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A Portrait of the Assessment Professional in the United States: Results from a National Survey

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NILOA Mission

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) primary objective is to discover and disseminate the ways that academic programs and institutions can productively use assessment data internally to inform and strengthen undergraduate education, and externally to communicate with policy makers, families, and other stakeholders.

About the Authors

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Abstract

While the systematic assessment of student learning has been undertaken since the 1980s, scant research is available that outlines a profile of assessment professionals or the roles and responsibilities these individuals perform in institutions of higher education. This study presents the results of the Assessment Professional Survey (n=305). By examining the demographics, range of roles and responsibilities, types of methodological skills and the service contribution of these professionals, this study provides the first national portrait of the assessment professional.

Findings are valuable for (a) the field of assessment, as it represents the first systematic attempt to create a profile of the assessment professional (b) institutions, as they work to provide authentic evidence of student learning, (c) assessment professionals, to understand how they fit within their own institutions and in relationship to other assessment professionals, and (d) new entrants to the assessment profession, to position themselves in the assessment job market.

A Portrait of the Assessment Professional in the United States:

Results from a National Survey

Mark C. Nicholas and Ruth C. Slotnick

This paper presents findings from a national survey of assessment professionals in the United States. It (a) creates a demographic portrait of the assessment professional, (b) examines where assessment professionals work, and (c) explicates the specific roles and responsibilities, range of skill sets, and career progression of assessment professionals. The goal is to establish the first national portrait of assessment professionals in the United States. Results can provide both institutions and new or experienced assessment professionals, insights about the profession on a national scale. Understanding the assessment professional and the profession within the context of higher education, we argue, can help frame the national discussion on the assessment of student learning. It also serves as an indicator of the steps that higher education has taken in the last decade to address questions about the value-added to student learning and educational effectiveness.

While research has focused on the processes of assessing student learning, the underlying landscape of professionals engaged in institutional assessment has developed a unique demographic composition, function, and role.

Background

"Assessment" as a function, process, and profession in higher education has evolved rapidly in recent decades. It has moved from being associated with localized classroom assessments and tests, to the development and administration of standardized tests, to more macro applications at the program, institution, state, and national levels. Take for instance that outcomes assessment in higher education has evolved from institutional enterprises into multi-state and national operations (SHEEO, n.d.; VSA, 2008; Nicholas, Hathcoat & Brown, 2016). This evolution in how we understand and operationalize assessment has led to the emergence of professionals that are leading the effort of providing evidence of student learning. We argue that the need for the assessment professional resulted from an increased focus among institutions of higher education for evidence related to student learning, stemming from the competitive environment of higher education and the global economy, the movement for greater accountability, and the re-emergence of competency-based education.

Emergence of Institutional Assessment Professionals

When examining the literature on assessment of student learning in higher education, we found research on accountability and student learning, the processes and methods of assessment; and how to present assessment results (Banta, Jones & Black 2009; Maki, 2010; Suskie, 2015; Walvoord, 2010). There is also research on how to garner faculty buy-in for assessment (Banta, 2002); and systematic research that examines the assessment culture on college campuses (Fuller, Skidmore, Bustamante, & Holzwweiss, 2016). While research has focused on the processes of assessing student learning, the underlying landscape of professionals engaged in institutional assessment has developed a unique demographic composition, function, and role.

Take for instance that a number of assessment conferences and professional associations like IUPUI's Assessment Institute, the National Institute of Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), Association for the Assessment of Learning in

in Higher Education (AAHLE), New England Education Assessment Network (NEEAN), Virginia Assessment Group (VAG), and the American Educational Research Association (AERA) newly re-formed Measurement and Assessment in Higher Education Special Interest Group have emerged. The content and themes of these conferences and associations focus exclusively on assessment of student learning and provide support and networks for assessment professionals. Attendance at each of these conferences ranges from several hundred to thousands annually.

However we found, as did Jankowski and Slotnick (2015), little research on assessment professionals themselves and the distinct roles that they play. Consequently, some questions remain unanswered - what is the demographic profile of the assessment professional? What are the specific roles, range of skill sets, and types of disciplinary knowledge of assessment professionals? How do they spend their time and what contributions do they make to the higher education landscape? What motivates them? These are important questions that need to be answered to nurture and develop assessment as a field of study and profession in higher education. These questions are salient to higher education making a cogent argument to stakeholders that we have invested in and developed quality assurance processes and structures that can yield empirical evidence of student learning and educational effectiveness.

Methods

Data collected from administering a survey with a series of Likert item questions and open-ended responses formed the basis for data analysis. This study employed both quantitative and qualitative analytic approaches to create a profile of the assessment professional.

Definition of the Assessment Professional

For purposes of this study, we defined an assessment professional as one who works full-time in assessment at an institution of higher education. The assessment professional can work in both academic or student affairs assessment at the college or university level. Typically, these professionals are administrators or faculty with the following job titles: Director of Assessment, Associate/Assistant Director of Assessment, Coordinator of Assessment, and Assessment Specialist. Professionals who are faculty members with partial course release to do assessment work do not fall into our definition for purposes of this study. The broad emphasis and range of assessment professionals functions should primarily include institutional and program assessment of student learning, accreditation, assessment in grants, academic program review, institutional effectiveness, and planning.

Survey Instrument, Sampling, and Administration

Our approach followed many of the good practices for developing, conducting and reporting survey research (Kelley, Clark, Brown & Stizia, 2003). We deliberated extensively on the content and layout of the questionnaire, piloted the instrument with assessment colleagues, refined questions, and developed a cover letter for the survey. The questionnaire, when administered, contained 46 Likert scale questions and 21 open-ended responses. Questions were grouped

Questions regarding the assessment professional remain unanswered: what is the demographic profile? Roles and range of skill sets? How do they spend their time and what contributions do they make to the higher education landscape?

into seven categories: demographic information, educational background, assessment experience, assessment roles, scholarship, service, and professional development. In particular, we wanted to know about the demographics of assessment professionals, where they work, what they do, and what motivates them. A copy of the survey is located in Appendix A.

To answer the question, *who are assessment professionals*, respondents were asked for their current title, appointment type, duration in position, role, route to the profession, salary range level of degree earned and discipline, ethnicity, gender, and age. To answer the question, *where do they work* respondents were asked to indicate regional location (state), institutional type, and characteristics of their current appointment (e.g., college versus university, private versus public, reporting lines, and accreditation role). To answer *what do they do*, respondents were asked to indicate time spent on a range of assessment activities at their institution, service to the field of assessment, and to higher education. To answer the question, *what motivates assessment professionals*, respondents were asked to select types of professional development opportunities offered to them at their current institution and indicate what types of work conditions or environment would keep them satisfied in their position.

