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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE IN STUDENT AFFAIRS ASSESSMENT PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING EQUITY-CENTERED ASSESSMENT

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

Student affairs assessment is a field in higher education that emphasizes the measurement of effectiveness and student learning in student serving programs that take place outside of the classroom. Outcomes-based assessment is the basis of most assessment practices in student affairs, and focuses on the continuous improvement of out-of-classroom programs, services, and student learning. Many assessment practices stem from traditional research methods, which have been developed by people who hold mostly majority identities. These methods were not created with the rapidly changing demographics of today's college-going students in mind. To help address the increasing diversity of college students and the prioritization of diversity, equity, and inclusion in college missions and strategic plans (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021), outcomes-based assessment in student affairs has evolved to integrate equity-centered practices throughout the assessment process. Equity-centered assessment prioritizes the lived experiences and intersectional identities of students and addresses power dynamics, policies, and practices ingrained in higher education that ultimately influence assessment work (Heiser, 2021).

Equity-centered assessment in student affairs is a recent advancement in the assessment field, with a growing body of knowledge, frameworks, and research. This study explored the ways in which institutional culture in higher education influences equity-centered assessment practice in student affairs. The goals of this study were to: 1) explore how equity-centered assessment is implemented in student affairs, 2) determine how student affairs assessment practitioners perceive their institutional culture, and 3) describe how institutional culture influences the implementation of equity-centered assessment practices in student affairs. A qualitative, multiple case study design was employed that consisted of two interviews with student affairs assessment practitioners, one of which led participants through the Multicultural

Organization Development (MCOD) Lens Exercise, and the collection of various institutional artifacts. Qualitative analysis of the interviews along with a review of institutional artifacts provided a detailed picture of the role of institutional culture in practitioners' experiences implementing equity-centered assessment.

The results of this study indicated that student affairs assessment practitioners are intrinsically motivated to engage in equity-centered assessment, strive to elevate the diverse voices of students and staff through their work, and consider the role of their identities as they are implementing assessment practices. The participants in this study choose to engage in equity-centered assessment despite various institutional influences and are often the only leaders of equity-centered assessment on their campuses.

Recommendations based on this study call for institutions to hire, train, and retain assessment leaders that demonstrate a commitment to advancing equity, utilize climate surveys to address institutional inequities, and implement regular reviews of mission statements, policies, and procedures through an equity lens. Future research should continue to explore the intersection of institutional culture and equity-centered assessment work in both student affairs and academic settings.

Chapter I: Introduction

Most college students view their higher education as much more than an academic experience. Since 1937, higher education institutions have included what we now know as student affairs, those out of classroom programs and activities that cultivate the emotional, physical, social, vocational, moral, intellectual, and other aspects of a person's wellbeing. With the emergence of student affairs grew the use of student and institutional assessments to design and evaluate programming for student needs. Today, institutions recognize the need for missions, policies, and programming that addresses diverse student experiences and is inclusive of and equitable for all students. However, assessment practices in student affairs have only begun to reflect these same values. Further research is needed to guide practitioners and leadership in equity-centered assessment practices that can inform equitable and inclusive programs and services at institutions of higher education.

As the identities of college-going students have changed over time, student affairs assessment has evolved to evaluate college programs and services (Henning, 2016), the achievement of program objectives (American Council on Education, 1949), student attitudes, interests, and personality characteristics (Banta & Associates, 2002), the impact of the college environment on students (Bresciani et al., 2009), and the growth of individual students and marginalized populations (Henning, 2016). By the year 2027, the high school graduate population in the United States will only be 51% White. As we consider a future with half of college-aged students coming from historically minoritized groups, changes will be necessary in higher education, including how assessment is conducted to ensure supportive and nurturing college experiences for diverse student populations.

Student affairs assessment today is mainly focused on outcomes-based assessment, which focuses on implementing assessment practices that produce information that can be used to improve programs, services, and learning within a cycle of continuous improvement. Continuous improvement is applied in assessment by assessing intended outcomes, making changes based on the assessment, and assessing outcomes again periodically and over time to determine if the implemented changes had the intended effect. Typical outcomes include those that focus on program and service delivery, improvement, and effectiveness as well as the out-of-classroom learning and development that occurs in students as a result of these programs and services.

When issues of equity within the college student experience are not considered, outcomes-based assessment can fail to demonstrate disparities in the experiences of students holding historically marginalized identities. The norms, personal biases, resource constraints, timelines, and procedures that can influence the implementation of assessment plans typically place students as the objects of assessment instead of active participants in and informers of the process of assessment, thus privileging the ways of knowing of the majority group while oppressing those who are not represented (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Equity and inclusion initiatives and values have become priorities in many college and university missions and strategic plans (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021), communicating a need to integrate equity-centered practices into assessment in higher education. However, including diversity, equity, and inclusion statements on a college or university website does little to demonstrate that historically marginalized students belong in these environments if such values are not embedded into every aspect of an institution's culture. Moving forward, programming and other inititiaves in higher education designed to support more diversified student populations will require assessment

models that intentionally engage students as well as practitioners and professionals in conversations around student learning (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020).

Integrating equity into assessment practices in higher education and student affairs is an emerging and necessary phenomenon; however, empirical research is limited on the topic of equity-centered assessment practices. A recent dissertation affirms that future research is needed on the impact of equity-centered assessment practices and barriers created by institutional cultures (Gardner, 2021). Research is needed to determine the role of institutional culture in the experiences of assessment practitioners implementing equity-centered practices in student affairs. This qualitative case study explored assessment practitioners' experiences with implementing equity-centered assessment within the context of institutional culture.

Assessment in Student Affairs

Early assessment efforts in student affairs involved the application of educational and developmental psychology through discipline-based hypothesis testing and theory building. This research focused on the growth and development of mostly White male college students in traditional residential college environments (Banta & Associates, 2002). The field evolved as publications such as the *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1936; 1949) and various student development theories emerged that introduced the assessment of outcomes for the purposes of continuous improvement of student learning and development (Henning, 2016).

Outcomes-based assessment remains the standard practice in both student learning and program effectiveness assessment in student affairs. This practice specifies the assessment of intended learning, development, or programmatic outcomes within cycles of continuous improvement that require outcomes to be measured regularly. Outcomes-based assessment

focuses on what a program intends to accomplish, what methods will be implemented to measure accomplishment, the end results of the assessment, and how the results will be used to make improvements to the program. While this practice seems beneficial, it is also heavily tied to accountability in higher education (Heiser et al., 2017). The cost of higher education must be justified, and the established method of proving its worth has been through assessment, both inside and outside of the classroom.

More recently, outcomes-based assessment is being reimagined to incorporate and promote equity in higher education and student affairs in response to increasingly diverse student populations entering college. The race, ethnicity, gender identity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, and abilities of today's college students are more diverse than ever, and this trend is expected to continue as college enrollments increase and the United States moves toward a majority-minority nation by the year 2050 (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Conducting assessment in a manner that takes into consideration and celebrates the various needs of diverse student populations is a responsibility of higher education.

Equity-Centered Assessment

The incorporation of critical theory and a focus on equity in student affairs assessment are beginning to change the landscape of assessment in the higher education environment. The need for this change is evidenced by the recent, increasing demands to dismantle inequitable structures in social, economic, political, health, and educational systems in the United States, as well as the changes to racial and socio-economic demographics of students matriculating into postsecondary education (Milligan et al., 2021). This changing landscape of higher education calls for assessment practices that reflect and enhance the experiences of the current diverse population of college students. The components of evidence gathering, interpretation of results,

and initiating change in an assessment cycle can be enhanced by centering marginalized voices in the process (Heiser et al., 2017). Centering these voices throughout the assessment process defines equity-centered assessment. Assessment practitioners are being called upon to ensure higher education practices are meeting the needs of diverse student populations. We can meet this call when we understand how the practice of assessment and established assessment methods are socially situated and relevant within the broader context of social justice (McArthur, 2017).

A transformative paradigm is now being considered in higher education research (Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015), after years of prominence in the evaluation field. Approaching assessment through this paradigm can shift the focus from assessment conducted to "check a box" to using student learning assessment results to develop and promote equitable spaces and experiences for students. Focusing on transformation and equity-centered assessment also benefits higher education institutions that seek to advance equity and inclusion missions and strategic priorities. Newly-established assessment frameworks (Henning & Lundquist, 2020) are beginning to provide guidance to practitioners for reflection and interrogation of established practices. Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) also call for the development of models or frameworks, reflection on privileges and positionalities, and raising additional awareness of the intersections of equity and assessment. There is a need to discover how to integrate equitable and inclusive practices into all stages of the assessment process (e.g., establishing outcomes, identifying measures of effectiveness or learning, analyzing data, reporting results, and implementing changes based on results) and many practitioners are moving the conversation forward through practice, papers, and other publications (Henning & Lundquist, 2018; Levy & Heiser, 2018; Tullier, 2018; Williams & Perrone, 2018; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). An equity focus in assessment conferences and other professional development opportunities,

increasing publications on the topic, and the formation of multiple consortia dedicated to equity in assessment are helping build capacity in practitioners dedicated to integrating equity into their assessment work (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Recent research on the experiences of assessment practitioners engaging in equity-centered assessment (Gardner, 2021) and examinations of existing equity-centered approaches such as the Equity-Centered Assessment Landscape Survey (Henning et al., 2021) are informing new practices, highlighting successes, and exposing barriers to engaging in this work. These transformations need to be implemented consistently across the field of student affairs assessment within higher education if we expect systemic changes to the student experience.

Institutional Culture in Higher Education

One influence on the successful implementation of equity-centered assessment in higher education are shifts in institutional culture. Institutional culture expands on notions of organizational development proposed by Edgar Schein (1986) who explained that

> Culture is the pattern of basic assumptions that the group has invented, discovered or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation or internal integration, and that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems (pp. 30 - 31).

This explanation of organizational development upholds a view that new members of any organization must adhere to already-established norms, and do not play a role in the progression of culture in the organization.

Kuh and Whitt (1988) state that institutional culture is both a product and a process. As a product, it reflects the intersections of history, tradition, structures, and behaviors, while as a

process it shapes and is shaped by the people on and off campus. Institutional mission statements, campus architecture, academic programs, myths, symbols, and ceremonies are artifacts of an institution's culture. Culture is also evident through values and core beliefs that are shared by institutional leaders, students, faculty, staff, and other constituents (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). The culture should evolve as these populations diversify and influence the values, traditions, and artifacts associated with any institution.

Since institutional culture is specific to each college or university, the impact of culture on an institution's processes, procedures, and behaviors of its faculty and staff will differ from one institution to another. Kuh and Whitt (1988) state that behavior that seems effective at one institution may not be effective at another, even among actions and events that seem similar across institutions. Focusing on institutional culture in higher education research can outline tangible reasons why procedures that are successful at one institution are not successful at another, even if the two institutions share many similarities (Tierney & Lanford, 2018). The specificity of this influence is but one explanation for differences in assessment culture, procedures, and practices across different higher education institutions.

Institutional culture can be both a stabilizing influence and a barrier. While culture can serve as a framework to interpret behavior and to socialize new students, faculty, and staff, it can become problematic when racist and exclusionary behavior is the norm and part of the history of an institution (Kuh & Whitt, 1998). Institutional cultures grounded in these behaviors can thwart efforts to embrace inclusion and equity, including the ability to integrate equity into assessment culture and practices. Organizational development models such as the Multicultural Organization Development (MCOD) model can serve as frameworks for assessment and evaluation practices and lead to change in higher education institutions. This particular model provides institutional

members and leadership ways to assess a path to multiculturalism, decide on a vision of multiculturalism, and choose goals and interventions to realize a desired vision (Holvino, 2008). Tierney and Lanford (2018) assert that a deep understanding of institutional culture is vital for promoting innovative environments that enable higher education to positively impact diverse societies. Similarly, if we aspire to implement an equity focus in our assessment efforts in higher education and student affairs, we must understand how institutional culture influences assessment practices.

Research Questions

The brief background presented above illustrates the need to explore how institutional culture affects the experiences of student affairs assessment practitioners who are responsible for implementing equity-centered assessment. Integrating equity into assessment practices in higher education and student affairs is an emerging and necessary phenomenon. Research is needed to understand the role of institutional culture in the implementation of equity-centered practices in student affairs. This study explored assessment practitioners' experiences with implementing equity-centered assessment within the context of how institutional culture impacts their work. The following research questions were addressed:

1. How is equity-centered assessment implemented in student affairs at higher education institutions?
2. How do student affairs assessment practitioners in higher education perceive their institutional culture?
3. How does institutional culture influence the implementation of equity-centered assessment practices in student affairs?

As the need to meet missions that promote social justice and support increasingly diverse student populations continues to grow in higher education institutions, additional research in equity-centered assessment can provide implications for practice in the assessment of student learning and development. The findings from this study will inform equity-centered assessment practices in student affairs and encourage the development of higher education institutions into multicultural organizations.

Methodology

This study employed a multiple case study design that explored the experiences of student affairs assessment practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment within various institutional cultures. Case study research is a favorable choice when the research questions for a study ask "how" and "why"; when the researcher has little control over behavioral events in the study; and, when the study focuses on a contemporary phenomenon, or a "case" (Yin, 2018). Multiple case study research can add confidence to findings by looking at a range of cases to understand how, where, and why the phenomenon happens in the way it does (Miles et al., 2014). Cases were defined by the experiences of six student affairs assessment practitioners who held the responsibility of leading assessment for their student affairs division and did so with an equity focus. Data was collected from each practitioner using semi-structured interviews, which included the Multicultural Organizational Development (MCOD) Lens Exercise (Holvino, 2008), institutional artifacts, and reflective memos that were developed throughout the research process. Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews and the MCOD Lens Exercise was coded and categorized to discover themes as well as codes that are dissimilar to be inclusive of the practitioners' experiences. Institutional artifacts such as institutional webpages, mission statements, diversity, equity, and inclusion statements, and non-public documents and

correspondence provided context to the practitioners' experiences, and my reflective memos were used to understand how the data came together throughout the process.

Summary

This chapter serves as an introduction to the current study that explored the role of institutional culture in the implementation of equity-centered assessment in student affairs. A focus on equity is necessary if higher education institutions are to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. Incorporating equity practices into student affairs assessment can address issues of power and oppression; however, the role that institutional culture plays in how equity in assessment manifests cannot be ignored. The existing research on equity-centered assessment and how institutional culture enhances or hinders these practices is limited. This study sought to address this gap in the research and inform effective practices for student affairs assessment practitioners and leadership who want to incorporate equity into assessment and provide more inclusive collegiate environments for students.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Assessment in student affairs is a field in higher education administration that focuses on measuring the effectiveness of student serving programs as well as the student learning that takes place as a result of involvement in out-of-classroom activities. Student affairs as a profession grew from expectations put forth in the Student Personnel Point of View (1937) that stated that higher education institutions should

> Consider the student as a whole–his intellectual capacity and achievement, his emotional make up, his physical condition, his social relationships, his vocational aptitudes and skills, his moral and religious values, his economic resources, his aesthetic appreciations. It puts emphasis, in brief, upon the development of the student as a person rather than upon his intellectual training alone (p. 1).

Assessment in student affairs began with studies of alumni and current students at colleges and universities and was grounded in researching educational and developmental psychology through hypothesis testing and theory building (Banta & Associates, 2002). Student affairs assessment has evolved over time to reflect different purposes and a range of information needs, including: evaluating college programs and services (Henning, 2016); measuring the achievement of program objectives (American Council on Education, 1949); student attitudes, interests, and personality characteristics (Banta & Associates, 2002); assessing the impact of the college environment on students (Bresciani et al., 2009); and, documenting the growth of individual students and marginalized populations (Henning, 2016). Today, outcomes-based assessment is the basis for most student affairs assessment practices, which focuses on the continuous improvement of programs, services, and learning. In a continuous improvement model,

outcomes, or the things that are expected to be achieved or learned as a result of a program or service, are assessed to inform changes and are then assessed again in later assessment cycles.

Throughout the evolution of assessment in student affairs, federal requirements, accrediting bodies, and funders of higher education have historically placed a focus on assessment for accountability (Suskie, 2004) that has undoubtedly influenced student affairs assessment. The perceptions of this accountability culture can encourage practitioners to use assessment strategies that meet minimum reporting requirements but are not inclusive of all types of learners. Even though this particular type of accountability culture is becoming less prevalent in student affairs assessment, the way that outcomes-based assessment practices are approached can be problematic for students holding historically marginalized identities when these practices do not account for their cultural differences and lived experiences. After all, assessment that is not mindful of equity can unintentionally become a tool to promote inequity (Montenegro and Jankowski, 2020). While outcomes-based assessment itself is not intentionally oppressive, traditional assessment practices stem from research methods developed over time by persons holding majority identities. These methods and traditional practices can be harmful to students if they are viewed as objects to be observed instead of contributors to the process. Assessment professionals may not have the knowledge about how their privilege and positionality in life impacts their assessment work, which can privilege specific ways of knowing in assessments while potentially oppressing those who are not represented (Montenegro and Jankowski, 2020).

Assessment in higher education has evolved from proving adherence to federal and funding requirements to demonstrating learning and improvement in continuous cycles. This evolution requires us to engage in equity-centered assessment practices as our student

populations become more diverse. Many colleges and universities claim to value equity and inclusion and have identified them as priorities in their mission statements or strategic plans (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021), furthering the need to integrate equity-centered practices into assessment. More diversified student populations in higher education will require assessment models that engage students as well as provide for the intentional professional development of practitioners and professionals in conversations around student learning (Montenegro and Jankowski, 2020), particularly for students holding historically marginalized identities.

Foundations of Student Affairs Assessment

In order to grasp the importance and urgency of equity-centered assessment, it is necessary to understand how higher education and student affairs assessment practices have evolved over time. Assessment in student affairs began in the 1930s with studies of alumni and currently enrolled students at colleges and universities. The field was based in researching the application of educational and developmental psychology through discipline-based hypothesis testing and theory building. Much of this work focused on the growth and development of traditional-aged, mostly White and male college students in traditional on-campus living environments (Banta & Associates, 2002). In 1937, The American Council on Education called for studies to be designed to evaluate college programs and services when they published the *Student Personnel Point of View* (Henning, 2016). A new edition of this publication released in 1949 called for the continuous evaluation of educational programs to ensure that students were achieving program objectives (American Council on Education, 1949). This revision served as the first formal call for the continuous improvement of programmatic outcomes that remains a large part of student affairs assessment work today. The Council also suggested that staff members in student affairs devote time to assessment in the areas of student satisfaction; faculty

satisfaction; student use of services; staff development and training; and, relationships between those who work with students (Henning, 2016). Conducting these types of assessments remained the standard practice until the 1960s.

During that time, assessment efforts were focused on measuring attitudes, interests, and personality characteristics (Banta & Associates, 2002) until the emergence of student development theory later in the decade. This marked another turning point in student affairs assessment as these theories heavily influenced how staff worked with college students, and created an expectation to measure the growth of individual students and specialized student populations outlined in the theories (Henning, 2016). Maturation and attitudinal development outside of the classroom were suddenly viewed equally important to learning inside the classroom by theorists such as Arthur Chickering (1969), who produced a foundation for further research in collegiate student learning through the next decade and beyond (Banta & Associates, 2002). Following Chickering, Alexander Astin (1977) introduced the concept of a value-added approach to assessment to demonstrate the impact of the college environment on students in *What Matters Most in College: Four Critical Years*. His Inputs-Environment-Outputs (I-E-O) model of assessing student learning utilized longitudinal studies and provided the basis for outcomes-based assessment practice today (Bresciani et al., 2009), along with trends that arose from student retention efforts, the evaluation field, and increased resources and scholarship.

Student Retention and Assessment

Literature on college student retention also began to emerge in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, and had significant impacts on the practice of assessment. The retention movement was grounded in Tinto's model of academic and social integration (1975) and called for new methods that involved longitudinal studies, specifically configured surveys, and multivariate analysis

(Banta & Associates, 2002). These studies contributed to a form of action research, and were focused on providing evidence to make changes or improvements to interventions in student retention efforts (Ewell, 2002).

Program Evaluation

Program evaluation also became an established research tradition during this time. Beginning in large, federally-funded programs, program evaluation ultimately influenced higher education in regards to strategic planning, program review, and budget development. The focus remained on student outcomes but demanded evidence of a return on investment in higher education. Program evaluation began with mostly quantitative studies, but evolved to include more qualitative methods that allowed for exploring organizations culturally and holistically (Banta & Associates, 2002).

Professional Standards

In the 1970s and 1980s professional standards emerged as assessment continued to evolve from research traditions. By this time, more practical guidance was necessary to assist post-secondary institutions and staff with measuring student learning and institutional effectiveness and came in the form of standards, textbooks and other publications, and support from associations. In 1979, the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) was founded and provided standards for higher education operations, programs, and services (Henning, 2016). CAS focuses on quality assurance through program review and reflective self-study, and provides self-assessment guides by which student affairs professionals can conduct a detailed assessment of their programs and services (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2021).

Standards specific to working in the field of student affairs assessment were created during the years 2006 – 2008. ACPA - College Student Educators International's Commission for

Assessment and Evaluation published the *Assessment Skill and Knowledge (ASK) Standards* for professionals in 2006, and CAS published standards for student affairs assessment offices that same year. These two publications officially established standards for both organizational and individual practice in student affairs assessment. In 2008, the first curriculum for developing student affairs assessment skills and knowledge was created through the NASPA - Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education's *Assessment Education Framework* (Henning, 2016).

By 2006, standards for assessment practice had been established. In the fall of that year, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education* was published. This document is more commonly known as the Spellings Report. This report spurred the growing prioritization of assessment in higher education and reported findings including the lack of documented student learning during college and the questionable return on the financial investment of students and their families (Henning, 2016). Based on the report, there was agreement that improvements should be made, but educators were not pleased with the focus on consumer-oriented metrics of quality and the use of standardized tests to measure learning. With this discontent came a re-emphasis on assessment that moved towards documenting student learning both in and out of the classroom (Henning, 2016).

Scholarship and Resources

Numerous resources exist for student affairs assessment practitioners to learn knowledge and skills in assessment. The first text about the field of student affairs assessment was published in the mid-1990s by Lee Upcraft and John Schuh. *Assessment in Student Affairs: A Guide for Practitioners* (1996) provided a roadmap for how to perform assessment in student affairs. A few years later, the first study of student affairs assessment offices was performed by Gary Malaney (1999). This study highlighted the prevalence of the evaluation function in student affairs and

identified 40 institutions that had full-time student affairs assessment professionals (Henning, 2016). Shortly after, Schuh and Upcraft (2000) published the companion to their first book, *Assessment Practice in Student Affairs: An Application Manual*. By this time, student affairs assessment had become a well-established field with professionals solely dedicated to the work and resources and scholarship to support it (Henning, 2016). The scholarship of student affairs assessment has continued to grow at a dramatic rate throughout the 2000s, seeing a drastic increase in texts written about student affairs assessment between 2010 and 2016, along with numerous journal articles and other publications (Henning, 2016).

