

Joint Project Paper

What do you say? Analysis of Topics on the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders Listserv

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The SAAL listserv is more than a message board, it is a living archive of professional dialogue, collegiality, community, a space for mentorship and learning, and a mirror of the field of student affairs assessment growth and evolution.

Context

ACPA/NASPA (2015) included assessment, evaluation, and research (AER) as one of the 10 professional competency areas, indicating the importance of assessment to the student affairs profession. The AER competencies address methodologies, processes, ethics, and use of results. As a professional development guide, the AER competencies demonstrate a shift from understanding and use of assessment on a smaller scale to more advanced application and leadership of assessment efforts.

In NASPA's *2025 Top Issues in Student Affairs* survey, assessment and evaluation are top concerns for senior student affairs leaders emphasizing how competencies in research, data analysis, and evaluation have become essential for the field (NASPA, 2025). By placing issues like evidence-based decision making near the top of their priorities, this report aligns with and reinforces the notion that "assessment" is one of the necessary core skillsets in student affairs today. Assessment is framed as a foundational tool through which student affairs practitioners can inform strategy, make decisions about interventions, and engage in continuous improvement.

Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) was founded in 2008 when a small group of student affairs assessment professionals gathered in North Carolina to create a network of staff responsible for assessment at the division level. The organization grew and matured to 1,400+ members and is now a recognized non-profit organization. Although the organization's membership was composed primarily of divisional assessment leaders, it transitioned into an organization and a resource for professionals whose roles were anywhere in the assessment galaxy.

One of the knowledge-sharing contributions provided since SAAL's inception is a listserv. In the beginning, it was hosted at Texas A&M University and then evolved into a Google Group. The listserv is a resource for SAAL members to ask questions, share learning opportunities, and advertise open positions related to student affairs assessment. A similar listserv is ASSESS, hosted by the University of Kentucky, but it is focused on assessment in higher education more generally, including academic affairs and institutional research/effectiveness. The purpose of maintaining the SAAL listserv is to intentionally bring together experts and practitioners who are advancing the field of student affairs assessment. It serves as a community of practice, one where professionals can exchange ideas, ask questions, troubleshoot challenges, and collectively elevate evidence-based approaches to student affairs assessment. Through this shared listserv space, SAAL continues to support collaboration and capacity-building, reinforcing assessment and research as key competencies for individuals engaged in student affairs assessment.

In 2020, Biddix et al., examined the SAAL listserv entries for any patterns and insights, finding trends including professionalization of student affairs assessment, as well as advancement in areas of the assessment cycle such as data collection, applications, and reporting. The context and complexity of student affairs assessment have changed in the last five years. Because of that, the purpose of this project is to update the analysis of listserv topics from more recent years to determine trends and implications for the student affairs assessment field.

Purpose

The impetus behind this project was not to just systematically build upon previous analyses but rather establish a replicable process for capturing and understanding, in real time, the evolving needs and priorities of the student affairs assessment community by analyzing current SAAL listserv discussions, seeking to identify emergent themes that reflect student affairs assessment practitioners' day-to-day needs, challenges, and questions. This approach enables those engaged in student affairs assessment professional development curation to respond more efficiently and swiftly in aligning opportunities, resources, and collaborative initiatives with the field's most pressing and relevant topics.

The project team was assembled using an open call to the Consortium of Organizations for Student Affairs Assessment (COSAA). COSAA brings together leading organizations in the field of student affairs assessment, including ACPA's Commission on Assessment and Evaluation (CAE), NASPA's Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Knowledge Community (AERKC), the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE), the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL), the Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact (JSAIII) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) to align efforts. Several members each from SAAL, the NASPA AERKC, and the ACPA CAE volunteered to contribute their time and expertise to this project.

Methodology

SAAL provided the listserv posts as an export including the date, subject line, author, and content. The coding team each completed an initial review and cleaning process for a selection of posts. This involved condensing replies into threads, with one row for the original post and a column to indicate the number of replies. Based on the author, subject line, and content, the initial reviewer also coded the thread as coming from SAAL, promoting a job, event, or other member resources. Subsequent themes were also noted.

Second round coding was employed to verify initial codes and add a layer of reliability. This round involved a different selection of reviewers who coded SAAL posts, job announcements, and other threads. Each review team identified sub-themes relevant to their category, then completed this secondary coding for each thread. As the codes and themes became more comprehensive, the second round resulted in some listserv threads being reassigned to other categories.