In summer 2014, the web-based questionnaire was administered nationally to professionals involved with assessing student learning in institutions of higher education. The questionnaire was circulated via national and state listservs, professional organizations for assessment professionals, and through individual outreach. At the completion of survey administration, a total of 324 complete responses were received. Of the 324 responses, a small number of respondents (n=19) were removed from the analysis, as their particular role (e.g., faculty chair of the assessment committee, assessment committee member, part-time faculty/staff, and institutional researcher), did not fit the definition of assessment professional used in this study. The study is based on results from 305 respondents (see Table 1). Our sample closely paralleled the national distribution of higher education institutions by accreditation region found by an earlier study (CHEA, n.d.), thereby adding credibility to our findings (see Table 6).

Analytic Process

The analytic process we employed comprised of two strands: an analysis of the quantitative data based on the 46 close-ended questions and a line-by-line analysis of the 21 open-ended questions. While we did not systematically code the qualitative data, we used it to establish categorical definitions (e.g., Director of Assessment, Coordinator of Assessment, Assessment Specialist, etc.), and to recode participant responses into these categories for analysis and to create the profile of the assessment professional. This analysis took place over an eight-month period using a combination of the Qualtrics® Insight Platform, SPSS, Microsoft® Word and Excel, emails, and in-person meetings. We applied an iterative, discursive approach to make decisions on the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). We employed qualitative inquiry lenses (one a critical realist and the other a social constructivist) to strengthen and shape the analysis of results, lending verite, rigor, and integrity to our findings (Piantanida & Garman, 1999). A third researcher, well versed in using Qualtrics, verified the recoded job titles during the data input phase of the project.

The report is based on the results from 305 respondents who answered questions regarding who they are, where they work, what they do, and what motivates them.

Organization Structure for Data Analysis

In our first attempt to analyze the data we were faced with an immediate challenge. In the survey, respondents were prompted to select their job title as one of the following as indicated by our call for participants: Director of Assessment, Associate/Assistant Director of Assessment, Coordinator of Assessment, Assessment Specialist, or Other (see Table 1). When analyzing participant responses to the question what is your job title, we observed considerable variation. However, we did not provide participants with definitions to guide their selection of the available options. We found that a sizeable portion of respondents (n=135) selected the "Other" option. We were therefore challenged with analyzing and re-categorizing respondents who selected "Other" into existing categories or creating new ones after the survey was administered.

The first type of variation observed in the data was in how job titles were named across institutions. Some examples included titles like "Director of Student Learning Assessment," "Director of Undergraduate Assessment," "Director of Assurance for Learning," and "University Assessment Officer." These respondents were easily moved into the category of "Director of Assessment." The second variation observed was between job titles and functions performed. We found instances where the job title did not explicitly state or was not aligned with the actual functions of the role. For instance, "Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment" or "Director of Research & Assessment," and "Director of Learning Assessment & Accreditation." We debated recoding these responses into a separate category for analysis but then also recognized that many professionals with just "Director of Assessment" in their titles had indicated that they performed functions like academic program review or accreditation which were beyond the strict scope of assessing student learning. Hence, we made a decision to include these respondents into the category of "Director of Assessment" for purposes of data analysis.

The third type of variation was in the wide array of professional areas over which assessment professionals have oversight. To address these concerns, we examined the job titles of respondents together with educational level, salary range, position role and responsibilities, supervision of personnel, nature of service contributions, and length of employment in the position. Through this analysis, we found that many respondents in the "Other" category could be moved into the original list of job titles while others necessitated the creation of new job title categories (Table 1). The two new categories that emerged were – Associate/Assistant Dean for Institutional Effectiveness and Assistant/Associate Provost or Dean of Institutional Effectiveness. We recoded these responses into two new categories for purposes of data analysis. The analysis presented in this study was conducted after the re-coding and re-categorization processes outlined above was completed. The results of the recoding and re-categorization are shown in Table 1 in comparison to the original categorization.

Assessment professionals were mostly hired as administrators (72%), followed by faculty (16%), and staff (12%).

| | Original | | Revised | |
Job Title	%	N	%	N
Director of Assessment	31%	101	49%	150
Associate/Assistant Director of Assessment	6%	21	7%	22
Coordinator of Assessment/Data Analyst	13%	41	19%	57
Assessment Specialist	8%	26	10%	31
Other	42%	135	N/A	0
Associate/Assistant Provost of Institutional Effectiveness*	N/A	N/A	7%	22
Associate/Assistant Dean*	N/A	N/A	8%	23
Total	100%	324	100%	305**

* New categories created from re-categorizing data

** 19 responses were removed from analysis as their roles did not focus on assessment full-time.

Table 1. Assessment Professionals by Job Titles: Original versus Revised

Results

Who Are We?

To create a picture of who we are, our first goal was to determine the specific job status associated with position titles (Table 2). Respondents were asked to identify themselves as administrators, staff, tenured, tenure track or non-tenured track faculty, researchers, or staff. The results presented below indicate that assessment professionals were mostly hired as administrators (72%), followed by faculty (16%), and staff (12%).

Job Status	%	N
Administrator	72%	219
Staff	12%	38
Faculty (non-tenure track)	5%	15
Faculty (tenured)	4%	13
Researcher	4%	12
Faculty (tenure track)	3%	8
Total	100%	N=305

Table 2. Assessment Professionals by Job Status

When examining the academic qualifications of assessment professionals, we found that they held advanced degrees in diverse disciplines (Table 3). Most respondents held doctoral degrees (63%), master's degrees (35%), and bachelor's degrees (2%). There were no assessment professionals in our sample with associate-level degrees.

Most respondents held doctoral degrees (63%), master's degrees (35%), and bachelor's degrees (2%).

