that student affairs educators bear full responsibility for all facets of the assessment cycle, including the methodological process, alongside all of their other responsibilities. However, measurement is not why they entered the field (EAB, 2011; Henning & Roberts, 2016); they are overwhelmed by their assessment responsibilities and do not feel prepared to engage in the work (Hoffman, 2015; Schuh et al., 2009, 2016).

In addition to the expectations of student affairs educators to engage in assessment, they have a primary responsibility to support students' basic needs–the foundational elements of students' hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). This primary responsibility was minimized during the 1990s when student learning was prioritized as the field's way to contribute to the educational mission. However, students cannot achieve growth needs, such as cognitive learning and self-actualization, without meeting their basic needs, such as psychological, safety, and belonging. These days, supporting students' basic needs is at the forefront of student affairs educators' minds. For example, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NCES, 2023) found that in 2019–2020, 22.6% of undergraduate and 12.2% of graduate students experience food insecurity, and 8% of undergraduate and 4.6% of graduate students experience homelessness. Recently, *The Student Mental Health Landscape* (Wiley, 2024) found that 80% of college students are struggling emotionally and 48% needed more help since the pandemic. They also found large numbers of students have anxiety (59%), burnout (58%), and depression (43%). Finally, student affairs educators are working on students' basic need to belong (Strayhorn, 2018), and projections show that the diversity of students, along with their sense of belonging needs, will continue to grow for decades to come (ACE, 2024).

Knowing that assessment cannot be educators' first priority, we believe that assessment also creates a negative emotional response for them because (a) they are unable to complete assessment-related tasks since they "have too much work for one person to complete" (Rickey, 2024, p. 57), and (b) they are typically blamed for their lack of knowledge, value, or effort when assessment does not meet expectations or are unrealized. We argue this is misplaced blame and perpetuates student affairs educators' frustration by overlooking the central issue—the field has yet to adopt realistic expectations for assessment that align with their primary responsibility of meeting the needs of current students. In fact, NASPA (2022) found that 68% of student affairs professionals may leave the field because of "hidden responsibilities that are not transparent in job descriptions or communicated up front" (p. 23). While this does not specifically say assessment-related expectations are hidden responsibilities, there is evidence that only 27.1% of student affairs job postings require assessment-related competencies (Hoffman & Bresciani, 2010). If we know that professional standards and guiding documents (e.g., NASPA, 2022) state and imply that all student affairs professionals should engage in assessment efforts, then it appears that assessment is a hidden job responsibility for almost three-quarters of professionals.

Student affairs employee wellbeing and retention is suffering (e.g., Kim, 2021; Marshall et al., 2016; Naifeh, 2019; NASPA, 2022; Rickey, 2024), and these high expectations are coupled with other wellbeing challenges. HESA is currently experiencing an "understaffing epidemic" (Kim, 2021) where practitioners are working nights and weekends because they do more than one job. Data also shows that 70% of practitioners think the salary and compensation do not align with the responsibilities and may prompt them to leave the field (NASPA, 2022). The recent College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) survey found that 40% of student affairs professionals are likely to search for a new role in the next year (CUPA-HR, 2023), and NASPA found that almost a third "do not know if they will continue working in the field in the next 5 years" (p. 22).

If they are already on the edge of leaving, because they are expected to work too much for too little pay, our expectations for them to engage in summative assessment to justify their job, their functional area, and their division might be their final straw to leave. "Not only do most student affairs administrators not have the time to devote to assessment, but many do not have an interest in doing assessment or the skills necessary [...], or know how to use assessment results once they have them" (Blimling, 2013 p. 8). The recent *Compass Report* (NASPA, 2022) shared that just over a third (36%) of student affairs practitioners who expect more assessment and evaluation responsibilities in the next five years feel "adequately prepared" for those additional responsibilities; just under half (47%) feel somewhat prepared, though it is unclear how social desirability bias may play into these results. Yet, the field continues to expect practitioners to build their "data analysis and assessment capacities to better understand the scale and impact of student supports" (NASPA, 2022, p. 26) to ultimately justify their work and the field.

We agree with NASPA (2022) that "challenges, if unaddressed, threaten the sustainability of the profession, as some individuals may determine that the requirements of their student affairs roles are too demanding, and the experiences do not meet their expectations" (p. 22). If we know that student affairs professionals (a) do not enter the field with an interest in assessment and measurement, (b) do not feel prepared for these responsibilities, (c) do not have time to engagement in assessment efforts, and (d) have a negative emotional response to assessment that is likely a compounding factor to work satisfaction—when do we address these challenges? When do we adopt realistic expectations for student affairs educators to engage in assessment?

A Call for Investing in Student Affairs Assessment Professionals and Units

We believe the field struggles with pragmatism and identifying what is realistic compared to the idealized version of assessment. To realistically advance the field, we argue that student affairs must change how it structures responsibilities for assessment. A new approach to these responsibilities requires a significant shift from focusing on student affairs educators' perceived deficits to the structural misalignment between expectations and realities. This requires focusing on student affairs educators’ strengths and investing in full-time student affairs assessment (SAA) professionals and units.

We contend that Strine-Patterson’s (2022) Multilevel Assessment Process (MAP) provides a strategy for altering our expectations for how student affairs practitioners engage in assessment, because it better represents planning, reflection, improvement planning, and storytelling alongside measurement. While the MAP delineates the unique and intersectional responsibilities of student affairs professionals (i.e., divisional leaders, departmental leaders, and student affairs educators), it does not address how SAA professionals can uniquely contribute to and alongside student affairs practitioners.

In part, we contend this is because the field has not figured out the unique role and responsibilities of SAA professionals as a functional area, meaning a team of people. Thinking about how PK-12 leverages formative and summative assessment terminology, we believe this language can be the key to addressing our persistent challenges to actualize assessment in student affairs. This terminology provides a means to differentiate the responsibilities of student affairs educators from SAA professionals.

The field has been asking student affairs educators to be experts at summative assessment. This is like asking the public school teacher to focus on their students’ education, social wellbeing, and emotional wellbeing, while simultaneously proving the value of public education. Rather, public school teachers focus on students in their classroom with formative assessment—knowing their individual efforts contribute to the summative efforts done by someone else in central administrative offices.

Within student affairs, those central offices should be SAA units. We agree that “assessment coordinators use specialized knowledge [and] speak a language unfamiliar to most others” (Roberts, 2024, p. 126) and that “the solution to accountability is not simply hiring one student affairs professional to address assessment” (ACPA, 2007, p. 3). We will never meet the calls for assessment by continuing to place summative assessment expectations on student affairs educators and one assessment professional who tries to coordinate those efforts. It is not realistic for individual coordinators to build the capacity of those who remain overworked, underpaid, and have different priorities. It is also a waste of assessment professionals' education and unique skills to hire them as divisional project managers for assessment. Assessment professionals have “specialized knowledge” (Roberts, 2024, p. 126) with technology, data collection and analysis, and supporting data interpretation and utility for decision-making and storytelling efforts. To establish and maintain a culture of summative assessment, “leadership for assessment in student affairs needs to be more consistent” (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010, p. 3).

While literature is beginning to drop hints that coordinators of student affairs assessment should have a team, such as “Structures to Organize and Implement Assessment” (Cebulksi, 2024) and “Supervising People in Assessment” (Shefman & Radimer, 2024), there are no articles that articulate why a team of SAA professionals could change the way in which we approach assessment in student affairs and subsequently how that would change our expectations to be realistic for student affairs educators. This article makes that case. We argue that a SAA unit, with a team of professionals, can give student-facing departments more time to work with and focus on students. Divisions need to invest in SAA units for summative assessment efforts, including “personnel [and] funding” (Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010, p. 10) to centrally and integratively support the division and its departments to meet the calls for assessment in student affairs.

Some functional areas have moved in the direction of hiring an individual responsible for assessment within a department, serving a single unit’s needs rather than the division. The reasoning is well intended, however these positions can perpetuate some of the same challenges as student affairs educators leading summative assessment efforts. For example, these positions can act alone and in isolation from other departmental, divisional, and institutional assessment efforts because they focus on one department’s agenda (Sandeen & Barr, 2006). Cebulski amplifies that “tensions arise when departmental priorities do not align with those set by the division” (2024, p. 72).

Moreover, unit-focused assessment positions may be charged to collect data that justifies budget requests. The ACPA/NASPA Competencies (2015) states that an intermediate skill level in Assessment, Evaluation, and Research includes the “use of assessment and evaluation results in determining the …re-allocation of resources, and advocacy for more resources” (p. 21). While it is logical to invest in well-performing programs based on evidence, this practice inherently puts departments in competition with one another for financial resources, and not all departments will have enough funding for a unit-focused assessment position. Even if every department could fund such a position, it would likely create a divisional culture of entrenchment that stifles collaboration, improvement, and divisional storytelling. These departmental positions can detract from the overall goals.