SAAL

Threads were categorized as SAAL if they came from SAAL leadership and/or promoted a SAAL program or organizational update. SAAL threads had subcategories for promoting the SAAL Blog, SAAL professional development, the SAAL Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), and business updates.

Jobs

Threads were categorized as Jobs if they were promoting a job opportunity. Jobs threads had subcategories when the position announcement was located within student affairs, and when the title of the job was Director.

Other

Threads were categorized as Other if they were not related to SAAL or Jobs. Other threads had subcategories for professional development, calls for proposals, calls for study participants, and questions seeking expertise from the SAAL community. Questions were further thematized if they were about software, measures, or assessment processes/models/frameworks.

Results

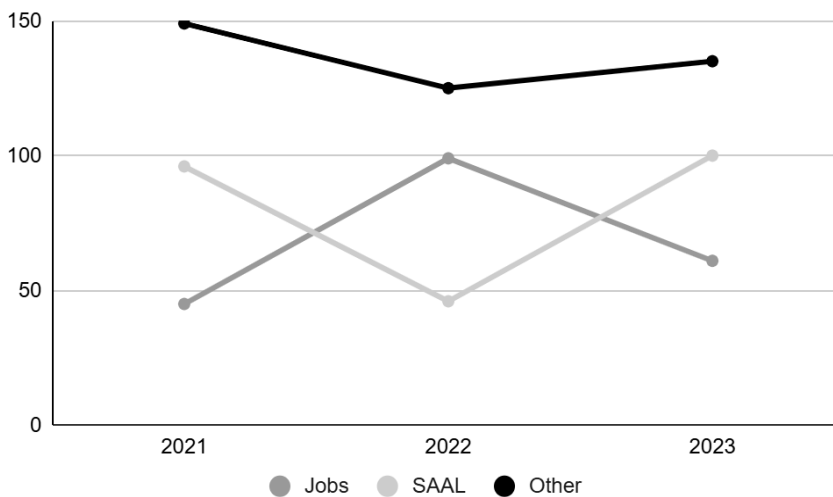
From August 30, 2020, to March 26, 2024, there were 1,421 unique posts to the SAAL listserv. Condensing replies resulted in 1,027 threads. These threads were coded based on their source and content type to identify broader trends regarding the listservs used by the student affairs and higher education assessment community. The findings below summarize key patterns and insights that emerged through this coding process. Some threads received multiple codes, so totals are often lower than the sum of sub-categories, and percentages often exceed 100.

Posting Trends Over Time

The volume of threads on the listserv remained fairly consistent across calendar years from 2021 to 2023. There was an increase in Job threads along with a decrease in SAAL-Originated Threads in 2022, but these returned to pre-2022 levels in 2023, suggesting steady engagement within the SAAL Community, despite ongoing shifts and challenges in higher education and assessment contexts post-COVID (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

SAAL Threads over time



The listserv served diverse use cases across its users, supporting recruitment for open positions, requests for support or collaborations, advertisements for professional development opportunities, and acting as a space for questions and knowledge sharing. As detailed in Table 1, Other Threads, which include Questions and Professional Development, was the most common category, followed by SAAL-Originated followed by Job-Related Threads.

Table 1.

Categories of all SAAL threads

Category	Count	Percent by Category
SAAL-Originated Threads	330	32%
Job-Related Threads	230	22%
Other Threads	467	45%
Total Unique Threads	1,027	

SAAL-Originated Threads

SAAL contributed 32% of the total threads (Table 2). Of these, 14% (approximately 5% of all threads) promoted the SAAL Blog, 12% (approximately 4% of all threads) related to the SAAL MOOC, and 80% promoted professional development opportunities, either from SAAL or external organizations.

Table 2.

Categories of SAAL-Originated threads

Category	Count	Percent by Category
Promoting SAAL Professional Development Offerings	263	80%
SAAL Blog	47	14%
SAAL MOOC	40	12%
Total SAAL-Originated Threads	330	

Job Announcement Threads

Job-related topics comprised 22% of all threads, with a noticeable spike in 2022, which may indicate a rebound in hiring activity following COVID-era budget cuts and hiring freezes. Of the job postings, 59% focused specifically on positions within student affairs, with 23% being director-level roles (Table 3). The data also indicate a gradual increase in director level job announcements and student affairs specific jobs from 2021 to 2023. Additionally, 30% of job threads included “analyst” in the job title, and there was an increase in Institutional Research job postings, suggesting a growing perception that student affairs assessment professionals possess transferable skills that are valued in IR roles. Some job announcement threads cover more than one of these categories, such as a director-level jobs in student affairs.