Academic Degree	%	N
Doctoral	63%	189
Master's	35%	107
Bachelor's	2%	7
Associate's	0%	0
Total	100%	N=303

*Note. The total number of participants varies, as some participants did not answer this question.
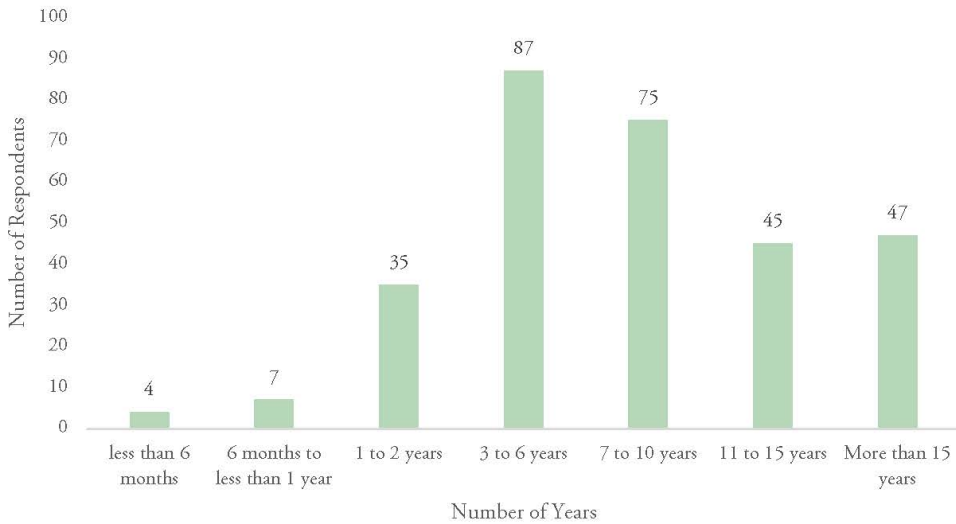Table 3. Assessment Professionals by Highest Degree Earned

As is evident from Table 4, assessment professionals are also a multi-disciplinary group with a majority of respondents (75%) holding degrees in education and the social sciences. Respondents from the social sciences, held degrees in Psychology, Sociology, History, and Organizational leadership. Respondents with degrees in education largely specialized in higher education, administration, leadership, educational psychology, assessment and measurement and, curriculum and design. Respondents from the Arts and Humanities earned degrees in disciplines like English, Literature, and Communication Arts. In the natural sciences, there was good representation from disciplines like Pharmacy, Biology, and Mathematics.

Disciplinary Background	%	N
Arts and Humanities	7%	21
Business	5%	15
Education	44%	133
Natural Sciences	12%	36
Social Sciences	30%	92
Theology	1%	3
Law	0%	1
Total	100%	N=301

*Note. The total number of participants varies, as some participants did not answer this question.
Table 4. Disciplinary Backgrounds of Assessment Professionals

When examining the number of years assessment professionals worked in higher education assessment, the mean was close to 6 years (Figure 1). In terms of experience in higher education assessment, 15% of respondents had 2 or fewer years, 29% had between 3-6 years, 25% between 7-10 years, 15% between 11-15 years and 16% reported having more than fifteen years. A closer examination of the years of experience reveals that 75% of respondents had moved into the profession within the last seven to 10 years.

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Figure 1. Assessment Professionals by Number of Years in the Field

We analyzed the demographic composition of assessment professionals in terms of gender, age and race/ethnicity. In terms of age, 4% of respondents were under 30 years of age, 23% in their thirties, 33% in their forties, 26% in their fifties, 13% in their sixties, and 1% seventy years or older (Figure 2). In terms of ethnicity, assessment professionals mostly (89%) identified as White (Figure 3). Those who selected the "Other" category identified as biracial or multiracial. When grouped by gender, 74% of respondents identified as female and 26% as male (Figure 4).
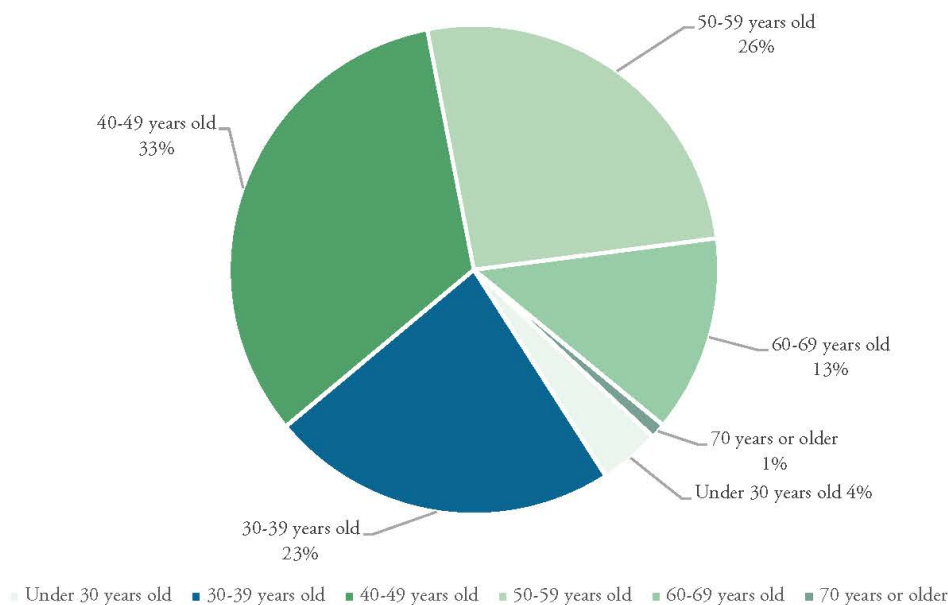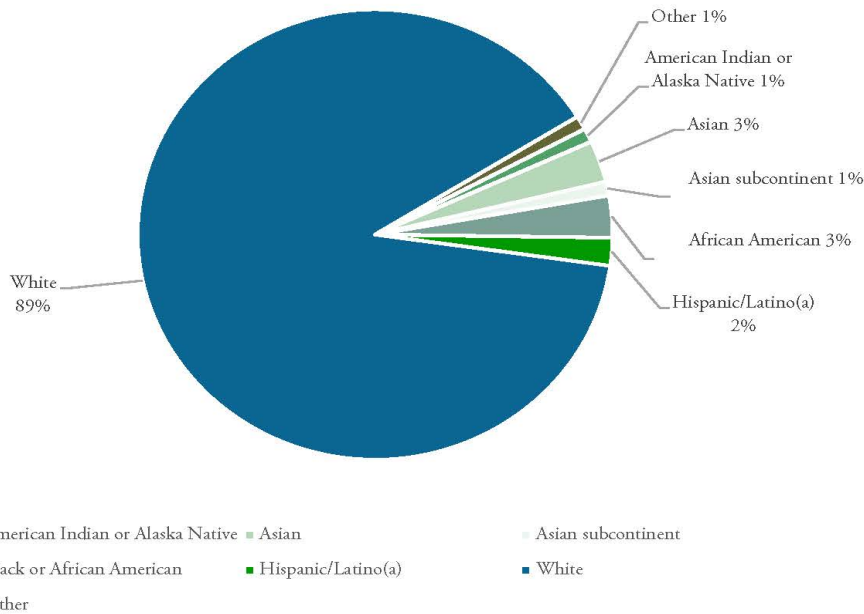

Figure 2. Assessment Professionals by Age

Other 1%
American Indian or Alaska Native 1%
Asian 3%
Asian subcontinent 1%
African American 3%
Hispanic/Latino(a) 2%
White 89%

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Asian subcontinent
- Black or African American
- Hispanic/Latino(a)
- White
- Other

Figure 3. Assessment Professionals by Race and Ethnicity

Assessment professionals work in all kinds of institutions, regions, and sectors.

