

Song, L. M., Nix, V., Nelson, E. B., Gibbons, R., Thomas, E., Young, L. C. (2025). The 2023 landscape report: Practitioners' perceptions on the field of student affairs assessment. *Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning, Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education Conference Proceedings*, 6(2), 35-57.

The 2023 Landscape Report: Practitioners' Perceptions on the Field of Student Affairs Assessment

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"We have no conflicts of interest to disclose"

Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

AALHE Conference Proceedings 2024-2025, Volume 6, Issue 2

Abstract: Researchers surveyed registrants of the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders Listserv. Quantitatively, we used a positivist approach to analyze data with inferential statistics and a relatively novel realist approach to analyze data with observation oriented modeling. Qualitatively, open-ended items were subjected to qualitative content analysis and then generalized to a legitimacy framework. Three broad categories of respondents' institutions impacted respondents' strength of agreement: institutional type, institutional designation, and accreditor. Recommendations for practice, research, and implications were provided.

Keywords: *student affairs assessment, assessment-informed practice, institutional type, institutional designation, regional accreditor*

Introduction

The Student Affairs Assessment Leadership (SAAL) Landscape Survey (LS) was initially developed to gain clarity about the needs of practitioners (SAAL Board, February 17, 2016). When the SAAL Research On and Advancing Knowledge of the Profession Committee (ROAKC) was formed, we were tasked with surveying our membership; consistent with the SAAL Board's wishes, we kept the structure of their previously used questionnaire with slight qualitative modifications. We extended the questionnaire by adding open-ended items gleaned from professionals through a modified nominal group technique (Nix et al., 2023) needs assessment. Thus, this research project is designed as an integral element of a SAAL strategic (Bullington-Miller, 2023) plan research initiative.

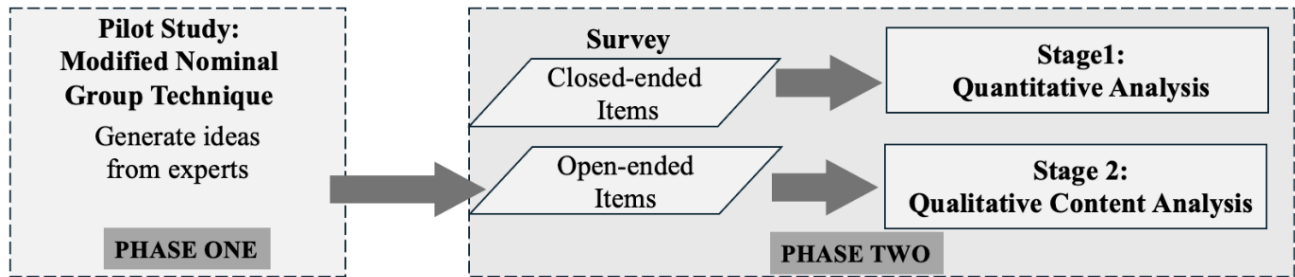
Methodologies

This 2023 LS (LS23) was nested into a larger—intended three-phase—mixed-method longitudinal research project and represents phase two of a project that began in 2022 (see Figure 1). In phase one, an mNGT (Nix et al., 2023) study was conducted to collect ideas and perspectives from student affairs experts who ranked those resulting concepts in terms of importance. According to Wiggins et al. (2020), an mNGT is an efficient type of facilitated group discussion for achieving consensus. The experts’ opinions, alongside scale-methodological principles from researchers (DeCastellarnau, 2018; Dillman et al., 2014; Krosnick & Presser, 2010), guided any modifications to the questionnaire (stage 1).

This research team collected data using survey methodology. Since we collected mixed data types and used separate analytical approaches for each type, this was a multimethod study (Hunter & Brewer, 2015) seeking methodological (or analytical) triangulation (Mitchell, 1983; Yin, 2009; as cited in Bryman, 2016). Analysis of data was divided into two stages: one quantitative and the other qualitative. In stage 1, quantitative analyses were conducted using SPSS 28, Minitab 22, and observation-oriented modeling (OOM) software (Grice, 2011). In stage 2, open-ended items of the questionnaire were subjected to qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Mayring, 2021) with MAXQDA 2024 software.

Figure 1

Research and Analytical Flowchart



Data Collection

Advanced notices posted on the SAAL listserv promoted the LS23 according to Dillman et al. (2014); weekly reminders were sent to the listserv, and social-media channels once the questionnaire was live, hosted by the SAAL Board’s Anthology Baseline product. Approximately 1,900 SAAL-listserv subscribers could have responded.

Participants

With a response rate of 5.63% and margin of error at $\pm 9.2\%$, we were unable to draw any quantitative inferences through the positivist null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) analyses other than roughly 80% of the listserv members (population) might have agreed with our respondents’ (sample) collective strength of relative agreement on any given forced-response item.

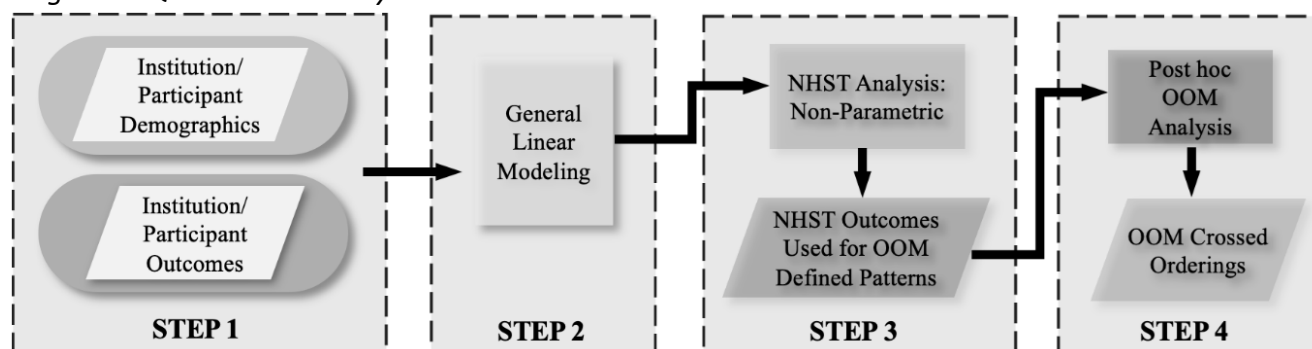
One hundred seven respondents granted consent (anonymously) and responded to most quantitative items and 87 of those people completed all forced-response items; of the 87, 69 respondents provided responses to open-ended prompts.