SAA professionals must be centrally organized, resourced, and empowered to allow them to lead *summative assessment efforts*. This article seeks to demonstrate how a dedicated unit of SAA professionals, regardless of institutional size, can advance assessment efforts that department and divisional leaders want, while allowing student affairs educators to lean into their passion and expertise for working directly with students and facilitating *formative assessment efforts*. This kind of approach is in alignment with how assessment efforts were initially talked about in the first and second editions of *Student Services* (Lenning, 1980, 1986). To help reimagine how SAA professionals and student affairs educators can uniquely contribute to assessment, this next section will give examples of responsibilities by utilizing formative and summative assessment terminology and the framework of the MAP (Strine-Patterson, 2022).

Responsibilities of Student Affairs Assessment Professionals

Considering a focus on summative assessment utilizing the framework of the MAP (Strine-Patterson, 2022), two examples of responsibilities that SAA professionals should assume are related to (a) goals, objectives, and outcomes, and (b) data strategy.

Goals, Objectives, and Outcomes

SAA professionals need to be experts in supporting the division and its departments with writing summative, or community-level (Strine-Patterson, 2022), goals, objectives, and outcomes. After divisional priorities are established, based on the division's mission and strategic plan, SAA professionals should work alongside division and department leaders to write these summative goals, outcomes, and objectives. Student affairs practitioners often struggle with writing measurable objectives and outcomes that are results oriented–demonstrating if efforts, or strategies, result in advancing students' experience, learning and development, wellbeing, or success. Student affairs practitioners are so good at getting things done, likely driven by their personal ethos, that the outcomes and objectives they write can become a measurable to-do list that is not focused on measurable results. Therefore, SAA professionals must work alongside division and department leaders to transform their intentions into meaningful measures that can inform their practice. Education and experience in the field of student affairs, education, or curriculum and instructional design are helpful to support these efforts.

Data Strategy

SAA professionals also need to be experts in strategic thinking about data by creating an integrated divisional and departmental "data strategy" (M. Glass, personal communication, March 11, 2024). This includes data flow management from data collection to utility across the division and institution. We recognize this is not an easy or quick task, because "student affairs organizations have struggled to move beyond conducting individual, disparate assessment projects to developing and maintaining an integrative assessment program that permeates all areas" (Barham, Tschepikow, Seagraves, 2013 p. 73). We want to give two examples of what an "integrative assessment program" can look like for a division of student affairs with a SAA unit to lead a centralized and comprehensive data strategy through a strategic survey plan and data collection in third-party systems.

Strategic Survey Plan. In the current model, student affairs educators are likely managing multiple surveys to collect summative evidence about their efforts. However, the data that one department wants is often data another department wants, such as sense of belonging data. These data about sense of belonging are also wanted by the division to communicate a comprehensive, cohesive, and succinct divisional story; however, data in the hands of one department cannot contribute to these other efforts.

The duplication of measures is also probably occurring at the same time, because multiple departments think about similar timeframes for their survey administration (e.g., 6-week survey, end of semester survey). Students receiving an onslaught of surveys hurts everyone, because it suppresses their response rates due to both *survey fatigue* and *survey confusion* (Eggleston, 2024). If one of the primary goals of assessment is to improve the student experience, surveys are part of that experience. Therefore, a key function of the centralized SAA professional team is to ensure a cohesive and integrative data strategy to reduce the number of surveys and increase the impact they have for departments, the division, and the institution.

In addition to benefiting the student experience, centralizing survey efforts benefits departments. It still enables the department to get the data they need, because the results can be disaggregated for their student participants, but it gives the added benefit of providing a control group that the department would not have working in isolation. While it is likely that department surveys have some formative assessment measures, SAA professionals are skilled at survey design and administration, and therefore able to advance the summative assessment needs for the division and multiple departments while simultaneously integrating a singular department's formative assessment needs. This also provides a clear example for why a centralized SAA unit is advantageous over a decentralized structure.

Centralized survey planning is not only applicable to home-grown surveys. Participation in national surveys should also be strategically planned on a cycle. For example, many campuses administer the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) every three years in the spring semester. If the department of residence life administers a national survey every two years during the spring semester, then every sixth year these two surveys are going to be administered at the same time. That sixth year, both surveys will likely see their response rates decrease. While overlapping survey administrations never completely go away, a strategic measurement plan from an SAA unit can significantly reduce this issue. Additionally, these national surveys often allow a small set of institutional items, which could be developed to benefit multiple departments and the division.

Third-Party and Home-Grown Application Data Collection. Technology is advancing to allow institutions to collect data from third-party and home-grown applications, and institutions are building data warehouses to store and connect these data to support data-informed decision making and storytelling. Departments across student affairs have a plethora of these applications, and these data can contribute to data warehouses for producing data analytics and visualizations (e.g., Boren et al., 2024, SAAL, 2023b; Strine-Patterson & Brooks Nelson, 2024).

Most student affairs departments have at least one application to support their unit's niche administrative processes, which used to be managed through paper filing systems. Because departments use these applications to streamline administrative processes, they do not generally consider that data is collected through these systems that can be leveraged for assessment purposes. Since data collection is not at the forefront of their mind when setting up these applications, the data forms and fields within the applications are not always structured to collect the right data.

SAA professionals need to work alongside student affairs practitioners within departments to understand the department's administrative needs alongside the department, division, and institutional data collection needs. This practice of deep understanding and reflection may lead to restructuring some application forms and fields to equilaterally meet administrative and data collection needs. Some divisions may consider SAA professionals co-managing or managing applications that are utilized by multiple departments. This is one example of how student affairs can begin to embrace the work necessary for data analytics (NASPA, 2022), which ultimately supports turning data into information that supports improvement planning and storytelling.

Responsibility of Student Affairs Educators

As reviewed earlier, the CAS Standards for HESA graduate programs have outlined assessment efforts in multiple areas of preparation (see Table 1), but these standards have not differentiated the ways in which practitioners should engage in formative assessment and utilize summative assessment results. Three professional subparts of these professional standards are focused on practitioners' direct work with students, therefore they are prime places to emphasize the ways in which practitioners should engage in formative assessment efforts (i.e., Subparts 5b.1, 5.2, and 5b.3). Subpart 5b.5: Assessment, Evaluation, and Research, is largely focused on summative assessment efforts and should be realigned with professional content to be addressed in HESA doctoral programs. Expecting these summative-related assessment efforts to be learned within a 2-year practitioner-focused master's program is unreasonable. Master's level practitioners should learn to use evidence-based results from research and summative assessment efforts, alongside implementing their own formative assessment efforts.

That being said, if we consider a student affairs educator's work to focus on formative assessment utilizing the framework of the MAP (Strine-Patterson, 2022), two examples of responsibilities that student affairs educators should assume are related to evidence- and theory-based program development and planning, and implementation fidelity.

Evidence- and Theory-Based Program Development and Planning

The field is seeing an increased call for individual practitioners to integrate broader theory into their program development efforts, as well as their everyday practices (Manning, et al., 2012; Schuh et al., 2010). Students, parents, and stakeholders expect that student affairs professionals are knowledgeable about best practices, and current theories and research related to the services they provide (Carpenter, 2001). Many argue that student affairs professionals have an ethical obligation to design programs that are firmly grounded in evidence and theory (e.g. Finney & Horst, 2019a; Finney et al., 2021; Pope et al., 2019). Bresciani (2010b) found that even for those who understand how to engage in assessment practices, "without an understanding of theories, [student affairs educators] were having difficulty" (p. 86) engaging in assessment.

The recent updates to the CAS Standards (2023) further emphasize the importance of theory-driven practices, incorporating guidelines for using program theory to clarify cause-and-effect relationships between program activities and desired outcomes (CAS, 2023). Program theory is "the construction of a plausible and sensible model of how a program is supposed to work" and it "clarifies the set of cause-and-effect relationships" connecting activities that students engage in to the intended outcomes (Bickman, 1987, p. 5). This approach ensures that strategies and interventions align with established research and best practices, contributing to effective and meaningful student learning and development. For example, when creating a leadership development program, practitioners working in a student leadership center might use the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Dugan, 2006) to plan workshops for student club and organization leaders that build self-awareness and foster collaborative skills. By integrating established theories and research into their planning, professionals ensure that their programs are intentional and *capable* of achieving the outcomes.

Program planning, also known as program mapping, involves aligning program components with their intended outcomes, often using tools like facilitation guides (Kerr et al., 2020), program differentiation (Dane & Schneider, 1998), and logic models (e.g., Kekahio et al., 2014). This process helps ensure that every component of a program contributes to its overarching goals. For instance, in a career readiness workshop, mapping might involve linking specific activities—such as resume reviews and mock interviews—to broader outcomes like improved confidence in the job search process. By creating a detailed roadmap, student affairs educators can identify which aspects of their program are most likely to drive success. A helpful question for practitioners might be: "What part of this program would you bet your car on achieving these results?" (Finney & Buchanan, 2020). Such reflective mapping allows professionals to focus resources on strategies that are most likely to yield impactful outcomes, avoiding the inefficiency of untested methods.

Implementation Fidelity

Ensuring that programs are implemented as designed—known as *implementation fidelity*—is critical for achieving the intended outcomes of a given program (Finney et al., 2021). In practice, implementation fidelity is critically important for student affairs educators to engage in formative assessment. If implementation fidelity results demonstrate the intended program was not implemented, then any measures about the program are not reliable or interpretable. For example, if student learning outcome measures demonstrate that students did not learn as a result of the program and no implementation fidelity evidence was collected, then student affairs educators cannot know if learning did not occur because the intended program was not implemented or because the intended program was implemented and did not produce the intended results.