The 2000s saw the creation of standards specific to working in the field of student affairs assessment. ACPA and CAS released publications that officially established standards for both organizational and individual practice in student affairs assessment (Henning, 2016). The first curriculum for developing student affairs assessment skills and knowledge was created through NASPA's *Assessment Education Framework* (Henning, 2016).

Several resources for student affairs assessment were created in the early 2000s within professional associations (Henning, 2016). ACPA changed the mission for its Commission for Research for Student Development to focus on assessment, becoming the Commission for Assessment for Student Development. As of 2006, that commission has broadened its scope to include evaluation practices beyond student development and is currently known as the Commission for Assessment and Evaluation (Henning, 2016). Additionally, NASPA formed its Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community in 2005, and the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) were founded in 2008. SAAL is an open and free community for assessment professionals, and provides a space for these practitioners to share knowledge and best practices among one another regardless of professional association affiliation. ACPA, NASPA,

and SAAL continue to provide networking and professional development opportunities for those involved in student affairs assessment (Henning, 2016).

The first Student Affairs Assessment Institute sponsored by ACPA was held in 2003, and NASPA's Assessment and Persistence Conference began in 2004 (Henning, 2016). Originally called the Assessment and Retention Conference, NASPA wanted to differentiate between retention and persistence; persistence is focused on the student as an individual while retention is institutionally-focused. This conference intentionally focuses on how students continue toward their own educational goals as opposed to how institutions measure retention and graduation rates (Henning, 2016). While other institutions and organizations held conferences that included sessions in student affairs assessment, these two events were the first formal professional development opportunities specifically focused on the field (Henning, 2016). These conferences remain an important part of practitioners' knowledge and skills development in assessment, and are evolving to focus on equity-centered assessment and decolonizing assessment work.

Traditional Student Affairs Assessment Practices

The interventions proposed by and based in student development theory and research are a predominant influence on today's outcomes-based assessment efforts in student affairs. Outcomes-based assessment is often geared toward what students learn or perceive as a result of participating in a specific experience, and it is frequently implemented with the goal of informing interventions that can impact student learning or development in college (Bresciani, et al., 2009). Outcomes-based assessment has become the standard practice in both student learning and program effectiveness assessment. Bresciani's definition of outcomes-based assessment states that student affairs assessment professionals:

> articulate what the program intends to accomplish in regard to its services, research, student learning, and faculty/staff development programs. The faculty and/or professional then purposefully plan the program so that the intended results (e.g., outcomes) can be achieved; implement methods to systematically - over time - identify whether end results have been achieved; and, finally, use the results to plan improvements or make recommendations for policy consideration, recruitment, retention, resource reallocation, or new resource requests. This systematic process of evaluation is then repeated at a later date to determine whether the program improvements contribute to intended outcomes (Bresciani, 2006, as cited in Bresciani, et al., 2009).

This definition remains one of the most comprehensive statements on what student affairs assessment means and is inclusive of program effectiveness, student learning and development out of the classroom, strategic planning and systems thinking, and the continuous improvement cycle. Despite this clear definition, the cyclical process of outcomes-based assessment has continued to be a challenge for practitioners working in higher education environments where assessment culture is new or not yet established across the institution. Recently there has been a renewed focus on "learning improvement" (p. 12) with repeated calls for the reassessment of learning outcomes and using the evidence to make improvements (Finney & Horst, 2019). At the core of this learning improvement movement is the cyclical process of assessment defined by Bresciani (2006).

Traditional Paradigms

Student affairs assessment is grounded in various paradigms, and the primary paradigm of influence changes slightly as the field adjusts to respond to the needs of higher education. One approach to assessing student learning is grounded in a positivist view of education. This suggests

that educational outcomes should be described in terms of student behaviors that serve as a basis for testing and educational objectives. This positivist view has led higher education to adopt evaluation models that mimic business techniques such as strategic planning, zero-based budgeting, and institutional effectiveness (Banta & Associates, 2002).

Another approach focuses on a subjectivist view that values the knowledge of professional authorities, and knowledge and authority are based on expertise gained through experience. Initially, accreditation was performed by credible faculty and administrators in higher education and relied on implicit knowledge to pass judgment about institutions and their programs. Self-studies, such as those mentioned in the section on professional assessment standards, were and still are important in the accreditation process, as local experts are included in decision-making (Banta & Associates, 2002).

In 1995, Robert Barr and John Tagg suggested a subtle shift in paradigm in American higher education that significantly contributed to how assessment is conducted today (Bresciani, et al., 2009). They asserted that colleges and universities were traditionally viewed from an "Instruction Paradigm" (Barr & Tagg, p. 13) where teaching consisted of traditional 50-minute lectures delivered by an instructor lecturing to rows of students in a large classroom. Their new "Learning Paradigm" (Barr & Tagg, p. 13) viewed higher education institutions as dynamic places to produce learning rather than instruction. This paradigm involved creating opportunities for learning that considered students' preferred learning styles and maintained that the institution itself is in a constant state of learning. This shift in paradigm heavily influenced assessment by switching the focus from the students and faculty to the evaluation of the overall experience of higher education and the learning and development that is produced as a result (Bresciani, et al., 2009).

Predominant Research Methods

Not unlike traditional research methods in education, student affairs assessment employs quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approaches in the assessment of student outcomes and program effectiveness. However, while assessment can be conducted in such a way to include and test a hypothesis and report results that are statistically significant, it is not necessary nor common in student learning and programmatic assessment in higher education (Bresciani, et al., 2009). Assessment in higher education and student affairs is conducted to improve practice and student learning (Suskie, 2004), and draws from established research methods to meet those goals.

Quantitative methods emphasize the use of numbers, measurement, and statistical analysis. When using quantitative methods in student affairs assessment, data collection can occur through questionnaires, tests, and national survey tools. There are several national survey tools that have historically been used to gauge college student experience such as the National Survey of Student Engagement and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. Quantitative measures can also be locally created and used to measure specific campus programs and student learning (Bresciani, et al., 2009).

Qualitative measures in student affairs assessment provide detailed descriptions of experiences, attitudes, and situations. Qualitative assessment can occur through open-ended interviews or focus groups, observations, and documents. Qualitative methods are traditionally considered to diminish the process of scientific discovery, but yield data that provide rich information to create a holistic picture of the student experience (Bresciani, et al., 2009). These methods are particularly useful in the assessment of student experiences in college, as they allow for participants to share deep narratives and stories explaining multiple facets of their lives.

Challenges with Traditional Assessment Practices

Despite an increased emphasis on continuous improvement of student learning and program effectiveness outcomes, there remains a focus on accountability in student affairs assessment, from both the institution itself and from external stakeholders and accrediting bodies. As efforts expand to continuously improve student learning outside of the classroom, the need to prove that this learning is taking place is not going away. Expanded efforts to improve student learning sprung from a focus on accountability (Finney & Horst, 2019), and institutional budgets are being cut drastically as stakeholders focus on the return on investment of a college education, especially in student affairs units (Henning, 2016). At some institutions, student affairs units are being asked to focus on providing services rather than student development. Other student affairs divisions are being dismantled or units are being shifted to academic or business affairs (Henning, 2016). Additionally, accrediting bodies want evidence that colleges and universities are able to ensure the cognitive, affective, and social development of students. The problem with accountability is not so much that it exists, but that perceptions of accountability can lead practitioners to conduct assessment in ways that "check a box" instead of focusing on the outcomes and improvements as a result of assessment. Outcomes-based assessment of student learning and effectiveness, which focuses on the desired end result of a programmatic or learning strategy, provides the means to address these concerns (Bresciani, et al., 2009). However, outcomes-based assessment is not always carried out through an equity lens, much less implemented for the purposes of advancing social justice. As colleges and universities release statements committing to the advancement of racial justice and equity (Evatt-Young & Bryson, 2021) and seek to educate a more diverse and global student population, the need to ensure equity in student success has increased (McArthur, 2017). Assessment in higher

education and student affairs must help meet this need, but equity in assessment has not been a focus of modern assessment practices until the last decade.

Equity in Assessment

Assessment, when not conducted from an equity mindset, privileges certain types of learning and evidence of learning over others, hinders the validation of demonstrating learning in multiple ways, and can reinforce within students the false notion that they do not belong in higher education (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Recently, there have been advances in the field to incorporate inclusive practices and critical theory into the assessment of student learning and program effectiveness. In *Opportunities for Social Justice Within and Through Assessment*, McArthur (2017) states, "Assessment practices do not exist in isolation from the world around, and it is critical to social justice to understand such practices as socially situated and socially relevant" (p. 1). Dominant, power-based paradigms and practices do not meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations at institutions of higher education, and a focus on equity needs to be incorporated into every step of the assessment process. This equity focus is recent, ongoing, and developing and in many ways mirrors the growing diversity, equity, and inclusion priorities of colleges and universities. The following discussion on the various influences, iterations, and challenges of equity-centered assessment provides context for the current study.

Culturally Responsive Assessment

The culturally responsive conversation in the assessment and evaluation community began with a focus on test item validity (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020), but has expanded to address the entire assessment cycle. Cultural responsiveness in assessment requires that the individual cultures of students and other contexts are taken into account when engaging in the assessment process (Henning & Lundquist, 2018).

Historically, Western values tacitly guide every aspect of our formal education systems, including academic content, the organization of classrooms, expected styles of communication, instructional practices, and the means by which we assess student learning (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). One such example is that of the No Child Left Behind Act, initiated in 2000, which placed an emphasis on standards of learning to be achieved by every student in public education in the United States, regardless of background, abilities, culture, and other contexts. Due to high demands for students to perform at specific levels on standardized tests, culture-based instructional practices were diminished or abandoned altogether for American Indian and Alaska Native students in favor of methods meant to prepare them to do well on the tests. Decision makers under pressure reverted to "best practices" or "the One Best Way" (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019), leaving no space for these students to demonstrate their learning in ways that may be more meaningful for them from a cultural perspective.

The aims of culturally relevant pedagogy are to "produce students who can achieve academically…demonstrate cultural competence, and develop students who can both understand and critique the existing social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 474). Applicable to settings outside of the classroom as well, cultural relevance in teaching and learning requires assessment methods that honor students and the contexts in which they live and learn. Being culturally responsive in assessment is much like what Trumbull and Nelson-Barber (2019) describe as "cultural validity" (p. 3) in assessment. They explain that cultural validity means that educators and practitioners must recognize that assessments are cultural artifacts and that students' cultural backgrounds, educational experiences, epistemologies, communication styles, and socioeconomic situations need to be accounted for in the development and implementation of assessments (Trumbull & Nelson-Barber, 2019). When practitioners conduct assessment in this

way, it allows students to demonstrate their learning and experiences in ways that are relevant to their cultural background.

Since culturally responsive assessment is dependent upon the context in which the assessment is happening, what works for one institution, program, or classroom most likely will not work for another (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Striving for cultural responsiveness in assessment requires reflection on the part of the educator or practitioner as well as careful planning and implementation that involves multiple voices, including those of students. Montenegro and Jankowski state that the following considerations should guide culturally responsive assessment work:

1. Be mindful of the student population(s) being served and involve students in the process of assessing learning;
2. Use appropriate student-focused and cultural language in learning outcomes statements to ensure students understand what is expected of them;
3. Develop and/or use assessment tools and multiple sources of evidence that are culturally responsive to current students; and
4. Intentional improvement of student learning through disaggregated data-driven change that examines structures, demonstrations of learning, and supports which may privilege some students' learning while marginalizing others (p. 7).

These guidelines help ensure instructional and programmatic assessments are highlighting our historically minoritized students who are not acknowledged through Western approaches to education and assessment.

The concept of culturally responsive assessment has gained traction in the assessment and evaluation community with the publication of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes

Assessment (NILOA) Occasional Paper 29 titled *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment* (2017). This paper served as the first formal presentation of the intersection between equity work and assessment. The field has responded with more than 15 published responses to Occasional Paper 29, collaborations among professional associations and higher education organizations, and conferences and other professional development programs focused on equity in assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020; Henning & Lundquist, 2018). Throughout these publications and initiatives, an evolution of culturally responsive assessment to include social justice and equity arose as a need.

Socially Just Assessment

Socially just assessment includes the elements of culturally responsive assessment within a framework that analyzes the intersectionality of culture, bias, power, and oppression in the assessment process (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). The concept of socially just assessment refers to the application of a social justice lens in every facet of the assessment process as well as the intention of helping advance social justice by conducting assessment. The term *assessment for social justice* was introduced by McArthur (2016) to refer to assessment being implemented in a socially just way as well as the act of using assessment to promote justice. More broadly, Bourke (2017) states that:

> Achieving social justice is multifaceted and complex. The process of social justice requires effort, active participation and collaboration, and sustained advocacy with members of groups who experience oppression on campus and beyond. Social justice, as a goal, is equally complex. Dismantling systems of oppression is a big task. Each of us have to determine our place, and identify our sphere of influence (p. 4).

This means that student affairs assessment practitioners are not only responsible for integrating social justice approaches into their assessment practices, but are also called upon to disrupt oppressive power structures within higher education as a result of this work.

Socially just assessment goes beyond culturally responsive assessment to address the external structures and processes that impact student experience, achievement, learning, persistence, and retention (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). These influences can include institutional culture, assessment data collection and analysis practices, decision making processes, and diversity and inclusion efforts, to name a few. Approaching assessment in this way calls for practitioners to view their work through a critical lens.

Assessment is critical when practitioners acknowledge their own subjectivity and positionality; participants in assessment are recognized as knowers and collaborators in the work; diversity of assessment methods that center marginalized voices are employed in gathering and interpreting data; and, results are used in pursuit of equity (Heiser, et al., 2017). Culturally responsive assessment and socially just assessment both operate from a critical perspective and help inform equity-minded assessment.

Equity-Minded Assessment

Equity-minded assessment takes aspects of culturally responsive assessment and socially just assessment to incorporate an equity lens by which assessment is viewed (Baker & Henning, 2022). Equity-minded assessment began to arise from Montenegro and Jankowski's (2020) second NILOA occasional paper. In this publication, they proposed that equity-mindedness must be present in the entire assessment process as well as the work of assessment practitioners. As Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) built upon culturally responsive assessment, they conceptualized equity-minded assessment as the need to:

1. check biases and ask reflective questions throughout the assessment process to address assumptions and positions of privilege;
2. use multiple sources of evidence appropriate for the students being assessed and assessment effort;
3. include student perspectives and take action based on perspectives;
4. increase transparency in assessment results and actions;
5. ensure collected data can be meaningfully disaggregated and interrogated; and
6. make evidence-based changes that address issues of equity that are context-specific (p. 13).

Equity-minded assessment can be viewed as a transition point in the path toward equity-centered assessment. However, as the literature and conversations about integrating equity and assessment have evolved, it is more recently discussed as one of the many ways to critically approach assessment in higher education (Baker & Henning, 2022).

Equity-Centered Assessment

The term equity-centered assessment goes beyond equity-minded assessment to address the process and products of assessment within the context of the pursuit of equity in higher education. Thus, equity is centered, or prioritized, in each step of the assessment process. In defining equity-centered assessment, Heiser (2021) writes that it:

> …integrates work from critical theory, social justice, and assessment practices in Student Affairs…Equity-centered assessment prioritizes the lived experiences and intersectional identities of students throughout the assessment process and addresses the power dynamics, policies, and practices ingrained in the higher education context which shape assessment work (p. 3).

Equity-centered assessment puts equity at the center of assessment, where the goal of conducting assessment is to address inequity and change systems that perpetuate oppression (Baker & Henning, 2022).

What equity-centered assessment looks like as a process has begun to take shape in recent years. In a 2018 publication, Henning and Lundquist began to unpack an equitable assessment process by addressing the impact of culture, philosophical beliefs and methods in assessment, and systems of power and oppression on established assessment practices. This process identified specific features of assessment and included assessment practices that moved from the concept of bias free assessment to assessment for social justice (Henning & Lundquist, 2018). They later proposed an expanded assessment continuum that illustrates a progression towards assessment for the advancement of social justice and decolonization:

- Do no harm: The first priority is to not cause harm through assessment (Henning & Lundquist, 2020).
- Bias-free assessment: Remove cultural and contextual biases from the assessment process, recognizing that not everyone has the same experience (Henning & Lundquist, 2020). Ensuring response options in demographic survey items are exhaustive and not exclusive is an example of this (Henning & Lundquist, 2018).
- Culturally responsive assessment: Outlined by Montenegro and Jankowski (2017), culturally responsive assessment takes students' cultural backgrounds into consideration. The field of assessment must expand its view of what constitutes learning, employing language, assessment methods, and tools that are appropriate for diverse populations of students (Henning & Lundquist, 2020). An example of this might be offering to conduct

retention exit interviews in Spanish for students of whom that is their first language (Henning & Lundquist, 2018).

- Socially just assessment: Aligns with critical theory and acknowledges power dynamics in higher education. Assessment should be implemented in a way that does not reinforce power dynamics (Henning & Lundquist, 2020). One example of this may be conducting a retention assessment that attempts to understand the impact of campus climate on students' continuation at an institution (Henning & Lundquist, 2018).
- Deconstructed assessment: Acknowledges that systems of power and oppression are created and reinforced by social structures (Henning & Lundquist, 2020). Investigating structures of how student complaints of microaggressions are addressed within an institution or the impact of the local political climate on student experience could be examples of this level (Henning & Lundquist, 2018).
- Assessment for social justice and decolonization: This level is an aggregate of the previous levels and is where assessment takes on the form of activism and is transformational. It dismantles systems of power through deconstructing colonial ideologies of White and Western archetypes (Henning & Lundquist, 2020). Topics addressed through assessment in this way serve to understand and remedy inequities in higher education and within the context of a specific institution (Henning & Lundquist, 2018).

Adopting a framework such as this can provide assessment practitioners guidance on where their own and their institutions' practices fall along the continuum and what to strive for in their operations moving forward. It requires that practitioners think critically about their own historical and current assessment praxis, where they are in their own learning of diversity, equity,

and inclusion issues in education, and the campus environment in which they operate. Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) assert that assessment practitioners must be conscious of how their work can either contribute to cycles that perpetuate inequities or can serve to introduce more equity into higher education. The latter presents challenges for student affairs assessment practitioners focused on integrating equity into their work.

Challenges in Equity-Centered Assessment

Just as there are challenges to conducting meaningful and manageable assessment in student affairs and challenges to engaging in diversity, equity, and inclusion work, there are certainly barriers to implementing fully-integrated equity-centered assessment in higher education and student affairs. Perhaps the most pervasive is that of the cognitive and emotional barrier encountered when assessment and other practitioners become uncomfortable or defensive when asked to engage in equity-minded work and conversations (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Roberts (2019) provides a personal example from a training she attended focused on equity in data-informed improvements and shares that

> ...when the presentation shifted to a review of national data about inequity, the room exploded with anxiety. Suddenly, several White people had seemingly random objections, others had comments they believed were crucial about all the aspects of inequity outside of their control, or comments about how "other faculty" on their campuses would never tolerate reflecting on campus wide or course-specific data on inequity (pp. 1-2).

This responsibility-shifting behavior is not uncommon at institutions of higher education, and can contribute to assessment practitioners committed to advancing social justice feeling at a loss as to how to communicate the importance of this work to others.

Another barrier is that of the value placed on traditional assessment approaches in higher education and student affairs. These approaches can mask the experiences of historically minoritized students on college campuses that often differ from those of their White peers (Dowd, et al., 2011). Many of these assessment approaches are misaligned with social justice agendas, failing to inform practices within higher education that will best support minoritized and marginalized students (Wall, et al., 2014). Examples include the implementation of commonly used evaluation systems (McArthur, 2016) and benchmarks that rely heavily on quantitative data that do not account for social justice outcomes (Wall, et al., 2014). Traditional assessment methods are typically void of methodological creativity, do not center minoritized student voices throughout the process, and lead to aggregate data that does not call attention to the needs of historically marginalized groups.

Other barriers to implementing equity-centered assessment include institutional culture, struggles with involving students in the assessment process, and the fatigue in professionals tasked with doing assessment work on top of other job responsibilities (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Institutional culture can be problematic when assessment is viewed as a way to hold students and others accountable, instead of focusing on learning and development. Even when the culture is focused on student learning and the student experience, the conversation of equity-centered assessment can be difficult and practitioners can feel pressured to use language and practices that resonate with institutional culture (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). These practices often do not center student involvement and needs nor account for the labor exerted by assessment professionals wearing multiple hats.

Institutional Culture in Higher Education

Understanding institutional culture is critical in understanding the state of an institution's assessment practices, and incorporating equity-centered assessment serves as a way to reflect institutional missions and culture specific to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Schein (1985) asserts that understanding culture is essential because it permeates every aspect of an institution and creates patterns for members of the institution that help them manage their behavior, actions, and response to change. A typology proposed by Schein (1985) outlines three aspects of culture: artifacts; values and beliefs; and, basic underlying assumptions. Artifacts are the tangible, physical, and observable manifestations of an institution's culture. Examples of artifacts include physical spaces, art, technology, and traditions. Values and beliefs are the adopted values of a culture, such as those in mission and vision statements. Basic underlying assumptions are the hidden frameworks by which members are expected to operate (Grassadonia, 2006). Colleges and universities also tend to have several subcultures within an institutional culture through which smaller units such as academic departments or student organizations function (Kuh & Whitt, 1998). A university's assessment culture as well as culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion are similar in this subculture concept.

A higher education institution's culture impacts every facet of its environment and will differ from that of another institution. Kuh and Whitt (1988) state that behavior that seems effective at one institution may not be effective at another, even among programs, services, and initiatives that seem similar across institutions. Culture is not generalizable across higher education institutions, even among the same institutional types. Therefore, assessment procedures and practices differ across higher education institutions. Wall (2014) states that

> There is no common definition for assessment in higher education. Rather, any definition grows out of social context. For some, assessment is about examining student learning,

> for others, examining programs, and still others, determining institutional effectiveness (p. 6).

These differences are especially apparent when the lens of equity is applied to assessment in higher education, as it is a more recent phenomenon and still evolving.

The recent and rapid evolution of both assessment and equity issues in higher education has begun to shape institutional cultures in recent years. A focus on diversity and equity has experienced a rebirth, of sorts. Bourke (2017) references the events of the past two years, where college students have engaged in social activism in ways that have not been seen since the 1960s and early 1970s. We have seen multiple types of demonstration, from large-scale campus protests to sit-ins, all in response to "the ongoing subjugation of people from underrepresented groups in the United States" (Bourke, 2017, p. 2). This increase in activism requires higher education institutions to support students in new and different ways. Despite, or perhaps because of this activism, we are seeing an increase in the number of state governments that are limiting or even abolishing funding for equity efforts at state higher education institutions. The most prominent example is that of Florida, where its anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion legislation, HB 999, "seeks to leverage social conservatives' governmental power to change state higher education in unprecedented ways" (Spindelman, 2023, p. 1). This includes demonizing critical race theory in education, slashing funding for DEI programs, and dismantling DEI efforts in human resources practices (Spindelman, 2023). Most institutions already have or are in the process of publicizing mission and values statements, as well as procedures and practices related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Despite government restrictions or other barriers, these statements, policies, and practices need to be actualized in ways that allow assessment practitioners to collect and report data that best serves diverse students (Heiser, 2021).