Where Do We Work?

In this section we explore where assessment professionals work, reporting lines and appointment types, as well as their accreditation role, if any. We also identified in which higher education accreditation region assessment professionals were located. We found that assessment professionals worked across all institution types (Table 5). The majority of respondents (60%) worked at public institutions, followed by private non-profits (34%), and private for-profit institutions (6%). Of the public institutions, most respondents indicated that they worked at undergraduate and graduate institutions (41%), research institutions (29%), undergraduate institutions (13%), and community colleges (12%), with a smaller number of respondents (5%) indicating that they worked at professional health-related institutions. Most respondents served in a university-wide role (61%) compared to college-level appointments (39%), report to academic affairs (89%) versus student affairs (11%) and serve as the institution's accreditation liaison (32%).

Type of Institution	%	N
Community College	12%	36
Primarily Undergraduate Institution	13%	39
Research University	29%	88
Undergraduate and Graduate Institution	41%	124
Professional Health-Related Institutions	6%	17
Total	100%*	N=304

*Note. One respondent did not complete this question. The individual values are rounded and may not total to one hundred percent.

Table 5. Where Assessment Professionals Work by Institutional Type

Regional Accrediting Body	Schools Accredited by CHEA N	Schools Accredited by CHEA %	Our Sample N	Our Sample %
Higher Learning Commission	989	32%	101	34%
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools	797	26%	84	28%
Middle States Commission on Higher Education	527	17%	48	16%
Western Association of Schools and Colleges & ACCJC	365	12%	28	9%
New England Association of Schools and Colleges	236	8%	30	10%
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities	164	5%	7	2%
Total	N=3078	100%	N=298	100%*

*Note. Seven respondents did not complete the survey question on state or geographical region in which their current institution was located. The individual values are rounded and may not total to one hundred percent.
Table 6. Respondents by Regional Accreditation

71% of assessment professionals preferred to use a mixed methodological approach.

Accreditation region

Analysis of the data by accreditation region (Table 6) revealed that respondents worked in institutions affiliated with the Higher Learning Commission (34%), followed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities (28%), Middle States Commission of Higher Education (16%), New England Association of Schools and Colleges (10%), and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (9%). The Northwest Accreditation Commission was represented by 2% of respondents in our study.
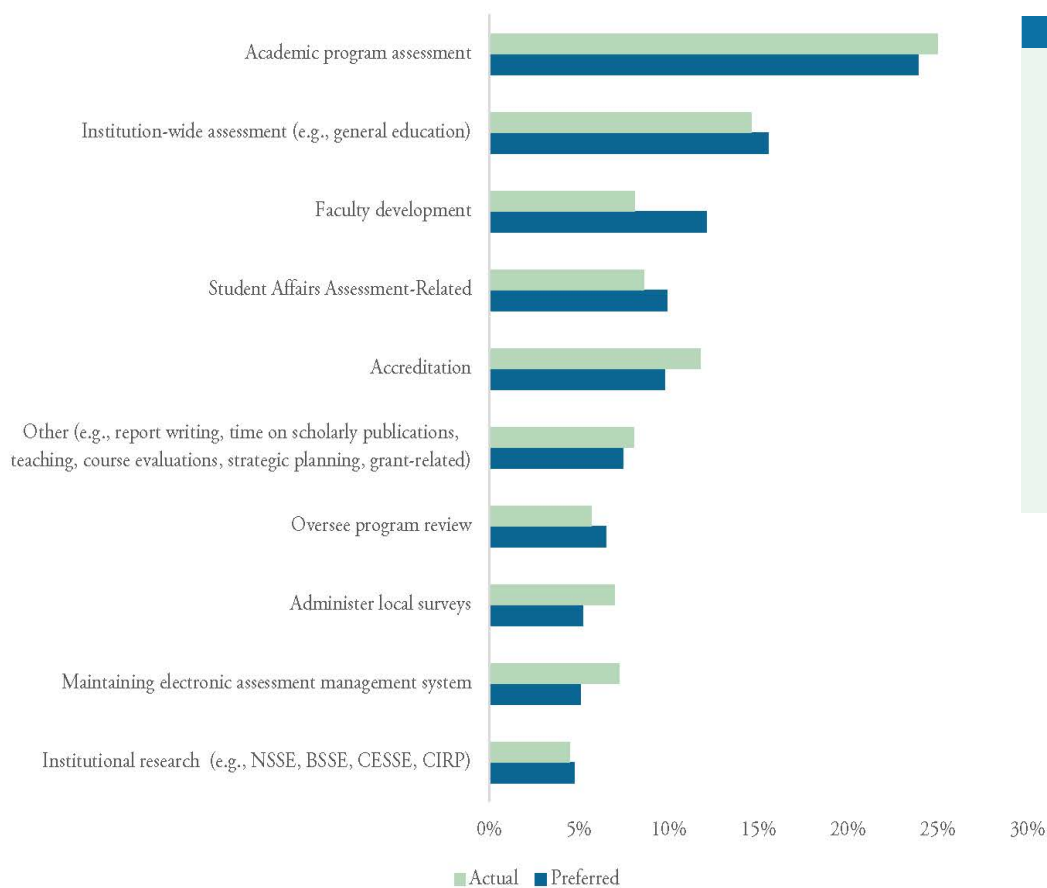
What Do We Do?

In this section we examine the types of activities assessment professionals are performing within their institutions, and contributions they make to higher education in general.

Within the Institution

We asked respondents to indicate what types of activities they currently spend time on and what types of activities they preferred to spend time on (Figure 4). As is evident, assessment professionals ranging from directors to deans spent the greatest portion of their time focused on student learning at the program and institutional level. While most respondents indicated being satisfied in their current roles and responsibilities, some would like more time to focus on faculty professional development. Respondents reported that they spent only 4% of their time on institutional research-related functions.