Stage One — Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative stage 1 included four steps (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Stage One Quantitative Analytical Flowchart



Descriptives derived from SPSS identified resonant strength of agreement from frequencies and central tendencies of forced-choice items. General linear modeling (GLM) through Minitab Statistics as step 2 was used as an approach to data-snooping. Ramsey and Schafer (2012) suggested this approach for exploratory factor analysis to identify the areas most likely to yield useful information, which helps researchers explore datasets without any predefined (specifically, deficit) hypotheses. Since GLM outputs suggested that several response/dependent variables were impacted and since none of the data were normally distributed, subsequently, nonparametric statistics were used in further NHST analyses (step 3). When appropriate, we conducted post hoc Dunn's tests ensuing any significant Kruskal-Wallis result.

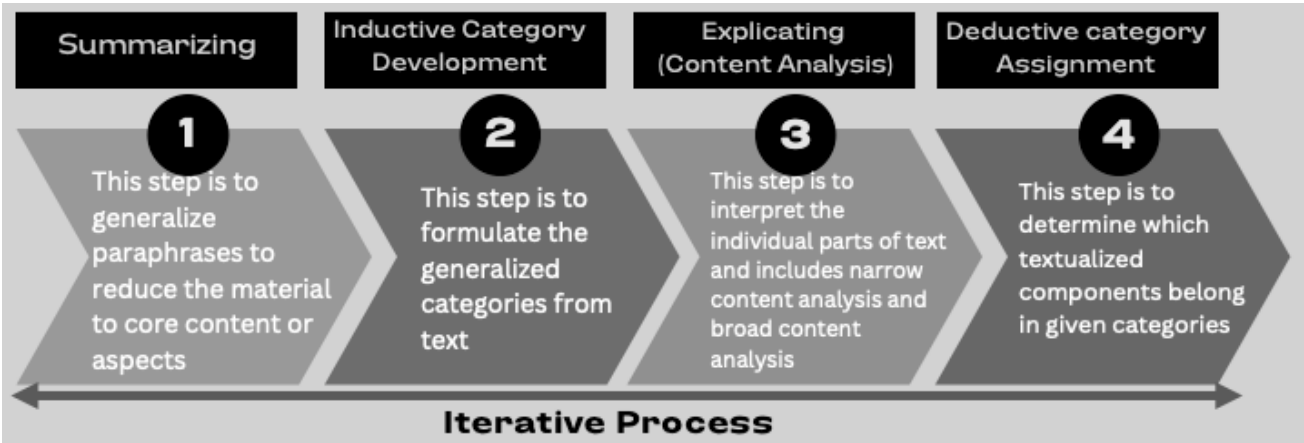
During step 4, we incorporated a realist-based tool, observation-oriented modeling (OOM) (Grice, 2011), for additional post hoc analytical procedures. OOM may be considered as an advanced nonparametric software package, since it is also distribution-free. OOM does not use the term *variable* but instead uses *ordered observations*. There are two types of ordered observations: *target observations* are what the researcher expects to see based on a research hypothesis, and *conforming observations* are those that match expectations. OOM also differs from the traditional NHST approaches using *p*-values and effect sizes, as OOM uses the percent correct classification (PCC) index, which represents the percentage of tested observations that match the expected ordinal pattern. *Chance values* (*c*-values) are the secondary measures in OOM, representing the probability of achieving the ordered-observation PCC randomly. Valentine et al. (2019) suggested that the combination of a PCC greater than 50% and a *c*-value ≤ 0.10 be considered significant. We used Kruskal-Wallis rankings to identify expected patterns in each OOM procedure. OOM does not use group aggregates, but instead relies on individual/case observations; in essence, individuals are the effect sizes (Grice et al., 2020) in OOM outputs.

Stage Two — Qualitative Content Analysis

QCA tenets were used to code the textual data collected. As Mayring (2021) emphasized, his pragmatist-centered QCA provides a systematic way to analyze large volumes of text or media content, allowing researchers to convert qualitative data into quantifiable variables, making it easier to analyze patterns and trends across extensive datasets; therefore, the unique nature of QCA allows researchers to manage large datasets based on both theory-driven (deductive) and data-driven (inductive) category formation. Figure 3 illustrates our four iterative analytical steps.

Figure 3

Stage Two Qualitative Content Analysis Flowchart



Note. This flowchart illustrates the inherently iterative process of qualitative content analysis.

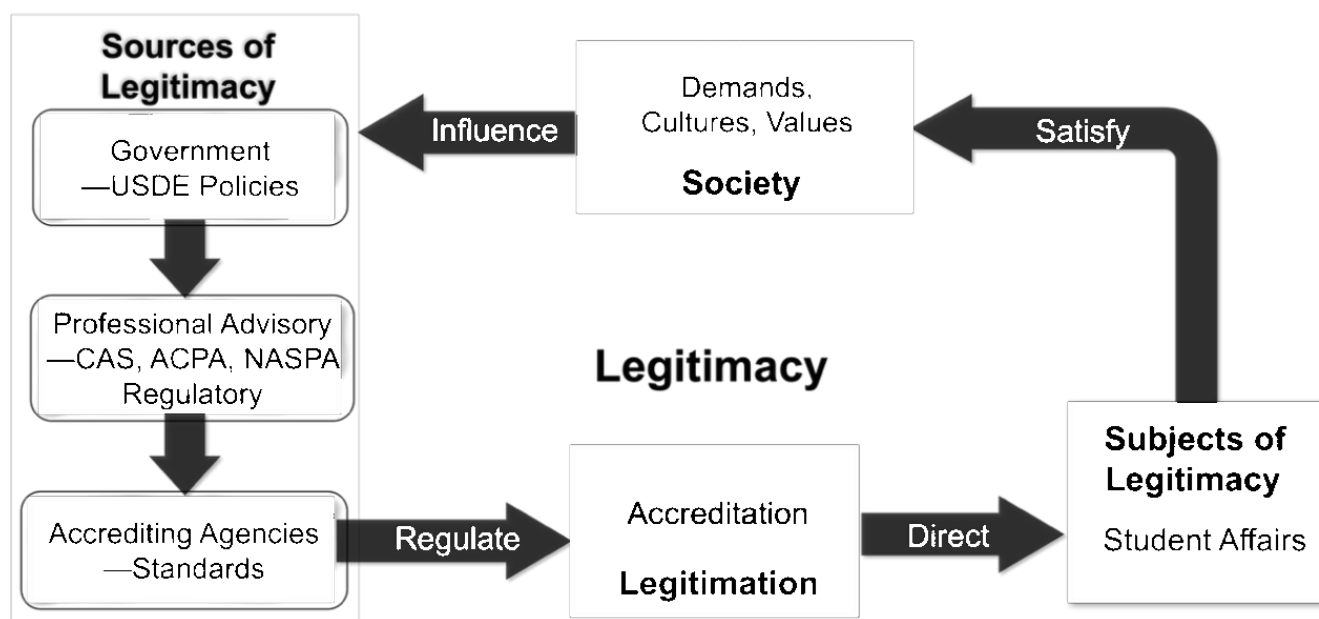
We constructed a categorical code system based on the criteria and levels of legitimacy (see Figure 5) and peer-reviewed literature. Subsequently, in step two of the second stage, we created categories and sub-categories. Meanings and explanations on code-memos provided clarity for how and why segments were coded; explication interpreted the raw data into meaningful insights by considering the context and theory (Mayring, 2021) guiding us. Step three is crucial as researchers analyze content through iterative processes—both inductively and deductively. In step four, deductive category assignment to previously defined categories structured the organization of the data (Mayring, 2021). The analytical flowchart (Figure 3) guided the iterative qualitative analytical processes.