Assessment conducted with an equity focus could lead to changes in institutional culture where the experiences of historically minoritized students, faculty, and staff are elevated and prioritized.

Institutional culture implicitly establishes a specific way of doing things, which can further marginalize students, faculty, and staff who do not conform to the informal institutional code of conduct (Adonis & Silinda, 2021). This causes institutions to put forth a public identity not representative of all populations they claim to serve. Higher education institutions continuously seek out ways to present their brand in competition with one another. Assessment practices can reflect this orientation and are often carried out by organizational leaders to demonstrate baseline metrics of institutional success as opposed to what they do for the public good (Wall, et al., 2014). Similarly, institutional cultures stress the importance of benchmarking, metrics, and key performance indicators related to student outcomes. These measures are designed to elicit information on minoritized populations who have never seen the measures nor been afforded the opportunity to help shape them (Heiser, 2021). Assessment practitioners must get creative in gathering, analyzing, and reporting institutional data if they are committed to an equity focus in their work. Indeed, institutional culture influences the ways in which equity-centered assessment is implemented in student affairs units in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

This study was based in a critical theoretical framework. Critical theory encompasses many branches and highlights change-oriented approaches by centering lived experiences to challenge social inequities (Heiser et al., 2017). The origins and many traditional approaches of assessment in student affairs are focused in an accountability culture. A critical theory lens was

appropriate in looking at the role of institutional culture in the implementation of equity-centered assessment. Levinson (2011) states that,

> critical social theories are those conceptual accounts of the social world that attempt to understand and explain the causes of structural domination and inequality in order to facilitate human emancipation and equity (p. 2).

This study attempts to explain the ways in which institutional structures hinder or enhance equity in assessment. Traditional assessment approaches can reinforce neutrality, objectivity, and sameness, all of which stall the transformation of inequitable policies, procedures, and outcomes that are systemic in higher education (Heiser et al., 2017). A critical framework provided an equitable orientation in each phase of the research process and addressed the need for systemic organizational change in higher education institutions to encourage and facilitate equity in assessment.

Organizational Development

If institutional cultures are going to change so that historically minoritized students, faculty, and staff feel included in campus structures and systems, organizational development practices and models are needed to realize that level of systemic change. Organizational development refers to the use of models and frameworks to plan and implement change that promotes organizational effectiveness (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). Within the field of organizational development, there are multiple models that are based in the two main theories of change process theory and implementation theory. Change process theory addresses how and why change occurs, whereas implementation theory is concerned with how actions generate change and which actions can initiate and guide change (Austin & Bartunek, 2003). While both theories can inform effective change in an organization, the latter is more action oriented than the

former. Approaches within implementation theory are largely developed and utilized by practitioners, whereas change process theory contains approaches that are mostly developed by academics (Asumeng & Osae-Larbi, 2015). However, action-oriented approaches will be needed to advance equity and inclusion in higher education and student affairs systems.

An organizational development approach that aligns with implementation theory and is inclusive in nature is Appreciative Inquiry. Russell K. Elleven (2007) advocates for an appreciative inquiry model to implement organizational change within student affairs. He cites Watkins and Moore (2001) in describing Appreciative Inquiry as the following:

> A collaborative and highly participative, system-wide approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the "life giving forces" that are present when a system is performing optimally…It is a journey during which profound knowledge of a human system at its moments of wonder is uncovered and used to co-construct the best and highest future of that system (p. 451).

Appreciative Inquiry consists of four phases: Discovery; Dream; Design; and, Destiny. These phases ask participants to examine the best things of the organization, envision a positive organizational future, think of strategies to implement visions and dreams, and form mini projects that are developed through the first three phases that focus on empowerment, learning, and improvisation (Elleven, 2007). Appreciative Inquiry is different from typical, problem solving organizational change approaches, and operates under eight assumptions: In every society, group, or organization there is something that works; what we focus on becomes reality; reality is created in the moment and there are multiple realities; asking questions of a group influences the group in some way; people have more confidence and comfort to journey into the unknown when they embrace parts of the past; if we carry parts of the past forward, they should

be what is best about the past; it is important to value differences; and, the language we use creates our reality (Elleven, 2007). These assumptions communicate a participatory, inclusive approach to organizational change that can be beneficial in higher education and student affairs settings. The techniques involved in Appreciative Inquiry require coordinated efforts from everyone in the organizational structure to participate and validate the change process (Elleven, 2007).

Another model that should be considered for organizational change to advance inclusion in higher education and student affairs is the Multicultural Organization Development (MCOD) model (Holvino, 2008). The model is based on previous work by Bailey W. Jackson and Evangelina Holvino (1988) as they sought to respond to a resurgence of racism and social injustice in localities, higher education institutions, and the workplace. At the time they first proposed MCOD as a field of study and practice, they considered it to be emerging and recognized the lack of journals dedicated to serving the field, and found only one example of a college degree program dedicated to MCOD (Jackson & Holvino, 1988). Recalling work by Jackson and Hardiman (1981), Jackson and Holvino (1988) defined a multicultural organization as one that: reflects the contributions and interests of diverse cultural and social groups in its mission, operations, and product or service; acts on a commitment to the eradication of social oppression in all forms with the organization; recognizes members of diverse cultural and social groups as full participants in all levels of the organization, especially those where decisions are being made; and, follows through on the broader external social responsibilities including its support of efforts to eliminate all forms of social oppression (pp. 14-15). The initial research and recommendations outlined by Jackson and Hardiman (1981) as well as Jackson and Holvino (1988) informed the development of Holvino's (2008) MCOD model.

The MCOD model outlines "a process of change that moves an organization from a monocultural - or exclusive - organization to a multicultural - or inclusive, diverse, and equitable - organization (Holvino, 2008, p. 1). This model is action oriented in approach and allows participants and leadership to identify equity and inclusion gaps in an organization's policies, procedures, and environments. The MCOD model provides ways for an organization to:

1. Frame an initial assessment of where it is on the path to multiculturalism,
2. Decide on a vision of multiculturalism it wants, and
3. Select appropriate goals and interventions to support its desired vision (Holvino, 2008, p. 1).

There are three stages in the MCOD model that describe where an organization may be in their journey to becoming a multicultural organization. Those stages are monocultural, transitional, and multicultural. Within the monocultural stage, an organization can be considered exclusionary by committing to dominance and values of one group, or a passive club where the organization actively or passively excludes those who are not part of the dominant group. In the transitional stage, an organization can be in compliance, where it is passively committed to including others or in a state of positive action where it is committed to making a special effort to include others. Finally, in the multicultural stage, an organization can be in a state of redefining, where it actively tries to expand its definition of inclusion, or it can be multicultural by actively including a diversity of people and continuously learning to make systemic changes (Holvino, 2008).

As part of the MCOD, there is a lens exercise that can help an organization assess where it is in becoming a multicultural organization. This exercise evaluates "the complex, systemic, and interrelated dimensions of diversity in organizations" (Holvino, 2008, p. 3). Through this evaluation, the external and internal factors as well as products of an organization are examined

through the lens of equity and inclusion. The assessment tool used in the lens exercise evaluates any or all of the following organizational dimensions: mission/purpose; structure/roles; policies/procedures; informal systems/culture/norms; people/relationships; leadership; environment; products/services/technology; and, language use (Holvino, 2008). Participants in the lens exercise are asked a series of questions for each dimension of interest. Any or all of the dimensions could be assessed, depending on the scope of the evaluation.

The MCOD model also serves as a guide to action. It can help organization members and leaders identify goals and change strategies to become a more multicultural organization, depending on the stage of development in which the organization currently operates (Holvino, 2008). An organization desiring change must be met where it is at for members and leaders to be ready to implement the change. The MCOD considers the following to be key elements of organizational change: overall purpose of the change; change goals; change strategies; interest in change by organization members and leaders; and constituencies for change (Holvino, 2008). These elements can help determine specific interventions needed to initiate and sustain changes to inclusion and equity in the organization.

Organizational development models have been applied to change initiatives in higher education and student affairs (Boyer & Crockett, 1973; Elleven, 2007; Grapin & Pereiras, 2019). The MCOD model is appropriate to incorporate into the current study as it will provide insight into the diversity, equity, and inclusion cultures inherent in institutions included in the study as well as the role those institutional cultures play in the implementation of equity-centered assessment.

Purpose of the Study

Empirical research is limited in the topic of equity-centered assessment practices. A recent dissertation on equity in student affairs assessment affirms that future research is needed in the areas of the impact of equity-centered assessment practices and barriers created by institutional cultures (Gardner, 2021). The current qualitative study explored the role of institutional culture in the experiences of student affairs assessment practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment.

Summary

This chapter provided a depth of context to frame the need for research on the role of institutional culture in the implementation of equity-centered assessment in student affairs. The historical underpinnings of student affairs assessment are still prevalent in current practices, but there is movement towards a critical framework for assessment that encourages equity and social justice as outcomes of this work. Equity-centered assessment can help higher education institutions respond to the needs of increasingly diverse student populations, providing these institutions are committed to discovering and dismantling barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This chapter highlighted the need for additional research into how institutional cultures influence equity-centered assessment praxis and the experiences of practitioners responsible for conducting and leading assessment in student affairs.

Chapter III: Methodology

This qualitative multiple case study explored the role institutional culture plays in student affairs assessment practitioners' implementation of equity-centered assessment. This chapter explains the study design, the target population of the study, data collection and analysis procedures, researcher positionality, and delimitations of the study.

Research Questions

The previous chapters demonstrated the need to examine how institutional culture influences the experiences of student affairs assessment practitioners when implementing equity-centered assessment. The following research questions guided the study design:

1. How is equity-centered assessment implemented in student affairs at higher education institutions?
2. How do student affairs assessment practitioners in higher education perceive their institutional culture?
3. How does institutional culture influence the implementation of equity-centered assessment practices in student affairs?

Design of the Study

Qualitative research is a field of inquiry that is interpretive and grounded in the lived experiences of people, drawing on methods that respect the humanity of the study participants and are ever-evolving throughout the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Because the current study sought to explore the experiences of student affairs assessment practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment and how institutional culture impacts those experiences, a qualitative design was appropriate. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) write, "qualitative data…focus on *naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings*, so

that we have a strong handle on what 'real life' is like" (p.11). Within the qualitative methodology, a multiple case study design was employed to provide a breadth of examples of the naturally occurring phenomenon. Case study research is useful when "how" or "why" questions need to be answered, when the researcher has little to no control over behavioral events, and the focus of the study is a contemporary phenomenon (Yin, 2018). The current study met these criteria and consisted of multiple cases of individuals with similar job responsibilities at different higher education institutions.

Conceptual Framework

This study was situated within a conceptual framework developed at the intersection of the ideas of critical theory and the transformative paradigm. The transformative paradigm employs many different methods that, when applied through a critical lens, critique power dynamics by setting emancipatory goals for individuals and transformative goals for institutions and other oppressive systems (Hurtado, 2015). A paradigm identifies a set of underlying beliefs to help frame a study and guide a researcher's actions (Wilson, 2008). The transformative paradigm was an appropriate guide for this study since I addressed institutional culture and its role in equity work within student affairs assessment. Framing this study in a transformative paradigm encouraged collaboration between myself and the study participants throughout data collection, analysis, and implications for practice. Participants were invited to review and contribute to their own interview transcripts, the findings I developed, and the implications for practice and institutional change I derived from the findings.

The critical theoretical framework provided a lens through which each phase of the research process was conducted. Using a critical lens furthers the intention to promote action

against inequities and recognizes that this study and the resulting data were shaped by social, political, and cultural forces (Strega, 2015).

Within the conceptual framework of my study, the ontological and epistemological approaches took a critical stance. Placing emphasis on ontology addressed the nature of reality (Hurtado, 2015). In my study, ontological assumptions recognized that my own privileges have the potential to influence what was accepted as data. I needed to ensure my analysis provided insight and legitimacy to the various realities of implementing equity-centered assessment as presented by the participants, particularly their experiences with marginalization or oppression in their work. Similarly, critically thinking about epistemology brought to light the nature of the power dynamics between myself and the study participants (Hurtado, 2015), as well as their interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental relationships (Wilson, 2008). Shawn Wilson (2008) describes the relational accountability associated with Indigenous research and asserts that the assumptions that make up an Indigenous paradigm are related, as opposed to operating as separate aspects of the research process. It was appropriate to consider the relationship of and among epistemology, ontology, and methodology within this conceptual framework as I conducted this study. This focus helped me remain aware of how my role as researcher is based in power structures. I sought to co-create a relationship based on relational accountability between myself and the participants to better understand the relationships that influence their experiences with institutional culture and equity-centered assessment.

Methods

A multiple case study methodology was used to explore the role of institutional culture in the experiences of practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment in student affairs. Case study explicitly focuses on context and interactions within a phenomenon, and can include a

variety of methods, including those that illicit quantitative data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the current study, the cases were defined by the experiences of assessment practitioners who implement equity-centered assessment. It was imperative to the study that these practitioners held a role dedicated to leading assessment for a student affairs division at a higher education institution. This methodology provided a depth of understanding of the assessment practitioners' experiences with institutional culture as they implemented equity-centered assessment at various higher education institutions.

Participants

The population in this study consisted of assessment practitioners who are regularly engaging in and leading equity-centered assessment at the division level within student affairs. Division-level assessment practitioners were recruited because of their positional connection to institutional leadership and the effects of institutional-level policy, procedure, and politics in their work. These professionals were selected through purposeful sampling, which calls for specific persons, settings, and/or activities to be selected deliberately to provide information relevant to the goals of the study (Maxwell, 2013). I began this sampling strategy by contacting practitioners in the student affairs assessment field with whom I have a personal connection and who are knowledgeable in equity-centered assessment practices. I sought suggestions for possible participants from these professionals. I then incorporated snowball sampling to seek participation from other student affairs assessment practitioners so that data collection and recruitment was an ongoing process and I maintained continued engagement with practitioners. Snowball sampling allows the researcher to build on insights or connections made from earlier data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), and ensured that I received quality recommendations for participants from others who are well-versed in equity-centered

assessment. Once I exhausted my options with personal contacts and snowball sampling, I had four participants that met my criteria from four different institutions. In an effort to identify additional participants, I sent a recruitment email to the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) listserv. As a result, I was able to secure two additional participants for the study.

I sought to include at least one division-level student affairs assessment practitioner from each institution, and aimed to recruit practitioners from no fewer than four different institutions. I did not want to exceed eight practitioners for the total number of study participants. The sampling approach and size allowed for an exploration of diverse experiences while maintaining a sufficient amount of data for analysis. Ultimately, I was able to recruit and interview six participants from six different institutions. Table 1 illustrates the number of participants in the study per institution.

Table 1

Number of Study Participants Per Institution

Institution	Number of participants
Historically Black Institution (HBCU)	1
Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	1
Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	1
Minority Serving Institution (MSI); Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI)	1
Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	1
Predominantly White Institution (PWI)	1

Procedures

This study comprised multiple cases that explored how institutional culture affects the experiences of student affairs practitioners responsible for implementing and leading equity-centered assessment. Multiple case study research is used when a researcher is interested in exploring multiple instances of a phenomenon to provide confidence in how, where, and why it occurs (Miles et al., 2014). The multiple case study approach ensured that cases involving practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment were presented within various institutional cultures, allowing for a breadth of examples. The availability of student affairs assessment practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment helped determine how many institutions were included in the study. The data collection for each case consisted of two interviews with student affairs assessment practitioners and institutional artifacts such as mission statements, strategic plans, websites, and diversity, equity, and inclusion statements.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with student affairs assessment practitioners to explore their experiences with institutional culture and how it influenced their implementation of equity-centered assessment. In the first interview, I asked participants to reflect upon their role in implementing equity-centered assessment, what led them to engage in equity-centered assessment, challenges they experience in their work, and what institutional factors affect their experiences.

The second interview was focused on exploring institutional culture and engaged practitioners in the MCOD Lens Exercise. The MCOD is "a process of change that supports an organization moving from a monocultural - or exclusive - organization to a multicultural - or inclusive, diverse and equitable - organization" (Holvino, 2008, p. 1). The three stages in the MCOD model describe where an organization may be in their journey from a monocultural to a multicultural organization. Figure 1 illustrates the three main stages and substages of the model.

Figure 1.

The Multicultural Organization Development Model

The Multicultural Organization Development Model					
Monocultural		Transitional		Multicultural	
Exclusionary	Passive Club	Compliance	Positive Action	Redefining	Multicultural
Committed to the dominance, values, and norms of one group. Actively excludes in its mission and practices those who are not members of the dominant group.	Actively or passively excludes those who are not members of the dominant group. Includes other members only if they "fit" the dominant norm.	Passively committed to including others without making major changes. Includes only a few members of other groups.	Committed to making a special effort to include others, especially those in designated protected "classes." Tolerates the differences that those others bring.	Actively works to expand its definition of inclusion, diversity, and equity. Tries to examine and change practices that may act as barriers to members of non-dominant groups.	Actively includes a diversity of people representing different groups' styles and perspectives. Continuously learns and acts to make the systemic changes required to value, include, and be fair to kinds of people.
Values and promotes the dominant perspective of one group, culture, or style.		Seeks to integrate others into systems created under dominant norms.		Values and integrates the perspectives of diverse identities, cultures, styles, and groups into the organization's work and systems.	

Source: Holvino, E. (2008). Developing multicultural organizations: A change model.

The six substages described in Figure 1 within the monocultural, transitional, and multicultural stages are the proposed stages that an organization moves through as they become multicultural.

While the model is intended to be applied to a larger institution or organization for the purposes of change, the MCOD Lens Exercise served as a way to assess the dimensions of diversity within an organization (Holvino, 2008). To utilize the assessment tool, study participants were asked to focus on the organizational dimensions of mission/purpose, policies/procedures, informal systems/culture/norms, and leadership. The following four questions comprise the exercise:

1. How do you assess the level of multiculturalism: monocultural, in transition, or multicultural?
2. What indicators or information did you use to assess it that way?
3. Given your assessment, what would be an appropriate change goal in order to become more multicultural?
4. What other information do you need in order to assess more accurately the level of multiculturalism in the organization?

As originally designed, the questions lend themselves to a written response. As a result, it was necessary to pilot the MCOD exercise with two colleagues to ensure the questions would translate well to interviews. Revisions were made to the MCOD based on the pilot. For example, I found that the term "assess" in the first two questions caused confusion and elicited a different response than what was intended. For the participant interviews, the questions were slightly edited from their original versions to be clearer to the participants. I also made sure to explicitly name the specific organization dimension of focus during each round of the questions. The final version of the MCOD Lens Exercise questions were as follows:

1. How would you describe the level of multiculturalism for _____: monocultural, in transition, or multicultural?

2. What indicators or information do you use to describe the _____ that way?
3. Given your assessment, what do you think would be an appropriate change goal for the _____ to become more multicultural?
4. What other information do you need in order to more accurately assess the level of multiculturalism for _____?

The two interview sessions were held via Zoom, to account for the variety of the participants' geographic locations. The interview sessions were recorded within the virtual meeting platform, producing an audio-only recording with a corresponding interview transcript. Each transcript was compared to its corresponding recording and edited where the transcription was inaccurate. The participants' responses in the interviews and to the questions for each of the four MCOD dimensions provided insight into their work in equity-centered assessment and perceptions of culture at their respective higher education institutions.

Additionally, I collected institutional artifacts to provide observational insight into the culture of each institution included in the study. Artifacts can convey messages about an organization and portray the values and beliefs of participants in a study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). For the current study, I reviewed publicly available documents and artifacts and requested documents in various formats from the study participants that were not publicly available but that help illustrate the culture and practices surrounding equity-centered assessment. These artifacts included mission statements, strategic plans, diversity, equity, and inclusion statements, division of student affairs websites, organizational charts, assessment plans and associated documents, documents related to various assessment trainings and workshops, and participant resumes and curricula vitae. Some of these artifacts were identified and described through participant responses to the second question in the MCOD Lens Exercise. This collection was used to

support the data provided from the participants through the interviews and MCOD Lens Exercise.

Data Analysis

As the semi-structured interviews were completed, audio-only recordings were automatically processed in the Zoom cloud along with their corresponding transcripts. VCU has a license for Zoom and it is used widely in higher education environments, so it is easily accessible by students, faculty, staff, and my study participants. Using Zoom ensured that the interviews were transcribed accurately and in a timely manner. Following each interview, I compared the audio recordings with their corresponding transcripts and made any corrections that were needed as a result of the automatic transcription. The finalized transcripts totaled 473 pages (247 pages of first interview transcripts and 226 pages of second interview transcripts). The transcripts for both interviews were shared with their respective participants, to conduct member checks and ensure accuracy of the transcribed conversations.

Once the transcriptions were member checked, I performed an overall read of the transcripts to familiarize myself with the data. I then performed open coding, where I identified key ideas and patterns that emerged from the data and assigned them a phrase that describes them. I also used in vivo codes in my analysis. In vivo codes utilize exact words that the participants use, and can help the researcher better understand the meaning behind their experiences (Maxwell, 2013). These codes were then categorized to identify themes in the data across the two interviews. I used Dedoose (version 9.0.90), a qualitative analysis software, to identify, apply, and organize the codes. Given the amount of interview data, the data analysis process was focused on reducing the data to identify primary themes. The data analysis process involved creating a large set of initial codes based on reading through each of the transcripts and

involved merging similar codes and reducing overlapping codes (n = 544). Codes that were dissimilar to others were also included in the analysis to add to the depth of experiences among the participants. These codes were then combined into 59 code categories to generate the main themes. See Appendix C for a detailed example of code categories, specific codes, and interview transcript text where codes were applied.

The MCOD Lens Exercise responses were coded and categorized in a manner similar to the interviews. Each question response from each participant was analyzed to develop codes to identify meaning, and then categories were formed among the similar codes that arose from the responses of all participants. Codes that were outliers were also included in the final analysis to honor experiences that are dissimilar to other participants. Codes and categories from both interviews were shared with the participants and they were invited to participate in a discussion about the analysis, to continue the relational nature of the study.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is how reliability and validity of the research are addressed in qualitative studies and asks if we believe the claims that one puts forward through their research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This section describes the strategies used to ensure the research and findings generated in this study are credible and dependable.

Triangulation

Due to the nature of multiple case study research, triangulation is an obvious way to help establish trustworthiness. Triangulation involves the use of different research methods as a check on one another to see if the methods all support the same conclusion (Maxwell, 2013). Not only did I use multiple data sources within each case in the current study, but I analyzed multiple cases across different institutions. These cases also contributed to triangulation in this study, to

determine if I could draw similar conclusions from each case. Triangulation attempts to establish a convergence of evidence where each case study's data illustrates multiple measures of the same phenomenon. These data supported the overall findings and helped strengthen the construct validity of this study (Yin, 2018).