When asked about their preferred methodology, we found that (71%) of assessment professionals preferred to use a mixed methodological approach to answer assessment questions with some respondents preferring only quantitative methodologies (23%) and others preferring qualitative (6%) methods to answer questions about student learning.

Assessment professionals are involved in service related activities within the field of assessment as well as higher education in general.

Figure 4. Types of Institutional Activities Assessment Professionals are Currently and Prefer to Spend Time On

Number of Supervisees	%	N
0	55%	168
1-1.5	19%	58
2-2.5	11%	34
3 to 6	10%	32
7 to 12	3%	10
20 to 50	1%	3
Total	100%*	N=305

*The individual values are rounded and may not total to one hundred percent.

Table 7. Number of Supervisees for Assessment Related Work

Staffing in Offices of Assessment

A little more than half of the respondents reported that they had no additional staff to assist with assessment related functions (55%) at their institutions. Of those that had assistance, most noted that they had only one employee with many professionals indicating that additional support was provided from graduate assistants or undergraduate student employees (Table 7). We found that respondents reporting higher numbers of staff identified as provosts or deans indicating they were overseeing entire divisions versus just offices of assessment.

Service Contributions to the Profession and Higher Education

The data indicates that assessment professionals were very active in service related activities within the assessment profession (Figure 5). More than half were involved in regional and state assessment initiatives (56%), and have conducted assessment-focused workshops on campuses other than their own (56%). A little less than half of the respondents indicated participation in national assessment work (42%). About a third of the respondents have served as reviewers, chairs, or moderators at assessment conferences, organized conferences, and taken part in accreditation review teams. To a lesser extent, assessment professionals provide keynote addresses (15%) and serve as peer reviewers (12%) or editors on assessment journals (2%). Other types of activities noted by respondents include, writing an assessment blog, serving as an external tenure and promotion reviewer, serving as an external reviewer/auditor for accreditation-related processes in other countries, and serving as an assessment board or consortia member for a regional or national organization. Some individuals had also participated in writing accreditation criteria for professions or disciplines.
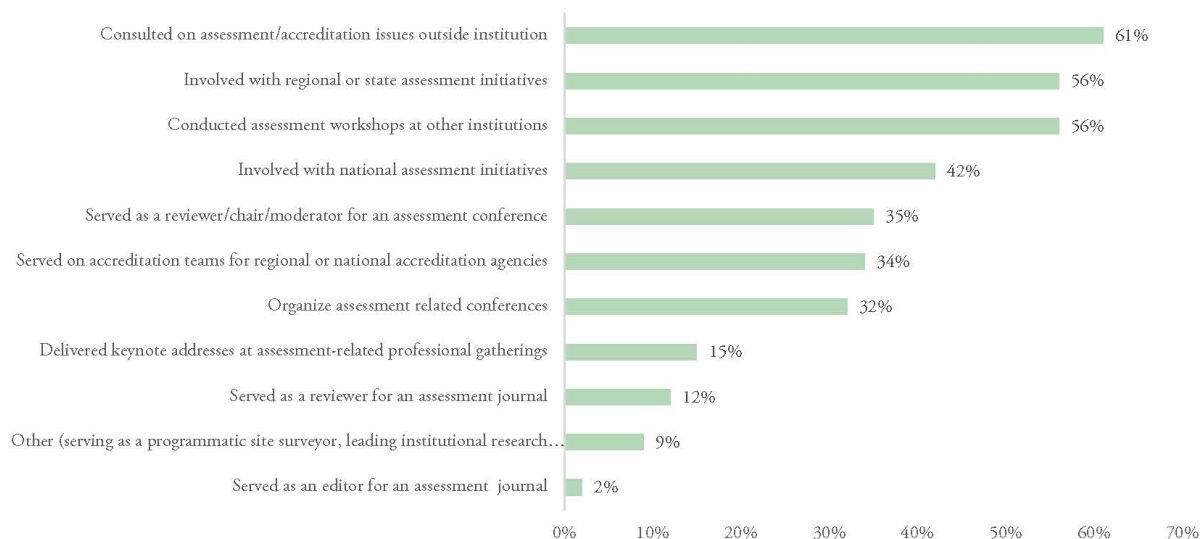

Figure 5. Service to the Field of Assessment

Assessment professionals also make considerable service contributions to higher education in general (Figure 6). Whether at the director, coordinator, specialist, provost, or dean levels ninety-percent of all respondents teach and take an active role in the classroom. About half of the respondents served as reviewers, moderators, or chairs for higher educational conferences (48%) or peer reviewers for higher education journals (40%).
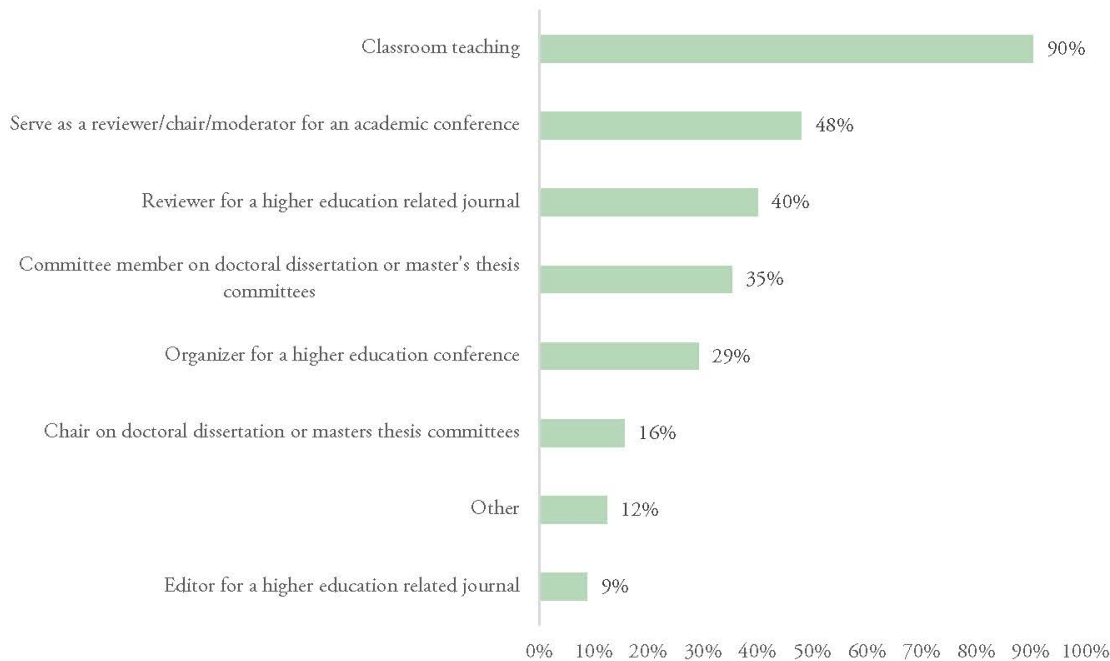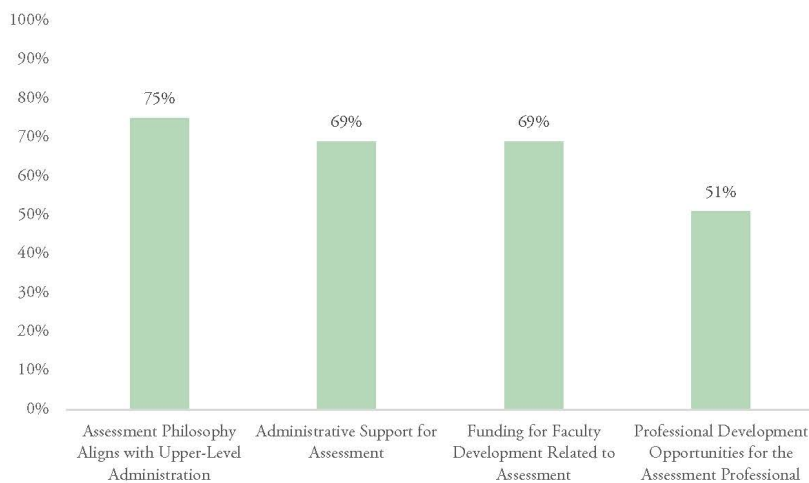
Figure 6. Service to the Field of Higher Education

