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Exploring ACCELERATE Principles and Assessment Influence: Evidence from Three Public Universities

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Early View

Abstract: This study examines how institutional actors describe and enact the use of assessment information and how those descriptions compare to formal documentation of assessment use. Drawing on a multi-case study of three public universities recognized for excellence in assessment, findings show that assessment influence most often unfolds through relational, interpretive, and temporal processes that are underrepresented in formal reports. Using Jonson et al.'s multidimensional framework of influence and the ACCELERATE Assessment Principles for Best Practice as an interpretive lens, the study highlights how assessment use is cultivated through practice rather than captured through linear documentation.

Keywords: *ACCELERATE, influence of assessment, case studies*

Introduction

Despite expanded infrastructures and the proliferation of dedicated assessment staff, higher education institutions continue to struggle to translate assessment information into actions that meaningfully enhance learning (Bichsel, 2012; Cox et al., 2017). Scholars have long critiqued institutional assessment practices as routinized, compliance-oriented, and largely disconnected from improvement efforts (Banta & Blaich, 2011; Cooper & Terrell, 2013). More recently, critics have interrogated data-driven cultures that privilege metrics, reporting, and accountability over collaboration, reflection, and learning (Brown et al., 2023; Taylor, 2020). Importantly, these critiques transcend the varying types of assessment within higher education, from institutional assessment to program-level assessment and from learning outcomes assessment to cocurricular assessment.

This study examines how institutional actors describe their use of assessment information and whether those descriptions differ from how assessment use is documented across institutional actors and types of assessment. Drawing on data from three public universities recognized for excellence in assessment, the study explores assessment use through the complementary lenses of Jonson et al.'s (2014) multidimensional framework of influence and the ACCELERATE Assessment Principles for Best Practice (Samuga-Gyaanam et al., 2025). By doing so, the study seeks to better understand how assessment use is cultivated and how influence extends beyond formal decisions and documented actions.

Brief Literature Review

Typically, assessment is grounded in the assumption that the use of data will inherently lead to improved instructional and administrative decision-making (Taylor, 2022). The linear and cyclical framing of the assessment process further reinforces this assumption by positioning the use of results as a natural and inevitable culminating step (Jankowski, 2012). As a result, much of the scholarship critiquing the limited use of assessment results conceptualizes “use” as a linear process of decision-making. Yet studying assessment use is inherently challenging because organizational decision-making rarely unfolds in linear, sequential, or easily traceable ways, particularly within decentralized institutional contexts (Jankowski, 2012).

Questions about whether assessment is “used” often presume that the influence of assessment is visible, direct, and readily documented in formal artifacts. When narrow definitions of assessment use are applied, important and meaningful forms of engagement with assessment may be overlooked or dismissed (Jonson et al., 2014). However, the influence of assessment frequently unfolds through relational, interpretive, and temporal processes that resist linear representation and remain difficult to capture in conventional reports.

Taken together, this literature underscores the need for conceptual frameworks that move beyond narrow, results-oriented definitions of assessment use and instead account for the complex ways assessment shapes thinking, relationships, and action over time. While these frameworks must be capable of capturing both visible actions and less tangible forms of learning, they must also attend to the conditions under which assessment practices are cultivated, sustained, and aligned with institutional values such as equity, collaboration, and continuous improvement. This paper responds to that tension through the lens of the ACCELERATE Assessment Principles for Best Practice (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025). These principles emphasize assessment as an ongoing, relational practice of learning and improvement rather than a linear, compliance-oriented task. Drawing on Jonson et al.'s (2014) multidimensional framework of influence, findings illustrate how assessment use unfolds through reflection and dialogue as much as through formal reporting. Viewed through the ACCELERATE Assessment Principles for Best Practice (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025), these findings provide empirical grounding for the state of engagement with these promising practices. The following guiding questions shaped this work:

1. How do institutional actors describe their use of assessment?
2. As the use of assessment is described, how do the ACCELERATE principles help us to understand how the use of assessment is cultivated?