Other Threads

A number of threads did not originate from SAAL nor focus on job postings or recruitment. These “other” topics make up 45% of the total threads and reflect a more diverse, needs-driven range of engagements. Subcategories of the “other” threads were mutually exclusive.

Table 3.*Categories of job announcement threads*

Category	Count	Percent by Category
Job Posting - Student Affairs	136	59%
Director-Level Job	54	23%
Analyst in Job Title	68	30%
Total Job Announcement Threads	230	

Of the Other threads, 32% were professional development opportunities (Table 4). Professional development opportunities shared on the listserv ranged in cost, with some being free virtual webinars and others being invitations to register for regional or national conferences. Calls for proposals, authors, external reviewers or panelists represented 14%, and an additional 7% were participation requests for research studies.

Notably, 43% of the Other threads were peer-to-peer knowledge exchanges where a question was posed for other members of the listserv to help answer. This accounts for 20% of all threads. Questions related to measurement or the research process made up 37% of these threads. In these threads, members solicited focus group guides, asked for examples of student consent language, and benchmarked specific content topics like measuring student wellness.

Twelve percent of the Other threads related to a process, models, frameworks, or assessment office structure. This included asking questions about class assignment protocols, navigating program review procedures, using the National Survey for Student Engagement, or applying the CAS standards. Finally, approximately 10% of the Other threads related to software or technology systems. Threads in this category related to what technologies others were using to review large batches of student data, which software departments were using for task tracking as a department, and benchmarking the development of student affairs databases.

Table 4.*Categories of other threads*

Category	Count	Percent by Category
Professional Development	151	32%
Call for Proposals, Authors, Panelists or External Reviewers	63	14%
Call for participation in a study	31	7%
Asking a Question	201	43%
“Other” Classification	21	5%
Total “Other” Threads	467	

Discussion

The SAAL listserv has a very resourceful and important function in the student affairs assessment community, serving as a hub for collaboration, inquiry, resource sharing, and professional development. Its diverse functions range from requests for collaborators, requests for advice about conducting assessments or research, sharing findings and resources, and opportunities for professional development. These topics, and emphasis on skill development, emphasize the usefulness and importance of the listserv as a resource. This is consistent with what Biddix et al. (2020) found, with similar post topics.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting findings of this analysis. First, there is a self-selection bias inherent in the dataset, as it only includes posts shared publicly on the listserv. As the field has grown and become more networked, individuals may reach out directly to their peers (e.g., division directors may contact other division directors personally). As a result, this analysis does not reflect the full spectrum of assessment practices and professional dialogue occurring across the broader field.

A related challenge is that replies to listserv posts may be sent directly (individually) to the original post rather than to the listserv. These conversations are no longer publicly visible and therefore not captured in this analysis, potentially underrepresenting the extent of collaboration and support occurring via the listserv. While some posters do summarize responses back to the listserv, this practice is inconsistent. There is an ongoing balance between avoiding inbox overload and ensuring access to shared resources.

Additionally, data about the individuals posting to the listserv, such as institutional role, department, or type of institution, were not consistently available. This limits the ability to analyze engagement trends by job role, institution type, and geographic location. It is also important to note that conclusions about broader job trends are limited by the voluntary nature of job post submissions. This means the findings may not reflect the full hiring landscape across student affairs and assessment roles. Many jobs are cross posted with other listservs, and it is not known if successful candidates were found through the SAAL postings.

Feasibility is another factor to consider. Replicating this analysis may be difficult due to capacity constraints, although conducting quarterly through the SAAL Research On & Advancing Knowledge of the Profession Committee could make it more feasible. It remains a consideration for future efforts.

Finally, as technology evolves, there are more ways to communicate to specific audiences about specific topics. LinkedIn, for example, hosts organizations (e.g., NASPA AERKC) that share resources and job opportunities. This analysis did not include other virtual groups to determine any overlap or uniqueness.