Because the term “legitimate” and phrases similar to “*we don’t feel as legitimate as academic affairs assessment*” were written by respondents, we looked for a legitimacy framework. As Mitchell (1983) stated, qualitative data should draw inferences to a theory or model; therefore, we constructed a framework based on research published by legitimacy scholars. As Deephouse et al. (2017) articulated, “organizational legitimacy is the perceived appropriateness of an organization to a social system in terms of rules, values, norms, and definitions” (p. 32). In light of the principles and the processes of legitimation, a conceptual framework was constructed, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Yin (2003) discussed “analytical generalization” (p. 32) as a technique for qualitative research in which the results from the study are likened to theories as prototypes. Mitchell (1983) termed an approach to qualitative research “theoretical generalization” (p. 36); he went on to discuss how qualitative data is inherently heuristic insofar as the narratives of the participants mirror abstract theoretical principles.

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework



Note. This figure was created based on “Organizational legitimacy: Six key questions.” by Deephouse et al. (2017) in R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer, (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (2nd ed., pp. 27–54). Sage.

The legitimacy processes encompass both subjects and objects of legitimacy: the sources of legitimacy are internal and external stakeholders who possess the capacity for evaluation, while “subjects of legitimacy refer to those social entities, structures, actions, and ideas whose acceptability is being assessed” (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008, p. 54).

Sources of Legitimacy for SA assessment, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) represents authority, recognizing the soundness of institutions and programs for receiving federal funding. The USDE alongside professional organizations such as the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), issue standards and guidelines that lead the practices and processes of advisory organizations, such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). This three-level hierarchical system represents authority, rigor, and quality through assessment practices.

Subject of Legitimacy—SA Assessment Generally, a subject of legitimacy needs to be recognized by the policymakers, regulators, and advisory organizations. Therefore, the purpose of SA

assessment's legitimacy includes two facets; first, to comply with the policies or to meet the standards of the policymaker and regulatory organizations; second, to enhance "student learning, development, and success." (CAS Vision, n.d.). The policies and standards of the USDE, CAS, NASPA, and ACPA direct the development, assessment, and improvement as students meet stated outcomes; therefore, the subject (SA assessment) must meet the requirements of legitimacy while ensuring the effectiveness of co-curricular programs and services designed with student success outcomes in mind.

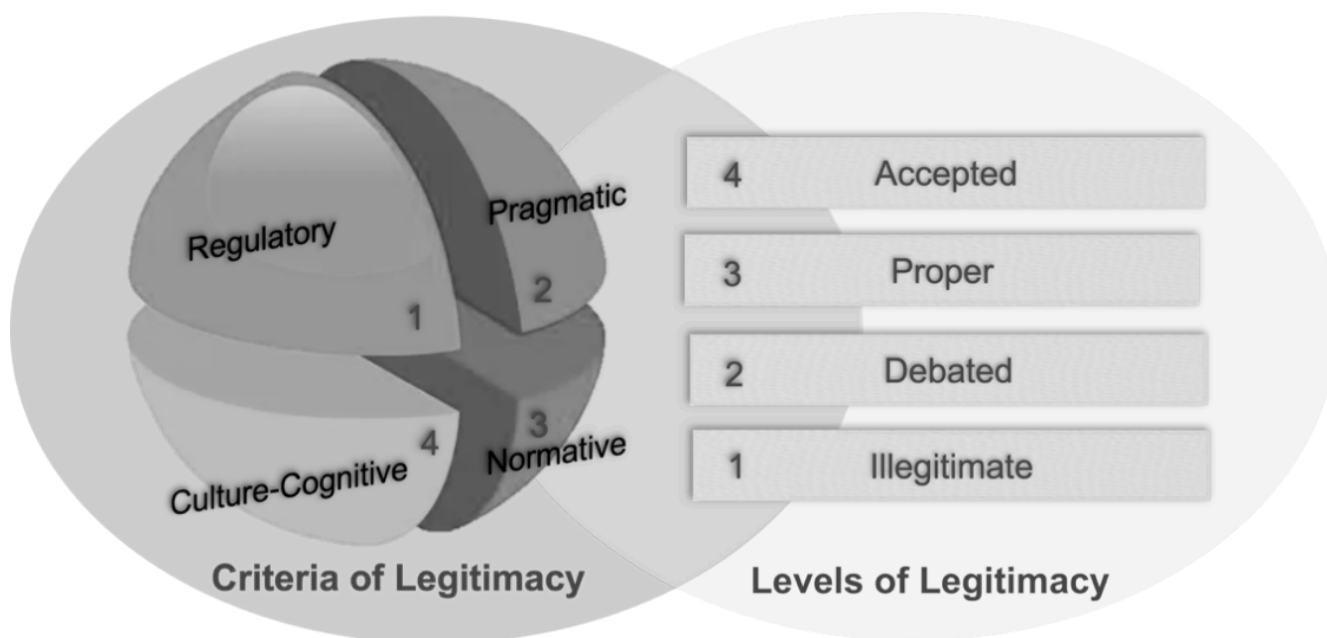
Legitimation The framework's core, legitimation, is a dynamic process by which stakeholders evaluate, respond, and adapt to the expectations based on—sometimes rapidly-shifting—societal norms and values (Deephouse et al., 2017). For our purposes, legitimacy levels (refer to Figure 5, later in this manuscript) reflect the efforts of SA assessment towards meeting the standards and guidelines.