Frameworks

Contemporary assessment theory increasingly recognizes that the value of assessment cannot be captured solely through short-term or instrumental outcomes. Jonson et al.'s (2014) model of assessment as influence reconceptualizes assessment “use” as a multidimensional set of influences that may originate either from assessment findings or from the assessment process itself. Their model outlines four interconnected dimensions: (1) source of influence (findings-based or process-based), (2)

effect of influence (instrumental, conceptual/cognitive, symbolic/affirmation, and process-based learning), (3) results of influence (changes in practice, understanding, community, or culture), and (4) time (immediate, end-of-cycle, or long-term) (Jonson et al., 2014). This framework broadens our understanding of assessment use to include visible actions and less tangible but equally meaningful conceptual shifts, symbolic uses, legitimizing effects, and learning through participation. Table 1 describes the domains and subdomains of Jonson et al.'s (2014) framework.

Table 1

Jonson et al.'s (2014) Domains of Influence

Domain	Subdomain	Description
Source of Influence	Findings-Based	Influence that originates from assessment results or evidence, such as data summaries, outcome reports, or analyzed findings.
	Process-Based	Influence that originates from participation in the assessment process itself, including designing measures, collecting data, or engaging in interpretation and discussion.
Effect of Influence	Instrumental	Direct actions or decisions taken because of assessment, such as curricular changes, policy adjustments, or resource allocation.
	Conceptual / Cognitive	Changes in understanding, awareness, or ways of thinking about student learning, programs, or institutional priorities.
	Affective	Emotional responses to assessment, such as increased motivation, confidence, frustration, or validation.
Results of Influence	Symbolic / Affirmation	Use of assessment to legitimize existing practices, affirm values, demonstrate accountability, or support advocacy efforts.
	Improved Student Learning	Changes to teaching, programs, or services intended to enhance student learning or outcomes.
	Personal Transformation	Professional growth, increased assessment literacy, or shifts in individual roles or identities.
Timing of Influence	Communities of Practice	Development or strengthening of collaborative groups engaged in shared inquiry, learning, or improvement.
	Symbolic or Political Results	Use of assessment to justify decisions, secure resources, or align with institutional or external priorities.
	Immediate	Influence that occurs in real time or shortly after assessment activities or discussions.
	End-of-Cycle	Influence that occurs at predictable points, such as annual reporting, planning, or review cycles.
	Long-Term	Influence that unfolds gradually over time, contributing to sustained change, cultural shifts, or institutional learning.

In developing the framework, Jonson et al. (2014) drew from a rich body of literature regarding use in the field of evaluation (Kirkhart, 2000), adapting an existing model for a higher education assessment setting. Since the introduction of their adapted model in 2014, the framework has been referenced frequently to argue for more expansive understandings of use as influence, moving away from focusing too much on direct, linear evidence of assessment use (Driscoll et al., 2021, Guetterman & Mitchel, 2016; Jankowski, 2021; Pastore, 2026). However, outside of Jonson's original work, the model has not been used as an analytic tool. At the same time, the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) recently introduced the ACCELERATE framework (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025), a set of ten principles intended to guide ethical, collaborative, equity-centered, and improvement-focused assessment practice. ACCELERATE is a framework for advancing meaningful, sustainable improvement in higher education assessment. The ten principles center assessment as a collaborative, improvement-oriented practice that is continuously cultivated through shared ownership, technical expertise, and transparent processes. The principles highlight the importance of aligning assessment work with institutional mission, empowering participants by reducing structural and cultural barriers, and sustaining momentum through responsiveness to evidence and context. In encouraging practitioners to enact these principles in their assessment of student learning, ACCELERATE positions assessment practice as an evolving and integrated aspect of efforts towards student learning. Whereas Jonson's framework describes possible influences and uses that emerge through assessment processes, the ACCELERATE principles collectively describe the conditions under which assessment is most likely to produce meaningful use of assessment results.