This responsibility is particularly important when programs are delivered by individuals that did not develop the program, such as peer leaders, because variations in facilitation can affect the program quality. For example, if peer mentors are trained to deliver a wellness workshop using a structured guide, then student affairs educators must monitor whether the guide is followed consistently by observing sessions, collecting feedback, or using fidelity checklists. If student affairs educators find the guide is not being followed as intended, then they can use results for formative assessment purposes to quickly make adaptations that deliver the intended program for the next group of students.

The most recent updates to the CAS Standards (2023) emphasize the importance of program theory and incorporate guidelines for collecting implementation fidelity data (CAS, 2023). While program theory undergirds program development and execution, implementation fidelity regards the extent to which the programs are implemented as designed (Dhillon et al., 2015). Maintaining high implementation fidelity not only protects the integrity of the program but also provides credible evidence during department reviews. By prioritizing fidelity, professionals ensure that their programs truly reflect the evidence-based designs they were built upon.

Our Closing Argument

Every student affairs practitioner is charged with and involved in efforts to help students' experiences, learning and development, wellbeing, and ultimately success. In this aim, every practitioner needs to use data (Kruchen-Spaulding & Cyr, 2024; Parnell, 2021), but they should not be expected to create summative data to defend our field.

Using formative and summative assessment terminology alongside the framework of the MAP (Strine-Patterson, 2022), we can begin to conceptualize how SAA professionals can provide a unique and intersectional contribution to assessment in student affairs. Below we offer acknowledgement and recognition to student affairs educators for the load they have been carrying and present a final appeal to department, divisional, and assessment leaders to work towards adopting strategies outlined in this article.

Our Declaration of Love

This is personal for us. All of the authors graduated from HESA masters programs and have maintained deep connections to the lived experiences of those serving in a student-facing role. We see the challenges to simultaneously navigate students' rising basic needs, mental health, and social wellbeing alongside summative assessment expectations to justify the work. The slow pace of change to shift organizational expectations and structures can make us all feel defeated. In many ways, this article is our love letter to you, the student affairs practitioner–we see you and the weight you are carrying.

As student affairs practitioners who have shifted to full-time student affairs assessment roles, we hear you explain that you were late to an assessment meeting because you were counseling a student whose sorority sister recently committed suicide. Or providing support to students recently displaced due to a fire or financial emergency. Or navigating pressures of developing and implementing institutional free speech policies, their ramifications, and ongoing student protests. Or desperately trying to increase capacity of the campus pantry while your department is operating with 50% of the usual full-time staff. In this context, we have collectively become frustrated and confused at the expectation placed on you to create stellar social and educational student experience, manage regular crisis response, and become measurement-savvy professionals because "the future of the field is in jeopardy" (Henning, 2016, p. 15)… all while earning a modest salary. It is aspirational—not realistic. We deeply hope that this article proposes a way to give you back time and energy, by investing in other professionals to help advance assessment efforts and defend our field's critical work.

Our Argument of Advocacy

This article is also a plea to consider how our current approach may be part of the problem, as challenged by Richard Dunsworth, a member of the Board of Trustees for the Higher Learning Commission, at the 2024 Assessment Institute (2024). We used to have a plethora of students entering HESA programs for our graduate assistantships, and now as graduate enrollment is declining (Knox, 2023), some HESA programs have been closed or paused (Rehr et al., 2024). Further, 68% of senior student affairs leaders indicate hiring and retaining talent is a current critical issue (NASPA, 2024). We used to hear student affairs professionals recruiting undergraduates into the field; now, we hear them discouraging undergraduates who express an interest. Our biggest threat to sustaining the field of student affairs is not external–it's internal. If we don't have people entering the profession, then we don't have a field. This article demonstrates the well-intended efforts to answer the calls of assessment in student affairs have likely had unintended consequences, which unfortunately coincided with the growing and evolving needs for students' mental health and wellbeing that were not anticipated.

Regardless of institution size, every department wants more staff to do the work. When you, as leaders, have limited funds and everyone wants more people, centralizing the assessment efforts–even by starting with one position–can give every department more time for their staff to work directly with students. Even in small schools, where you may have 2,000 students and less than 20 student affairs professionals, you may not think that you should invest in a SAA professional. As authors, we disagree. We believe there is value in even part-time support to allow your student affairs professionals to focus on their expertise of working directly with students, because all 20 of those staff want more time and are shouldering assessment efforts.

Days before we finalized this article, NASPA President Amelia Parnell reshared 2024 Top Issues in Student Affairs (NASPA, 2024), in which senior student affairs leaders indicated that determining the impact of student affairs and providing staff assessment-related professional development were very important (67% and 47%, respectively). As authors working full-time in student affairs assessment, we are among the biggest champions of assessment work, but let's not translate that to the backs of practitioners whose backs are already breaking. Our ability to advance assessment in student affairs, while recruiting and retaining a talented workforce, is not going to improve unless we change our expectations and approach to this critical work.

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Appendix
Thematic Analysis of Foundational HESA Assessment Texts

This appendix provides results from a thematic analysis of 14 foundational HESA assessment texts from the past 50 years (see Table 1A). Chapters of each text were coded into categories—Planning, Measurement, Using Results, and Introductions & Conclusions—to determine what proportion of each text addresses measurement versus planning, using results, or other relevant themes. The percentage of pages dedicated to each category was calculated to illustrate focus distribution (see Table 2A). Texts were selected based on criteria such as timeframe (post-1974), relevance to student affairs educators, scholarly credibility, and use in graduate-level curricula. Chapter titles, and where needed, headings and chapter content details, guided categorization. Chapters on methodology were categorized under Measurement, while those discussing strategic planning or goal-setting were assigned to Planning. This coding highlights how assessment literature has shaped and potentially reinforced an emphasis on methodological rigor.

Table 1A. *Foundational HESA Assessment Texts Analyzed*

Book #	Title	Author	Year Published
1	Assessing Student Learning and Development: A Guide to the Principles, Goals, and Methods of Determining College Outcomes	Erwin	1991
2	Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners (1st ed.)	Upcraft & Schuh	1996
3	Student Affairs Research, Evaluation, and Assessment: Structure and Practice in an Era of Change	Malaney	1999
4	Assessment Practice in Student Affairs: An Applications Manual	Schuh & Upcraft	2001
5	Assessment Essentials: Planning, Implementing, and Improving Assessment in Higher Education	Banta & Palomba	2014
6	Five Dimensions of Quality: A Common Sense Guide to Accreditation and Accountability	Suskie	2014
7	Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education	Kuh et., al.	2015
8	Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice (1st ed.)	Henning & Roberts	2016
9	Assessment in Student Affairs (2nd ed.)	Schuh et., al.	2016
10	Student Affairs by the Numbers Quantitative Research and Statistics for Professionals	Sriram	2017
11	Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide	Suskie	2018
12	Research Methods and Applications for Student Affairs	Biddix	2018
13	Student Affairs Assessment, Evaluation, and Research: A Guidebook for Graduate Students & New Professionals	Wise & Davenport	2019
14	Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice (2nd ed.)	Henning & Roberts	2024

Table 2A. *Percentage of Pages in Foundational HESA Assessment Texts by Category*

Category	Book #														Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
Benchmarking and Effectiveness	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.7	3.7	0.0	2.0
Collaboration with Faculty and Campus Partners	10.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.2	2.8	0.0	0.0	1.8
Equity, Ethics, Integrity	0.0	3.5	0.0	5.9	8.9	0.0	0.0	2.5	7.3	0.0	10.3	0.0	7.8	12.4	4.4
Introductions and Conclusions	21.2	0.0	27.8	10.6	9.1	17.5	25.5	10.2	11.3	14.1	7.8	8.4	18.3	10.0	12.3
Leading and Coordinating Assessment	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.9	5.1	12.4	0.0	0.0	6.8	0.0	8.6	2.8	0.0	0.0	3.1
Measurement	61.2	75.0	49.4	49.5	43.7	10.3	10.6	75.7	49.2	66.7	0.0	31.8	51.2	25.3	46.8
Planning	0.0	0.0	10.5	12.5	14.5	9.4	0.0	0.0	13.0	0.0	16.4	17.8	7.1	13.5	8.5
Program Review, Professional Competencies, and Accreditation	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1	0.0	6.0	0.0	3.5	0.0	0.0	10.3	0.0	7.1	16.5	2.9
Research	0.0	21.5	0.0	0.0	6.7	0.0	48.9	0.0	0.0	19.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	8.8	4.9
Special and Integrated Topics	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.3	3.0	17.5	14.9	3.7	6.2	0.0	23.3	9.2	0.0	7.7	5.1
Use of Results	7.5	0.0	12.4	11.4	9.1	17.5	0.0	0.0	6.2	0.0	18.1	15.6	4.7	5.9	7.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. See Table 1A for the HESA assessment text title associated with each book number

Providing for a Community

How a Basic Needs Center Uses Assessment to House Students

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Abstract: This article discusses how practitioners at the University of Colorado Boulder use assessment to refine an Emergency Housing Assistance program through a Basic Needs Center. Leaders of the center use people-driven practices combined with quantitative and qualitative assessment practices to provide housing relief for students. We show how equity-centered assessment practices improve student health and well-being. Practitioners across the country can apply actions from this center's assessment to assist students at their own universities to secure reliable and safe housing.