External Pressures Greenwood et al. (2017) posited that for an organization to attain legitimacy, it must align itself with societal expectations by exhibiting a sense of appropriateness; the perception of such appropriateness is fundamentally constructed upon the frameworks of societal regulations, norms, values, cultural paradigms, or systems of meaning. The field of SA in past three decades has undergone significant transformations, driven by technological advancements, evolving student needs, and changes in societal expectations (Barr et al., 2014). These transformations might influence the decision-making of local policymakers, USDE, CAS, ACPA, and NASPA as the levels of "regulatory, pragmatic, normative, and cultural-cognitive" (Greenwood et al., 2017, p. 28) shift.

Criteria & Levels for Legitimacy The four criteria to achieving legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017) include cultural-cognitive, normative, pragmatic, and regulatory; the four levels are: illegitimate, debated, proper, and accepted (see Figure 5). Both criteria and levels are independently nonlinear. Our conceptual framework integrated legitimacy criteria and levels to evaluate organizational legitimacy through the words of our respondents. In qualitative research, researchers should generalize analytically (Yin, 2003) and theoretically (Mitchell, 1983). By using criteria and levels, we were able to accomplish analytical and theoretical generalization.

Figure 5

Criteria for & Levels of Legitimacy



Note. Constructed from “Organizational legitimacy: Six key questions,” (Deephouse et al, 2017), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (2nd., pp. 27-54).

Regulatory legitimacy arises when an organization complies with laws, regulations, and rules set by governmental and regulatory bodies (Deephouse et al., 2017). This criterion ensures that the organization is operating within the legal framework and adhering to formal standards. **Pragmatic legitimacy**, based on the self-interested calculations of an organization's stakeholders, occurs when the organization meets the practical needs and interests of its stakeholders such as customers, employees, and investors. **Normative legitimacy** stems from the alignment of an organization's actions with societal norms, values, and expectations, reflecting the moral and ethical approval of the organization by the broader community. **Cultural-cognitive legitimacy**, rooted in the shared beliefs and cultural understandings within a society, occurs when an organization's practices are taken for granted and seen as natural or inevitable.

Additionally, organizational legitimacy can be viewed through these lenses as occurring through four stages. **Illegitimate legitimacy** refers to organizations' actions or activities that are widely perceived as not conforming to established norms, values, or laws, which can lead to criticism and legal challenges, or create legitimacy dilemmas. **Debated legitimacy** describes organizations that operate in gray areas; their legitimacy is questioned or contested. Such organizations may adhere to some norms but deviate from others, leading to ongoing debates about their legitimacy. **Proper legitimacy** can be achieved when an organization conforms to established norms and values, gaining a stable and positive perception among stakeholders; such organizations are seen as legitimate but still face occasional scrutiny. **Accepted legitimacy** occurs when an organization is fully embraced and supported by its stakeholders. These organizations are seen as exemplary; they set standards and raise bars.

Results/Findings

Stages one and two were conducted concurrently but results are reported in two sections.

Quantitative Stage

Descriptives revealed the following salient outputs:

1. Approximately 60% of the respondents worked at four-year, large institutions (over 10,000 students), while 40% were employed by two-year or smaller institutions (less than 10,000 students);
2. 49% of respondents earned doctoral degrees, 18% and 20% possessed master’s and bachelor’s degrees respectively;
3. 58.6% of respondents worked in the field of SA assessment and 30.6 % respondents considered 76-100% of their roles dedicated to SA assessment; 54.8% of respondents claimed that they had no experience in SA assessment.
4. Respondents’ institutions were accredited by major regional accreditors; however, five respondents were not sure of their accreditors.

Three demographic categories were repeatedly shown to be significant impact/predictor variables: *Institution Type*, *Institution Designation*, and *Accreditor*. Table 1 lists the significance of impacts that institutional type had on respondents’ highest degree attainment, engaging students in the assessment processes, and partnering with institutional research (IR).

Table 1

Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Significant Impacts by Institutional Type

Variable	N	df	H	<i>p</i>	η^2
Practitioners’ Highest Degree	85	6	13.00	0.043	0.103
Engaging Students in	85	6	13.74	0.033	0.099
Partner with IR	85	6	17.24	0.008	0.144

The results from OOM¹ (Table 2) aligned with the results from the NHST analyses. An additional observation, “*years of experiences outside SA assessment*” was also impacted by *Institutional Type* (PCC = 54.73%, *c*-Value < 0.01) of the respondent; almost 55% of our respondents’ experiences outside the field were related to the type of institutions where they worked.

¹ As an example for clarity (Appendix A), a combination of a PCC value of 66.67% with a *c*-value of 0.09 indicates that our respondents indicated 4-year institutions with more than 10k student enrollment had higher student engagement than 2-year institutions with a less than 10k student enrollment 66.67% of time and the chance that we would have observed this randomly was 0.09. Similarly, the assessment practices at 4-year institutions with an over 10k student enrollment partnered with IR more than 56.29% of the time. Two-year institutions with a less than 10K student enrollment partnered with IR less often than 4-year (over 10K and less than 10K), for-profit (100 % of the time), faith-based (75% of the time), and stand-alone graduate institutions (100 % of the time) (see also, Appendix A). Remember, these were observations; they are not predictions.

Table 2*OOM Results for Impacts by Institutional Type*

Ordered Observation	PCC (%)	c-Value
Practitioners' Highest Degrees	50.33	<0.001
Years of Experience outside SA	54.73	<0.01
Engaging Students in Assessment	57.84	<0.001
Partnering with IR	56.29	0.00

Table 3 displays the results of several Kruskal-Wallis tests, which revealed statistically significant relationships, the first row of which reveals a statistically significant ($H(3) = 9.63, p = .022, \eta^2 = .082$) impact on perceptions of using assessment findings for division-level decision-making across different institutional designations. There were six other variables predicted by *Institutional Designation*.