Reflective Memos

Throughout the data collection process, I developed memos to record my thoughts about the data and the research process. Writing reflective memos and notes "is invaluable for generating the unusual insights that move the analysis from the mundane and obvious to the creative" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.221). I used the memos in the collection and analyzation processes to understand how the data were describing the phenomenon and relating to the literature.

Member Checks

In an effort to ensure that I did not misinterpret data from practitioner interviews I conducted member checks. Member checking serves as respondent validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where the researcher solicits feedback from participants in the study about the data and conclusions drawn from the data (Maxwell, 2013). I conducted member checks in two ways during the research process. First, I asked participants to review the interview transcripts, to ensure that everything they said was captured in the automatic transcription. Second, I sent the participants my conclusions drawn from the interviews after coding and categorizing the data to ensure that I interpreted the data correctly. I made adjustments to transcripts and findings as needed based on feedback from the study participants to ensure their experiences were accurately reflected.

Thick Descriptive Data

To encourage transferability of the data in my study, I focused on using thick descriptions of the data throughout the research process. Providing thick descriptions helps the reader to determine the extent to which the findings "ring true" (Shenton, 2004, p. 69) and demonstrate the potential for replication of the study across contexts (Anney, 2014). My role in achieving transferability was to ensure thick descriptive data was presented in every phase of the study including context, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and production of the final report.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument and their presence in the lives of the study participants is fundamental to the methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Therefore, my reflections on my identities and ways of knowing are critical components of why I chose this study, my development of research questions, the methods I selected, and how I interpreted the data to draw conclusions. As a practitioner of student affairs assessment, and one who attempts to incorporate equity into my work, this study had much to do with who I am currently and where I have been in life.

I identify as a White, cisgender, straight woman. I am able-bodied, educated, and benefit from many privileges that my observable identities afford me. I have a White male partner who is enthusiastically supportive of my professional and academic endeavors, as well as numerous family and friends who are just as supportive. I am fortunate to have discovered a career in assessment within higher education and student affairs, as it has afforded me numerous benefits including excellent health insurance, a retirement plan, paid time off of work, and the ability to pursue my masters degree and now my doctorate degree at no monetary cost as part of my benefits package.

I am from a working-class background and was raised in a small town in southern Virginia where textile mills and furniture factories once thrived. One of my favorite things about myself is my southside Virginia accent, but it is sometimes a topic of conversation because it is different or hard for others to understand. Neither of my parents attended a four-year college or university, nor left their hometown to attend college. I was educated in the public school system and was an "okay" student. When it comes to diversity and equity, I was taught to "not see color." While this mindset taught me to value and respect everyone regardless of skin color, I remained mostly unaware of continued injustices to Black, Indigenous, and other persons of color (BIPOC) until I was well into adulthood. And, even more recently I've learned about how many of our systems in the U.S. - including education - are built to benefit White, straight, cisgender, able-bodied persons and oppress those who do not hold those identities.

My commitment to equity and integrating equity into my work as an assessment practitioner is a newer part of my identity, but is one that I feel passionately about. I'm grateful for continued conversations with colleagues, both in and outside of the assessment field, that are insightful, challenging, and kind. I am still learning and I do not get it right all the time. I have engaged in assessment practices that have further marginalized certain groups by centering White, objective, and traditional practices in my work; crafting demographic questions for assessment projects that were not inclusive of all members of the population; and by conducting my work alone or with other White people instead of seeking the perspectives of persons from historically marginalized backgrounds or identities. I still struggle to find ways to involve students in every step of the assessment process so that they are participants in the work instead of subjects to be scrutinized. I am committed to doing better and being better. I continuously try

to incorporate equity into my work and my encounters with others, and this study is part of that effort.

Delimitations

Delimitations address the ways in which I've bound my study to identify criteria that best answer my research questions. First, I have limited the participants in my study to practitioners leading assessment for student affairs divisions in higher education settings. These practitioners were specifically situated at the division level to ensure they would be able to provide detailed experiences with their institution's culture in their implementation of equity-centered assessment.

Second, this study was focused on practitioners' experiences with student affairs assessment work that takes place outside of the academic classroom. Assessment that occurs in academic classroom settings within higher education was not addressed.

Finally, I limited the methods used in this study to only qualitative methods. The interviews, including the participants' responses to the MCOD Lens Exercise, were all qualitative in nature. Additionally, review of institutional documents and artifacts that support the participants' interviews is considered a qualitative method. There were no quantitative methods or measures utilized in this study.

Summary

This chapter detailed the methodology involved in conducting multiple case study research on the role of institutional culture in the experiences of practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment. Purposeful and snowball sampling techniques were used to select practitioners who are intentionally engaged in equity-centered assessment practices. A multiple case study approach utilizing interviews, the MCOD Lens Exercise, and artifact review with

practitioners at several institutions was conducted. Qualitative analysis provided a comprehensive picture of the role institutional culture plays in the practitioners' experiences, and attempted to address gaps in the research surrounding the implementation of equity-centered assessment.

Chapter IV: Findings

This chapter describes the findings of a multiple case study used to explore the role of institutional culture in student affairs assessment practitioners' experiences implementing equity-centered assessment. Data was collected through two semi-structured interviews with participants. A review of institutional documents and artifacts from each institution helped corroborate what the participants shared during their interviews. In reporting the findings, I share profiles of the participants and the major themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes are presented by research question. The three research questions that guided the study are:

1. How is equity-centered assessment implemented in student affairs at higher education institutions?
2. How do student affairs assessment practitioners in higher education perceive their institutional culture?
3. How does institutional culture influence the implementation of equity-centered assessment practices in student affairs?

There are some important points that should be addressed prior to the presentation of findings. First, most direct quotes from the interviews have been edited to improve readability. Some of the starts, stops, and tangents that come with natural speech patterns have been deleted to ensure the reader's focus remains on the participants' experiences and thoughts. Additionally, certain participant details have been altered to maintain confidentiality. This includes the use of each participant's chosen pseudonym as well as changes to demographic, geographic, and/or work-related details as needed. In all of these instances, careful attention has been paid to not alter the meaning of what has been shared by the participants. Finally, participants were consulted in the presentation of these findings to ensure that I accurately captured their

experiences and to continue my critical approach to conducting this study. Alterations to the findings were made where necessary based on the participants' feedback.

Participant Profiles and Themes

Table 2 below provides a preliminary snapshot of each participant. In reporting the findings, I have included a brief profile of each participant with each research question and its emergent themes instead of separating detailed profiles under their own heading and presenting themes in a separate section. Therefore, each profile is focused on the participant's experience related to that theme. This presentation method is intended to align with the critical focus in my conceptual framework by centering the experiences of the participants and highlighting the intersections of their identities, institutional settings, and experiences integrating equity into assessment work.

Table 2

Participant Identities, Assessment Role, and Institutional Type

	Salient identities[a]	Assessment role[b]	Institutional type
Andy	Mexican American, first-generation college student	Leading assessment as part of senior leadership role in division of student affairs	Minority Serving Institution (MSI); Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI)
Dayna	White, heterosexual, cisgender woman, first generation college student	Leading assessment as part of department leadership role in division of student affairs	Predominantly White Institution (PWI)
Isabella	Hispanic woman, mother	Director of assessment for division of student affairs	Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

Leah	Black woman, first generation college student, spiritual	Director of assessment for division of student affairs	Historically Black College or University (HBCU)
Peter	White, cisgender male, heterosexual	Director of assessment for division of student affairs	Predominantly White Institution (PWI)
Victoria	White, heterosexual, cisgender woman	Director of assessment for division of student affairs	Predominantly White Institution (PWI)

[a]Salient identities refer to participants' self-described identities

[b]Assessment roles are listed as general descriptors, not official titles, to maintain confidentiality of participants

Research Question 1: How is Equity-Centered Assessment Implemented in Student Affairs at Higher Education Institutions?

Interviews with participants revealed that while there are common themes that can be drawn from practitioner experiences implementing equity-centered assessment, the ways in which their experiences illustrate the themes look different across identities and institutions. To address the first research question, I have presented participant profiles to begin to introduce the themes followed by descriptions of each theme with examples of how experiences are different and similar, where applicable.

Participant Profiles

Andy

Andy identifies as Mexican American, was a first-generation college student, and uses she/her pronouns. She holds a leadership position in the division of student affairs at an institution that has Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) designations. Andy's oversight of units that serve students who hold marginalized identities provided the lens by which she formalized and

continues to lead the assessment initiatives in the division. She felt the need to "tell the stories of the voices that aren't being heard." Even though assessment was not her area of expertise and she did not always see herself as an assessment practitioner, Andy formalized division assessment processes, discovered and onboarded assessment champions, and organized training and education for assessment. Her education in equity-centered assessment occurred through the development of the initiatives, processes, and training opportunities she coordinated for her division. Initially, the goal of creating the assessment initiative in the division was to increase knowledge and capacity in assessment, including her own. Andy feels that equity is her "life's work" and the use of data provides a neutral way for her to center equity in conversations with other student affairs leaders.

Dayna

Dayna is a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman who was a first-generation college student. She is a department director at a mid-size Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and has been leading the assessment efforts for student affairs for about one year in addition to her full-time position. While assessment is not her primary role, her director position requires that she is familiar with using data to inform practice and she has had what she describes as "mostly positive experiences with the process of assessment." Leading assessment was unexpected for her and she believes it is an area that emerges out of her strengths and how she has been mentored during her career. Dayna is committed to focusing on equity in the student experience through division assessment initiatives and advocates for the use of data to explore the sense of belonging in marginalized groups on her campus. In learning about integrating equity into assessment work, Dayna has experienced an informal education and says that she's "picked it up in a classically, very eclectic way" as she has supported institutional efforts to advance equity

and inclusion. She believes that her sex and gender are reasons why she was not encouraged to pursue a math or data-related major in college despite her skills, which ultimately impacted her career path. Dayna is aware of this as she engages in equity efforts institutionally and through her assessment work.

Isabella

Isabella identifies as a Hispanic woman and a mother and feels these identities deeply influence her work. She leads assessment for the division of student affairs at a mid-to-large PWI as her primary role and has been engaged in student affairs assessment and research for most of her career. Isabella's first professional role in the academy was in student affairs assessment and research, and even though she has been responsible for direct student support in previous positions, she has always maintained an assessment lens in her work. As a first-generation low-income college student of color, she benefitted from programs created for diverse students and was able to get involved in research as an undergraduate student. These influences inform her assessment focus, which she describes as "Understanding if we're doing the right things for students. And, if we're doing things right." Isabella was formally trained in quantitative assessment practices, but increasingly values qualitative analysis, mixed methods approaches, and storytelling to elevate diverse voices as she continues to learn and engage in assessment and research. She states that "the academy wasn't built for me" and uses this lens, combined with published resources and frameworks in her learning about equity-centered assessment. Isabella's personal lens and knowledge of equity-centered assessment helps her advocate for the use of non-cognitive, psychosocial assessments in measuring student success and informing institutional support and systematic changes to improve student belonging.

Leah

Leah is a Black woman who serves in an official assessment capacity for the division of student affairs at a historically Black university (HBCU). She was a first-generation college student and considers herself to be a spiritual person. She believes that all of these identities show up frequently in her work and describes herself as "a product of predominantly White institutions." Prior to working in student affairs assessment Leah held positions in various student services offices and came into assessment work through committee involvement and the pursuit of her doctorate degree. She described a great deal of imposter syndrome in her first assessment role but quickly built upon knowledge and relationships established through professional development opportunities. Leah is passionate about equity-centered assessment and describes it as "second nature." She cites publications about equity-minded assessment as beginning her formal educational journey toward equity-centered and socially just assessment. This education has helped her distinguish between equity-minded and equity-centered assessment, and she knows when she is engaging in each. She describes herself as a "disruptive scholar." Leah engages in equity-centered work because, as she shared, "when I looked at everyone who was writing about it and presenting on it, none of them looked like me."

Peter

Peter identifies as a White, cisgender, heterosexual male and holds a position leading assessment for the division of student affairs at a large PWI. He has a staff that he can collaborate with to enact the values of the office, which include maintaining data integrity and ensuring diverse voices are not being missed in assessment. Peter began this work through other student affairs roles when he needed to justify a need for funding by using data and has experienced increasing responsibility for assessment efforts leading up to his current position. Even though he has led his office for several years, he says that he is "still keeping a healthy

dose of imposter syndrome." Peter and his staff incorporate equity into assessment work almost every day, particularly in the need to address the limitations of demographic descriptors at the institutional and federal levels. He has learned about equity-centered assessment through publications from experts in the field who have recently formalized the discussion and informally by ensuring that the work of his office tells "the story that needs to be told" of participants and focuses on "advocating for the student voice."

Victoria

Victoria is a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman who leads assessment for the division of student affairs at a large PWI. In talking about her path to engaging in assessment work, she indicated that "I for sure never saw myself in assessment at all" but saw the benefit of data for making policy changes at the institution and state levels while in her student affairs masters program. Victoria intentionally incorporates equity into assessment work "any time assessment work comes up, so that could be daily, weekly, or monthly" and referenced integrating it into specific projects as well as trainings and conversations led by her staff. She is aware of how holding majority identities can influence her work and that there is a need for her to mitigate that by collaborating with colleagues holding different identities. Victoria has experienced a great deal of professional development in assessment, and first learned about integrating equity into assessment through her masters program that centered equity and inclusion throughout the curriculum. She has since sought out opportunities to integrate it into her work and learn more through formal publications and conferences. She believes she has developed from being less intentional about it in her first formal assessment role to actively seeking resources and ways to prioritize it in her work in her current position.

Themes

Elevating Diverse Voices Through Assessment

Each participant shared examples of how they use assessment to draw attention to, or elevate, the voices of diverse participants. They described the importance of highlighting the needs of marginalized populations on their campuses to inform decision-making, and some participants referred to incorporating storytelling or telling the story of these groups. Storytelling served as a way for these practitioners to advocate for the experiences and needs of diverse groups that may be different from their counterparts holding identities that align with the majority population. Participants also shared how elevating diverse voices showed up in other phases of the assessment process, including planning, data collection, and analysis and interpretation. While this theme emerged as a clear focus area for all participants in the study, the act of elevating diverse voices showed up differently in their examples.

Andy sits in spaces with senior leaders in her division, and talked about how sharing assessment data on diverse programming and student experiences helps her navigate politics when advocating for marginalized students. She stated,

> I needed to be able to tell the story of my departments a little more fully, and I'm responsible for a lot of equity-centered programs themselves. So, I wanted to make sure that students' voices were coming forward in some way. But I needed to be able to bring that forward in a way that the academy would listen. So, assessment was one of the ways that I found that I could do that.

She continued by saying, "I figured I need to be able to tell the stories of the voices that aren't being heard. Whose data are we looking at? Whose are we not?" Telling these stories requires that Andy examine her own biases, and she shared about she looks inward to effectively elevate diverse voices:

> If I have to tell the story of all these diverse voices, I need to be educated on them. I need to interrogate myself in terms of what are the things I need to learn, what are the things I need to unlearn. So, I really had to interrogate self and learn a lot to make sure that I was being as effective as possible. So, there's that whole process you have to go through if you're going to do assessment. You know what biases you need to factor, and then how do we bring these voices to the table?

Drawing attention to diverse voices through assessment helps Andy navigate institutional politics in her advocacy work, but she has needed to learn and unlearn in order to do that successfully. While Andy focuses on highlighting diverse voices at the division and institution level, Dayna's work reflecting this theme is more departmentally focused.

Dayna tries to elevate diverse voices through assessment by looking at disaggregated usage data for the student affairs department she oversees. She is committed to serving her university's diverse student populations and is reviewing this data to determine if students from marginalized groups are using her unit's services at the same rate as White students. She stated,

> One of my most important goals for my area has always been to create a very welcoming environment. That's what we called it 20-30 years ago. Now, I love the term belonging-sense of belonging. But you know, I think when I started this work, I just thought that I want any student to feel like they are welcome here, and that they can utilize our services. And, so you can't really know that until you look at data. How can you tell? Are you really interacting with students from all kinds of different student populations?

Dayna went on to discuss how she hopes to "go about doing additional outreach to student groups and identities that we might not be engaging with at the same level as our White students, as a predominantly White institution." Intentionally seeking out the voice of diverse students will

allow her to explore which services in her unit have higher use from specific identity groups. She knows that she will need data to know if they are truly making a difference in the experiences of diverse students or if that is just their assumption. The intentional outreach to diverse student groups could ultimately help Dayna tell the story of how these students are experiencing the services her unit provides.

Isabella already engages in storytelling to call attention to diverse student needs. She talked specifically about how it is "such a huge part of elevating those voices to a level to help make decisions, and I feel that is such an important component of doing this work, and as a researcher." She also shared specific aspects of what she and her colleagues consider when elevating diverse voices is the goal:

> People talk about equity, but they don't know how to do it in [assessment] work. We're not perfect. We obviously have a lot of room for improvement. But we are very intentional in the way that we collect demographic information, and not having an "other" box, and just different ways that we're structuring our research protocols to make sure that we're including some of those mixed methods and storytelling. And, that we're being inclusive and sharing diverse voices, especially on a predominantly White campus.

Isabella also spoke about advocating for non-cognitive assessments that could help tell student stories and demonstrate student success more than GPA and background characteristics alone. In her experience, these basic metrics led to assumptions about certain student populations being at risk. She advocated for a more strengths-based approach and explained,

> I just felt like it was a very deficit model, and…students are bringing a lot to the table. They may not have knowledge about some things in the academy, but they may have really high help seeking behavior, and they may be super motivated.

Isabella's implementation of non-cognitive assessments highlighted the stories of diverse students for advisors and other student support areas so they could know the resources students of all identities need to succeed.

For Leah, taking identities into consideration and being intentional about how the assessment process impacts them is a primary way she elevates diverse voices through her work. She stated,

> We're creating a space where BIPOC voices can be heard in assessment, and a lot of that is based on how we ask questions, how we collect data, and who's analyzing the data. Wellbeing looks different across BIPOC populations- we have to think about the questions that we ask and how they're delivered.

When discussing the telling of diverse stories more broadly, Leah also shared, "I'm constantly thinking about, especially being at a HBCU where the majority of people here identify as African American, how do I help tell their stories to generate ideas, to break these barriers, to provide more equity in different spaces [besides race]?" She provided a specific example of how this played out at her institution:

> A couple of years ago I worked with our SGA President, and at the time the issue was, we want more support for LGBTQ community. What does that look like? We did a campus climate survey and realized that we weren't doing our part as an institution to help them have a sense of belonging for this community. The results of that climate survey led to us opening our first LGBT resource center.

Leah shared that she is constantly thinking of all the intersecting identities represented at her institution and how her assessment work can lift up those diverse voices.

In his work to include multiple identities and diverse voices in his assessment work, Peter regularly has conversations with departments regarding the integration of demographic questions in their assessment projects. He gave the following example about how his office pushes departments to consider differences in engagement levels by demographic:

> The traditional view would be, I had a lot of participants [in my program] right? I had 100. That's amazing, and just leave it at that. And, we know that's not enough- we need to know who came and who did not come. So, if it's dicing by gender or race/ethnicity or academic college, academic year, on campus students and off campus students, you know. Undergrad and grad students. There are a lot of different ways that we ask. And so, we push them. If they are doing a report on engagement, it will include some demographic factors. So, that happens fairly regularly, and that's intentional. It's kind of almost a checklist of things that we look at to make sure we're not missing a voice.

Ensuring representative demographics contributes to storytelling through assessment. Similar to some of the other participants, Peter also talked about storytelling and specifically shared his focus on telling the story that needs to be told in his work. He stated, "you know, when you work with clients and you're trying to do the best thing to tell the most honest story…the correct story…that's part of it, is advocating for the student voice." He realizes that the story itself matters when elevating diverse voices, and that it should be reflective of the students that shared it.

While she did not specifically talk about storytelling, Victoria shared other ways she elevates diverse voices through assessment. She ensures projects account for identities and access needs such as participants' first spoken language, access to technology, and reading ability. She provided a detailed account of an employee wellness survey that brought together

multiple and diverse colleagues to provide input. She shared, "While I might be the assessment expert, knowing the needs of our colleagues and what we needed to know from them was not just going to fall to me." Because she included multiple voices in implementing the survey, Victoria was able to offer paper copies of the survey in a way that ensured anonymity for the participants, and in four different languages in addition to English. Regarding that process she shared,

> We figured out what are some of the most common languages that are spoken- where English is not even a second or third language, or is a barrier to providing their feedback. And, so, we had the survey translated into those languages. And the intent was, while folks had colleagues that could translate it for them, we really wanted to have them feel empowered to respond to the survey in their own language. So, they could submit a survey back to me in that language [anonymously] and then I shared the completed survey with the translator who translated it back to English for me.

For this and similar projects, Victoria also stressed the importance of highlighting diverse voices through sharing the results with division leadership and following up on changes that need to be made as a result of the assessment. Sharing results and follow-through are important ways for her to demonstrate to the students, faculty, and staff holding diverse identities that their voices are heard and valued.

The Role of Identities in Assessment Work

While not every participant spoke about the ways in which their salient identities influenced their assessment work, most referred to this at least once during the interviews. They talked about their experiences being first generation and/or low-income college students and how that influenced their career paths, the support they needed, and the student affairs services from which they benefitted. One participant, who identifies as a Black woman, uses her identities to

influence her focus on equity and how she approaches assessment work for marginalized populations. And yet another participant shared how she tries to ensure her identity as a White woman does not get in the way of her elevating the voices of diverse groups in her assessment work. For the participants that talked about their identities, they did so without being asked and were passionate about the role of their identities in their equity-centered assessment work.

In her assessment role and through the work of her primary department, Dayna calls upon her experience as a first generation, female student entering college. She feels that the assumptions that were made about her aptitude and potential hindered her from pursuing a major that was data or math related:

> When I was coming out of high school, I knew I was gonna go on to college. But I had no concept of what college really was. As a first-generation student and as a female student, I was very good at math in high school, but I did not have any encouragement for pursuing something that was math related. Because, I do love data. I have become a little bit of a data nerd. And, I always feel disappointed that I wasn't mentored.

This experience informs the equity and belonging focus in Dayna's work. She continued on to say "I do believe that my sex and gender as a female and a young woman impacted the career path that I had." She is keenly aware of identity-based stereotypes and how they can shift or negatively impact a student's collegiate experience.

Isabella, another first-generation student, talked about how higher education was not created for students holding her identities. Her identities and how she experienced college created her approach to assessment, in which equity is always embedded:

> I've been very passionate about student success my whole entire career mainly because I was a first-generation, low-income student, and I also became a single parent really

young in college. As somebody who came from a background which didn't quite fit into the academy when I first became a college student, I really had that intentional bias of needing to make sure that we're serving all students and being inclusive in our practices. And I was always very intentional, always calling out inequities. Why are we not looking at it this way? Why are we using this as an outcome? Why can't we think about this?