Keywords: basic needs, college students, assessment cycle, student affairs assessment

There is a dire need to address housing insecurity (e.g., affording rent, commuting time, homelessness) among college students across the United States (Martinez, et al., 2021). Research shows that 19–45% of college students in higher education are affected by housing insecurity (Broton, 2020; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Profit-Rheinwald (2024) states that students with housing insecurity have reported lower academic performance and higher dropout rates than their peers due to the extra stress incurred from unreliable housing. Studies have linked housing insecurity with lower grade point averages and retention rates (Hallett & Freas, 2017; Kornbluh, et al., 2022).

In this article, we provide an example of how staff at one institution, the University of Colorado Boulder (CU), use assessment to ensure students' basic housing needs are met. We provide adaptable and replicable strategies to help student affairs practitioners implement strategies to help students with basic housing needs. We chronicle the general problem of housing insecurity as it affects college students in the United States, particularly those at our institution. We then detail the desired outcomes of the Emergency Housing Assistance (EHA) program at CU and describe the general operational strategy of the program. We share our measurement plan and how campus partners are involved throughout our continuous improvement process. We then demonstrate how the housing strategy was measured, how data was collected and analyzed, and how these insights were used to enhance the quality of our program to deliver greater benefits to students. We end our article with recommendations for practitioners working with students who experience housing insecurity.

Housing Insecurity at the University of Colorado Boulder

There are more than 38,000 students enrolled at CU, 30,000 of whom live off-campus in the surrounding region (Doak, 2024). Boulder is one of the highest cost-of-living cities in the United States (Hickcox, 2007; Levin, 2015). According to the American Community Survey 2022 1-year estimate, the median rent and utilities for residents in the city was $1,811 per month, compared to $1,646 for the state and $1,300 for the country. Nearly a quarter of Boulder residents are considered living in poverty, double the rate for the country (American Community Survey, 2022). Consequently, many students at the university experience basic needs insecurity, especially as it pertains to housing. We define housing insecurity as "experiencing a broad set of difficulties that prohibit an individual from having a residence that is safe, stable, adequate, and affordable" (Albrecht, et al., 2024, p. 3). Staff should consider local data like this when thinking about how residents experience housing insecurity in their communities.

Until recently, services to support food and housing insecurity at CU were limited to community referrals (e.g., food pantries and community resources including housing shelters, hostels, or family resources). Housing insecurity and homelessness were not directly addressed by the university with tangible resources, except for the Student Emergency Fund, which was limited prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Education disseminated Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund dollars to alleviate insecurities during the height of the pandemic in 2020 through 2022. Staff on campus advocated for, and secured, an increase in Student Emergency Funds during the pandemic.

In 2018, student affairs practitioners at CU conducted a food assistance survey and found that one-third of students at the institution experienced food insecurity. These results aligned, in part, with the results of a 2021 basic needs survey conducted by The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. Goldrick-Rab and her team found that 48% of students at 2-year and 4-year institutions across the United States experienced some level of housing insecurity, with the most common challenge being an inability to fully pay rent and bills. Staff at CU coupled the internal data from 2018 with the Hope Center data from 2021 to expand our services and take action.

After operating a centralized food pantry for CU within the Volunteer Resource Center, the director realized that certain aspects of the work, particularly the growing demand for housing assistance, were not well-aligned with the center's resources or mission. A joint board within the Volunteer Resource Center benchmarked services with other peer universities to understand what was taking place across the country in the basic needs space. The benchmarking looked at PAC-12 schools and institutions with similar service-based organizations. The board determined that food pantries, emergency and housing assistance funds, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) registration, and food recovery programs were common in well-established Basic Needs Centers.

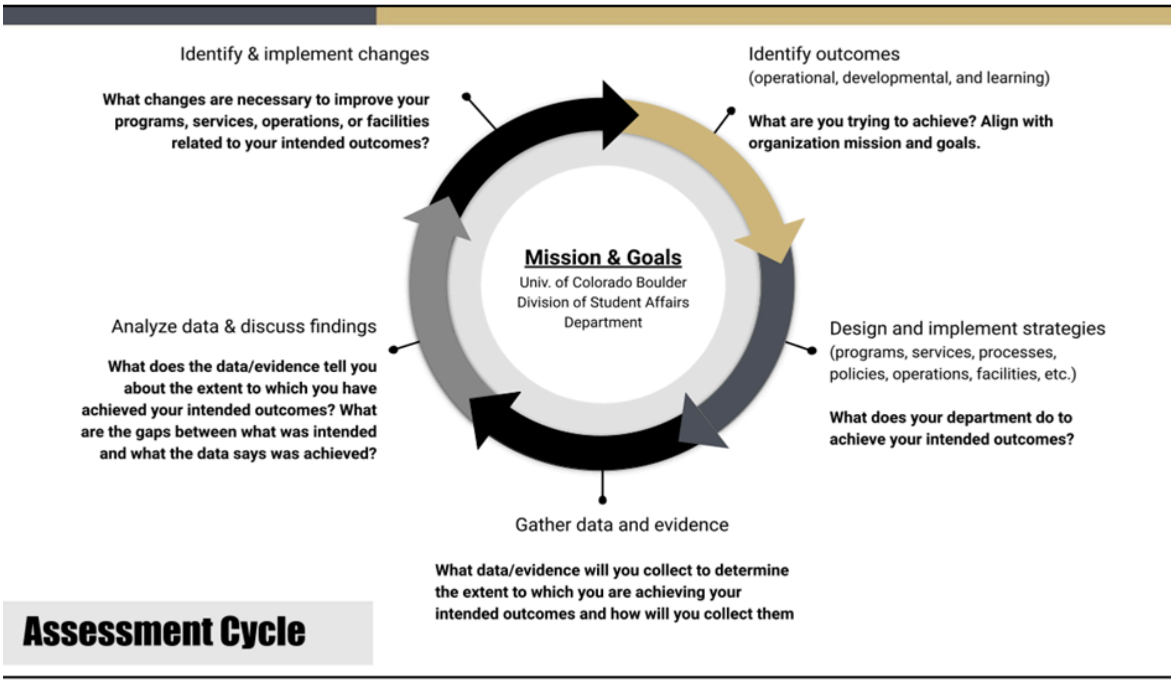
By 2021, with data from the 2018 survey, food pantry usage, and benchmarking results, a proposal was developed, presented to divisional leadership, and approved by the chancellor and their executive cabinet. This proposal advocated for a new unit in the Division of Student Affairs: The Basic Needs Center (BNC), which was established in September 2022 "to provide equitable basic needs and services for our campus community and advocate for systemic change to address barriers to access for basic needs" (BNC, para. 2). BNC leaders worked with Student Support and Case Management staff to identify a process that provides funding to students who experience basic needs insecurity as well as emergencies that impact their academic experience.

From its inception, staff within the BNC partnered with staff from the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Data Analytics (PANDA) to position assessment as a central practice. Assessment is a cycle; one that rotates perpetually between inquiry, improvement, and impact. Student affairs assessment at CU follows a five-step process (Figure 1): identifying outcomes, designing and implementing strategies, gathering data and evidence, analyzing data and discussing findings, and identifying and implementing changes (continuous improvement). Figure 1 presents the assessment cycle and questions associated with each step; the mission and goals sit in the center of the cycle. Student affairs practitioners can adapt this cycle for their offices, units, and divisions. Continuous assessment practices within the BNC ensures support for students' basic needs are met and improved upon year-after-year.

Identifying Outcomes

Staff at the BNC partnered with PANDA staff to develop operational outcomes aligned with BNC's mission, as outlined in the Appendix. Operational outcomes included identifying differences in access to services, providing equitable resources, offering education about root causes of basic needs issues, and providing baseline insecurity data for CU students. In the 2023–24 academic year, annual assessment priorities included collecting data on program and service use, interviewing students served, and critically evaluating findings to identify gaps and make decisions to address them. Collaborative assessment planning allowed BNC staff to monitor program quality, identify students who needed services, and be accountable for achieving outcomes that support student wellbeing. Indicators of supporting student wellbeing include providing equitable services to students to support

Figure 1. *Assessment Cycle Used at the University of Colorado Boulder*



their individual needs, advising on applying for SNAP benefits, ensuring the pantry is stocked with items of various cultures, and providing emergency housing or housing assistance for students.

BNC staff use an individual case management approach to meet the needs of those who qualify for support. This approach centers students in the conversation, which is more equitable and adheres to the mission of the office. An equity-based approach seeks to identify and mitigate exclusionary practices; for example, reviewing policies and procedures to determine who qualifies for certain types of assistance and connecting students to other supportive resources when they do not qualify for assistance. Equity-focused practitioners must collaborate with divisional leadership and other campus units to critically examine the purpose of policies so they can be changed or amended to allow a wider range of students to qualify for support.