Integrating these two frameworks provides a comprehensive theoretical lens for examining assessment processes. Jonson et al. (2014) identify the sites through which use of assessment results occurs, while ACCELERATE describes design principles that intentionally cultivate those sites. For instance, ACCELERATE's emphasis on collaboration and co-creation directly aligns with Jonson et al.'s emphasis on process-based influence, which results from stakeholder participation in meaning-making activities. Similarly, ACCELERATE's focus on transparent and trustworthy practice strengthens the credibility and legitimacy of assessment findings, increasing the likelihood of conceptual and symbolic/affirmation influence.

Several ACCELERATE principles directly reinforce the potential for instrumental influence, such as Aligned Purposefully and Action-Driven, which ensure assessment is tied to meaningful decisions and positioned for use at both the end of the cycle and over long horizons. Additionally, Equity & Empowerment-Motivated and Learning-Centered practices create conditions supportive of conceptual/cognitive shifts, especially in areas where faculty or institutional understanding of student learning requires reframing. Continuously Cultivating and Enduring & Evolving map onto Jonson et al.'s temporal dimension, recognizing that actual use of assessment results may unfold across cycles and that long-term cultural change is an important outcome of assessment practice.

Viewed together, this integrated framework supports a more nuanced analysis of assessment practices. Accordingly, this study adopts Jonson et al.'s (2014) influence domains as a sensitizing theory while using ACCELERATE to conceptualize the practices that shape how assessment use unfolds. Such

an approach provides a robust foundation for exploring the diverse ways assessment activities impact individuals, programs, and institutions.

Methods

As part of a larger collective multiple case study design (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016; Stake, 2010), I examined three large, public universities recognized by NILOA between 2018 and 2022 as Excellent in Assessment. Using the Excellence in Assessment award as a selection criterion ensured some sense of grounding that the institution had a history of credible assessment work. This study was approved by the Indiana University's Institutional Review Board. Participants at each site provided written informed consent prior to participation

Sites and Participants

Across the three sites, data were collected from 35 participants through focus groups, individual interviews, and structured reflective activities, complemented by observations of assessment-related meetings and analysis of 98 institutional documents. Participants included assessment professionals, faculty, institutional researchers, student affairs staff, and academic leaders, reflecting the cross-functional nature of assessment work.

Emerald Ridge University (ERU)

ERU is a large public research institution in the Southeast, serving over 30,000 students. As a campus, they are known for their commitment to regional engagement and access. ERU offers a comprehensive portfolio of programs across nine colleges, currently providing 79 bachelor's, 66 master's, and 24 doctoral degree programs. ERU is also recognized as an Emerging Hispanic-Serving Institution. Students hail from 49 states and over 100 countries. In the fall 2024 semester, ERU enrolled 31,091 students. The undergraduate population reached 24,868, marking a 3.7% increase from the previous year. The university also welcomed a record number of first-time college students ($n = 4,657$, a 3.5% increase), with an average weighted GPA of 3.93. ERU draws students from across 99 of the state's counties, all 50 U.S. states, and more than 120 countries. The student body is composed of approximately 46.9 % White, 16.9 % Black or African American, 13.0 % Hispanic/Latino, 9.2 % Asian, 4.47 % Two or More Races, and small proportions of American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander.

My engagement at ERU centered in Student Affairs. I conducted 8 hours of observation and completed focus groups or individual interviews with 10 participants, covering student health survey results reviews, multiple observations alongside an internal program review process, focus group planning, program impact discussions, and assessment council meetings.

Orange Coast University (OCU)

OCU is a large public research university in the southeast, enrolling over 60,000 students and known for its comprehensive academic programs and cutting-edge research. The institution comprises 16 colleges and more than 150 schools, departments, and research centers. The institution enrolled more

than 60,000 students in Fall 2024. The OCU student body represents all 50 states and more than 85 countries. Nearly half of its undergraduates identify as students of color, and the institution is federally recognized as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. OCU currently enrolls a significant proportion of first-generation students. The campus is majority female, and student demographics reflect a blend of racial, ethnic, and international backgrounds that mirror the state's rapidly changing population.