Isabella also spoke about how initially, her assessment work came from a place of "I'm doing this for my community", as a way to expose the inequities experienced by students holding similar identities to hers.

Leah also readily shared her identities and how they influence her assessment work. When asked about the frequency in which she incorporates equity into assessment, it was apparent that her identities, her equity work, and her assessment work are always intertwined. She said,

> So, it's second nature because of me being a black woman. And so, when I think about equity, meaning eliminating barriers as a black woman, I've been doing that all my life because of racism, societal views, and how black women are viewed. It's like we come into the world already ten steps behind. And so, we're creating spaces to eliminate barriers. And so, being in this space of assessment, being able to tell the stories, I get the opportunity to break those barriers because of how I collect data, how I pose certain questions, how I analyze the data, how I share the data with certain entities, how we analyze it together, and how we use the data to improve practices for not only students or faculty, but staff as well.

Even though her identities empower Leah's assessment work, she also talked about a time when they spurred some uncertainty in her abilities. However, members of her community were reassuring of her skillset and identities in leading equity-centered assessment:

> For me, it's a little bit of imposter syndrome. These are White folks, but I have the same degree. I'm a doctor too! But once I got the confirmation from my community that I deserve to be up there [talking about equity in assessment], even colleagues in the space saying "we want you here, not just because you're black, but because you know what you're talking about." That continues to allow me to be in that space.

This confirmation from respected colleagues seems to be a continuous affirmation of Leah's equity-centered work.

Regarding this theme, Victoria approaches her identities differently and is focused on ensuring they do not White-wash her assessment work. As a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman, she realizes that she needs to interrogate how she is doing her work and include other voices. She asks, "How am I making sure that my identities are not influencing the work that I'm doing considering the identities that I hold? And how is this work impacted? What can I do to mitigate that? Who can I collaborate with?"

Victoria also realizes her identities influence how she sees change occurring as a result of assessment, and that her view is most likely different than that of persons holding marginalized identities. She shared about how shifts at her institution are perceived differently by different identities:

> I don't know that it's moving as fast as folks want it to, though I mean, in the time that I've been here I've seen the change. But at the institution it does take time, and I also hold mostly majority identities. And so, it's easy for me to say, "but the change is happening."

> But if I'm not the one who's experiencing the microaggressions or the very overt discrimination every single day, it's easier for me to say that in my seat than it is for someone else with the different identities.

Awareness of her own and others' identities are central to Victoria's equity-centered assessment work.

Intrinsic Leadership in Equity-Centered Assessment

This finding emerged from the participants' descriptions of experiences with "being the change" and their equity-centered work being "the right thing to do." There were many ways that this theme presented itself throughout their experiences, including the influences of leadership frameworks, personal motivations and ethics, and the Whiteness that exists in the assessment field. Participants shared examples of how they lead through equity-centered assessment work, which included the mentorship of colleagues, using assessment to disrupt inequity, re-envisioning how student data is analyzed, and including multiple, diverse voices in every step of the assessment process. The overarching message was that these practitioners are intrinsically motivated to lead change through equity-centered assessment work.

Andy referred to her research in equity-centered leadership and the theoretical frameworks associated with it. This research background seems to be one of the drivers in her desire to lead change that benefits diverse students:

> You know, doing research in terms of integrating diverse voices and work, one of the frameworks I'm coming from is, if you think you won't have any representation then you won't because you all stop doing it. It's a defeatist approach. Whereas if you think that your voices can be integrated, then they will. Because, you'll find ways, right? So, I'm like, okay- If I come in there and say, we're a reactive emergency-centered division,

> that's what we're going to be. Or, I could change the narrative to be inclusive of the [student support areas] to have those more fully integrated.

Using this approach to guide her leadership and assessment work makes Andy a strong change leader at her institution.

Dayna explicitly talked about leading change, referencing that she strives for this in her work for her primary department as well as her newer role leading assessment for the division of student affairs:

> Throughout my student affairs career I have tried to "be the change you want to see" in the area of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, and I try to infuse that in my work. And it's also how I'd really like to help support our division in utilizing assessment that does help them make progress on equity issues, social justice issues, and the needs of our students.

Dayna also shared her frustrations with the "status quo" culture at her institution and stated, "I guess that's why I have a personal commitment to seeing where I can keep influencing that…You look at these numbers- we aren't making the progress we like to think we are." She challenges the status quo at her institution through her personal commitment to using assessment in the advancement of equity.

For Isabella, leading through equity-centered assessment means initiating change, mentoring others, and is influenced by her own personal ethics. Working with data and assessment helped make the inequities that exist in higher education more apparent:

> When I started working in the academy and started seeing data from this broader lens, I really started seeing the inequities, and so it just kind of gave me more power to say, how

> can I use my space to try to change something that I have control over? And so, I'm doing this for the right reasons, because it's the right thing to do.

While there is a feeling of responsibility in her work, she is also personally committed to advancing equity through assessment. She shared, "I feel like I have to be a leader in this work. But I'm going to do it because I'm passionate about it." Isabella's leadership in equity-centered assessment also means that she educates and develops her colleagues in doing that type of work:

> What I see in the academy here is, a lot of people have the passion, but they don't have the know-how to do it. And so, I've become kind of like a mentor for other people on campus who are in different divisions- helping mentor them through the [equity-centered assessment] process.

In our conversations it was clear that Isabella's leadership is evident not only in doing the equity-centered assessment work, but through engaging colleagues in learning about it as well.

Leah referred to this theme several times during our conversations, and is influenced by identities and the Whiteness that permeates higher education assessment. She talked about "recognizing that assessment practices have been very White supremacy dominated" and shared, "I learned very quickly that assessment was a White space. I remember at [a conference I attended], maybe one other person was there from a HBCU, and I could probably count on one hand how many Black folks I saw." She noticed the Whiteness in assessment as being an opportunity for her to lead through equity-centered assessment, and said,

> I'm known as a disruptive scholar, and I unapologetically go into these spaces with an assessment mind frame as a Black woman to talk about what it means not to be equity minded, but to be equity centered in these higher ed spaces.

She went on to talk about the differences between her leadership through assessment work and the approach of others at her institution:

> I also recognize that there's a difference between doing assessment work and being assessment work, and I think I am "being" assessment. It's part of who I am. It's what I do even after hours. But for my colleagues [at my institution] collectively, it's more of a this is what I need to do, you know, to report on certain things. They're not immersed in it as much as I am.

Leah is a passionate leader in equity-centered assessment who disrupts White ways of conducting this work, and is committed to leading in ways she can stay true to herself.

Peter and Victoria both described equity-centered assessment as something that can't be ignored once you know about or engage in it. This belief influences how they lead and advocate for an equity focus in their work. Peter shared an example of analyzing student GPA correlations with participation in student affairs programs and offices and said the following:

> I mean, part of it is, it's the right thing to do. When I first came here, I really pushed for a [more inclusive] GPA analysis. I talked with my team about it, and one of the limitations that came up [in the current GPA analysis] was, what if some privileged, White male students are driving this correlation, you know. So, the engagement in [equity-centered assessment] came to me. I guess I could have decided to ignore it, but it was there, and is a critical part of doing our work correctly- that we had to engage in equity-centered work thinking of access at the same time as outcomes.

Similarly, Victoria spoke about not being able to do assessment work any other way since she has learned about equity-centered assessment. In talking about why she engages in equity-centered assessment, she shared, "I guess the question to me was, well, why not? I mean, if I care

about students, if students matter, if their experiences matter, why would you not engage in equity-centered assessment?" She continued on to talk about the multiple aspects she considers when leading a project that centers equity:

> Why would I not work to make sure the assessment is not doing harm? And, not only is it not doing harm, but it's being thoughtful, and intentional in the way the questions are asked, the way that the survey is shared, the way the focus group is conducted, and the language that's being used. Also, the way it's reporting out the voices that are brought in on the front end and the development of it. So, to me, once it was something I learned about, I don't know how I could do the work any other way. It was one of those things that once your eyes are open, how could you ignore it?

It was clear through conversations with Victoria and Peter that they felt similar to some of the other participants that leading with equity in their assessment work was responsible practice, but for both of them that practice is now impossible to ignore.

Research Question 2: How Do Student Affairs Assessment Practitioners in Higher Education Perceive Their Institutional Culture?

Interviews with participants included questions focused specifically on how they experienced institutional culture. Two main themes arose through these conversations. Within these two themes, participants experienced their institutional cultures differently with few similarities. A review of documents and artifacts specific to each institution were used to support what participants shared during their interviews. I have again presented participant profiles specific to this research question followed by descriptions of each theme with representative examples and quotes.

Participant Profiles

Andy

Andy is at a mid-to-large Research I university that holds MSI and AANAPISI designations. She sees research, public service, relevance, and community as some of the most obvious indicators of her institution's culture. Her institution is responsible for producing Nobel Laureates and responding to real-world issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In Andy's eyes, diversity is a cornerstone value that shows up in research, community collaborations, and student-facing initiatives. She speaks highly of her institution's ability to work collectively to advance the needs of diverse student populations. However, she realizes that for their students of color, the institution can feel like a PWI, as faculty are not representative of the demographics of the student population. To advance equity in the university, Andy believes that exploring to what degree the institution's research is centering, impacting, and connecting to diverse communities.

Dayna

Dayna works at a mid-to-large, Research I, Predominantly White Institution. Some prominent aspects of the culture of her university include the concepts of family, humility, and hard work. The school colors are celebrated on the institution's website, physically across campus, and in the attire of faculty, staff, and students. It is a tradition that Dayna sees as part of how they establish a sense of belonging on their campus. Dayna sees her university take pride in helping students who are "diamonds in the rough" figure out "how to shine" by the end of their experience at the institution. However, she knows there is evidence of lower retention and graduation rates for their students of color. Dayna describes her school as "such a classic predominantly White institution" and notices a reactionary culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. She observes that the institution has not reckoned with its land grant status coming at the expense of Indigenous people. However, she is proud that the university has been

approved to implement a Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation center, and sees that as a way for the institution to make progress on racial healing and reckoning with its history.

Isabella

Isabella is at a mid-to-large, Research I, Predominantly White Institution. To her, the most tangible aspect of institutional culture is their budget. She feels it is the moral compass of what the university values, and points out how their espoused values are not reflected in budget expenditures. Regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, Isabella views the institution as performative, compliance-based, and perpetuating dominant norms. She sees the university's focus on their brand as getting in the way of advancing equity at the institution.

Leah

Leah works at a Historically Black University with high research activity. She sees the university's rich history, STEM focus, and community engagement as major aspects of its culture. Her university has a large alumni network and national level institutional notoriety and pride. Regarding the institutional culture surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion, Leah feels she is still trying to find it and describe it. She believes that the institution's identification as an HBCU has something to do with that, and there is a need to figure out what belonging looks like for other diverse groups on campus.

Peter

Peter is at a large, Research I, Predominantly White Institution. He describes his institution as a flagship institution that is nationally and internationally known. He talked about his university having a "made up" emerging preeminent status and an attitude of "we're the best" having nothing to support those descriptors. He has had a difficult time navigating these aspects of culture as an assessment professional trying to move colleagues and leadership towards an

improvement mindset. The students at his institution are very high caliber and encounter high anxiety once they enter the university environment. Peter sees conflicts with the university trying to maintain its top tier status while increasing accessibility and success for diverse students and students of need. He recognizes there are programs and initiatives to advance DEI at his institution, but there are also local and state level politics impacting how resources are being allocated in the advancement of equity.

Victoria

Victoria works at a large, Research I, Predominantly White Institution. She sees the university's status as a military institution, its lack of wheelchair accessibility on campus, its students' response to campus issues, and institutional care for students and employees as tangible aspects of culture. She believes that the lived experiences of students, faculty, and staff do not match the espoused DEI values of the university, and would like to see more resources put toward making those values actionable.

Themes

Perceptions of Institutional Culture are Individualized

When asked about indicators of institutional culture, participants perceived these indicators differently. Salient indicators included campus traditions, historical events, presence or lack of resources, points of institutional pride, and a focus on institutional brand, all of which were supported by the documents and artifacts that were readily available or provided by participants.

For Andy, research is a major indicator of her institution's culture. She talked about the pride felt in the research focus and how it is the common thread that weaves through other aspects of institutional culture, including diversity, equity, and inclusion, stating that "You know,

we don't have an athletic program. So, our focus is research. What we're known for is research. Research is the commonality that we circle in terms of advancing [diversity and equity]."

She also pointed out how research informs the public service component of the university and is conducted for the public good:

> The number of Nobel laureates we have. The grants that come in. The research that helps advance whatever issues are happening in the world to like, you know, COVID, we developed one of the test strips. So, you know, how it applies to the real world and so forth. So, it's just making sure that we're being relevant and communicating and doing some public service with research. Being a public institution, that public service focus is there, then the cornerstone of it is the research that informs it.

The focus on research seems special for her institution considering its size. While it is a mid-to-large institution, Andy also talked about how the public good and community focus helps it feel small:

> So really, valuing and leaning into the culture of who we are as an institution that we are a medium size to large school that feels small. We build community, we try to lean into the communities that we have, and how we each contribute to the whole, so that it doesn't feel so big and so unreachable. So, I think community is one of the cultural values that we try to aspire to. Try to make it small, so that people can connect.

Andy summed up the primary indicators of her institution's culture as the diversity, the research, and the community.

Dayna talked about many aspects of her institution's culture including points of pride, ranging from a strategic planning process to campus traditions. Regarding strategic indicators, she said,

> We have a new President. And so, we are going through a strategic planning discovery process right now. We are looking at our branding as an institution, because, like many other institutions, we have experienced declining enrollment. And so, we've been looking again at our branding and who we are.

Despite a need to address declining enrollment, she also spoke about the student body of the institution as being a major indicator of culture. She shared how the students and the institution's goals for them are points of pride:

> We draw students that do not necessarily have, you know, are not exceptional in terms of academics, they don't have extensive, powerful networks. But the way I describe it is, we often take those kind of "diamonds in the rough", and we help them figure out how to, by the end of their experience here, how to shine, and we've taken a lot of pride in that, and we do that together pretty effectively, both in the classroom and out of the classroom.

Related to the student body as well as faculty and staff, Dayna indicated a common approach on her campus to interacting with and among the community, saying that "Traditionally, we have focused very much on the concept of family, caring for one another. We tend to embody the [regional] ethic of working hard. We work hard and are very humble." Along with this common ethic is the tradition of the bonding that happens over the school colors. She enthusiastically said, "We wear [the school color] *everywhere*. It is part of our culture in that it does provide this sense of belonging through what we wear and how we see ourselves sharing these, you know, common experiences and traditions." Dayna felt there were many salient indicators of her institution's culture, most of which were described with fondness and pride.

Isabella focused her discussion of institutional culture on some broad but tangible aspects, such as budget, leadership, and branding. She feels that the budget and the way it is distributed is the primary indicator of culture:

> Our budget. I feel like it's a moral compass of what we value, culturally. We say we value data. But again, there's not very many of us on campus doing this. I think a tangible example is the way that we fund units to do assessment and research work for the institution. So those who do institutional research, or those who do specific data for decisions around the institution's programs and services. There's not a lot of us, so we don't fund it at all.

She also talked about how leadership functions at her institution, and the double standard that exists with expectations and autonomy:

> We're also a very distributed model of leadership on our campus. So, it's very anti-authority here. But what's really interesting is people like top down, they like stuff coming from senior leadership down to the staff level. But then they say they don't like hierarchy. It's a very weird kind of culture here, people say "Don't tell me what to do. I'm gonna do it my way. But wait. I'm unclear what the expectations are. Can you tell me what you want me to do?" So, it's just this weird kind of environment that we deal with.

Related to leadership, Isabella also shared how leaders need to recognize and honor areas of improvement within the university. There is a focus on "the brand" and how the institution doesn't want to show where those areas exist:

> It's this [university] brand. You know, I don't think we want to be vulnerable enough to admit that we're not perfect. We're always caring about benchmarks and peers, and how we're better. But we don't actually acknowledge where we can improve and be vulnerable

> in that process. And I think it's gonna take an inspirational leader to acknowledge that we're humans. We make mistakes. Let's be vulnerable, so we can get better.

This focus on appearance shows up in enrollment, as well, and is a detriment to admitting instate students to Isabella's public institution:

> So, our freshman class- for the first time our non-residents are higher than our state residents, and we are a state institution, so we should be serving our state residents. And [a colleague] said "we're not admitting those state students, because they have a lot of challenges, and they would really struggle here. They have a lot of deficits they're bringing, and they would really struggle in this system, and it wouldn't be good for our student success outcome." That's a total deficit on the student, right? And I see that in lots of spaces like this, one of many examples, even when we do our dashboards where it's like, oh well, the students are just not prepared enough and they didn't come from a good high school. Our schools here aren't great, so they wouldn't do very well here. So, let's not have them come here because that'll hurt our numbers. Basically, we're gonna bring in out-of-state students because we're going to get more tuition dollars and they're more prepared.

Isabella's conversation about the institution's focus on the brand and bringing in out-of-state students highlighted the desire of leadership to turn the attention away from systemic issues that need to be addressed at the university.

Leah talked about how her institution, an HBCU, shows up in its mission statement, as well as some points of pride as salient indicators of her institution's culture:

> We are kind of like in a class of our own. I don't know if that's intentional or not. But if you ever come to [institution location], you know about it. It is community enriched. It is

> throughout this community. And, I think that has to do with the history of it, a lot of the alumni that still live in the area. We just opened up a STEM academy this school year. So, our elementary students actually go to an academy that is [run by the institution]. We have really big partnerships within the community and globally. We're really on the cutting edge in terms of getting ourselves out there beyond just [institution location].

She continued on to talk about the general school spirit and pride associated with her institution:

> You know [my institution] when you see the [school colors]. We have a really big alumni base, very big nationwide, internationally. And so that also adds to the institution's culture. And there is not a place that I haven't been that if I have just a little paraphernalia on, I'm stopped and someone says [enthusiastic school spirit phrase]!

Leah also shared details of her institution's history and how they are salient to the brand, institutional pride, and culture. Unlike Isabella's account, the brand at Leah's institution is described as a positive influence. She said, "We have a brand like no other. We are home to [students who were a significant part of the civil rights movement]. So, we have a very rich history." She also talked about her institution's founding as an HBCU and how it relates to the mission of the university. She believes that relationship speaks to the transitional, unclear nature of the university regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion:

> Also, the fact that we are founded as a HBCU, however, that's not explicitly written in our mission. And that can be seen in multiple ways. One, on the not so good side, people may see it as why we're leaving out the HBCU language and our mission and the other, it could be okay, maybe taking it away from the mission itself allows people to see it as more diverse in that aspect. You know, I don't know how I feel. I'm in the middle of that. The other piece is, you know, we use words such as the human condition. So, the mission

> is really focused around this economic growth that we provide our state and community, and we speak of diverse educational experiences and a holistic approach without using the word holistic. So, it's a lot of different words and phrases that are in the mission that appear to be transitional in terms of going from this monolith of you know, only focusing on black students because it's an HBCU, to okay, how do we become more diverse?

Leah's perception of her institution's culture shows up through both institutional pride and seeing the need for continued growth and clarity.

For Peter, institutional culture at his university is also focused on brand and appearance, although it is not described as a point of pride. He shared an example of this from when he first arrived at his institution:

> You know you've got [the university], the flagship institution, nationally and internationally known. And then, right when I got here, we were in the top 10 for US News and World Reports, and were trying to be top five. And so, the culture really solidified at the institution level- that's what you should be focused on is the US News. Like, we're amazing.

He continued on to share phrases that he feels are problematic, but are also salient indicators of his institution's culture. These indicators get in the way of seeing the potential for improvement at the institution:

> So, it's not unique to here, but I've heard "we've always done it this way." I didn't think anybody actually said that, I thought it was used as a cliche of what not to say, you know? But I've also heard "our way is best." And, I'll ask how? How is it the best? Compared to who? And we have so many talented people here that want to excel and improve.

In alignment with the university's brand and approach toward improvement, Peter also talked about how the student body is a major indicator of the institution's troubled culture:

> We also have a really high caliber of student. A student with a 4.0 will not get in here, not even a chance. And so, you just have this different level of student, and it comes with all sorts of interesting side effects. You know, our students have never failed a class. So, when they come here, and everybody has the same level of prior success, the level of anxiety hits pretty hard with our students. But the good thing is, they're incredibly involved, and you know high achievers are motivated folks, but it is part of the culture- that pushes for excellence. And some of it does come with the facade, while underneath there's a lot of improvement that we could all still make.

Peter's discussion of his institution's culture illustrated how focused the university is on appearances and public perception, which seems to have a troubling impact on his experience.

Victoria's salient indicators of institutional culture were primarily focused on the people of the institution. She talked about how students drive institutional response and are also vocal in responding to campus issues:

> I mean our students, I think, are definitely an example. So, their behavior in the way that they respond to campus concerns or create campus concerns, or what behavior gets noticed, I guess, by the division of student affairs, you know, but also the institution, the newspaper right?

Since Victoria works with staff development as well, the ethic of care shown to both students and staff were also major indicators of culture for her:

> So, I spend a lot of time thinking about employees, so my work is often balanced between students and employees. I do believe it's my responsibility to advocate for employees

> similarly in the way that I advocate for students. I don't think that we could serve our students if we didn't care for our employees. That in itself, I think, is a tangible example of the institution's culture is how we show up and care and value employees in addition to our students. We are an institution that is centered around serving our students, but if our employees are not cared for and also centered then we don't have anyone there to serve the needs of our students, or to think about how best to serve our students.

Victoria also talked about some physical aspects of campus as tangible indicators of institutional culture. Her university has a history as a military institution, and that history is still physically prominent on campus. She said, "We are a military institution for sure, and there are definitely symbols. I'd say those are examples of institutional culture." Another physical characteristic of institutional culture she shared had to do with wheelchair accessibility, and how the campus is known for not being accessible in that way:

> We're not very accessible as far as a wheelchair compatible campus, and so I know a lot of our students and employees feel that that is an example of how the institution respects and values them on campus. If you can't get around in a wheelchair…I think the University is trying to make changes on that and make some financial changes which would be another tangible piece of the culture, if there's money put behind creating more of an accessible environment.

Her discussion continued on to tie in budgetary implications with increasing accessibility on campus, and she sees that as another salient aspect of the institution's culture.

Indicators of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Culture Differ Across Institutions

This theme describes how institutional culture specific to diversity, equity, and inclusion is perceived differently among the participants and is illustrated in various ways across

institutions. Diversity was talked about as a cornerstone value at one institution, while other institutions were described as performative in their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some participants shared examples of a lack of progress in advancing equity and a lack of action in response to racist acts on campus. Others talked about the disparity in the experiences of students, faculty, and staff in how they experience the institution, depending on the identities they hold. And, a lack of clarity in diversity, equity, and inclusion culture was described at another institution. This section begins with participant perceptions of specific dimensions of institutional culture and will then proceed to descriptors of the theme.