Designing and Implementing Strategies

Research shows that millions of students enrolled in higher education are affected by housing insecurity and up to half of college students struggle with housing in at least one way (Broton, 2019; Crutchfield, et al., 2019; Morton, et al., 2018). Walsh-Dilley et al. (2022) showed that international students reported higher levels of housing insecurity than domestic students. Frank et al. (2022) also wrote that politics can affect housing insecurity due to the ethical obligation to meet housing needs. Reporting on the number of students who experience housing insecurity can be a sensitive subject.

BNC staff understand the personal impacts of housing insecurity on students' lives through multiple surveys, interviews, and one-on-one interactions with students who visit the

Center. Staff build data-informed strategies to minimize barriers when seeking assistance. The BNC requires as little documentation of expenses as possible to meet funding criteria (e.g., a housing lease, contract in the applicant's name, or a verifiable bill) while many public assistance programs collect several personal documents which can feel intrusive to those seeking financial support. Students at CU need only to be enrolled in at least one credit hour, meet with a case manager to discuss their unique situation, and provide a few documents relevant to their request for aid to receive support.

Another way staff seek to minimize barriers is by collaborating with student-serving units across campus like Student Support and Case Management and the Office of Victim Assistance, to communicate and coordinate entry and on-going support. Early students supported by the BNC vented that it felt frustrating to be passed around from office to office. The BNC coordinates with other units to determine the lead contact for each student and identify when other units should provide additional support to alleviate this frustration.

Gathering Data and Evidence

BNC and PANDA staff worked together to collect CU student housing insecurity data. From the spring of 2022 to the fall of 2023, the EHA program provided nearly 100 students with housing, with an average stay of 38 days in off-campus housing, located within one-half mile of campus. These five weeks allowed students adequate time to apply for jobs, apply for housing, and take care of basic needs while being close enough to campus that their academic priorities did not suffer. Students received assistance to ease the financial burden for both on- and off-campus housing or emergency housing which provides physical housing spaces. These two programs (monetary funds and physical properties) comprise the EHA program. During the 2022–2023 academic year, 60 students received housing assistance totaling $72,285 and 23 students received emergency housing costing $14,829. During the 2023–24 academic year, 38 students received housing assistance totaling $73,415 and 29 students received emergency housing that amounted to $14,768 in rental costs. While emergency housing assistance gave students more than $29,000 in supplemental housing costs, general housing assistance from the BNC provided more than $145,000 for students in need of financial assistance (BNC, n.d.).

Of those who sought emergency housing assistance during the 2022-23 academic year, 53.85% reported their reason as long-term homelessness, 20.52% reported safety concerns, 15.38% reported uninhabitable living conditions (e.g., fire damage, mold, pests), 7.69% reported they had faced/experienced eviction, and 2.56% reported an inability to afford rent. One student mentioned they were unaware of a requirement to have renter's insurance, which may have provided them an option of recourse to address chemical damage to their residence. Through these findings, BNC and PANDA staff recognized further qualitative exploration in the next assessment cycle could provide additional insights.

Researchers from both offices conducted a series of interviews during the 2023 and 2024 academic years to study why students sought emergency housing assistance and identify potential interventions. BNC staff contacted all students who utilized the EHA program in the Fall of 2023, requesting to interview them about their experiences with the center. Students who agreed to be interviewed were given 20 meal vouchers for meals on campus. The interviewers were two Master's of Social Work students from a nearby institution completing an internship in the BNC while a notetaker from PANDA was also on-hand. The interviewers asked how students got connected to the BNC, how housing insecurity impacted their academic success, and how the BNC could support students' transition out of emergency housing. Interviews were transcribed by hand and stored with notes from the notetaker. Staff heard the concerns of students during these interviews and always ended with the same question, "What are some ways the Basic Needs Center can improve our services or support?" Students were candid, open, and honest which allowed for staff to truly understand what students experienced on campus. Two PANDA staff members coded the interviews via Microsoft Word and compared notes to ensure coder consistency.

Through a multimethod approach, staff were better able to appreciate student experiences within the BNC and the emergency housing assistance program. In Spring 2024, BNC and PANDA deployed the first campus-wide Basic Needs Survey to capture a comprehensive picture of how students lack access to resources (e.g., food, housing, hygiene, transportation, mental wellness) across campus. This survey was sent via Qualtrics to all full-time undergraduate and graduate students (n = 37,162) and 8,008 students completed it, yielding a 22% response rate. Staff in PANDA coded the qualitative data by coding answers to open response items. Each response was reviewed by other members of the staff after coding for consistency. Data analysis required multiple software tools: Microsoft Excel and Tableau Software facilitated quantitative analysis and NVivo and Microsoft Word facilitated qualitative analysis. Findings from the analyses paved the way for action to be taken.

Analyzing Data and Discussing Findings

We administered two surveys that were instrumental in our analysis: a 2023 End-of-First-Year Survey and a 2024 Basic Needs Insecurity Survey. The 2023 End-of-First-Year Survey confirmed food and housing insecurity at CU with 25% of respondents expressing small or major obstacles of housing insecurity, and 21% of respondents indicating small or major obstacles of food insecurity. This survey provided a starting point for exploring more analysis.

We coupled these results with findings from the 2024 Basic Needs Survey that revealed 44% of students experienced at least one type of insecurity (housing, food, homelessness, or other [e.g., healthcare, transportation, technology]). Of the students who took the survey, 20% experienced housing insecurity, 7% of respondents experienced homelessness in the past 12 months, with 75% of those students having stayed with someone (e.g., relative, friend, classmate), 25% experienced food insecurity, and 25% experienced an "other" type of insecurity. Taken together, these two surveys show that the problem of housing insecurity was pervasive at CU.

We combined these surveys with results from student interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024. These interviews were recorded and transcribed into a Word document. A notetaker who was present during the interviews then coded and themed the interviews while cross-checking data with notes during the interview. These four sources of data (Basic Needs survey, End-of-First-Year survey, 2023 Emergency Housing Assistance interviews, 2024 Emergency Housing Assistance interviews) gave practitioners insight into the true student experience.

One prominent theme that emerged from our qualitative analysis: the BNC offered support and stability. Staff were able to point students in the right direction because they knew the resources that existed on campus. Without support from the Center, other students expected less fortuitous options: moving back home with family and learning virtually or facing an inconceivable reality of not knowing where to go or call home. BNC case workers are continually providing information about their services to academic departments, thus ensuring faculty are aware of how to help future students in need. BNC staff placed students close to campus and helped them find jobs to ensure commute times were reduced, on-campus involvement was increased, and safety was achieved. Findings such as these led case workers to find and share job opportunities to work close to or on campus, increasing students' capacity to pay rent and limit commute times.

Another prominent theme emerged from our quantitative and qualitative analyses: students were able to persevere through difficult times. Students were happy to meet with staff during the interviews and expressed their thankfulness for helping them find homes. A useful finding from this study was students' gratitude towards BNC staff. Every student interviewed mentioned a kind, compassionate, and human-centered approach that changed their lives and gave them hope. Social workers within the BNC and faculty across campus showed the students that they cared about their well-being.

Experiencing housing insecurity can permeate students' academic experiences on multiple levels. Nearly half of all students who experienced housing insecurity in the 2023–24 academic year reported the insecurity affected their academic performance, according to our Basic Needs Survey 2023. At CU, students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness in the past 12 months also reported lower levels of belonging and mattering as compared to those who did not experience housing insecurity. On a six-point agreement scale, students who did not experience housing insecurity or homelessness in the past 12 months had a mean belonging score of 4.75 and a mean mattering score of 4.56, whereas students who experienced housing insecurity or homelessness in the past 12 months had a mean belonging score of 4.43 and a mean mattering score of 4.14. Eighty-four percent of students who experienced housing insecurity reported that there was someone on campus who cared about them and their future. Those who utilized the EHA program knew that they were cared for by staff at the university. The BNC gave students opportunities to tell their stories, by participating in the annual Basic Needs Surveys or taking part in the EHA interviews. This was another way we took an equity-centered approach to assessment; we listened to students tell their stories, validated their experiences, and reassured them that practices would change to benefit their success. The use of data as part of a larger assessment process allowed staff to understand their impact and confirmed that empathy supports students more than knowledge alone.

The BNC's mission centers on providing equitable basic needs support for students enrolled at the institution. Providing emergency housing assistance, either in the form of physical housing or funds for housing, allows students to focus on their education without the stress and threat of homelessness. All of the students who were interviewed received stable housing, and most put forward a recommendation to spread greater awareness of the BNC across campus. On the Basic Needs Survey, 652 students personally requested a staff member connect with them. Advocacy through assessment is central to the BNC story and will continue to be as the unit grows to meet the campus community's needs.

