

Benchmarking Assessment Course Syllabi in Graduate Higher Education and Student Affairs Programs: Implications for Practitioners

Tori Rehr, Paul Holliday-Millard, Shaun Boren, Joe Levy, &
Natasha Jankowski

Introductions: Please get into groups of 3-4

- Name, role, and institution
- What is your favorite assessment project to date (does not have to be yours)?
- What questions do you have about graduate training in assessment?



Learning Outcomes

- Session participants will identify at least three common practices used in assessment graduate education in higher education and student affairs.
- Session participants will identify at least two areas of overlap between trends in higher education graduate assessment education and the Grand Challenges in Assessment project.
- Session participants will describe at least one application of this project for their interaction with colleagues at their institution.



Syllabi Project Overview

- Common questions we were hearing:
 - From grad students: what do I need to know about student affairs assessment?
 - From hiring managers: what assessment knowledge do recent HESA grads have?
 - From assessment professionals: what professional development should I be offering my division?
 - From faculty: what are other instructors teaching in their courses?
- Focus on assessment courses in student affairs and higher education graduate programs (HESA) programs, but broader implications

Project Background



What are HESA Graduate Programs?

- Higher Education and Student Affairs
- Tend to be M.A. or M.Ed. programs, but can include M.S., Ed.D., or Ph.D.
- Generally prepare grads to work in a student support role in higher ed, but diverse applications (e.g., K-12, non-profit, etc.)
- Departments that likely have HESA grads include Residence Life, Student Activities, Advising
 - Most people in student support roles do not have a HESA degree, but curriculum is useful for understanding the knowledge informing the field

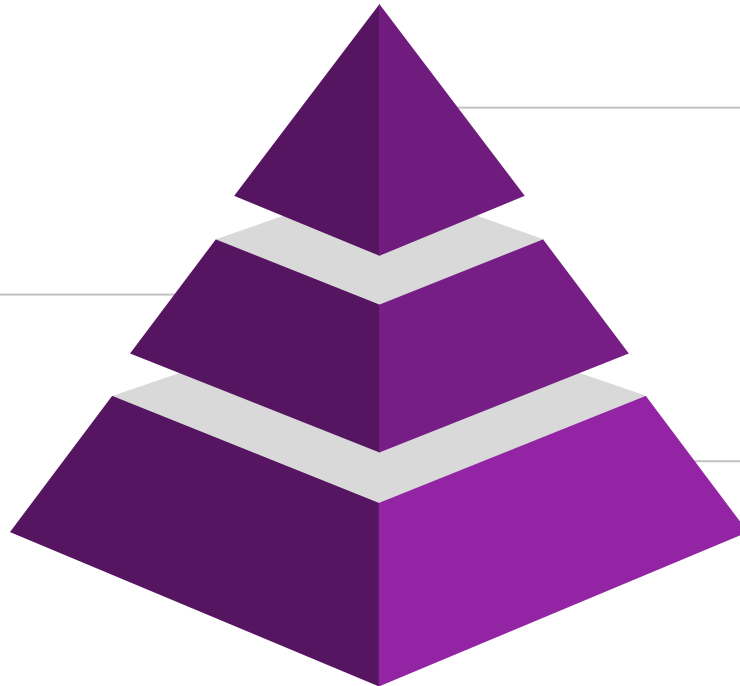
Assessment Standards in Student Affairs



NASPA/ACPA Student Affairs Professional Competencies

Beginner, intermediate, and advanced competencies for student affairs practitioners (includes assessment, evaluation, and research domain).

2



ACPA Assessment Skills and Knowledge (ASK) Standards

1

Professional competency standards specific to student affairs professionals and assessment

CAS: Council for the Advancement of Standards

3

Standards for co-curricular programs and departments



Syllabi Project Methods

- Joint project between three associations:
 - ACPA Commission for Assessment and Evaluation
 - NASPA Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community
 - Student Affairs Assessment Leaders
- Requested syllabi through listservs, personal outreach, and direct outreach to graduate program directors using the NASPA graduate program directory
- Collected 116 syllabi from 102 institutions focused on assessment and evaluation in higher education; not all were included for every analysis
- Good representation and coverage of regions, program types, and response from programs with assessment related courses



Findings

Findings: Course Description and Focus

Course category	# of Syllabi	% of Syllabi	Primary course topics
Higher Education Assessment	46	41.4%	Focuses on how assessment is integral in higher education. Topics include assessment, program evaluation, research, and accreditation.
Student Affairs Assessment	37	33.3%	Foundational assessment principles.
Research	12	10.8%	How to formulate research questions, conduct literature reviews, study design, instruments for data collection, and data analysis techniques.
Program Evaluation	7	6.3%	Program evaluation is the sole focus of the course.
Classroom Assessment	6	5.4%	Assessment of student learning in a classroom setting.
Equity-Minded/Centered Assessment	2	1.8%	Equity and how it intersects with assessment is the core foundation of the course.