Implications

The data generated from this analysis have practical applications across multiple audiences. For graduate students in Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) programs, the listserv offers a real-time snapshot of practitioner needs, challenges and interests, providing a valuable alignment with classroom learning. For onboarding new staff, it serves as a gateway to community support and avenue for seeking guidance, helping new professionals navigate the complexities of assessment work. Seasoned professionals can also benefit, as the evolving nature of the field is reflected in the types of questions and resources shared. These posts are not just exchanges; they are sentiments expressing how the field is being co-created and co-constructed in real time.

The SAAL listserv continues to be a useful resource for professionals interested in student affairs and higher education assessment. As the field continues to grow, more individuals are discovering and utilizing SAAL and its listserv. For example, there is evidence that the listserv mirrors job availability; the spike in posts seeking applicants in 2022 may reflect post-COVID recovery and/or more campuses investing in assessment strategies. In support of how Biddix et al. (2020) found professionalism of the field evidenced in the listserv, these posts also reflect the maturity of the field, as posters address topics such as technology integration, data infrastructure (e.g., warehouses), best practices in assessment, professional development, and organizational models for assessment.

Given the growing number of staff involved in assessment work, SAAL resources, including the listserv, should be incorporated into onboarding materials for new professionals. Encouraging broader participation beyond the SAAL listserv, especially from graduate students, new(er) professionals, mid-level managers, and directors, could enrich the dialogue and diversity perspectives.

Across SAAL-Originated and Other threads, and congruent with what Biddix et al. found in 2020, the most common topic area was professional development, including 32% of Other threads and 80% of SAAL-Originated threads. This demand underscores the need for continuous investment in webinars, training, knowledge-sharing, and professional development resources on assessment practices and resources across the field. There may also be value in fostering stronger connections between student affairs assessment and institutional research (IR), particularly since the listserv is frequently used to recruit for IR roles. Collaborations with organizations such as the Association for Institutional Research (AIR) could help bring these communities together and expand access to relevant professional development. The Consortium for Organizations in Student Affairs Assessment (COSAA) can be leveraged for identifying topics, presenters, and forums for introducing and offering professional development and skill building resources and opportunities.

In addition to one-way posting of information, 20% of all threads were questions posed for other members to help answer. Similar to Biddix et al. (2020), most of these questions were methodological in nature. Almost two thirds of these threads received at least one reply, with a volume of up to 17 replies in one thread, not accounting for offline discussions. This confirms that the SAAL listserv has remained a place for members to request and receive assistance. The temporary nature of listserv messages, combined with the value of the message's content, suggests a need for better archiving and accessibility. Creating a searchable, indexed repository (e.g., web browser interface) could preserve

institutional knowledge, make resources easier to retrieve, and help build upon, rather than re-answer repeat questions.

Finally, the size and diversity of the listserv membership present opportunities for more targeted networking. Smaller affinity groups, such as directors, residence life assessment staff, or regional cohorts, could foster deeper connections and more focused conversations. Considering disproportionate posters, it raises important questions: What barriers prevent others from engaging? Are they observing, learning, or unaware of how to contribute? Exploring these dynamics could inform strategies to increase participation and strengthen the community of practice.

Call to Action

The SAAL listserv is more than a message board, it is a living archive of professional dialogue, collegiality, community, a space for mentorship and learning, and a mirror of the field of student affairs assessment growth and evolution. Its continued use and thoughtful expansion can help sustain a community applying theory to practice. As the findings demonstrate, professional development is a consistent theme, signaling a clear need for ongoing investment in structured learning, mentorship, and collaboration. This analysis reaffirms the power of the SAAL listserv, and SAAL should intentionally leverage these findings by partnering with COSAA organizations to transform these listserv conversations from dialogue into action (e.g., webinars, blogs, conference presentations, etc.). This work calls upon professionals across the field such as staff, graduate students, emerging scholars, and seasoned assessment leaders to:

1. Actively engage by asking questions and contributing to the shared knowledge base.
2. Contribute resources and feedback to help build upon a repository of tools, frameworks, and practices.
3. Leverage the listserv for community learning, webinars, workshops, and or conference presentations that are aligned to real practitioner needs.
4. Join one of the COSAA organizations to help identify common themes, support professional development offerings that meet the field's needs.

By participating intentionally, we can make sure that the SAAL listserv remains a space within the community of practice where expertise, curiosity, collaboration, troubleshooting continue to converge and where professional development is proactive in continuing to support and shape the future of student affairs assessment.

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