Identifying and Implementing Changes

Staff have made several changes resulting from these data, including shifting how educational and skill building programs are implemented on a request basis for cohort groups, classes, departments, or student organizations: (a) increasing outreach in the fall semester by attending more orientation and information sessions for graduate students, international students, commuter, and transfer students; and (b) building a peer navigator program to better meet the needs of additional students seeking resources in the absence of additional professional staff roles and funding available. Conversations have begun about how to ensure more students, faculty, and staff are aware of the Center's services. When full-time staff positions are limited, graduate students who require internships for various programs, like social work, can gain experience through an internship while also leveling the caseload of full-time staff. Success through this endeavor can be demonstrated by creating a paid internship program for Master's of Social Work students to support the caseload of the office while providing hands-on training for future social workers.

Forty-four percent of students who took the Basic Needs Survey indicated they were unaware of the BNC. Many students only found out about emergency housing assistance through word-of-mouth from other students. Student affairs staff have had conversations with colleagues across the institution, posted flyers on campus, and visited new student orientations to ensure students, staff, and faculty are aware of the EHA program. Staff have also uncovered that international students face unique challenges and have countered with specific actions to help this population. BNC and PANDA staff learned about these unique challenges through interviews and personal conversations with international students. BNC staff have spoken at international student orientation events and with graduate student advisors to ensure these two populations are aware of housing services. Academic advisors and faculty also refer students to the center to ensure basic housing needs are provided.

The staff of the Center have adjusted outreach strategies for the fall semester to increase awareness, adjusted their educational programming to align with a "request for training" model that will serve cohort based groups, including departments, student organizations, shared governance committees, and founded the Colorado Higher Education Basic Needs

Coalition to work across the state to model data collection for basic needs insecurities within state higher education institutions. With assessment as a cornerstone of their operations, the BNC will continually evolve to meet the diverse needs of its student population, and students will reap the benefits.

The BNC at CU is reproducible, especially when grounded in assessment practice. Establishing a successful basic needs center requires integrating assessment into its culture. This means utilizing data to identify disparities and tailor interventions that address specific communities' needs. This also includes collecting data to substantiate program efficacy, advocating for resources, and facilitating cross-departmental collaboration. Additionally, this emphasizes engaging divisional and community partners—including students—in the assessment process to promote a collective responsibility for addressing basic needs challenges, enhancing transparency, and campus-wide problem-solving.

As central as assessment is to the foundation of the CU's BNC, assessment will be critical in shaping its future. Staff used data from the 2023–24 survey for a more comprehensive picture of who utilized emergency housing assistance. Through assessment, staff were able to connect with hundreds of students across the institution, while data from 8,008 students led the center to critically evaluate areas of improvement. Data have and will guide strategic decision-making and planning for the next academic year to ensure programs remain effective and responsive.

Embedding assessment into operations allows staff within the BNC to make data-informed decisions and address areas of further exploration. To continually improve, leaders from the BNC meet annually with PANDA to plan: creating and revising goals, outcomes, and annual assessment priorities tied to its mission. As universities navigate the complex landscape of student health and well-being, fusing assessment into basic housing needs initiatives offers a tangible path forward, laying the groundwork for a future where every student can learn and grow in a supportive campus community.

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Appendix
Basic Needs Center Goals, Priorities, and Assessment Plan 2023-2024

Division of Student Affairs
Goals, Priorities and Assessment Plan 2023-24
Department Name: Basic Needs Center (BNC)

Department mission statement:
Explicitly states the purpose and function of the unit within the context of the institution.

Mission Statement
To provide equitable basic needs services for our campus community and advocate for systemic change to address barriers to access for basic needs

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Department goals:
Clarifies the mission statement by breaking it down into categories or themes. Specifically, and comprehensively captures the scope of what the unit is trying to achieve. Goals should include evidence-based changes to programs, services, operations and facilities that address issues of equity in stakeholder access, learning and experiences.

#	Goals
1	Provide equitable basic needs support for students enrolled at University of Colorado (CU) Boulder
2	Identify systemic barriers to access for basic needs
3	Establish resources for students, staff, and faculty to access
4	Ensure policies and procedures of BNC are relevant to serve the student population needs.
5	Educate the CU Boulder campus on basic needs resources and root causes

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Department outcomes:
Articulates a department or program's desired impact by parsing out a goal into specific, measurable and observable elements or end results. There are three types of outcomes commonly used in student affairs.

- *Learning outcome*: desired impact statements that describe the intended knowledge, skills and habits that individuals may gain and demonstrate. What do you want students or other individuals to know and/or be able to do as a result of interacting with your unit?
- *Developmental outcome*: desired impacted statements that describe how the unit intends to foster student development in areas such as identity development, sense of belonging, etc.
- *Operational outcome*: desired targets that a unit intends to achieve in its operational processes, e.g. cost-effectiveness, customer service, satisfaction

Goal #	Outcome #	Outcome
1	1	Identify differences in access, learning, and/or experiences for Buff Pantry participants. Measure change in food insecurity level for students - report in aggregate % of change for students
1	2	Students will be able to indicate if the resources we provided were equitable for their needs
[1] 5	3	Student staff can effectively identify root causes to basic needs issues and apply appropriate resources in their customer service
2	4	The BNC can effectively identify their ROI for donors and reporting on findings
3	5	Establish outcomes for individual programming and events that meet mission and vision for center
4	6	Identify basic needs insecurity data for students at CU Boulder

Note. The full assessment plan is available, upon request.

The Added Value of Student Affairs in Retention Prediction Models

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Abstract: For this inquiry we supplemented typical academic variables to evaluate the degree to which several student affairs variables add value in a machine learning model predicting first-year retention. Findings indicated that living on campus, being Greek, as well as engaging in recreational sports all had positive contributions to predicting retention. Higher education leaders should use this study to advocate for and enact the inclusion of student affairs variables into predictive models of student success.

Keywords: machine learning, student success, retention, student affairs

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During the pandemic, our institution developed an early alert system to identify students at risk for dropping out of the institution in order to offer more targeted and timely support. The system primarily utilized academic data, including mid-semester grades and utilization of the learning management system. Working in a student affairs assessment office, we were interested in whether adding student affairs variables would improve the power of the early alert system. This study was conducted by student affairs assessment professionals, involved permission from data custodians of several student affairs departments, and included collaboration with analysts involved in our university's early alert program. It was pitched to student affairs leadership as a way to build the case for including student affairs data in future models.

Machine Learning

Our institution's early alert system utilized machine learning predictive models. Machine learning is a type of artificial intelligence that uses a computer (machine) to improve predictive capabilities (learning) without human programming at each iteration. Machine learning uses algorithms - such as logistic regression - to analyze data, and the resulting output is the model, used to make predictions. Our study involved a supervised machine learning model, where algorithms are trained on a dataset where the actual outcome is known, so we could then test the predictive capability of the resulting model.

The literature underscores the potential of machine learning for identifying at-risk students through early warning systems, where insights drawn from institutional data enable institutions to take proactive measures to support vulnerable students (Hoffait & Schyns, 2017; Howard et al., 2018). Machine learning models are emerging as transformative tools in this area due to their adaptability and ability to handle complex datasets. Unlike traditional statistical models, which can be restricted by assumptions or limited tolerance for incomplete data, machine learning models perform effectively even with missing information and have been shown to enhance predictive accuracy for retention outcomes (Alkhasawneh & Hargraves, 2014; Delen, 2011).

However, machine learning model accuracy is highly variable and context-dependent, with few studies directly comparing the effectiveness of different predictive models in this domain. Scholars such as Cardona et al. (2020) recommend combining various models to identify which approaches yield the highest accuracy across institutional contexts. Addressing specific challenges like the *cold start* problem, where limited data is available on new students, has led to advancements in prediction techniques, with strategies designed to extend model accuracy for students who lack historical data (Sweeney et al., 2016).

Retention

The outcome we selected for this study was first-year retention, specifically a student's continuous enrollment from the first fall semester to the following fall. Using retention as an outcome measure offers institutions the advantage of identifying and addressing potential risks early, rather than waiting for graduation data, making it a foundational metric in student success tracking (DesJardines et al., 2003). Many institutions have implemented data-driven approaches to better understand student retention and predict potential dropouts (Cui et al., 2019).

Traditional retention prediction models often include a range of variables spanning academics, demographics, and socioeconomics. Studies consistently find that academic metrics, such as freshman grades, are highly significant in predicting retention, with pre-college variables like high school performance also playing a critical role (Cardona et al., 2020; Delen, 2010; Raju & Schumacker, 2015). In addition to academic performance, demographic and socioeconomic variables—such as age, gender, financial status, and residency—are frequently included in models. However, their impact on retention is inconsistent, with studies reporting mixed findings depending on institutional type or discipline. For example, while demographics like race and gender are relevant predictors in STEM fields, other studies find these variables to have minimal impact in different academic settings (Alkhasawneh & Hargraves, 2014; McAleer & Szakas, 2010).

Financial and socioeconomic variables also hold predictive value, although, as some studies indicate, results are inconsistent due to variances in how family socioeconomic status is measured. For instance, Oztekin (2016) found monetary variables are less relevant predictors of graduation rates. However, Marquez-Vera et al. (2016) identified 'mother's level of education' as a predictor for dropout rates among Mexican high school students, which aligns with findings in the United States showing that family socio-economic status is a strong correlate of academic performance (Sirin, 2005).