Participant perceptions of levels of multiculturalism for specific institutional dimensions. Participants' second interviews led them through the Multicultural Organizational Development (MCOD) Lens Exercise (Holvino, 2008) where they were asked a series of questions for four dimensions of institutional culture: mission/purpose; policies/procedures; informal systems/culture/norms; and, leadership. The same series of questions were asked for each dimension and consist of the following:

1. How would you describe the level of multiculturalism for _____: monocultural, in transition, or multicultural?
2. What indicators or information do you use to describe the _____ that way?
3. Given your assessment, what do you think would be an appropriate change goal for the _____ to become more multicultural?
4. What other information do you need in order to more accurately assess the level of multiculturalism for _____?

The first question was similar to a rating-style item, where participants were asked to rate each institutional culture dimension on a scale of *monocultural*, *in transition*, and *multicultural*. A

monocultural organization is exclusionary and the dominant values or culture are reflective of one specific group (ie: White men). An organization that is in transition is on the path from monocultural to multicultural and can be in a compliance or positive action stage. Finally, a multicultural organization is inclusive, diverse, and equitable, where the culture and perspectives of diverse persons are valued and contribute to organizational excellence (Holvino, 2008).

During the interviews, participants sometimes had difficulty placing a defined rating or level on the dimensions of institutional culture, often citing that the dimension was approaching the next, or that they could see aspects of the dimension in the next level or across two levels. The following table shows their responses to question one for each dimension of institutional culture.

Table 3

Participant Perceptions of Level of Multiculturalism for Specific Institutional Dimensions

	Mission/ purpose	Policies/ procedures	Informal systems/ culture/ norms	Leadership
Andy	In transition	In transition[a]	Multicultural	In transition
Dayna	In transition	In transition	In transition	In transition
Isabella	In transition	In transition	Monocultural	In transition[a]
Leah	In transition	In transition	In transition	Monocultural
Peter	In transition	Monocultural[a]	Monocultural	In transition
Victoria	In transition	In transition	Monocultural	In transition[a]

[a]Indicates where participants stated the dimension is approaching the next level on the scale of *Monocultural*, *In transition*, *Multicultural*

When Andy spoke about the diversity, equity, and inclusion culture on her campus, she provided several examples of how those values are enacted. She talked about diversity being a "cornerstone value" and that "it's reflected in the faculty. We try to recruit the diversity that we create...to do innovative work that involves understanding the demographics of who the students are that we're serving." She continued by talking about faculty and staff and their advocacy for the diverse campus community at the institution:

> So, we take into account the diverse needs of a diverse community. You know, our faculty may not be at parity with our students, but the faculty that we do have and the staff that we do have are strong advocates and champions. So, you know, I think it's vocal leadership, intersectional leadership, that collectively collaborates.

These advocates and champions are aware of the many aspects of diversity on their campus. Andy spoke about how the advancement of students at her institution means intentionally focusing on all of the communities that exist there:

> So, it's just making sure that we're advancing all the different groups that we have on campus, whether it's international students or students with disabilities or first gen students. We really define it in all the areas that we really want to have full communities in, so looking at a broad plan and working collectively to advance the needs of those students and their success.

Often this advancement and support shows up as challenging self and resisting the urge to impose allyship into diverse groups when they need to be in community with their own:

> We constantly challenge ourselves to advance in terms of inclusion and awareness and education. We try to focus on calling in versus calling out. So, we call communities in. We allow our communities to be in community. Let's say, there's a national incident, and the community is really needing to do some healing work. We don't impose ourselves. If we're not from that identity, we ask, would it be helpful to have allies? Or, would you like to have an in-community meeting? Then we make sure to support whatever the direction is.

Andy also talked about how faculty and staff practice giving each other "grace" and said, "When we have a teachable moment, we lean into it. We talk about it, we unpack it." This culture extends to their work with student organizations "that are very diverse in different ways" and the mentorship and advisement they receive:

> We support in a lot of various ways, and then uplift in advance what they're doing. One of the things I appreciate the most about how we approach diversity work is that we understand that our students are in practice for their own leadership. We're at different points in terms of our advocacy work or DEI work, but they are also in formation of themselves as a DEI leader.

The culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion at Andy's institution includes centering diverse faculty and students, showing grace while challenging self, and advancing diverse groups and their leadership development.

Dayna sees the diversity, equity, and inclusion culture of her campus differently. This culture presents itself in various ways, from the institution's student success approach to its "troubled beginning" as a land grant institution. As she was explaining the institutional pride

around transforming students who are “diamonds in the rough”, she also spoke about how not every student has that experience:

> I would say, we have a history of being able to do that. but I think if we did look at it with an equity lens, we can see a lot of evidence of where not everyone gets to be the shined-up diamond in the end. And, we do not retain and graduate and help our students of color persist.

She continued her assessment of institutional culture in a broader sense, focusing on the reactive nature of support for diverse communities on campus:

> We are such a classic predominantly White institution. We are very reactive most of the time, and so we rally around diversity, equity, and inclusion when there's been a hate incident or other injustices in our country that our students are affected by.

Dayna also shared about the lack of progress related to diversity, equity, and inclusion at her institution. She attributes part of this to being a mid-to-large institution that focuses on maintaining existing systems and structures:

> We have a really hard time sustaining the effort to make real progress. I’ve realized that large institutions really maintain the status quo very well, and we do that. We want to make progress. But, our progress by any sort of measurement is pretty limited.

Dayna hopes that progress will come, particularly with the hiring of a chief diversity officer at her institution. However, she sees barriers to change and believes that breaking those barriers begins with honoring the institution’s beginnings:

> We have a new diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging vice president, and I think there’s a lot of hope that this person will help make progress. I hope we can help that person make progress. I see a lot of obstacles. And, it starts with the fact that we have to

> acknowledge as a land grant [institution] that our beginning came at the expense of Indigenous people. We haven't really reckoned with that. Yeah, we do a land acknowledgment. But we haven't really reckoned with that.

The diversity, equity, and inclusion culture at Dayna's institution shows up through inequitable student experiences, sustaining a status quo mentality, and failure to acknowledge the Indigenous sacrifices that made the institution possible.

The culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion at Isabella's institution is similar to what Dayna described in that she sees it as performative and lacking the ability to change. Isabella spoke of hiring positions and identifying needs but never shifting the culture:

> We're very performative and compliance based. We don't actually do the hard work to change the culture. We check a lot of boxes, and we hire certain people for a position. But when it actually comes down to shifting the culture and systems that are barriers, we don't really do a lot of that. And then we'll always say, "well, we need more money", or "we need a full-time position to do this." And, we never move it forward.

She continued on to describe the performative aspect of the diversity, equity, and inclusion culture in more detail:

> People are like, "Oh, I care about it" but they don't actually do the equity walk, and actually put things into action, because that's where the hard work is in this. We're very vocal about what we care about. And, if you Google [the institution]-equity, you're going to find it on every single person's website and webpage and strategic plan. But you're not going to see a whole lot of systemic action associated with it.

Isabella also talked about the personal aspects of experiencing the diversity, equity, and inclusion culture at her institution. There is an exclusionary, club mentality that calls upon spokespersons to advocate for specific groups without valuing inclusion:

> I always say our equity goals are aspirational, and I think people truly believe that we're there. But the reality is, I would say in terms of our cultural norms we're probably more monocultural than anything else in terms of we include people as we see fit. I think that is the perfect statement of what we do. And, we'll call upon one person that we think is a spokesperson for a group, but it's not really inclusive. It just feels so icky. That's the best way to describe it.

She continues to share these personal experiences and highlights how people of color are tokenized and treated differently than their White counterparts:

> It can feel very othering and very exclusive in the way that we do business. And I'll be honest if you're not a White male in the system, or even a White female, it's really hard to be taken seriously sometimes. And, I have seen it at the highest levels with people of color, who are the token person, get treated very differently than other people, and that's unfortunate.

Isabella's experiences with her institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion culture feature performativity, a lack of systemic change, and being tokenized.

Leah shared how she is still trying to figure out her institution's culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion. She also mentioned a lack of action, but for her, it seems this stems from a need to define the culture for an institution created to serve the Black community:

> I'm still trying to find it. Describe it. When it comes to our spaces for DEI in terms of strategic plan, et cetera, I'd say we're included with all institutions that I have worked

with or talked with- to me it's just a statement. I don't see a lot of action from it. I think it's because when you're part of a population that historically has been oppressed, what is DEI, you know? We *are* DEI. But, you know, as time goes on there are identities that we need to start looking at and including, such as sexual orientation.

She continued to ponder her institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion culture and questions what sense of belonging looks like at an HBCU for other intersecting identities:

> Though we are a public institution, there's an underlying tone of religion, Christianity, et cetera. And so, how do we utilize that in this space to show what this religion and spirituality look like? Another part of this DEI space is non-traditional students. We have more and more students that are coming back to school to finish a bachelor's degree, more and more over the age of 25. That's part of DEI. So, what does that really look like in terms of sense of belonging?

Regarding these additional diverse groups, Leah talked about how the culture is different for staff and faculty than it is for students:

> I see some accommodations being made for students that are normally marginalized beyond just race. On the staff and faculty side I don't see that as much. I don't see support for a lot of accommodations or conversations around diversity within faculty and staff. So, it's kind of a space of don't ask, don't tell. But, there's also this culture within our culture- what's said in his house stays in this house. So, whatever we have going on on campus, it stays on campus. However, there are individuals and spaces on campus that are not always welcoming. I think people are welcoming to the degree that they work on campus, but outside of campus I'm not sure if they're welcoming to those same

> marginalized groups ie: The LGBTQ community, individuals of different religious backgrounds, et cetera.

Leah is in a questioning space- what does diversity, equity, and inclusion culture mean for an institution that was created from the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion for a specific, oppressed population?

For Peter, a lack of response and action shows up in the culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion at his institution in more overt ways. He talked about several specific examples of identity-based aggression that were not openly addressed by the university. In particular, he shared, "We have two [cultural student centers], and there's been some vandalism there. There's been some anti-Semitic things happening around campus lately." He also discussed an example of a particular event where a White-identifying event volunteer was being visibly aggressive toward students of color. Regarding this account, Peter stated "nobody responded" despite public attention that was brought on by the incident.

Similar to Isabella, Peter also talked about aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion culture that are exclusionary for some groups. For him, this is seen in the ways that committees and informal professional relationships are developed:

> A lot of things are informal. They're not written down. So, you're trying to build relationships to get things done, and there are formal committees and then there's the real meeting, right? The meeting after the meeting, or the meeting before the meeting. And, that happens a lot, too. And, how do you get into those circles? Are those friend groups that tend to come from the same backgrounds? There does seem to be some of that.

Another issue that Peter recognizes in the institution's culture is that of the influence that state and local government currently have on how the university enacts diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and education:

> So, there's [state governance action] restricting university instruction around inclusion. And, we're trying to navigate. We didn't know if we could have that [DEI] conference we had last week, or like, is somebody going to come down and say that this is breaking state law, you know?

The diversity, equity, and inclusion culture at Peter's campus consists of various indicators, including acts of racism, exclusionary ways of conducting business, and government restrictions.

For Victoria, the culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion at her institution is espoused but not always enacted. She talked about how this is evidenced in lived experiences and resources devoted to creating the espoused values. When sharing about experiences and dedicated support for diverse groups, she stated,

> I would say that culturally we espouse a very strong value for diversity, equity, and inclusion if you look at our marketing campaigns, if you look at things on our websites. If you read stuff- they would definitely, I think, appear that [the institution] very much values diversity, equity, and inclusion. I think, when it comes to the lived experience it depends on the person that you talk to, and probably the identities in which they hold, or the identities of folks with which they spend time. I think that we have worked really hard to recruit a diverse class of students. Because, we want to be diverse when we think about numbers. So, if we're just talking about diversity, which would be representation, I think the university really wants that to be the case. Systematically, I don't know that we have created the most inclusive community for our diverse students, so we might do a

> really good job of getting them here, but what their experience looks like versus what we tell them they're going to experience, I think, can be very different.

She continued on to address that inclusive communities require support and resources. Victoria sees this need for both students and employees at the institution:

> So, retaining both our students and our employees is a big concern and question that we talk a lot about because you can get them here, but if we don't have systems in place…We don't have support- financial support, physical spaces, emotional support, thinking about different structures, or even people who look like them in positions that they're trying to obtain. Whether that's students wanting to do a certain job or faculty or staff wanting to move up. There are a lot of folks doing a lot of great work around that, but those are areas I think we can do better on.

Victoria also spoke about the lack of change experienced by diverse students and employees, particularly in the way they are treated by others and in how the university disregards their identities:

> I would say that maybe another piece of information would just be how students and employees say that the only time that they ever see change is when they bring it up, or how many times even very overt macroaggressions have happened, and that people don't even know they're doing them. Like, scheduling things on important holidays or experiences for students, or just disregarding an identity that's different from their own.

Victoria's perceptions of her institution's diversity, equity, and inclusion culture are focused on a lack of enacted values, systemic support, and change that benefits the experiences of diverse groups.

Research Question 3: How Does Institutional Culture Influence the Implementation of Equity-Centered Assessment Practices in Student Affairs?

Participant profiles and themes for this research question are centered on how participants experience the impacts of institutional culture on their equity-centered assessment work. Similar to the first two research questions, participant profiles relevant to this research question are presented first to introduce the themes.

Participant Profiles

Andy

As a Mexican-American woman in a senior leadership role at an MSI/AANAPISI, Andy feels that her institution's culture allows her to be in spaces where she and others can focus on the whole student. This culture impacts the collective work in which she participates, whether that work is to help students feel supported or learn from a social justice issue or exploring student success in terms of student behavior relevant to educational goals. The culture at Andy's institution also influences her work through the accreditation priorities it sets in the advancement of diversity, equity, and sense of belonging. While the institution's culture seems to in many ways enhance Andy's experience leading assessment for her division, she is also very aware of how White male focused her leadership is and that there is a need to acknowledge expertise from diverse leaders that also have a seat at the table. She sees all aspects of her institution's culture as influential in her work to define student success at the institution.

Dayna

A White, heterosexual, cisgender woman at a PWI, Dayna feels frustrated with how her institution's culture shows up in her work. She feels it is very focused on maintaining the status quo and that it creates large obstacles for advancing equity work. Dayna believes in the power of

data in revealing progress toward goals as well as showing where improvement is needed, but the institutional culture hinders those honest, data-driven conversations. On the other hand, she also feels fortunate to be part of a division of student affairs that values data and making progress toward equity. Dayna feels that her institution's culture causes her to experience a mixture of forward progress and big challenges in her equity-centered work.

Isabella

For Isabella, who is a Hispanic woman working at a PWI, her institution's culture causes her to experience barriers in her work every day. While she is passionate about equity-centered assessment work, she is tired of being the sole person to call out inequities across the institution. Isabella feels like she is always fighting a battle with colleagues who focus on perceived student deficits or restrictive ways of reporting demographics instead of acknowledging student strengths and intersecting identities. She is aware of the importance of being a leader on campus for equity-centered assessment, but feels a great deal of responsibility for calling out inequities and mentoring colleagues.

Leah

As a Black woman leading assessment for an HBCU, Leah experiences uncertainty in her equity-centered assessment work due to the institution's unclear culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion. She struggles at times to determine what needs to be assessed regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, and has a hard time explaining her institution's culture to colleagues outside of the university. Leah believes she should be involved in conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion with the institution's chief diversity officer and DEI committee, but is not a part of those discussions as they relate to assessment. While Leah sees her institution's culture as an influence on her work, she doesn't let it shift what she is doing. Instead, she has begun to

approach her equity-centered assessment work as a way to influence and define the diversity, equity, and inclusion culture of her institution.

Peter

A White, cisgender, heterosexual male at a PWI, Peter experiences both hope and unease in his equity-centered assessment work. These conflicting feelings stem from positive work at the university in the advancement of diversity, equity, and inclusion combined with overt acts of racism on campus and limitations on DEI efforts posed by state and local government. Peter often wonders how far he can take his equity work without pushback, but is determined to advance equity through assessment and good data practices across the institution despite the resistance he sometimes feels.

Victoria

For Victoria, a White, heterosexual, cisgender woman at a PWI, her institution's culture of espousing equity while not advancing it is something she considers in every assessment effort she leads. While there may be assessment initiatives in which she'd like to lead to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion at her institution, she does not believe in conducting assessments when no action will be taken. Victoria sees this as an act of causing harm through assessment, and realizes that her institution's culture is not always ready to take action in the advancement of equity. She is constantly thinking about where colleagues and leadership are on the diversity, equity, and inclusion spectrum and intentionally tries to fill their educational gaps where needed.

Themes

Institutional Impacts on Equity-Centered Assessment Work are Varied

Participants were asked several interview questions about their respective institutional cultures and the ways in which they experienced their institution's culture in their equity-

centered work. A focus on equity in student success measures and collaboration between student affairs and academic units in diversity-related education for students was cited by one participant, but most of the participants' experiences related to this theme are not as positive. Tokenism of leaders of color, a need to maintain "the status quo", and having to navigate the institution's readiness to receive equity-focused assessment feedback were cited. Experiences with a problematic focus on the external institutional brand, an unclear DEI culture, and local government restrictions were shared by other participants. The following examples for this theme illustrate the various ways in which the participants felt the influence of institutional culture in their work and their commitment to equity-centered assessment despite institutional influences.

For Andy, the diversity, equity, and inclusion culture of her institution shows up in how student success is measured as well as her advocacy and education efforts outside of the assessment realm. When discussing student success measures, she stated the following:

> So, we're looking at a wide range of why students do what they do and what they want to get out of the institution, not just, you know, degree completion. So, we look at how active they are, and how they act on what they want to get out of their education in addition to what they're here to accomplish academically. So it's focusing on the whole student.

In addition to her assessment role, Andy engages in equity-centered leadership in her division while supporting student learning. The culture of her institution fosters an environment where she can collaborate with other leaders. She stated,

> Really, you know, if there's any event or anything going on in the world, [we lean] into it. Making sure our students are supported or learning. We could be trying to work out a

> social justice issue. So, we'll do a lecture series to advance an area of learning. So, the collective work we're doing to move us along as a socially just society.

Despite the collaboration and equity focus in much of her work, Andy also shared about times when she needs to advocate for greater representation of diverse voices in groups or committees. This advocacy often falls to her and can be a disheartening experience:

> You know, the multicultural diverse groups aren't as highly represented. We're the only people sometimes, or one of the few people- that's when you really have to push up against the stream, so to speak. So, even though the mechanisms are there sometimes, the representation isn't and it becomes challenging to constantly be that voice on committees, and you know why you're there. That's your job, but it's discouraging to constantly be put in that position without more holistic support.

The institutional culture that Andy experiences in her work often encourages looking at data differently and the holistic support of students, but can weigh heavily on her as the sole advocate for equity-centered work.

The culture at Dayna's institution causes her to have both discouraging and positive experiences implementing equity-centered assessment. She talked about how this culture helps spur her personal commitment to using data to highlight equity progress and challenges:

> I think this culture of the status quo is what I get very frustrated about in my work, and I guess that's why I have a personal commitment to seeing where I can keep influencing that. And, I do think that you know, assessment and having data to either say, "yeah, we are making some progress, look at that!" Or, "yeah, we thought we were making progress on that, but you look at these numbers- we aren't making the progress we like to think we are." So, I think that culture is very strong within a large organization, but I'm glad that

> I'm within a division [of student affairs] now that doesn't just talk about equity-centered work, but really wants to make progress. So, I guess it's kind of a mix of positive influences and some really big obstacles to continue to challenge.

Dayna also specifically shared her thoughts on her institution's approach to measuring student success. She stated, "We need a better emphasis on looking at equity and our assessment, and how we can know that students across all demographics and identities are experiencing the same sense of success." Dayna is committed to combating her institution's status quo culture through her equity-centered assessment work.

Isabella also experiences frustration in her equity-centered work because of institutional factors. She included several examples of how her institution's culture impacts, and at many times, impedes her work. In one example she stated,

> I feel like I have to fight a lot more battles than I'd like to…Just the other day, [a colleague] said, "Oh, we didn't admit those students because they were seriously flawed, and they would really struggle with student success on our campus." And I was like, okay, that's not a great way to say that. A better way would be we don't have the infrastructure in place to support students, and we need to do a better job with that, instead of putting the onus on the student. So, I have to call things like that out.

Similar to other participants' experiences, Isabella has also felt the need to call out and educate colleagues on the problems associated with using traditional ways of reporting demographic data:

> Like, yesterday in our data definitions meeting- we're trying to create a data dictionary. And people are just, you know, focusing on the traditional IPEDS way of reporting race and ethnicity. And I'm like, how can we be more inclusive in the way that we talk about

this? And, do we want to lump all students into students of color? Can we break that down a little bit further?

An influence on issues such as this and other impediments to Isabella's equity work is the institution's focus on its brand and reputation. One example she shared is as follows:

> So, our university is so focused on the brand and the PR that sometimes we get so caught up with, "is this gonna make us look bad" that we include this small group of folks to do this [equity] work rather than being inclusive and open and welcoming to other folks. The whole equity-minded process is to include and elevate those voices at the highest level. And these senior leaders keep everything in this bubble, they make these decisions. And so again, you don't have any major changes, because I feel like when you're in a senior leadership position it's really hard to know the day-to-day in the trenches of what's happening, and how equity manifests in those areas, and they're not spending enough time leaning in and trying to listen. And so, I would say, a lot of this [equity] work happens in a bubble which is unfortunate, because that's not the way it's supposed to happen.

She continued to talk about the leadership at her institution and how they perpetuate a monocultural environment as it relates to equity work:

> I don't feel like there's any challenge for [leadership] to be coached to learn and grow, and so they need individual coaching. But then I also think there needs to be more collective coaching, because I spend more time with senior leaders lately because of this campus climate stuff, and it just doesn't feel good to me. I leave these meetings, and I just feel icky- there's not a level of respect, that's the best way to describe it. I think we need to build community and team building within the senior leaders, too. So, in addition to

> personal development, there needs to be more community [development] as well, and I don't think that's happening.

Isabella also spoke about the leadership in the division of student affairs and how it was more supportive in her equity-centered assessment work. She stated, “I’m fortunate- I have great leadership that has my back.” While she battles with her institution’s culture in doing equity-centered work, she experiences support at the division level.

For Leah, the culture at her institution brings up questions for her in implementing equity-centered assessment on her campus. One reason for this is the lack of collaboration she experiences with institutional leadership focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion:

> I know we have a DEI committee. We just actually hired our first ever Chief Diversity Officer about a year ago, and I've only had maybe one or two conversations with them. So, I'm not really pulled into those conversations around DEI as it relates to assessments and the [institution’s] culture as much as I need to be and I want to be.

Leah also talked about how diversity, equity, and inclusion is not clearly defined at her university and how that shows up in her work:

> It makes me go against the grain at times because if I can't define [the institution’s diversity, equity, and inclusion culture], I can imagine how students can or cannot define it. What does that mean in terms of what I need to be assessing or what I do? What does the division need to be assessing in terms of DEI?