Table 3*Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Impacts by Institution Designation*

Variable	N	df	H	<i>p</i>	η^2
Assessment Findings used for Division Decision-Making	84	3	9.63	0.022	0.082
Assessment of Co-curricular Learning	85	3	8.43	0.038	0.067
Demonstrable Culture of Assessment in Division	85	3	10.86	0.013	0.097
Senior Division Leaders Demonstrate Support	83	3	8.21	0.042	0.066
Senior Division Leaders use Assessment for Decisions	85	3	7.82	0.050	0.060
Established Division-level SLOs/KPIs	84	3	8.86	0.031	0.073
Interested in SAAL Virtual Meetings	80	2	7.45	0.024	0.071

Correspondingly, Table 4 lists the OOM results, a PCC of 50.80% with a c-value of 0.01 was obtained (row one). Just over half of the respondents' relative agreement that their institutions discussed assessment findings for decision-making was dictated by institutional type, and the chance of getting this result randomly was 1%. The results of OOM shed light on other impacts, listed in Table 4.

Table 4*OOM Results for Impacts by Institutional Designation*

Ordered Observations	PCC (%)	c-Value
Findings used for Division Decision-Making	50.80	0.01
Assessment of Co-curricular Learning	53.68	0.00
Demonstrable Culture of Assessment in Division	51.68	0.03
Senior Division Leaders Demonstrate Support	52.68	0.00

OOM analyses (Appendix B) demonstrated that 77.24% of the time, respondents at institutions without designations used assessment findings for decision-making at the division-level more than respondents at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Additionally, respondents working at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) 69.52% of the time believed they used assessment findings for decision-making more than respondents from HSIs believed they did; results of other observations are listed in Appendix B.

Table 5 reports three significant impacts across accreditors, including “*demonstrable culture of assessment in division*”, “*established division-level SLOs/KPIs*”, and “*established department-level SLOs/KPIs*”.

Table 5

Kruskal -Wallis Test Results for Impacts by Accreditors

Variable	N	df	H	<i>p</i>	η^2
Demonstrable Culture of Assessment in Division	85	6	14.64	0.023	0.111
Established Division-level SLOs/KPIs	84	6	26.02	0.000	0.260
Established Department-level SLOs/KPIs	84	6	14.57	0.024	0.111

Post hoc Dunn's tests with Bonferroni corrections were conducted to pinpoint the exact sources of the statistically significant differences (see Appendix C). These were the only areas where post hoc Dunn’s tests were feasible since no other categories had cells where $n > 5$. Despite nonparametric statistics being distribution-free, cells with an $n < 5$ presented challenges for all NHST findings. OOM is not bound by those assumptions; we use individual observations instead of aggregates.

Correspondingly, OOM (Table 6) aligned with the NSHT tests—but at the individual-case observation level—revealing that the respondents who worked for institutions accredited by HLC 69.31% of the time believed they had a demonstrable culture of assessment in the division more often than institutions accredited by NECHE thought they did. Respondents from HLC-accredited institutions agreed they demonstrated cultures of assessment in their divisions more than respondents from institutions accredited by MSCHE 68.66% of the time.

Table 6

OOM Results for Impacts by Accreditor		
Ordered Observations	PCC (%)	c-Value
Demonstrable Culture of Assessment in Division	54.19	0.00
Established Division-level SLOs/KPIs	60.70	0.00
Established Department-level SLOs/KPIs	52.92	0.00

Additionally, respondents working at SACSCOC- accredited institutions thought they demonstrated an assessment culture more than NECHE-accredited respondents (PCC = 77.78%, c-value = 0.00) and more than MSCHE-accredited (PCC = 76.07%, c-value = 0.00) respondents. OOM results aligned with findings from the Kruskal-Wallis conclusions (refer back to Table 6); respondents working at SACSCOC- and HLC- accredited institutions perceived they had a demonstrable culture of assessment in their division more than respondents working with different regional accreditors. However, rather than comparing the rankings of the groups, OOM compared each response to every other single response. Finally, the OOM results also revealed that respondents who worked at WASC-accredited institutions believed their institutions put the least efforts toward division-level SLOs/KPIs, while respondents working at NECHE accredited institutions believed they exhibited the least efforts toward department-level SLOs/KPIs.

Qualitative Stage

During this qualitative analytical stage, researchers iteratively used inductive and deductive reasoning concepts to analyze the top three successes and challenges that respondents perceived and wrote. As the legitimacy conceptual framework guided the QCA process, the current SA assessment practices were deductively categorized into the four legitimacy criteria (see Appendix C).

Legitimacy Criterion—Cultural-Cognitive

The majority of the comments (see Appendix D: Figure 1) indicated that establishing a buy-in culture, particularly buy-in from leadership and the key stakeholders, is crucial for SA assessment professionals. Some respondents perceived that assessment should be everyone’s business, as one respondent noted, “*equally shared, equally held*”. Overall, respondents considered that SA assessment was not as legitimate as academic-affairs assessment, however, they believed it is vital to the institutions they represented.

Legitimacy Criterion—Normative

Respondents believed that it is critical to reinforce awareness of assessment and establish relationships engaging stakeholders across the institution in order to overcome resistance and misconceptions about assessment (see Appendix D: Figure 2), as one respondent commented, ...we should be “*ending multitude of assessments for the sake of doing them...*” Other common opinions stressed the importance of fostering collaborative relationships and partnerships across the institution to educate leaders, empower staff, construct assessment frameworks and models, share impactful stories, and as they noted, “*SA (assessment practitioners) should improve sharing their succusses [sic] ...*”, “*they (leadership) know what assessment is, but will they engage is another story...*”. Therefore, as

respondents suggested, strategies must be created towards demonstrating the value and impact of SA assessment. Ultimately, the goal is to position SA assessment as central to improving equitable student learning outcomes and successes.

Legitimacy Criterion—Pragmatic

The key sub-categories of the “*pragmatic*” criterion included challenges regarding resources, including time, funding, personnel, and capacity (see Appendix D: Figure 3). Respondents struggled with competing priorities, burnout, and lack of dedicated staff and funding for assessment efforts; one in particular noted, “...*too many people doing assessment under 'other duties as assigned' and having no dedicated SA assessment professional...*”, “*(we) lack staff with expertise...*”, and “*(we) lack education in student affairs...*”; these comments indicated lower capacity is a major issue. Moreover, other respondents noted difficulties in establishing consistent standards for assessment across decentralized student affairs units. They suggested appropriate and standardized implementation guidelines are needed. As one respondent critiqued, “*the current focus on student success outcomes which can be [sic] difficult to measure in student affairs.*” Finally, respondents opined that “*closing the loop*” is essential in assessment practice; one respondent said [this means] “*converting data and assessment into actionable direction for staff to work with*” and “*connecting institutional and divisional strategic priorities to unit-level assessments*” but many felt capacity was a limiter. Overall, the passages highlight the pragmatic realities and constraints that respondents believed they must navigate in order to improve SA assessment capacity and use data effectively to support student successes.