Researchers have increasingly called for an expansion in the types of variables included in retention prediction models, arguing that non-academic variables—such as emotional well-being, family background, and cultural variables—play a significant role in students' academic decisions (Delen, 2010; Slim et al., 2014). For example, Delen (2010) emphasizes that student retention is often higher when students perceive their university environment as aligned with their personal values and social interests. Others have since found that social integration and engagement variables, such as living on campus, involvement in campus organizations, or engaging in campus recreation, are influential predictors of student persistence (Graham et al., 2021; Milton et al., 2020; Oztekin, 2016).

Methods

Data Sources and Measurement Plan

This study utilized multiple institutional data sources spanning three academic years (2017–2020) of freshman data to predict retention into their second fall semester. Primary data sources included the university's student information system for academic and demographic data, as well as data from the systems of several student affairs units: on/off-campus status from Housing, facility visits from Recreational Sports, greek affiliation from Greek Life, and program engagement from the Career Center.

The measurement approach was developed by the authors, who were staff members conducting this inquiry in their roles in an assessment office within a student affairs division at a southeast university. Authors have various levels of experience in higher education, from 1 to 20+ years. The authors also vary in their education level, ranging from masters to doctoral degrees. The selection of variables was informed by previous retention studies (Delen, 2010; Oztekin, 2016) and input from colleagues in student affairs at the same institution regarding available data points that could indicate student engagement.

While machine learning models perform well with missing data, they benefit from a more even distribution of data across outcomes (Abd Elrahman & Abraham, 2013). At this institution, first-year retention is around 95%, leaving only around 5% in the non-retention group. To decrease this difference, the data set used in this study focused on the 2,054 students with a cumulative first-year GPA of <=3.0. This cutoff was selected because <=2.0 would have been too small a sample, and <=3.0 is in alignment with the threshold to maintain scholarships such as Florida Bright Futures (Florida Department of Education, 2024). With this group, retention was closer to 75%, as detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Number of Students Retained by GPA*

Cumulative GPA	Retained	Not Retained
GPA<=3.0	2,040	504
Any GPA	20,898	929

Table 2 details a list of variables included in the analysis, noting those from student affairs. A Greek Student is a student that was an active member of a university-approved fraternity or sorority in their first year. Live on Campus is a student who lives in university-run Housing. Recreational Sports visits in Spring or Fall is the total number of times a student swipes into a Recreational Sports facility that semester. Career Center visits in Spring or Fall is the total number of times a student uses a menu of Career Center services that semester, including various 1:1 appointment types as well as workshops and larger events such as career fairs.

Table 2. *Variables Included in Analysis*

Description	Data Type
* Career Center visits in Fall	Number
* Career Center visits in Spring	Number
Carried Hours in Fall	Number
Carried Hours in Spring	Number
Classification	Number
College	Category
County Code	Category
Ethnicity	Category
First Generation Flag	Binary nominal
Gender	Binary nominal
* Greek Student	Binary nominal
* Live on Campus	Binary nominal
Major	Category
Term Registered Hours in Fall	Number
Transfer Hours	Number
* Recreational Sports visits in Fall	Number
* Recreational Sports visits in Spring	Number
Residency	Category
Second fall registered (Y/N)	Binary nominal
Term GPA in Fall	Number
Term GPA in Spring	Number

* Variables from Student Affairs

Implementation and Analysis Process

We used the Cross-Industry Standard Process for Data Mining (CRISP-DM), which provides a systematic and structured way of conducting data mining studies, and hence increasing the likelihood of obtaining accurate and reliable results (Delen, 2010). This method contains six steps:

1. Understand the business needs and develop the goal for study
2. Identify, collect, and understand the relevant data for the study
3. Select attributes, clean, and transform the data for modeling
4. Use various modeling techniques to develop models
5. Evaluate and assess if the results of models are valid and meet the goal of study
6. Deploy the model and use the result in a decision-making process

Before applying the machine learning models, several preprocessing steps were necessary to prepare the data. Categorical variables, such as student major, residency status, and Greek life membership, were transformed using one-hot encoding, a technique that converts categorical variables into a binary format suitable for machine learning algorithms (Potdar et al., 2017). For example, the 'Greek Student' variable was converted into two binary columns: 'Greek_Yes' and 'Greek_No', where each column would contain a value of 1 or 0 for each student.

Numerical variables, including GPA and visit counts, were standardized using z-score normalization to ensure all features were on the same scale. This transformation is particularly important for the logistic regression and neural network algorithms, which are sensitive to the scale of input features (Zhang et al., 2019). The standardization process involved subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation for each numerical feature:

$$Z = (X - \mu) / \sigma$$

During implementation, the primary challenge was data imbalance in the original dataset, which led to our focus on students with ≤3.0 GPA and using K-fold cross-validation.

K-fold cross-validation was applied to minimize the bias and estimate model performances. This procedure involves dividing the data into k groups of samples, which are called folds. As k gets larger, the difference in size between the training set and the resampling subsets gets smaller. As this difference decreases, the bias of the technique becomes smaller (Kuhn & Johnson, 2013). In this study, we set k to 10. This meant the dataset was divided into 10 folds, with nine folds used to train the model and one fold used to test the predictive performance of the model.

The technical implementation utilized Python for data preprocessing and model development, employing the Scikit-learn library for machine learning implementations, Pandas for data manipulation, and NumPy for numerical computations. Data visualization was accomplished using Matplotlib and Seaborn libraries.

Classification Models

In this study, we used three supervised machine learning algorithms: Logistic regression, random forest, and artificial neural network. Logistic regression, which can be considered a machine learning as well as general data analysis technique, is powerful at solving classification problems (Ray, 2019). It predicts the chances of a categorical outcome given one or more ranked input variables. At the most basic level, logistic regression has a binary outcome, such as whether a student is retained, but it can also extend to multi-class outcomes (Delen, 2010; Karsmakers et al., 2007).

Random forest combines a set of decision trees, which are branching choices of how to predict outcomes. The model is refined using bootstrapping, which involves picking random samples to test against each other and average across the entire dataset (Gislason et al., 2004). Accuracy is then verified against a final sample from the original dataset that was not part of the bootstrapping.

An artificial neural network mimics the functionality between neurons in the human brain (Zhang et al., 2019). Its basic structure is formed from the input layer, hidden layer, output layer, each of which consists of at least one unit (neuron). Units in the hidden layer receive data from the input unit, adjust the weight through connection and function, and then pass the data to the output layer. (Krose & Smagt, 2011). These hidden layers between input and output use this processing to predict nonlinear relationships (Dreiseitl & Ohno-Mchado, 2003; Lek et al., 1996).

Model Evaluation and Validation

The performance of each model was assessed using metrics organized into what is called a confusion matrix, which is a table containing the counts of predicted and actual values. The rows represent the actual categories, and the columns represent the predicted categories. The subsequent four metrics are defined as follows:

- True positive (TP): number of students correctly predicted as not retained
- False positive (FP): number of records incorrectly predicted as not retained
- False negative (FN): number of records incorrectly predicted as retained
- True negative (TN): number of records correctly predicted as retained

These metrics are in turn combined in the following equations to calculate accuracy, sensitivity, and specificity:

$$\text{Accuracy} = \frac{TP + TN}{TP + TN + FP + FN}$$

$$\text{Sensitivity} = \frac{TP}{TP + FN}$$

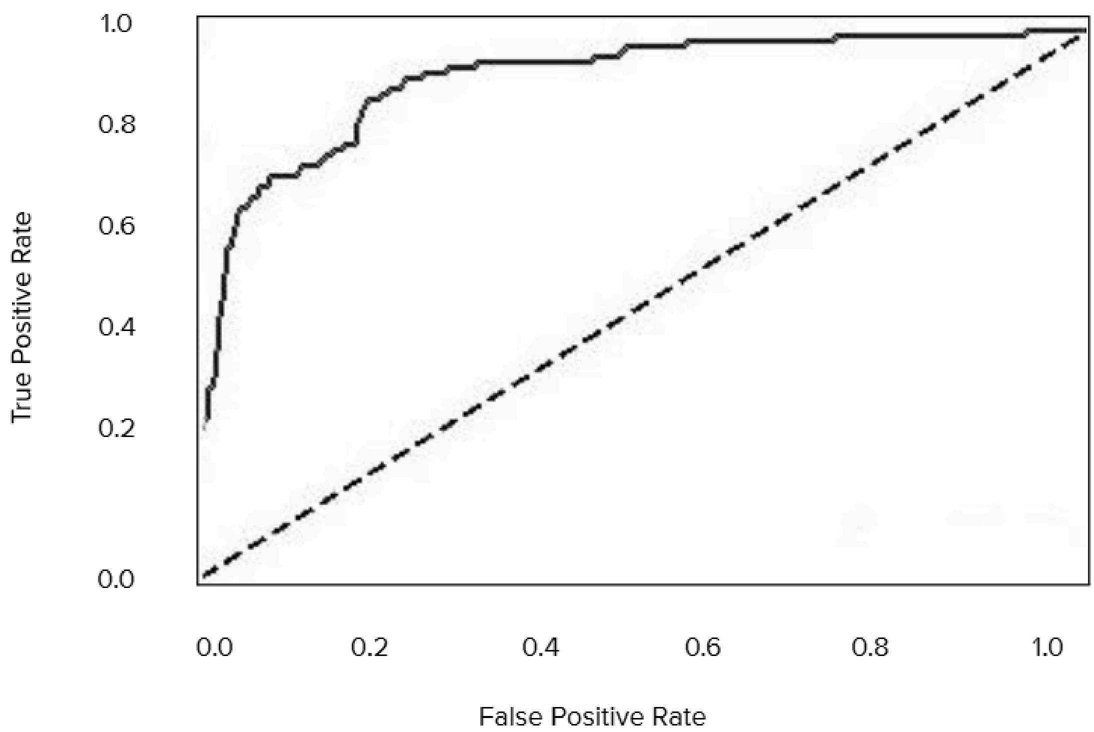
$$\text{Specificity} = \frac{TN}{TN + FP}$$

In this study, sensitivity is the ability of the model to predict which students will drop out, and specificity is the ability of the model to predict which students will come back. Accuracy is the percentage of students correctly classified out of all students in the model.