She continued on to talk about how this lack of clarity impacts her experiences at professional development opportunities, stating that, “It also shows up when I go to present at conferences, et cetera. Because I work at a HBCU that question is always brought up, and I really can't give a concrete answer.” However, even with the unclear nature of her institution’s diversity, equity,

and inclusion culture, Leah continues to engage in equity-centered assessment work. She has started to see her work differently and how it might begin to define institutional culture:

> In terms of institutional DEI, it's an influence but it doesn't really shift my work. I've begun to think about [my DEI work] from a larger perspective in terms of allowing that to kind of feed into the culture at the institution in a way.

For Leah, there seems to be a commitment to conducting equity-centered assessment regardless of the institution's unclear culture and leadership of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Peter's experiences with institutional culture influencing his equity-centered assessment work mostly stemmed from state and local government restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. This shows up in large, equity-focused initiatives that are coordinated by him and his team:

> We had to navigate this specific law, the wording, and that's the real effect that we see- as you get into the wording of the law, and then you've got the fear of it, that you actually self-govern beyond the wording of the law, just to be extra careful. You're actually being more restrictive than you need to be. So, there's that fear of how to even bring up the topic and how to do the work without push back.

Peter also talked a bit about the conversations that needed to take place prior to hosting a specific equity initiative. There were questions about whether the initiative should happen and what language could be used to describe and publicize it at the institution. He stated, "we navigated and said no, like, [hosting this initiative] isn't saying that you are inherently racist or whatever it is." Peter maintains his commitment to engaging in equity-centered assessment work despite both institutional and state government barriers.

For Victoria, the influence of institutional culture on her equity-centered assessment work shows up in how ready the institution is to take action as a result of assessment. This is a barrier at times when she feels the need to refrain from sharing certain results or engaging in specific projects due to a lack of readiness:

> I think you do need to be aware of what the current culture is, what the current language is, what folks are able to process now. Do you need to maybe hold back a little bit, because the culture is not quite ready? So, knowing what folks espouse versus what is actually possible. Sometimes I think we espouse a lot, but we're not actually ready for action related to what we're saying. And so, understanding the culture there is going to be really important to the type of assessment we do, how we do the assessment, and how we share out results.

She went on to talk about how harmful it can be to engage in equity-centered assessment work when an institution and its population are not ready to receive the results and create change. She also shared how it is important to recognize the potential for harm, even when she knows the work would advance diversity, equity, and inclusion:

> Because to me, if you are not actually going to take action on the assessment data, there's no point in doing it. So, there might be some pieces of assessment that I really want to do related to advancing [diversity, equity, and inclusion] culture. But, if I'm pretty sure that that is going to be a no-go depending on what my colleagues or students say, then I've probably done more harm, because I've given hope to folks that there's going to be a change.

On Victoria's campus, her leadership in equity-centered assessment requires awareness of the culture and how that culture can be a barrier at times in multiple places in the assessment process.

Equity-Centered Assessment is Needed to Shift Institutional Cultures

This theme emerged from conversations related to how participants were experiencing their institutional culture as well as their responses to questions in the MCOD Lens Exercise. Participants shared that in order for institutional culture to shift to one that values diversity, equity, and inclusion, an equity focus in assessment initiatives, education, and leadership is needed. Most participants talked about a need for climate, experience, and need-based assessments to be utilized for equity advancement across the institution. The transparent sharing of data, assessing the changing dynamics of students, faculty, and staff, assessing institutional goals and metrics, and professional development in equity advancement were cited by participants, as well.

While Andy's interviews shared a mostly supportive institutional culture for engaging in equity-centered assessment, there were beneficial shifts and ways that assessment could assist with those shifts that she identified. One example she shared had to do with putting measures in place to explore how the institution's research is enhancing diverse students and communities:

> We do student experience surveys. We use a lot of different measures to understand what our students need, and so forth. The data is there. But you know, I think there's also the time and energy and resources and also research emphasis that could flip it a little more. So, if I were to put some measures in place, I would look at how we are being community centered with our research. How we're connecting it to communities. How we're advancing different industries that impact diverse communities.

Andy also talked about her advocacy of data to shift from being reactive to proactive in decision-making, and as a way to include more diverse voices in decisions. She stated, “I was the only voice saying, we need to be more inclusive of assessment and data in our decision making, we need to be more evidence-based versus being reactive. The loud voices aren't the full voices.” Andy sees value in and advocates for equity-centered assessment to enhance the diversity, equity, and inclusion work already happening at her institution.

Dayna shared perspectives from a department level and more broadly at the institution level on how equity-centered assessment could influence her institution’s culture. She talked specifically about how data needs to be utilized to ensure diversity among staff in division of student affairs departments:

> I think a department head should review the demographics of their department every single year and have a conversation with their supervisor about [the diversity of their staff]. I do know there is information available on campus through our institutional research about the demographics of our leadership and departments, and so forth. So, I think that can be helpful. It's whether you actually use it and look at it. Do something with it.

When speaking more broadly about her university, Dayna referenced climate surveys as a way to address some of the unspoken, informal aspects of institutional culture:

> I think [informal institutional culture] is one of those things that we probably don't ever get enough data on. And, I would say that's some of what a campus climate survey might get at. But, of course, those are always one of the most difficult assessment activities to take on within a university setting. And yet that's some of the kind of information that

> you have to have to be able to help shift the culture and really think about what is stemming from some norms that we have.

Dayna sees both department-level and institutional-level equity-centered assessment as integral to shifting the culture of her institution.

Isabella's experiences with her institution's culture require multiple assessment methods, consistently sharing out equity-centered assessment results, and mentorship to shift the culture. When talking about institutional policies and procedures, she talked about a need to use assessment to move from compliance-focused to value-added:

> What's come out of some of my focus group work and some of my research in this area of leadership is that we're very compliance based. It's very much like checking a box. But there's not really a whole lot of depth to [institutional] policies. So, I think part of it in the process of understanding is, how can we actually bring those policies into real actionable change and culture shift? So, we also need to hear from people to get a sense for okay, what's working? What's not? How can we make it more valuable and useful? Or, is this just to check the box? I want to move beyond that.

Isabella also talked about the mission and purpose of the university, and how an equity focus is needed in assessing the institution's mission and purpose related to multiculturalism:

> We need to do a needs assessment. I think there's a lot of anecdotes, and I've done a little bit of work from my position to try to understand this, but we just need to spend time understanding where people are in this, how they're feeling about it, and building rapport. But I also think that helps with the elevating voices, too. I'm not saying that focus groups are the only way to do it, but I feel like we need to go to groups and spaces and really be intentional about understanding where people are. And kind of do that whole

> environmental scan which is kind of a part of strategic planning. I don't want to really call it a SWOT analysis, but you know, that's kind of part of it- we don't do enough of that work.

Another way that Isabella spoke of shifting institutional culture is through her office's data sharing initiative, that focuses on metrics related to equity and inclusion on her campus:

> A couple of years ago, we started [a weekly data sharing initiative], so I send out a little infographic, with some type of attached report, small digestible ways to share information. And so, that listserv has grown. I'm constantly thinking, how can we make sure our equity is shining through every day?

Isabella also tries to call others into equity-centered work. Her office is leading the equity-centered assessment work on her campus and there is a sense of responsibility that she feels for leading the work, calling out injustices, and calling people in:

> I also feel like I have to fight a lot more battles than I'd like to and call out the inequities that exist. We're the only ones kind of really doing [equity-centered assessment]. We're not perfect, but I just feel like we've become a leader on campus for doing this. And then with that comes the added responsibility of having to call out inequities, and mentor people, and help them kind of come along to this.

Along with the focus on mentoring colleagues in equity-centered assessment, Isabella recognizes that acknowledging issues and initiating systemic changes are required to advance equity:

> In order to move forward, we need more structural change. We need to focus on the system, not the individuals. So, obviously individuals are carrying these very political ideologies that map with wanting to be inclusive, but the structural changes in place aren't aligned with that. So how can we, as an institution, work to create better structures? And,

> I think part of that is to understand the structure. But we can't understand it if we don't acknowledge that it's not working. So, questioning those practices, unpacking those assumptions…We don't do that.

Shifting culture at Isabella's campus means that she and her team are serving as leaders in approaching assessment initiatives, education, and leadership with an equity focus, as well as questioning institutional systems and structures.

Leah's assessment role focuses on faculty, staff, and students, so she sees those groups as a large part of her institution's culture. For culture shifts to happen on her campus, Leah believes that change dynamics and campus climate need to be assessed:

> I think a goal would be to really look at the changing dynamics of our faculty and staff, and what they are bringing to the table, and what they need to be successful in their spaces. And, if that matches the changing dynamics of our students, especially with, you know, COVID, and how a mass majority of our students started their first two years at home in front of Zoom, and for faculty and staff, how we've had to also navigate. You had individuals who'd been teaching for twenty-plus years and not used a computer to teach. And now everything is computerized. And so, looking at the trends and higher education as a whole, and then the trends on our campus to better improve and better inform the policies and procedures that we need.

Specifically for faculty and staff, Leah talked about the need for a climate survey to explore where biases exist:

> I would love to see a campus climate survey just for faculty and staff. We do them for the student perspective but I would love to see it from the faculty and staff perspective. Because, you know, we're the ones that are entrusted to develop our students. But we

don't know much about who our colleagues are that are developing these students and what biases they may intentionally and unintentionally shift to our student population.

Leah sees equity-centered approaches in assessing the needs and biases of faculty, staff, and students as important for implementing change in her institution's culture.

Peter talked about the need for shared goals and metrics in order to see shifts in his institution's culture. He believes that moving beyond graduate rates and setting equity-focused goals while allowing for conversation around why goals may not be met could lead to greater transparency:

> So, the assessment comes down to those metrics that we all need to agree upon. You know, grad rates are not good enough. We want to see that we're graduating our first gen students at the same rate. And if we're not, why not? What happened, right? So, setting goals. It doesn't mean if we don't hit those goals somebody is in trouble, but what we've seen is not even setting the goal or ignoring it. But we should be welcome to explore why we didn't hit [a goal], and what unexpected barriers were there. So, we need to have a transparency of that assessment as well.

He continued to talk about how important it is to have shared goals and measures when there are changes in leadership. He feels that shared goals would have been beneficial to his institution's culture as it has experienced leadership changes at multiple levels:

> So, with [frequent leadership changes] we have all been needing something stable. And almost every time there either hasn't been a strategic plan, or it's been put on hold, or canceled. And, we know our jobs but it makes us fairly head down and siloed in our work, which isn't as effective particularly for multicultural work. So, I think we could benefit from shared goals, shared measures of success that matter to us all. If we all

> agreed to look at representation, or to look at multicultural learning. You know, competencies that are important for our students to achieve in our goal.

For Peter, consistent goals and measures that place an equity emphasis on success could be a significant contribution to shifting institutional culture on his campus.

Victoria talked about institutional culture shifts from the perspectives of equity-centered assessment as well as professional development. She believes that going beyond climate surveys and collecting specific data on informal systems and norms at her institution could be beneficial:

> I think it'd be interesting to do a formalized assessment around [informal culture, systems, and norms] to have quantifiable and qualitative data around the students' experiences and employees' experiences to assess that. I mean, we do climate surveys which tell you some of that data, but some of what you're getting at- I would be interested in having assessment data specifically targeted to collecting data around [informal culture, systems, and norms] to inform, to be able to track and see if we're moving in the right direction.

Victoria also feels that greater knowledge related to diversity, equity, and inclusion leads to shifts in institutional culture:

> When I think about it from a professional development lens, I think about what my colleagues need to know in order to move the culture forward. So, if I think about where folks are on a spectrum related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, how am I serving different folks' needs? They're constantly learning and growing along the way. What are the gaps- places I need to make sure that we are intentionally educating our employees so that they can better serve the students, which means they need to constantly know what the needs are of our students and what the culture is. So, that way I can fill those gaps.

As a leader in equity-centered assessment and professional development on her campus, Victoria sees these aspects of her role as integral in moving the needle to create a more inclusive institutional culture.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from multiple case study research that explored participants' experiences implementing equity-centered assessment in student affairs, their perceptions of their institution's culture, and how their institution's culture influenced their equity-centered work. The findings showed that practitioners' experiences implementing equity-centered assessment differ across identities and institutional types. Participants shared different pathways of learning about and coming into equity-centered assessment work. Additionally, their commitment to equity-centered assessment stemmed from personal and professional motives. They described the many ways that their respective institutional cultures made their equity-centered work more difficult. The following chapter discusses the findings and provides recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter V: Discussion

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored practitioners' experiences with institutional culture in their implementation of equity-centered assessment in student affairs. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants who held various intersecting identities and worked at different higher education institutions. I reviewed institutional documents and artifacts to support what participants shared in their interviews. The following research questions were examined:

1. How is equity-centered assessment implemented in student affairs at higher education institutions?
2. How do student affairs assessment practitioners in higher education perceive their institutional culture?
3. How does institutional culture influence the implementation of equity-centered assessment practices in student affairs?

This chapter provides a discussion of the study findings followed by implications and recommendations for future research as well as institutional practice for equity-centered assessment practice in student affairs. Similar to the findings, the recommendations for practice and research were shared with study participants and their input was requested and incorporated where necessary to align with the critical approach to this study.

Interpretation of Findings

Student affairs assessment practitioners implementing assessment at the division level talked about their experiences leading equity-centered assessment efforts in their respective roles. They also spoke about their perceptions of their institution's culture, including the culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campuses. Finally, these practitioners shared the

ways in which they experience their institution's culture in their equity-centered assessment work.

Implementing Equity-Centered Assessment in Student Affairs

In discussing their equity-centered assessment work, participants talked about a focus on elevating diverse voices through assessment. This was presented in multiple ways, including a focus on sense of belonging and wellbeing, ensuring diverse identities outside of race are elevated through assessment, and including many different identities in the collection and reporting of demographic data. Using assessment data to give voice to diverse students in leadership spaces and measuring student success beyond GPA and background characteristics were also ways that diverse voices are elevated through equity-centered assessment.

Many participants also readily shared their identities and connected identity, both their own and those of their participants, to their equity-centered assessment work. Critical approaches to assessment challenge "the ability of practitioners to be neutral and unbiased because the practice of assessment is inextricably linked to the identities held by the practitioner" (Heiser et al., 2017). Experiences with being stereotyped based on identities, difficulty navigating higher education as a first-generation, low-income student, and having to fight for equity in every aspect of life were some of the influences in how these practitioners perform equity-centered assessment work. For the practitioners who hold mostly majority identities, ensuring that their own identities do not introduce bias and oppress diverse voices was a commitment they identified in their implementation of equity-centered assessment.

Participants talked about the ways in which they intrinsically lead equity-centered assessment in their divisions and on their campuses. Experiences with leading these efforts included aspirations of "being the change you want to see" and "doing the right thing." There

was a personal commitment to changing the narrative in leadership spaces to focus on diverse voices and combating assessment practices that are dominated by White supremacy. Mentoring and challenging colleagues in equity-centered assessment work was also a focus. Equity-centered assessment is something that cannot be ignored once these practitioners learned about it.

Through specific interview questions related to their learning about equity-centered assessment and in the various ways participants talked about doing equity-centered assessment, it was clear that the ways in which practitioners learn about this work varies greatly. Learning the specific language around equity-centered assessment has occurred quite recently- within the last five to six years. Much of this learning has occurred through formal educational opportunities to learn about equity-centered assessment, including conferences, institutes, and various publications. Some of the participants also referred to graduate degree programs that informed their focus on equity advancement, as well as learning through doing the work of implementing equity-centered assessment in their student affairs divisions. The different ways these practitioners learned about equity-centered assessment play a role in how they define and implement this work.

Assessment Practitioners' Perceptions of Institutional Culture

The findings showed that perceptions of institutional culture were individualized and quite different among the participants. According to Kuh and Whitt (1988), assumptions and beliefs held by individuals at a college or university may be different; therefore, interpretations of events, actions, and constructed meanings will differ. There were discussions of school spirit and pride, campus traditions, rich institutional histories, and a focus on community enrichment. An ethic of care among students, faculty, and staff was a strong indicator of culture for some, while a need for the university to maintain a certain status or brand was described as an indicator

of institutional culture for others. In this study, institutional culture was defined by the person experiencing it.

Perceptions of institutional culture around diversity, equity, and inclusion culture differed among participants, as well. At the PWIs, practitioners saw a lack of support and change when issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion arose as well as a lack of progress in advancing equity on campus. There was also a "club mentality" in decision making and committee involvement, ensuring that only certain voices were included. At one institution, the state government has placed strict restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts in educational settings, causing fear in implementing equity work. On the other hand, practitioner experiences at the MSI/AANAPISI with diversity, equity, and inclusion culture involved showing grace in each other's learning, centering diverse faculty and students, and actively advancing diverse student groups in their development. At the HBCU, the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion culture was unclear and undefined. Diversity, equity, and inclusion culture was individualized and personal for participants; however, some similarities exist among participant experiences at PWIs.

The Influence of Institutional Culture in Implementing Equity-Centered Assessment

In discussing the influence of institutional culture in implementing equity-centered assessment, most participants naturally gravitated toward the barriers that exist in their work. Montenegro and Jankowski (2020) affirm that depending on culture, integrating equity into assessment can be difficult, often requiring someone to lead and facilitate in ways that resonate with the institutional context. In this study, some participants experienced barriers through unclear culture and leadership around diversity, equity, and inclusion, government and institutional restrictions on equity efforts, and the need to be aware of what the current

institutional culture will allow in advancing equity. Some practitioners frequently combated an institutional need to "maintain the status quo" and see a need to look at equity through their assessment work. Others experienced being the sole advocate in leadership circles for advancing equity and experienced barriers from leadership and colleagues who are more focused on the university brand and appearance than on advancing equity. These practitioners engage in equity-centered assessment work despite the multiple barriers that exist.

Participants all shared ways in which a focus on equity-centered assessment could help shift institutional cultures to be more inclusive. Equity-centered assessment was described as enhancing the diversity, equity, and inclusion work that is already happening at the MSI/AANAPISI, but stronger measures were recommended to proactively assess how the institution's research is advancing the diverse communities it serves. At other institutions, a focus on department level and institutional level assessments for the purposes of advancing equity could help shift culture. Multiple aspects of equity-centered assessment were discussed for shifting institutional culture, including using multiple assessment methods, consistent and constant data-sharing, and mentorship of leaders and colleagues. Assessing the needs and biases of faculty, staff, and students was discussed as being valuable in addressing institutional cultures that lack clarity and focus around inclusion. Similarly, assessing the informal norms experienced by faculty, staff, and students, as well as an equity focus in professional development for faculty and staff was suggested by some participants. Others were focused on consistency in the equity goals and measures of the institution to spur a culture shift on campuses. While the methods and needs may differ, all participants indicated that equity-centered assessment is the way forward in helping to advance inclusive institutional cultures.

Limitations

A multiple case study approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the role institutional culture plays in the implementation of equity-centered assessment, but as with all research, this study has limitations. Utilizing purposeful and snowball sampling techniques ensured that I included assessment practitioners that are knowledgeable and engaged in equity-centered assessment; however, using personal connections to begin this process meant that I excluded other assessment practitioners who may have also been a good fit for the study. Additionally, since I based the sample on participants' knowledge and engagement in equity-centered assessment and not their institutions, I may have omitted institutions that would have been worthwhile to include in this study.

Another limitation is that of breadth versus depth. I attempted to include several practitioners at different institutions in this study instead of focusing on a specific, detailed case at one institution. My proposed study allowed for breadth and depth of data in an attempt to study the same type of case at different institutions, but one case at a single institution could have provided even greater depth, particularly regarding the ways in which institutional culture influences equity-centered assessment work.

Finally, limited empirical research exists involving assessment practitioners in student affairs and the use of the MCOD model in higher education environments. Much of the literature surrounding assessment in student affairs, including equity-centered assessment, is theoretical in nature. A recent dissertation (Gardner, 2021) has provided research-based context for equity-centered assessment for the current study. The MCOD model was created based on the theoretical work of Jackson and Holvino (1988). This model seems to have been used internally within various organizations and higher education for the purposes of engaging in transformative organizational development, but does not seem to have been used widely in research settings.

Implications for Assessment Practitioners

Despite the limitations, the study findings have several implications for assessment practice in higher education institutions. The following implications are based on the findings and observations made during the research process and are specific to practitioner experiences with equity-centered assessment and institutional culture. Study findings suggest that there is a need to encourage the use of a critical lens in assessment, formalize equity-centered assessment training and resources for practitioners, define what integrating equity and assessment means for practitioners at their respective institutions, and formalize a consistent approach to situating assessment positions in student affairs divisions.

Institutional missions that espouse a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion require that student affairs assessment practitioners approach their work through a critical lens. Study findings demonstrate the promising impact of equity-centered assessment efforts to elevate all student voices. If institutions are going to meet the needs of diverse students and demonstrate commitments to inclusive institutional cultures, employing a critical and equity-centered approach to assessment is one way to enact these institutional missions. As evidenced by this study, institutions may espouse these commitments but be unwilling to engage in the hard work needed to advance large-scale change. However, the practitioners in this study showed ways that they engaged in critical approaches to assessment work to effect change where they can, despite such barriers. Critical practitioners acknowledge their own subjectivity and the ways their positions influence their practice, and center marginalized voices through methodological diversity in data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Heiser & Levy, 2017). Assessment practitioners should be encouraged to consider their identities in their work and use assessment to elevate the voices of diverse populations, both of which were critical practices employed by

many of the participants in the current study. Supervisors of these positions and student affairs leadership should facilitate and support these and other critical approaches in practitioners' equity-centered assessment work.

In order for practitioners to be better equipped to engage in equity-centered assessment, education and training needs to be formalized and access to resources should be facilitated. Participants in the current study received their training and development in assessment through various means, and indicated they are still learning about the integration of equity and assessment. Higher education and student affairs graduate programs as well as professional associations can help practitioners learn what it means to integrate equity and assessment and prepare them for equity-centered assessment work (Gardner, 2021). Equity-centered assessment continues to be an evolving concept in higher education (Baker & Henning, 2022) and assessment practitioners in student affairs will need to stay current with this and adjacent topics. Practitioners who have limited institutional encouragement or support may need to take control of their own learning and development in equity-centered assessment by accessing the evolving body of literature that is available on their own. Additionally, higher education and student affairs graduate programs need to better prepare their students for the increasing diversity in postsecondary education by embedding critical and equity-focused topics into their entire curricula, especially courses in higher education assessment.

Student affairs leadership should work closely with their assessment practitioners to define and set the tone for what equity integration looks like in their division assessment practices. This study showed that this integration looks different at different institutions. One participant talked specifically about the differences between equity-minded assessment and equity-centered assessment. Equity-minded assessment serves as a lens for conducting

assessment and is about being aware, responsive, and intentional to not perpetuate inequities (Baker & Henning, 2022; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020), whereas equity-centered assessment places equity at the center of assessment for the purposes of addressing inequity and systems of oppression (Baker & Henning, 2022). The integration of equity into assessment can happen along a continuum. As the literature and frameworks on integrating equity and assessment continue to evolve, student affairs leadership should engage their assessment experts in intentional conversations and planning about where they want and need their practices to fall on the equity-centered assessment continuum.