Legitimacy Criterion—Regulatory

One key challenge that fell under this criterion was state-driven initiatives and policies such as additional assessment requirements, and recently, restrictive repressive state policies around diversity and equity (see Appendix D: Figure 4). One respondent specified, “*...and the lack of transparency and accountability in strategic planning and assessment*”. Another respondent clearly stated, “*we don't really have Student Affairs Assessment roles*”. Respondents claimed that limited human and financial resources, as well as concerns about job security and retaliation, further constrained the ability to meaningfully incorporate equity.

Legitimacy Level—Debated

Researchers categorized respondents' perceptions into the four legitimacy levels; this report—and the preceding conference presentation—focused on the debated and illegitimate levels (see Appendix E) since the practices that were categorized into these two levels indicated the issues to which institutions should pay special attention and may need to address immediately.

Overwhelmingly, comments lamented that the lack of resources, expertise, funding, and institutional support were major challenges in SA assessment (see Appendix E: Figure 1). These challenges were categorized into the pragmatic legitimacy criterion, which reflected the active disagreement among different stakeholders (such as SA assessment vs. academic-affairs assessment regarding funding distribution) or between dissident stakeholders and the organization (such as students vs. policymakers regarding tuition rates). Respondents also perceived a noticeable lack of awareness regarding SA assessment in their institutions, as it was seen as an “*add-on*”, and “*seems not as legit as*

academic affairs assessment", as another respondent mentioned. Respondents had also seen negative professional outcomes, such as burnout, siloed work, resistance to data-informed decision-making, fear of negative results, and the perception of assessment as an additional burden; as they commented, *"these issues [sic] hindered SA assessment progress"*.

Illegitimate

Illegitimate SA assessment practices included the absence of dedicated assessment roles, lack of structures and foundational implementation processes, lack of transparency, and accountability (see Appendix E: Figure 2). For example, a respondent critiqued the SA assessment practice of his/her institution, *"there are no institutional or divisional learning goals...alignment is a foreign concept..."*. Another illegitimate outcome was burnout due to overtime; one respondent articulated, *"(we are understaffing...I am expected to work 60 hours [per week] without overtime or compensation"*. Such illegitimate practices may lead to staff's inability to maintain consistent assessment practices and eventually such illegitimate practices will jeopardize the stability and continuous improvement efforts of the professional field; as one respondent pointed out, *"with high turnover, it is hard to keep a team!"*

Discussion/Recommendations

Ninety-five per cent of the respondents had earned advanced degrees, and nearly half possessed doctoral degrees; disparately, the stage three qualitative analysis results indicated that a lack of specific knowledge for completing assessment tasks is a critical issue in SA assessment. Researchers (Barr et al., 2014; Morrow et al., 2022; Parnell et al., 2018) specifically pointed out the curricula of many SA programs do not prepare students for the growing demands of data management and analytics, nor program evaluation. This research achieved both analytical and theoretical triangulation—across positivist, realist, and pragmatic paradigms, findings aligned. But more qualitative studies are needed to understand why and how legitimacy may be thwarted, through constructivist and interpretivist lenses. Our conceptual model was useful for generalizing our qualitative findings; perhaps as the seeming de-legitimization of higher education occurs, this framework would be appropriate to use in more studies on our profession. We noted earlier that progression across criteria and up/down levels was not linear, but shifts may also be abrupt, as we are witnessing.

Four-year institutions with over 10k students were perceived to have better engaged students and to have partnered with researchers for assessment efforts. This may be related to federal funding distributions, as four-year, public postsecondary institutions had higher-valued government grants than two-year or private institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). However, all respondents emphasized that lack of—or imbalanced —funding was a major problem. Institutions without federally specialized designations were perceived to perform better on *using assessment findings for decision-making at the division-level, establishing SA division-level student learning outcomes (SLOs)/KPIs, and measuring students co-curricular learning*. Moreover, a majority of respondents perceived that assessment results were discussed at the division-level (75%) and the institutional level (70%); however, inferential statistics suggested that respondents working at

institutions accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) believed they had a *demonstrable culture of assessment in their division*. Our evidence suggests accreditors have impacted the institutions' assessment practices to some extent; as Ascione et al. (2021) observed, accrediting bodies act as sources of promoting educational quality, yet the expectations among the accrediting bodies are not uniform and sometimes conflicting.

Key challenges and issues respondents isolated included (a) a lack of institutional buy-in and prioritization, (b) the ongoing perception that SA assessment is less serious or professional than academic-affairs assessment, (c) difficulties in coordinating assessment efforts across decentralized divisions, and (d) the high cost and expertise required to do assessment well. There is a perceived need for greater recognition of the value and impact of SA assessment, clarity on the differences between student-affairs and academic-affairs assessment, and stronger leadership support and use of student-affairs data in decision-making. Overcoming these challenges—according to our respondents—requires building and sustaining cultures of assessment; to wit, we offer the following recommendations.

Culture of Assessment Development

A *culture of assessment* in SA refers to “a commitment among student affairs professionals to use data to show the programs they offer, the processes they implement, and the services they provide are effective and contribute significantly to an institution’s ability to reach its stated goals and fulfill its mission” (Culp & Dungy, 2012, p.5). To commit to any cultural shift assessment leaders must acknowledge that the core mission of assessment is improving—not writing reports or conducting multiple assessments that are never analyzed and used—(Kuh, 2009). Leaders should establish policies and procedures to achieve these cultural shifts as well as accelerate the process of further legitimizing the professional field.

Leaders play vital roles in supporting individual development and collective learning (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Leadership can facilitate and sustain positive and welcoming environments where individuals will likely feel more comfortable sharing their opinions and concerns. Moreover, as we have outlined qualitatively, the SA assessment profession is challenged by the lack of resources, including personnel, funding, time, and capacity. Senior leaders ought to improve or optimize the resource allocation process based on evidence.

Banta and Palomba (2015) insisted that being able to cultivate and manage relationships effectively is a critical skill for promoting a culture of assessment. Involving students’ voices into practice demonstrates the holistic value that our co-curricular programs, initiatives, and services provide to students. Collaboration within or across units, departments, and divisions—even with other institutions—breaks down silos and improves SA assessment practice and institutional effectiveness (Jaafar, 2024).