Sensitivity and specificity are inversely related. As a model is adjusted to increase its ability to predict true positives, this comes with more false positives, so its ability to predict true negatives decreases. This relationship between sensitivity and specificity is often visualized in a graph summarizing all possible adjustments to the model, as shown in Figure 1. This is called the Receiver Operating Characteristics Curve (ROC Curve). The y-axis is the true positive rate, while the x-axis is the false positive rate. A model with no predictive power would yield a 50% split, which is represented by a dotted line across the graph. The solid line contains a point for the performance of each model's variation in threshold between sensitivity and specificity. The higher this line is above the 50% default, the better that model's performance.

Area under the ROC curve, often abbreviated as AUC, is the two-dimensional space under the ROC curve. This serves as an aggregate measure of performance across all thresholds of a model. A perfect model would have an area of 1, meaning that all cases are correctly identified as positives or negatives (Hosmer et al., 2013). Once a model is trained and identified as meeting an acceptable AUC, permutation feature importance is calculated to examine how important each input variable is to the model. Feature importance is calculated by quantifying the decrease in accuracy after randomly shuffling the value of a single feature.

Figure 1. *Example ROC Plot with Area Under the Curve.*



Results

Model Performance

The aim of this study was to supplement academic predictors to evaluate the degree to which several student affairs variables add value to classification models predicting student retention. Across all three models tested, the inclusion of student affairs data demonstrated improved predictive capability (Table 3). The random forest model achieved the highest AUC value (0.910), while the neural network showed the highest accuracy (88%) and specificity (0.904). Both logistic regression and random forest models demonstrated equal sensitivity (0.822). Notably, all three models resulted in AUC values above 0.9, indicating an outstanding level of discrimination between positive and negative instances (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000).

Table 3. *Model Results*

Measure	Random Forest	Logistic Regression	Neural Network
Models Including SA Variables			
Accuracy	83%	85%	88%
Sensitivity	0.822	0.822	0.772
Specificity	0.838	0.858	0.904
AUC	0.910	0.900	0.903
Models Not Including SA Variables			
Accuracy	81%	85%	84%
Sensitivity	0.891	0.832	0.822
Specificity	0.784	0.865	0.840
AUC	0.889	0.899	0.897

When comparing classification models with and without student affairs data, the models incorporating student affairs variables consistently showed higher accuracy and AUC scores. The logistic regression and neural network models specifically demonstrated improved specificity scores with the inclusion of student affairs data. While sensitivity scores were generally lower in the student affairs group, the random forest model proved an exception, showing enhanced sensitivity with the inclusion of these variables. These results suggest that student affairs data can contribute meaningfully to the overall performance of retention prediction models.

Feature Importance and Variable Relationships

Analysis of feature importance scores across the three models revealed that while traditional academic metrics maintained high importance (Spring term GPA, Spring Total Carried Hours, Fall term GPA), several student affairs variables emerged as significant predictors. Specifically, Recreational Sports visits in Spring, Live on Campus status, and

Greek Student affiliation appeared consistently among the top 10 features across models as noted in Table 4.

Table 4. *Top 10 Model Features Importance Score by Model*

Model Feature	Importance Score
Logistic Regression	
Spring term GPA	0.032711
Spring Total Carried Hours	0.009823
Fall term GPA	0.008350
Spring Total Earned Hours	0.007073
College	0.004028
* Recreational Sports visits in Spring	0.003733
Residency	0.003536
* Live on Campus	0.003340
Term Registered Hours in Fall	0.003143
First Generation Flag	0.002554
Artificial Neural Network	
Fall term GPA	0.079699
* Greek Student	0.003798
Fall term GPA	0.002554
Spring Total Earned Hours	0.001768
* Live on Campus	0.001637
First Generation Flag	0.001375
Term Registered Hours in Fall	0.001244
Gender	0.001244
Fall Carried Hours	0.001179
Major	0.000917
Random Forest	
Spring term GPA	0.045187
Spring Total Carried Hours	0.011788
* Recreational Sports visits in Spring	0.007859
Fall Carried Hours	0.006483
* Recreational Sports visits in Fall	0.006418
College	0.006221
Fall term GPA	0.005697
Transfer Hours	0.004650
* Greek Student	0.003733
Ethnicity	0.002620

* Variables from Student Affairs.

The addition of student affairs data influenced importance scores differently across models: in the logistic regression model, Live on Campus and Recreational Sports visits in Spring ranked among the top ten important variables; the random forest model ranked Greek Student status as the third most important predictor; and the neural network model identified Recreational Sports visits in Spring and Greek Student status as key student affairs predictors.

To understand the directional relationship between student affairs variables and retention, follow-up correlation analyses were conducted in Python. As noted in Table 5, all student affairs variables showed significant (n = 2,054, p < .0001) positive associations with retention, with Recreational Sports visits showing the strongest correlation (Spring: r = 0.333, Fall: r = 0.304), followed by Living on Campus (r = 0.204) and Greek participation (r = 0.133). These findings have implications for both immediate practice and future inquiry, suggesting the value of incorporating broader student affairs metrics into retention prediction models while highlighting opportunities for improved data collection and integration across student affairs units.

Table 5. *Follow-up Correlations*

Variable	Phi Coefficient	Probability
Recreational Sports visits in Spring	0.3330	<.0001
Recreational Sports visits in Fall	0.3038	<.0001
Live on Campus in Fall	0.2042	<.0001
Greek	0.1330	<.0001

Stakeholder Engagement and Implementation

The collaboration with each contributing department helped advance several initiatives: departments have agreed to expand the development of more proactive assessment plans than they have in the past; division leadership has committed to collecting more unique student participation data; once this data is collected, we have also gained buy-in to integrate disparate data platforms into a unified database; and we have more support to standardized metrics for division-wide assessment and storytelling. This study is also helping us pursue an expanded university early alert system that includes student affairs variables.

Recommendations

Results from this study support the value of several student affairs variables when included in models of predicting student retention. Recreational Sports Visits, Living on Campus, and being Greek had positive contributions to predicting retention. These findings confirm other studies reporting the importance of social interaction variables when analyzing retention (Delen, 2010; Oztekin, 2016; Slim et al., 2014).

Results also answered the call from several studies to merge several machine learning models when developing predictions of student success (Cardona et al., 2020; Sweeney et al., 2016). Future use of machine learning for student success, in inquiry and application, should benefit from similar merging of multiple models.

There are several limitations to acknowledge in this study. The dataset used is from only a single institution and from a single three-year period that happened to lead into a pandemic. In addition to variables that may differ across institutions and years, there is a high retention rate at this institution restricting the amount of data on non-retained students. The methods of this study should therefore be replicated at other institutions with varied retention rates to assess whether the results are generalizable. If exploring replication at other institutions, consider engaging institutional research, information technology, faculty, and other campus partners with expertise in machine learning models.

This study also only uses a subset of student affairs variables that happened to be available. There are a variety of other student affairs variables worth considering for student success models, such as student activities, student organizations, leadership programs, other health programs, and disability resource center services. Future inquiry should continue and expand the incorporation of such student affairs variables as potential contributors to predicting student success. There is also opportunity to apply theoretical frameworks in exploration of which student affairs variables might impact retention as well as understanding the mechanisms of these impacts.

Another limitation is that we only focused on first-year retention as the output of the predictive model. There are other commonly used measures of student success, each with varied gaps between prediction and outcome. For example, term or even course GPA are finalized all within a single semester. On the other end of the spectrum, the graduation rate takes 4-6 years to be realized. The contributions of student affairs to predicting such disparate outcomes requires additional inquiry.

Conclusion

Student affairs units and leadership can use results from this study to advocate for including their data in university efforts to predict and identify targeted support for student success. Furthermore, since most included student affairs data points had a positive association with retention, results also evidence the contribution of student affairs to not just predictive models, but also to the goal of student success. While historical and demographic variables cannot be changed by the time students attend higher education, the student affairs variables in this study—which change as students pursue higher education—offer an important opportunity to support the success of even more students.

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