Respondents also reported spending time on dissertation committees (35%), organizing higher education conferences (29%), and to a much lesser extent, serving as editors for a variety of higher education journals (9%). Other types of activities include serving as an external reviewer for program review, participating in activities involving tenure and tenure-track positions, running faculty development workshops at the state and national level, serving as peer reviewers for non-higher education journals, and reviewing conference proposals.

Assessment professionals were also active in grant writing as a service to the institution. 87% (n=266) of assessment professionals had successfully obtained external grant funding, both in their current assessment-related positions and in their overall careers. About 75% of respondents had been awarded grants of $20,000 or less with 10% of assessment professionals achieving grants greater than $500,000.

What Motivates Us?

An important aspect of studying a profession is examining the motivators that draw and retain talented professionals in the field. When asked to identify reasons for staying in the profession (Figure 7), assessment professionals emphasized the alignment between their assessment philosophy and that of upper level administration (75%), administrative support (69%), and funding from administration for faculty development related to assessment practice (69%). Professional development for the assessment professional was also a priority (51%).

Figure 7. Reasons for Staying in the Assessment Profession

Most assessment professionals reported receiving funds for conference travel (96%), leadership training (46%), and to a much lesser extent time for conducting research (24%). Other types of professional development opportunities (19%) included purchasing assessment-related books, technical and grant writing workshops or activities, technology/computer trainings, tuition waivers or reimbursements, subscriptions, visiting other campuses, and time to teach (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Types of Professional Development for Assessment Professionals

Discussion and Implications

The data revealed that assessment professionals have come to the profession through diverse pathways and currently constitute significant disciplinary diversity. This diversity is manifest in the methodological approaches preferred by these professionals to study student learning. The mixed methods approach that they used is not surprising given the academic disciplines of the respondents and the nature of assessment work that relies on both direct and indirect evidence of student learning.

The information we gathered from the age of the respondents and the years of experience indicates that institutional assessment is drawing in young entrants while at the same time retaining experienced practitioners. The age-related data results also supports the premise that institutions and individuals see the profession as a career rather than a temporary occupation.

Further analysis of demographic data revealed that there is room to diversify the profession in terms of gender and ethnicity. As institutions of higher education take steps to diversify student bodies, faculty and staff, they are increasingly focused on issues of access, equity, student success, and inclusive excellence. Research in the field of assessment points to a need for more localized, diverse and culturally sensitive assessments of student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1994). Hence, diversifying the pool of assessment professionals is an important step in achieving these aspirations in higher education.

The primary emphasis and range of functions performed by assessment professionals was focused on assessing student learning at the program and institutional levels and also includes working with the curriculum, faculty development, and strategic planning. It is fair to say that assessment is well established with regional and national networks to support its national stature as an established profession. It would be fair to say that a sizeable number of assessment professionals are engaged in scholarly activities like presenting and publishing research, obtaining grants, and performing editorial functions for academic journals. The service that these professionals provide both within the profession and higher education is noteworthy given the recent emergence of the profession.

While it appears from the data that institutions are evolving in their expectations from assessment professionals, the professionals themselves reported wanting more time to devote to faculty development which is key in creating and sustaining cultures of assessment and using assessment data for pedagogical, curricular and institutional improvement. Assessment professionals also noted that being able to spend time on faculty development ranked highly related to job satisfaction. The portrait of assessment professionals that emerged from this study is one of motivated individuals, committed to the assessment of student learning. What also became evident is that assessment professionals play a unique function in institutions of higher education. Given the close distribution of our sample with the spread of institutions by regional accreditors, range of functions and contributions made by these professionals, it would be fair to say that assessment as a profession is well entrenched in the higher education system in the US.

The Proliferation of Job Titles of Assessment Professionals

The challenges we faced in categorizing survey participants based on their titles and functions, leads us to believe that there is no consensus on the title and function of the assessment professional across the country. In our study, despite professionals identifying job titles, roles and responsibilities, we found it difficult to immediately articulate the function or hierarchical position of the assessment professional from their job titles alone.

The expansion of the role of the assessment professional is promising as they are being engaged in areas that can positively influence the use and application of assessment data on student learning.

Our findings are in line with Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) who drew on an investigation of 100 job advertisements for assessment professionals over a year and from one-on-one interviews with four nationally respected assessment scholars to gather their perceptions of the field over the past 30 years. They stated that the assessment field "lacks a requisite job classification nomenclature to fully describe the actual, on-the-ground knowledge and skill sets for the assessment practitioner" (p. 80). This finding highlights the possible confusion assessment professionals may face during a job search and those in established positions conducting compensation analysis for a possible monetary or title promotion.