Findings: Course Description and Focus

Research Methods:

- 71 syllabi (64.0%) included a focus on research methods.
- 66 syllabi either mentioned both qualitative and quantitative together or mixed methods.x
- 5 syllabi mentioned one methodology alone (aside from mixed methods), quantitative was the sole methodology mentioned.

Competencies/Standards:

- 28 courses included mention of or alignment with the Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER) competencies.
- 13 courses included the CAS Standards.
- 7 courses included both AER competencies and CAS Standards on the syllabus.



Findings: Learning Outcomes

- 98 syllabi contained 706 total student learning outcomes (SLO).
- Four reviewers coded SLOs using the ACPA ASK standards.
- Each SLO was categorized into one primary standard.
- Several themes emerged as frequent SLO topics not covered by the standards.

Findings: Learning Outcomes



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

Findings: Assigned Texts

- 57 unique texts across 99 syllabi
- Over half assigned at least one of three texts

Text Citation	% of Courses Requiring Text
Henning, G., & Roberts, D. (2024). <i>Student Affairs Assessment: Theory to Practice</i> . Routledge.	34.3%
Suskie, L. (2018). <i>Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide</i> . Wiley.	14.1%
Schuh, J.H., Biddix, J.P., Dean, L.A., & Kinzie, J. (2016). <i>Assessment in Student Affairs</i> . Wiley.	13.1%

How Did Instructors Use Texts?



- Over 80% of texts specifically focused on higher education or student affairs assessment
- 50.5% assigned more than one text
 - In cases where more than one text was assigned, tended to use general assessment text supplemented by methods or text more specific to course focus
- 17 texts focused on higher ed methods

Findings Summary



Our Overall Findings

- Lack of clear use of standards.
- Emphasis on assessment design and data collection over the political and institutional context of assessment.
- Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods are all emphasized.
- Specialized courses are common depending on program.



Implications for Practitioners

- Be upfront about expectations around assessment with new professionals - don't assume a common background
- HESA program grads likely to have a basic understand around methods (both quantitative and qualitative)
 - May have conducted an assessment project in their graduate coursework
- Need for professional development specifically around adapting to institutional context

Other Implications



- **HESA Faculty:**

- Scaffold learning - consider students' entering knowledge and how much is feasible in a given course.
- Update content - ensure details of emerging assessment topics are included to avoid compliance mentality and/or signal stagnation of field.

- **Professional Organizations:**

- Resource support - develop teaching guides to aid in alignment of courses with professional standards.
- Support dialogue - continue to facilitate engagement between faculty and practitioners for relevance and applicability of student learning in assessment focused courses.

Discussion and Next Steps

Next Steps



- Forthcoming article in the Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact (JSAIII)
- Exploring how to ensure competencies and standards are known and used
 - Responding to revisions in ACPA/NASPA competencies
 - Integrating faculty into professional association work
 - Thinking through teaching guides related to standards and competencies

Integrating Grand Challenges in Assessment

Challenge: Driving Innovation

1.1

Improve integrated planning skills in senior leadership, faculty, and staff

Staff may be familiar with overall assessment planning process, may need support thinking through connection with partners and obstacles

1.4

Create brave and safe spaces to promote an innovative culture

Staff may be enthusiastic about idea of assessment, may need support in thinking through political context

2.3

Improve data interpretation by increasing stakeholder engagement

Staff may have background in methods and basic data terminology, may need support in applying findings to work

Discussion Questions



- What did you find to be affirming or challenging about these findings?
- How do these findings shape your work with student affairs professionals (or other administrative staff) on your campus?
- What are the implications for how students experience and interact with assessment on our campuses?
- What other connections do you see with the Grand Challenges project?

Thank you!

Email cae@acpa.nche.edu to request a PDF copy of the slides or for more information.