SA Assessment Capacity Reinforcement

Much attention is centered on demonstrating the impacts of student affairs programs, initiatives, and services on student success (Parnell et al., 2018; Yang & Li, 2020). Producing evidence of student affairs' impacts (i.e., returns on investment) is increasingly critical. Productive, effective, and meaningful professional development should be designed and implemented to help our professionals develop and extend knowledge and skills. For SA graduate programs, educators need to prepare students with competence-based knowledge and skills, but also imbue continuous learning mindsets. Finally, as scholars (Henning & Roberts, 2023; Parnell et al., 2018) suggested, SA practitioners must increasingly demonstrate the impact of their programs, services, and initiatives; thus, communication and engagement skills are critical to eventually reshape the stereotype that as many respondents intimated, *"student affairs assessment is less legit!"*

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Appendix A: OOM Results for Impacts by Institutional Type

Ordered Observations	PCC (%)	c-Value
Practitioners' Highest Education Degree attained	50.33	< 0.001
Years of Experience outside SA assessment	54.73	< 0.01
Students engaged with assessment practices	57.84	< 0.001
4-Year over 10K > 2-Year over 10K	66.67	0.09
4-Year over 10K > 2-Year under 10K	68.19	0.00
4-Year over 10K > Faith-Based under 10K	79.91	0.00
4-Year under 10K > 2-Year under 10K	59.48	0.07
4-Year under 10K > Faith-Based under 10K	75.00	0.01
Partner with Research	56.29	0.00
4-Year over 10K < 2-Year over 10K	74.51	0.07
4-Year over 10K < 2-Year under 10K	84.75	0.00
4-Year under 10K < 2-Year under 10K	79.74	0.00
2-Year under 10K > For-profit under 10K	100.00	0.01
2-Year under 10K > Faith-Based under 10K	75.00	0.02
2-Year under 10K > Stand-alone grad school	100.00	0.01

Appendix B: OOM Results for Impacts by Institutional Designation.

Ordered Observations	PCC (%)	c-Value
Findings used for Division Decision-Making	50.80	0.01
None > HSI	77.24	0.00
None > Canadian Institution	89.66	0.02
HSI < MSI	69.52	0.01
MSI > Canadian Institution	85.71	0.10
Assessment of Co-curricular Learning	53.68	0.00
None > HSI	64.48	0.10
None > MSI	54.60	0.01
Demonstrable Culture of Assessment in Division	51.68	0.03
None > HSI	81.03	0.00
None > Canadian Institution	94.83	0.01
MSI > Canadian Institution	95.24	0.03
Senior Division Leaders Demonstrate Support	52.68	0.00
None > MSI	53.20	0.01
None > Canadian Institution	93.10	0.03
Senior Division Leaders use Assessment for Decisions	51.68	0.01
None > HSI	64.83	0.04
None > MSI	52.71	0.04
HSI < Canadian Institution	100.00	0.10
MSI < Canadian Institution	95.24	0.03
Established Division-level SLOs/KPIs	60.16	0.00
None > HSI	62.76	0.04
None > MSI	61.49	0.00
None > Canadian Institution	81.03	0.10
Interested in SAAL Virtual Meetings by Institutional Type	51.39	0.01
None > HSI	66.91	0.02
HSI < MSI	83.00	0.00

Appendix C: Kruskal-Wallis Conclusions from Post hoc Dunn's tests with Bonferroni Corrections

Groups	Bonferroni Critical Z-values	<i>p</i> -Value
Demonstrable Culture of Assessment in Division	2.593	0.01
MSCHE	0.446	0.941
vs. SACSCOC	2.953	0.003
MSCHE	0.446	0.941
vs. HLC	2.782	0.005
Established Division-level SLOs/KPIs	2.593	0.01
HLC	4.191	0.004
vs. WASC	0.00	1.00
SACSCOC	3.651	0.000
vs. WASC	0.00	1.00
Not Sure	2.874	0.004
vs. WASC	0.00	1.00
NECHE	2.617	0.009
vs HLC	4.191	0.004
Established Department-level SLOs/KPIs	2.593	0.01
NECHE	0.00	1.00
vs SACSCOC	2.882	0.004
NECHE	0.00	1.00
vs Not Sure	2.747	0.006
NECHE	0.00	1.00
vs HLC	2.717	0.007