We acknowledge that the proliferation we observed may result from some states and regions having their own naming conventions. We found many instances where coordinators of assessment were actually holding director-level positions and responsibilities. Hence the proliferation may very well be one of language. Nonetheless, it is unclear if the proliferation of titles and roles is simply a problem with institutions being unsure about the role of the assessment professional, or whether budgetary issues have created a need to fold multiple functions into one job description.

While job titles are the prerogative of individual institutions defining a role for assessment professionals within their own needs and contexts, the proliferation of titles may also be indicative that the role of an assessment professional is still evolving. It might also be that we are noticing that institutions tend towards a broader title to subsume areas related to curriculum, strategic planning, educational effectiveness, and institutional effectiveness which are all related to the assessment of student learning. The expansion of the role of the assessment professional is promising as they are being engaged in areas that can positively influence the use and application of assessment data on student learning. However, the titles of some assessment professionals, raises questions of whether assessment professionals are being increasingly called on to assume expanding responsibilities without adequate support. This is especially true given the finding that most assessment professionals reported being the only hired resource for assessment activities on their campus. It is fair to conclude from the data that most assessment professionals appear to function with little or no additional staff support. This observation requires attention because assessment professionals also listed having administrative support for their work as key to staying in the profession. We argue that the needs of the institution, while important, need to balance with the resources available to assessment professionals in order to optimize the effectiveness of the work performed by these professionals. Further research is needed in the field to capture the experiences of assessment professionals by institutional type and by role.

Navigating Competing Agendas and Organizational Challenges

Higher education institutions are complex organizations that grow and change over time. Whether a seasoned professional or newcomer to the field, the assessment professional is also constantly influencing institutional change and realigning themselves to adapt to both the cultures and structures within institutions while adhering to the dynamic reporting requirements from external stakeholders. These factors influence the role and tight balance that assessment professionals must maintain. This becomes clearly evident when assessment professionals ranked the alignment of their assessment philosophies with that of senior administrators as highest to job satisfaction.

Providing assessment professionals with philosophical space and operational support is important for their effective functioning. In addition, it is important to provide assessment professionals with professional development in organizational behavior.

Consequently, changes in administrative leadership or faculty ranks can have a major impact on the institution's assessment work and the job satisfaction of assessment professionals. Providing assessment professionals with philosophical space and operational support is important for their effective functioning. In addition, it is important to provide assessment professionals with professional development in organizational behavior. For instance, using organizational theory to analyze and diagnose organizational problems (Bess and Dee, 2008, p. 6) may help assessment professionals develop effective strategies while navigating the fluctuations of the field and differing views of assessment within and outside institutions. Addressing these needs will be pivotal in maintaining the robustness of the profession and in sustaining higher education's investment in the assessment of student learning.

A Substantial Investment by Higher Education into Assessment of Student Learning

The results of this study illustrate the first systematic review of the assessment professional focusing primarily on who we are, where we work, what we do, and what motivates us to stay in the field. We confirmed the assertion made by Suskie (2009) that assessment professionals arrive to the role from a rich variety of disciplinary routes. We also found that assessment professionals are positioned in both academic affairs and student affairs, primarily focus on program-level and general education assessment, have limited office support, serve on a number of institutional, state, and national committees and continue to teach in the classroom. These initial findings also point to a growing body of dedicated professionals committed to the field of assessment—a field that needs continual study as it grows and the educational landscape changes. As calls for accountability become resoundingly louder in higher education, our collective response has never been more important. A profession exclusively focused on assessing student learning is a significant systemic response, representative of the human, monetary and infrastructure investment that institutions of higher education are making to develop and sustain evidence-based approaches to assessing student learning and educational effectiveness.

While it is apparent that we have placed personnel in key locations within the institution to collect and analyze data on student learning, the challenge will be on how to expand and support campus cultures of assessment while strengthening faculty participation and resources to assessment professionals. Given that most assessment professionals seem to operate at the middle management levels, we question to what extent the results of assessment make their way to conversations and decisions at the executive levels in their institutions. The returns on this investment made by higher education will lie in how institutions of higher education use the results of assessment to inform questions related to improving student learning, curricular and pedagogical effectiveness, student satisfaction, strategic planning, and institutional effectiveness. It also simultaneously depends on supporting the assessment professional and expanding assessment resources across units of the institution. Hence we argue, as few institutions have already done, that there is need for assessment professionals to be hired into senior management positions so that they have a seat at the table and a voice in bringing compelling evidence on student learning to strategic planning and institutional decision making processes.

As calls for accountability become resoundingly louder in higher education, our collective response has never been more important. A profession exclusively focused on assessing student learning is a significant systemic response, representative of the human, monetary and infrastructure investment that institutions of higher education are making to develop and sustain evidence-based approaches to assessing student learning and educational effectiveness.

Appendix A: Assessment Professionals Survey Instrument

1. Do you agree to participate in this survey?
   - ○ Yes
   - ○ No

2. What is your current title?
   - ○ Director of Assessment
   - ○ Associate/Assistant Director of Assessment
   - ○ Coordinator of Assessment
   - ○ Assessment Specialist
   - ○ Other - please specify: _____

3. What is your current title – (re-coded)
   - ○ Director of Assessment
   - ○ Associate/Assistant Director of Assessment
   - ○ Assessment Coordinator/Data Analyst
   - ○ Assessment Specialist
   - ○ Associate/Assistant Provost of Institutional Effectiveness
   - ○ Associate/Assistant Deans
   - ○ Other - not used for analysis

4. What is your primary appointment in your current position (please select the one that best describes your appointment)?
   - ○ Administrator
   - ○ Faculty (tenured)
   - ○ Faculty (tenure track)
   - ○ Faculty (non-tenure track)
   - ○ Researcher
   - ○ Other - please explain: _____

5. Characteristics of your current position:

I primarily work in:	○ Academic Affairs	○ Student Affairs
I work at the:	○ University	○ College Level
I report to:	○ Academic Affairs	○ Student Affairs
I serve as the accreditation liaison for:	○ Yes	○ No

6. How many years have you:

	Less than 6 months	6 months to less than 1 year	1 to 2 years	3 to 6 years	7 to 10 years	11 to 15 years	More than 15 years
been in your current position?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
worked in the field of higher education assessment in total?	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

7. How many prior higher education assessment-related positions have you held? In the next question you will be asked to provide the position title, reason(s) for leaving, any effort the

institution made to retain you, and the duration of your position for each of these prior assessment-related positions.

o   None

o   1

o   2

o   3

o   4

o   5 or more

8. Please complete the following for job/prior higher education assessment-related position that you have held:

o   Position title: _____

o   Reason(s) for leaving: _____

o   Please indicate (if any) effort your institution made to retain you:_____

o   Duration in position (e.g. 1 year 4 months):_____

9. Of all of your assessment-related positions, how many were promotions within one institution and how many were promotions between institutions?