Consistency is needed in where division-level assessment leaders are positioned in student affairs. In this study, participants held director-level divisional roles strictly devoted to assessment and director-level divisional roles that incorporated other division-level responsibilities. One participant held a department-level director role with the added responsibility of leading division assessment, while another participant held a senior leadership position in the division of student affairs with the added responsibility of leading division assessment. These differences can impact how institutional culture is experienced, the amount of time that can be devoted to equity-centered assessment, and the level of access assessment practitioners have to institutional leadership. Zerquera et al. (2018) state that "oftentimes those charged to do assessment work and/or social justice work do not have the positional power to leverage organizational structures for large-scale change" (pp. 36-37). All student affairs divisions should have at least one person in a leadership role strictly dedicated to leading, educating, and implementing division assessment efforts. These leaders should be supported in their implementation of equity-centered and critical approaches to assessment work, as evidenced by previous recommendations. If student affairs assessment practitioners continue to

be situated at inconsistent places in the organizational chart, then equity-centered assessment work will continue to be hindered at some institutions and thrive at others.

Implications for Institutions

In addition to implications relevant to assessment practitioners, this study has produced potential implications for higher education institutions to move towards more inclusive cultures. These implications are presented within the dimensions of the MCOD Lens Exercise that were the basis of the second interview with participants. The following discussion suggests a regular review of institutional mission statements, review of policies and procedures through an equity lens, assessment of institutional culture and climate, and intentional recruitment and hiring of leaders and assessment practitioners with demonstrated equity priorities.

Mission and Purpose

Higher education institutions should engage in a regular review of their institutional mission statements. In this study, participants talked about espoused versus enacted values, a lack of focus on inclusion and equity, and misrepresentation in their institutions' mission statements. Tierney and Lanford (2018) assert that mission statements are extremely important because they use language that provide clues about an institution's relationship with the surrounding community, its status among peer institutions, its aspirations, and its priorities. Assessing perceptions of how institutions are acting on the aspirations and priorities espoused in mission statements, particularly those focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, could happen through campus survey initiatives or through formal program review. Program review is a method of evaluation and self-study (Finney & Horst, 2019) that can help assess mission strengths, deficiencies, and impact. Engaging in assessment methods such as this, and enacting

institution-wide commitments and plans to make changes based on the results, could go a long way to advance an inclusive culture at higher education institutions.

Policies and Procedures

Similar to mission statements, institutional policies and procedures should also be regularly reviewed through an equity lens to advance multiculturalism at higher education institutions. Study participants shared experiences with institutional policies and procedures lacking teeth in the advancement of equity as well as being unclear, difficult to find, and oftentimes "unspoken." In my search for institutional artifacts and documents, I could confirm participant accounts of documented policies and procedures being difficult to locate, as well as communicating surface-level commitments to equity and inclusion. These barriers, in addition to the other barriers identified by participants, can create inequities in access and understanding of institutional expectations and practices for faculty, staff, and students. When institutions communicate policies but do not address the action associated with adhering to or violating them, institutional culture can inform the response. This can be problematic where culture has been defined by a predominantly White or other majority group. Kuh and Whitt (1988) state that "Culture-driven policies and practices may denigrate the integrity and worth of certain groups" (p. 8). Engaging in regular, inclusive assessment practices such as program review, and enacting change based on the results, could assist in identifying and addressing deficiencies and impact of institutional policies and procedures.

Informal Systems, Culture, and Norms

Informal systems, culture, and norms are the unspoken expectations and accepted ways of being in an organization. These norms can be oppressive for students, faculty, and staff who hold marginalized identities. As Grapin and Pereiras (2019) explain,

> Most U.S. institutions of higher education ascribe to an assimilationist approach to acculturation, meaning that their minority members are expected to adhere to norms upheld by the dominant group. Typically, these institutions espouse a White, Eurocentric worldview that emphasizes ideologies such as individualism, competition, and meritocracy (pp. 308-309).

For higher education institutions, the impact of these norms can be understood through assessments focused on gauging perceptions of inclusion and equity, such as climate surveys. This dimension of institutional culture was the most problematic for study participants, as it was mainly found to be monocultural. Attributed to monocultural norms were a lack of action in advancing equity or addressing acts of racism, tokenism of persons of color on committees, and exclusion of diverse identities and thoughts in decision making. Faculty, student affairs professionals, and administrators need to be aware of the racism that exists in educational settings and acknowledge the systemic complexities that disadvantage students of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Patton et al., 2004). As evidenced by the practitioner experiences shared in this study, institutions are at different places in their readiness to engage in these conversations and take action to address racism and inequities. Engaging in equity-centered assessment efforts such as climate surveys and committing to utilizing the results can help address inequities in the experiences of students, faculty, and staff and advance more inclusive informal systems and cultures at higher education institutions.

Leadership

Finally, institutions need to prioritize hiring assessment practitioners and institutional leaders that demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in an effort to advance multiculturalism. In this study, participants shared various experiences with divisional and

institutional leadership. Institutional leadership was most often cited as having a lack of knowledge and/or commitment to advancing equity, whereas division leaders were more likely to actively support practitioners in their equity-centered assessment work. Kuh and Whitt (1988) state that managing meaning in an institution is an important responsibility for its leaders and that core leadership can provide continuity, which is integral to maintaining a cohesive institutional culture. Campus cultures are not cohesive or inclusive when members of leadership are not on the same page regarding knowledge of and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Institutions could ensure a more inclusive culture by hiring leadership and assessment practitioners that demonstrate a shared commitment to multiculturalism through equity-centered approaches and assessment.

Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study led to many practical implications for assessment practitioners and institutions. There are also implications for further research that could add to the growing literature about implementing equity-centered assessment at higher education institutions. While this study was focused on assessment in student affairs, what was learned about equity-centered assessment practice is applicable to the broader setting of assessment in higher education.

First, the current study was focused on a specific population of assessment practitioners that are responsible for leading assessment for student affairs divisions. Since equity-centered assessment work differs depending on where individuals work within the college or university organizational structure, further research is needed to understand how assessment practitioners in student affairs departments experience institutional culture when implementing equity-centered assessment and the factors and conditions that facilitate and limit these assessment practices. Practitioners responsible for leading equity-centered assessment efforts for a student affairs

department could have different experiences with institutional culture and how it impacts their work compared to the current study participants.

Additionally, further studies focused on specific institutional types could provide greater insight into how different institutional types influence the implementation of equity-centered assessment and provide valuable information to institutions about how to move towards a more inclusive campus culture. The current study placed the main focus on the assessment practitioner, ensuring that equity was an intentional focus of their assessment work and that they led such efforts for student affairs divisions. The type of institution at which they were employed was secondary to their role. Tierney and Lanford (2018) state that,

> One could reasonably contend that administrators and researchers need to have more than an intuitive understanding of institutional culture. By consciously interrogating and understanding the codes, symbols, and interpretations that inform institutional culture, leaders can appraise likely outcomes before charting a course of action (p. 3).

Research on the implementation of equity-centered assessment in specific university settings could show what implementing those practices and change outcomes means for different institutional types.

Additionally, subsequent research should examine the influence of individual and intersectional identities on experiences with and interpretations of institutional culture when carrying out equity-centered assessment. This study remained open to practitioners with any number of intersecting identities, and showed that identities played a role in how these practitioners approached their equity-centered work. However, questions remain in how specific identities experience institutional cultures that do not align with their identities. For example, how do BIPOC assessment practitioners experience institutional culture at PWIs? Are there

differences between their experiences and those of their White colleagues? Further case study research focused on how practitioners holding marginalized identities experience institutional cultures in their equity-centered assessment work could provide additional insight into the organizational supports and changes that are required to advance equity and inclusion.

Finally, this study focused on assessment practitioners in student affairs divisions in higher education. These practitioners engage in equity-centered assessment in settings that are outside of the classroom. Further research into the ways in which equity-centered assessment is implemented in academic department or classroom settings could provide a more comprehensive picture of what equity-centered assessment looks like across an institution. Practitioners in this study talked about a level of care for diverse students and staff and how they experience inclusion at their institutions. Would assessment practitioners in academic affairs share this focus? What does implementing equity-centered assessment look like in academic settings? Further studies could bring to light similarities and differences across the academy among assessment practitioners implementing equity-centered assessment.

Conclusion

Through conducting this study, I began to understand how institutional culture influences the work of student affairs assessment practitioners as they strive to implement equity-centered assessment. I discovered that these practitioners engage in equity-centered assessment because of personal, intrinsic motivations, whether those are because of the identities they hold, their belief in doing the right thing, or their care for diverse students, faculty, and staff at their institutions. They are often the only ones strategically elevating diverse voices through their work and are responsible for leading equity-centered assessment efforts in division and institutional settings. The participants in this study engage in equity-centered work despite barriers that arise within

the institution and at times, from state government. Institutions can move towards a more inclusive culture by hiring, training, and retaining assessment practitioners and leaders with a demonstrated commitment to advancing equity. Higher education institutions demonstrate action against racism and inequities on their campuses by utilizing findings from climate surveys and other assessments focused on advancing inclusive environments. The intersection of institutional cultures and equity-centered assessment work in student affairs as well as academic settings should be a continued focus of researchers. This research will be vital for change in higher education to meet the academic, developmental, and human needs of our increasingly diverse populations of students, faculty, and staff on college campuses.

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Appendix A

Email Invitation

Dear [Name],

My name is Jaime Williams and I am a doctoral candidate in the Research, Assessment, and Evaluation PhD program at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am writing to request your participation in my dissertation research that will explore how institutional culture impacts the experiences of student affairs assessment practitioners who are implementing equity-centered assessment practices. You were recommended by [Name of nominator] since you are an assessment professional regularly engaging in equity-centered assessment practices at the division level within student affairs at your institution.

Should you choose to participate, your involvement will consist of two interviews conducted via Zoom this semester. The interviews will seek to discover your experiences with institutional culture and how it impacts your ability to implement assessment with an equity and social justice focus. The first interview will ask you to reflect upon your role in implementing equity-centered assessment, challenges you experience in your work, and what institutional factors affect your experiences. The second interview will engage you in the Multicultural Organization Development (MCOD) Lens Exercise (Holvino, 2008). The MCOD model describes a process of change as an organization moves from a monocultural, exclusive organization to an inclusive, multicultural one. Participation in the Lens Exercise will involve answering four questions about your institution's mission/purpose, policies/procedures, informal systems/culture/norms, and leadership.

If you are interested in participating, I am happy to send questions in advance. Your responses will remain confidential and you will be asked to select a pseudonym for the study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose not to participate at any point in time. If you are interested in participating, please let me know and I will reach out to schedule the interviews. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me:

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Appendix B

Interview Protocols

First Interview

Thank you for being willing to share your experiences as a practitioner of assessment in student affairs. The study I am conducting is focused on practitioner experiences implementing equity-centered assessment and the role that institutional culture plays in your use of equity-centered practices. It is my hope that we can discuss your path to assessment and equity-centered assessment work, how you are currently engaging in equity-centered assessment, and your perceptions of the ways that institutional culture enhances or hinders your work in equity-centered assessment. We will begin the conversation today and I hope to continue it with a second interview in the next couple of weeks.

I am going to record our interviews so that I can listen to them later and transcribe them. At the end of each interview I will summarize our conversation so that we are both clear on what we discussed and so that you have the opportunity to add anything else you feel is important. Later in the process, I will share my transcript with you to ensure I've captured our conversation accurately as well as my conclusions drawn from the conversation to check that my interpretations of the data are accurate.

To ensure that our conversation is as confidential as possible, I ask that you choose a pseudonym that I will use in any written portions of the study.

Do you have any questions before we begin?
Do you agree to participate in the study?

1. Please tell me a little about yourself and why you agreed to participate in this study.
2. What is your current role and institution?
3. What was your path to becoming an assessment practitioner? How did you get here?
4. How often do you intentionally incorporate equity into your assessment work?
5. How did you come to learn about equity-centered assessment?
6. What was it that made you decide to engage in equity-centered assessment work?
7. Can you walk me through an example of an assessment initiative you lead where equity was centered in the project?
    a. What was the outcome of that initiative?
8. What does support for conducting equity-centered assessment look like for you in your role?
    a. Is it the support that you need? Why or why not?
9. In what ways are others at your institution incorporating equity into assessment practice?
10. What do you see as some of the most tangible examples of your institution's culture?
11. How would you describe the culture of your institution regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion?
12. How does this culture influence or show up in your work?

Second Interview

The primary purpose of this interview is to allow for verbal responses and conversation around the MCOD Lens Exercise that was emailed to you prior to the interview. Four questions will be asked for the institutional dimensions of mission/purpose, policies/procedures, informal systems/culture/norms, and leadership.

Once again I am going to record our interviews so that I can listen to them later and transcribe them. At the end of each interview I will summarize our conversation so that we are both clear on what we discussed and so that you have the opportunity to add anything else you feel is important. Later in the process, I will share my transcript with you to ensure I've captured our conversation accurately as well as my conclusions drawn from the conversation to check that my interpretations of the data are accurate.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. How do you assess the level of multiculturalism: monocultural, in transition, or multicultural?
2. What indicators or information did you use to assess it that way?
3. Given your informal assessment, what would be an appropriate change goal in order to become more multicultural?
4. What other information do you need in order to assess more accurately the level of multiculturalism in the organization?

Appendix C

Sample Categories, Codes, and Excerpts by Theme

Themes	Categories	Codes	Example excerpts
Elevating Diverse Voices Through Assessment	Elevating diverse voices	Creating space for BIPOC voices	We shift, creating a space where BIPOC voices can be heard in assessment, and a lot of that is based on how we ask questions, how we collect data, who's selecting the data, and who's analyzing the data.
		Different perceptions based on identities	In the time I've been here, I've seen change. But at the institution it does take time, and I also hold mostly majority identities, so it's easy for me to say "but the change is happening." But I'm not the one experiencing the microaggressions or overt discrimination every single day.
	Telling the story that needs to be told	Incorporating storytelling	Different ways that we're structuring our research protocols to make sure that we're including some of those mixed methods and storytelling, and that we're being inclusive and sharing diverse voices.
		Giving attention to the work of other division areas	I thought assessment would be a way that I could bring in some of the other narratives that we weren't giving as much time to.
The Role of Identities in Assessment Work	Identities influence approach to assessment work	Product of predominantly White institutions and spaces	I am a product of predominantly White institutions. So, all of my post-high school education has been at predominantly White institutions and in predominantly White spaces.
		Ensuring identities are not influencing assessment work	How am I making sure that my identities are not influencing the work that I'm doing considering [the identities] that I don't hold? And how is this work impacted? What can I do to mitigate that? Who can I

			collaborate with?
		Positionality frames equity-centered assessment work	Just my own positionality, and knowing that the academy wasn't set up for me, and there were a lot of systemic barriers in place. So, I think, those initial curiosities to investigate [barriers] a little more.
	Influence of identity-based experiences in equity-centered assessment work	Identities hindered mentorship at a young age	As a first generation student and as a female student, I was very good at math in high school, but I did not have any encouragement for pursuing something that was math related. I always feel very disappointed that I wasn't mentored. I think that I could have been involved with data early in my career.
		Benefits from student affairs programs	I was one of those students that super benefitted from student affairs programs, and just the community of resources. And so I became very engaged as an undergrad in an undergraduate research program for first generation, low income students of color.
Intrinsic Leadership in Equity-Centered Assessment	"Be the change you want to see"	Assessment is a White space	But something bothered me in the fact that [assessment] wasn't diverse, at least from the racial aspect. Realizing that because of the culture that I come from, as a black woman, not allowing other people to continue to tell our stories. And so, that's when I knew it was for me to be in that space.
		Assessment shows how we can eliminate barriers for students	So, I spend a lot of time understanding college students' needs...and what their student experience is like and sharing that with our colleagues to make effective decisions around- Should we continue to do this program? Do we need a better intervention? And, how can we better support our students?

	"It's the right thing to do"	No other way to do assessment once you know about equity-centered assessment	So, to me once [equity-centered assessment] was something that I learned about, I don't know how I could do the work any other way. It was one of those things that once your eyes are open, how could you ignore it?
		Student experiences matter	I mean, if I care about students- if students matter, if their experiences matter, why would I not engage in equity centered assessment?
Perceptions of Institutional Culture are Individualized	Institutional pride	Faculty research	The grants that come in. The research that helps advance whatever issues are happening in the world. So, I think you know, being a public institution, that public service focus is there, then the cornerstone of it is the research that informs it.
		Pride in helping students transform	We often take those kind of diamonds in the rough, and we help them figure out how to, by the end of their experience here, how to shine. And, we've taken a lot of pride in that, and we do that together pretty effectively, both in the classroom and out of the classroom.
		Large alumni base	We have a really big alumni base, very big nationwide, internationally. And so, that adds to the institution's culture.
	Problematic aspects of institutional culture	University brand gets in the way of the student experience	And, you know, when you come here it's very prestigious for a public institution. But yeah, our students are struggling. They're hungry. They're using our services.
		"We're the best"	I had never heard before [I came] here- the cliche of "we've always done it this way", or "we're the best" with no backup, and I got here, and people said that all the time- look, we're the best!

		Budget as a moral compass of institutional values	I feel like it's a moral compass of what we value, culturally. We say we value data. But again, there's not very many of us on campus doing this. I think a tangible example is the way that we fund units to do assessment and research work for the institution. There's not a lot of us, so we don't fund it at all.
Indicators of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Culture Differ Across Institutions	Positive strides in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion culture	Enacted DEI values	So, we take into account the diverse needs of a diverse community. You know, our faculty may not be at parity with our students, but the faculty that we do have and the staff that we do have are strong advocates and champions. So you know, I think it's vocal leadership, intersectional leadership, that collectively collaborates.
		Identities factored into assessment of the student experience	So it's just making sure that we're advancing all the different groups that we have on campus, whether it's international students or students with disabilities or first gen students. We really define it in all the areas that we really want to have full communities in, so looking at a broad plan and working collectively to advance the needs of those students and their success.
	Barriers to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion on campuses	Equity talk without the equity walk	People are like, “oh, I care about it” but they don’t actually do the equity walk, and actually put things into action, because that’s where the hard work is in this. And, if you Google [the institution]-equity, you’re going to find it on every single person’s website and webpage and strategic plan. But you’re not going to see a whole lot of systemic action associated with it.
			I would say that culturally we espouse

			a very strong value for diversity, equity, and inclusion if you look at our marketing campaigns, if you look at things on our websites. If you read stuff. I think, when it comes to the lived experience it depends on the person that you talk to, and probably the identities in which they hold, or the identities of folks with which they spend time.
		Still defining DEI culture	I'm still trying to find it. Describe it. When it comes to our spaces for DEI in terms of strategic plan, et cetera, I'd say we're included with all institutions that I have worked with or talked with- to me it's just a statement.
		Club mentality	So, you're trying to build relationships to get things done, and there are formal committees and then there's the real meeting, right? The meeting after the meeting, or the meeting before the meeting. And, that happens a lot, too. And, how do you get into those circles? Are those friend groups that tend to come from the same backgrounds?
Various Institutional Impacts on Equity-Centered Assessment Work	Doing the work despite the institution	Equity-centered assessment work is a battle	I feel like I have to fight a lot more battles than I'd like to…We don't have the infrastructure in place to support students, and we need to do a better job with that, instead of putting the onus on the student. So, I have to call things like that out.
		DEI culture doesn't change equity-centered assessment work	In terms of institutional DEI, it's an influence but it doesn't really shift my work. I've begun to think about [my DEI work] from a larger perspective in terms of allowing that to kind of feed into the culture at the institution in a way.
	Institutional culture	Advancing DEI without	We had to navigate this specific law, the wording, and that's the real effect

	influences DEI assessment	pushback	that we see- as you get into the wording of the law, and then you've got the fear of it, that you actually self-govern beyond the wording of the law, just to be extra careful. You're actually being more restrictive than you need to be. So, there's that fear of how to even bring up the topic and how to do the work without push back.
		DEI work is enhanced by culture	Really, you know, if there's any event or anything going on in the world, [we lean] into it. Making sure our students are supported or learning. We could be trying to work out a social justice issue. So, we'll do a lecture series to advance an area of learning. So, the collective work we're doing to move us along as a socially just society.
	Responsibility of leading up and across to advance equity through assessment	Only POC calling out inequities	I feel like I've become the spokesperson to call out things which is very exhausting. Because sometimes, I'm the only person of color calling things out so it feels very taxing.
		Leadership follow-through and action	That's hard, though, when it's not your data. To constantly encourage leadership, saying, "we need to keep bringing this up. You might think we have moved on, but [the participants] have not."
Equity-Centered Assessment is Needed to Shift Institutional Cultures	How can we create actionable change and culture shifts?	Campus climate assessments	Some sort of climate survey- wants, needs, holistic "what are your barriers?" assessment [for faculty, staff, and students] would be really informative.
			We need to do a needs assessment. I think there's a lot of anecdotes, and I've done a little bit of work from my position to try to understand this, but we just need to spend time understanding where people are in

			this, how they're feeling about it, and building rapport.
		Regular policy/ procedure reviews	You know that even with this analysis and recommendations of the current policies, I don't really see anywhere here that says we're going to do this on an every other year basis or something like that. It tends to be a bit reactive.
			I think a department head should review the demographics of their department every single year and have a conversation with their supervisor about [the diversity of their staff].
		Systemic change	In order to move forward, we need more structural change. We need to focus on the system, not the individuals. So, obviously individuals are carrying these very political ideologies, that map with wanting to be inclusive, but the structural changes in place aren't aligned with that. So how can we, as an institution, work to create better structures?
	Transparency is needed	Vulnerability in leadership	I think a goal will be to really understand the motivations of our leaders, and through those motivations understanding their conflict, as well. Something to consider as we are trying to move to a more multicultural space- self-awareness, vulnerability, and transparency are key when it comes to leadership.
			I don't think we want to be vulnerable enough to acknowledge that we're not perfect. If you're in the senior leadership position, this is a community thing- part of equity is to be inclusive and it takes a village. I think being vulnerable to that is really important.

		Accountability	I would like to see accountability of leaders in multiculturalism work. So, the assessment comes down to those metrics that we all need to agree upon. You know, grad rates are not good enough. We want to see that we're graduating our first gen students at the same rate. So setting goals. It doesn't mean if we don't hit those goals somebody is in trouble, but what we've seen is not even setting the goal or ignoring it. But, we should be welcome to explore why we didn't hit [a goal], and what unexpected barriers were there. So, we need to have a transparency of that assessment as well.
			So, if I were to put some measures in place I would look at how we are being community centered with our research. How we're connecting it to communities. How we're advancing different industries that impact diverse communities.