Appendix D: Qualitative Content Analysis – Categories of Legitimacy Criteria

Figure 1. SA Assessment Practices Categorized as Cultural-Cognitive Criterion

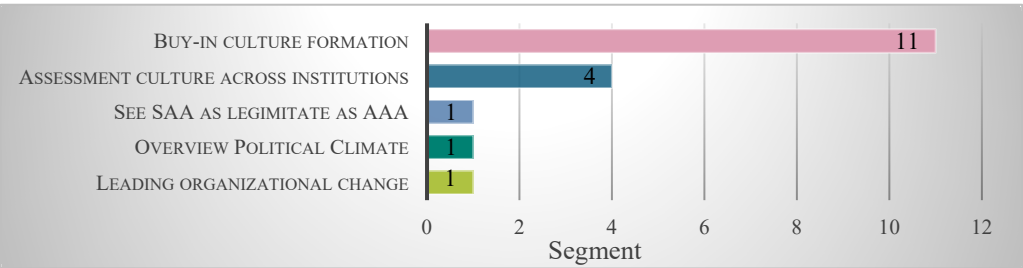


Figure 2. SA Assessment Practices Categorized as Normative Criterion

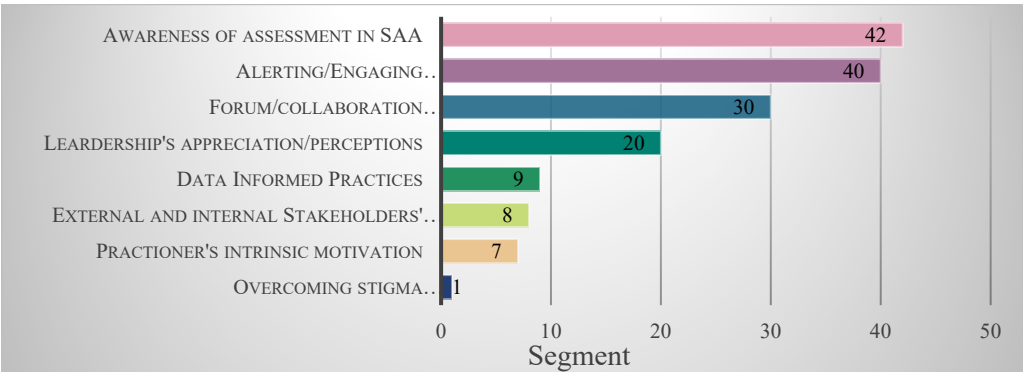


Figure 3. SA Assessment Practices Categorized as Pragmatic Criterion

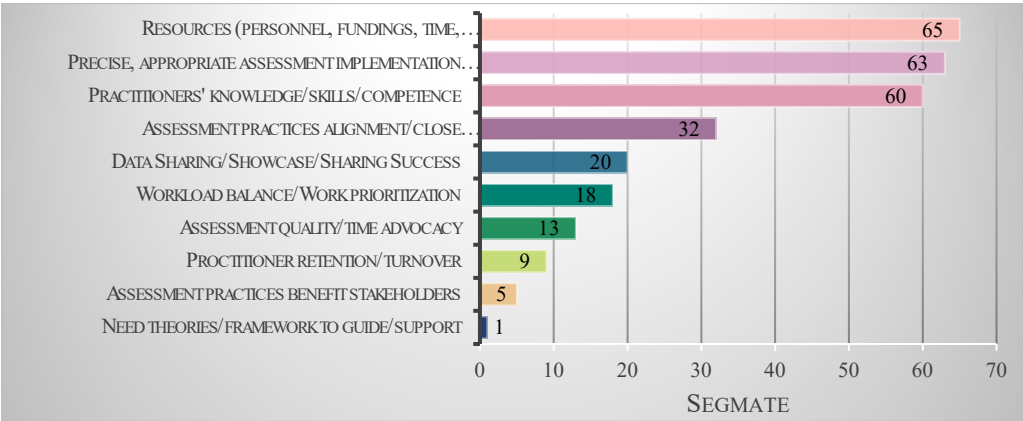
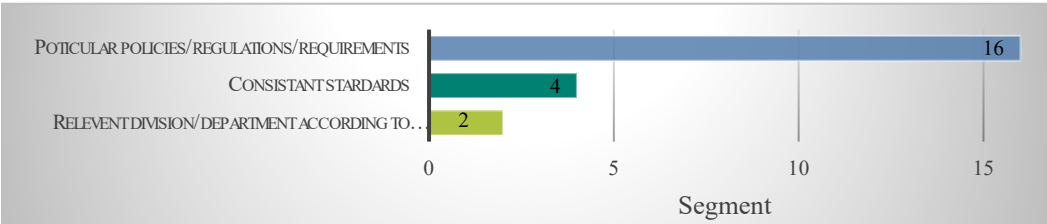
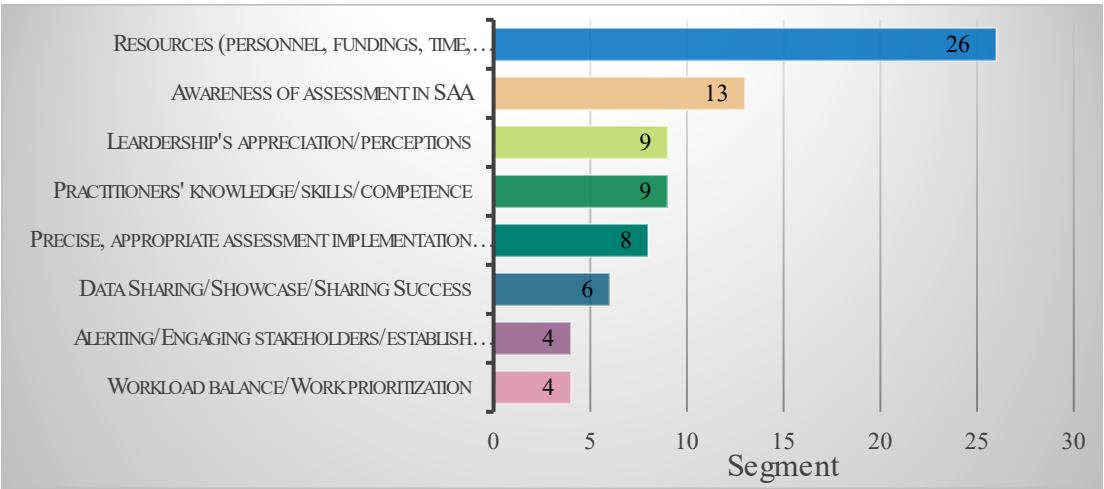


Figure 4. SA Assessment Practices Categorized as Regulatory Criterion

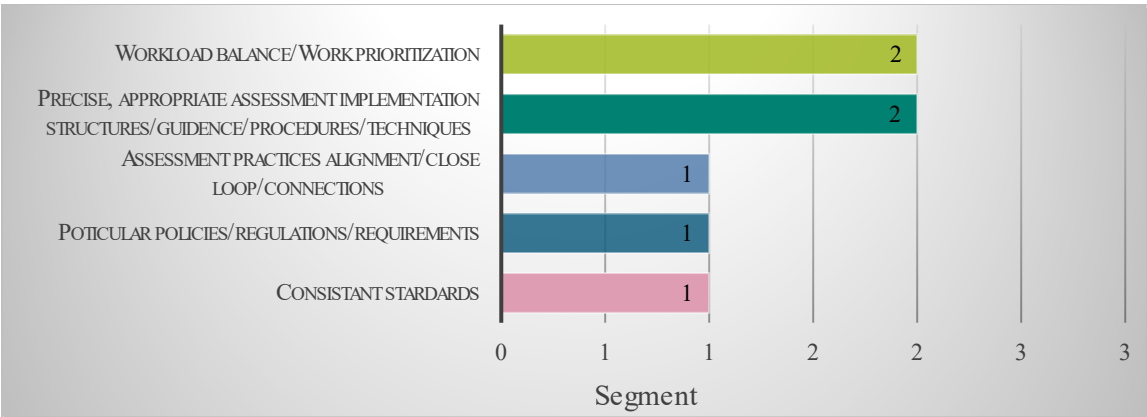


Appendix E: Qualitative Content Analysis – Categories of Legitimacy Levels

SA Assessment Practices Categorized as Debated Level



SA Assessment Practices Categorized as Illegitimacy



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