	0	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Within an institution	o	o	o	o	o	o
Between institutions	o	o	o	o	o	o

10. Please feel free to make any comments about these promotions:

11. What is your current salary range?

o   Less than $40,000

o $40,000 but less than $49,999

o $50,000 but less than $59,999

o $60,000 but less than $69,999

o $70,000 but less than $79,999

o $80,000 but less than $89,999

o $90,000 but less than $99,999

o $100,000 but less than $109,999

o $110,000 but less than $119,999

o $120,000 but less than $129,999

o $130,000 but less than $139,999

o $140,000 but less than $149,999

o $150,000 or more

12. What type of professional development opportunities does your institution provide to you in your current assessment role? (select all that apply)

☐ Funds for conference travel & attendance

☐ Research time

☐ Leadership development training

☐ Other professional development opportunities - please specify:

13. Is your current institution public or private?

o   Public

o   Private Nonprofit

o   Private For-Profit

14. Please select the type of institution at which you currently work as an assessment professional:

- ○   Community college
- ○   Primarily undergraduate institution
- ○   Undergraduate & graduate institution
- ○   Research university
- ○   Other - please describe: _____

15. Please use the drop down list below to select the state or geographical region in which your current institution is located:

▼ Alabama ... Other Pacific Island or Territories

16. What are your preferred research methods?

- ○   Qualitative
- ○   Quantitative
- ○   Mixed methods
- ○   Other - please describe: _____

17. Please complete the following chart related to the breakdown of your time on various assessment activities in your current position (each column should add to %100):

	Institution-wide assessment (e.g., general education)	Academic program assessment	Assessment of Student Affairs	Maintaining electronic assessment management system	Faculty development	Oversee program review	Accreditation	Institutional research (e.g., NSSE, BSSE, CESSE, CIRP)	Administer local surveys	Other - please describe in the comments section
What percent of your time is currently spent on each selected activity?										
What percent of your time would you rather spend on each activity?										

18. Please describe the other type(s) of assessment activities that you currently spend time on:

19. Please describe the other type(s) of assessment activities that you would like to spend time on:

20. How many staff do you supervise? (please enter a number, e.g., 2 - enter "0" if none)

21. Please list the titles of the staff you supervise:

22. Given your reason for leaving your last position, please rank the following factors that would have encouraged you to stay in that position (use the drag and drop feature to rank as many as you would like to):

       _____ Better alignment between your assessment philosophy and that of upper level administration

       _____ More faculty support for assessment

       _____ More administrative support for the assessment position

       _____ Professional development support

       _____ Tenure

       _____ Promotion

       _____ Salary increase

       _____ In-union position

       _____ Other - please explain:

23. As an assessment professional, when thinking about work conditions/environment that would keep you satisfied in your current position, rank the following in terms of importance to you: (drag each item to the appropriate box and then use the drag and drop feature to rank factors within that category):

Most important	Somewhat important	Not applicable
_____ Alignment between your assessment philosophy and that of upper level administration		
_____ Faculty support for assessment		
_____ Administrative support for the assessment position		
_____ Professional development support		
_____ Tenure		
_____ Promotion		
_____ Salary increases		
_____ In-union position		
_____ Non-tangible elements of campus culture, please explain:		
_____ Other - please explain:		

24. Publications and presentations (please enter a numerical value)

o   How many peer reviewed articles have you published in academic journals during your career? _____

o   How many peer reviewed articles have you published while serving in an assessment related profession? _____

o   How many conference papers have you presented relating to an assessment theme?

_____

25. Grants:

	Less than	$20,000-	$50,000-	$75,000-	$100,000-	$150,000-	$200,000-	$250,000-	$500,000 or
Total amount of external grant money awarded in your current position.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o
Total amount of external grant money awarded during your assessment career.	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o	o

26. Your service to the assessment profession - please check all that apply:

- ☐ Conducted assessment workshops at institutions other than your own
- ☐ Delivered keynote addresses at assessment-related professional gatherings
- ☐ Consulted on assessment/accreditation issues outside of your own institution
- ☐ Involved with national assessment initiatives
- ☐ Involved with regional or state assessment initiatives
- ☐ Served on accreditation teams for regional or national accreditation agencies
- ☐ Served as a reviewer/chair/moderator for an assessment conference
- ☐ Served as a reviewer for an assessment journal
- ☐ Served as an editor for an assessment journal
- ☐ Organize assessment related conferences
- ☐ Other - please describe: _____

27. Your service to higher education - please check all that apply:

- ☐ Classroom teaching
- ☐ Chair on doctoral dissertation or masters thesis committees
- ☐ Committee member on doctoral dissertation or master's thesis committees
- ☐ Serve as a reviewer/chair/moderator for an academic conference
- ☐ Reviewer for a higher education related journal
- ☐ Editor for a higher education related journal
- ☐ Organizer for a higher education conference
- ☐ Other - please describe: _____

28. What is your gender?

- o Male
- o Female
- o Other

29. What is your age?

- o Younger than 25
- o 25-29
- o 30-34
- o 35-39
- o 40-44
- o 45-49
- o 50-54
- o 55-59
- o 60-64
- o 65-69
- o 70-74
- o 75 or older

30. What is your race/ethnicity? (please select all that apply)

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Asian subcontinent

☐ Black or African American

☐ Hispanic/Latino(a)

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ White

☐ Other - please specify: _____

31. What is the highest degree you have completed?

o Associate

o Bachelor's

o Master's

o Doctoral

32. In what discipline is your highest degree?

33. What was your primary profession/role prior to entering the field of assessment?

o Higher Education Administrative

o Higher Education Teaching

o Higher Education Research

o Outside of Higher Education _____

o Other - please describe: _____

34. Rate how closely your previous profession/role was related to your current assessment position:

o Very closely

o Somewhat closely

o Somewhat related

o Not related

35. Please use this space to add any other comments that you have about being an assessment professional or any items in this survey.

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About NILOA

- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.

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