In primarily curricular contexts, I completed four hours of observations and completed focus groups with five participants. OCU provided me with opportunities to engage with faculty and staff working primarily with curricular programs, such as faculty working in specific colleges or staff supporting general education implementation, with some, but not many opportunities to connect with cocurricular assessment. For example, the site also features connections with two additional curricular and cocurricular areas: the division of student life and the special first-year student general education program.

Blue Horizon University (BHU)

BHU is a regional comprehensive university in the southwest serving roughly 21,000 students. Blue Horizon University (BHU) is nationally recognized for promoting social mobility in its state. BHU has nine colleges and offers more than 80 undergraduate, 50–60 master's, and 8–10 doctoral programs. As of Fall 2023–24, BHU enrolls approximately 21,403 students. The student body is 63.6% female, 36.4% male. About 46.2 % of students are white, 27.8 % Hispanic or Latino, 16.6 % Black or African American, 2.9 % Asian, 3.3 % two or more races, with smaller proportions of American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander students. BHU is also designated a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and around 50% of its students are first-generation. At BHU, I completed 6 hours of observations and completed focus groups or individual interviews with 8 participants in both curricular and cocurricular contexts. My contacts at BHU supported me in observing general campus assessment committee meetings, as well as some student affairs and cocurricular specific data debriefs.

During and after data collection, I combed through documents, focus group notes, and observation notes to pull out specific instances where “use” of assessment was discussed. Taken together, these sources yielded 252 discrete examples of the use of assessment results across the three institutions. Emerald Ridge University (ERU) contributed 133 instances, Orange Coast University (OCU) contributed 48, and Blue Horizon University (BHU) contributed 71 instances of use.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a sequential, deductive coding process. In the first stage, all data were coded using Jonson et al.'s (2014) model of assessment as influence. Each discrete example of assessment use was carefully considered against each sub-domain. For example, for the source domain, the example was determined to be findings-based or process-based in nature. In some instances, multiple sub-domains were selected, whereas in others, none were selected. For example, a use case from ERU was described as “*We also recognize there was inconsistency in the outreaches we provided evaluations for, and several programs we did not collect assessment data to evaluate the value and success of the program, and we rarely got any survey responses from our tabling events. We wish to implement a more consistent messaging and training for staff on providing evaluations for CIC outreaches.*” For the

source domain, this particular example of use was coded as process-based, and for the timing domain it was coded as long-term.

In a second analytic phase, coded instances were subsequently examined for alignment with ACCELERATE Assessment Principles for Best Practice. Again, each discrete example of assessment use was carefully considered for whether it reflected one of the principles in practice. For example, at Orange Coast University a faculty member described *“At the institutional level, we review how many years in a row the assessments have ‘been met’ and developed guidance for the units to utilize to determine if it was time to think about new goals. The concept of continuous improvement vs flatlining”*. This example was coded as Continuously Cultivating. At Blue Horizon University, another use case was described as *“The improvement from last year to this year is a set of achievable, measurable, and actionable goals that were directly tied into the strategic priorities of the institution. Additionally, we are fostering a culture of collective responsibility by engaging the entire team in the assessment process”*. This example was coded as Collaborative and Co-Creative.

ACCELERATE was thus applied as a secondary analytic lens to interpret the conditions and values associated with different forms of assessment use, rather than as a primary coding framework. This second phase of coding was used to examine how assessment values were articulated across contexts and sources, rather than to define assessment use itself.

Results

Across cases, assessment documentation and discussion diverged. Written reports emphasized technical adjustments while staff conversations revealed assessment’s more relational dimensions: advocating for resources, affirming effective practices, and building communities of practice. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the distribution of use instances across Jonson et al.’s domains as well as influence source.

Table 2

Distribution of Instances of Use Across Sources

Domain	Sub-domain	Document Analysis (n=167)	Focus Groups (n=68)	Observations (n=17)	Combined Sources (n=252)
Source	Findings-based	47%	75%	94%	58%
	Process-based	47%	40%	18%	43%
Effects	Instrumental	50%	44%	41%	48%
	Cognitive/Conceptual	27%	24%	29%	26%
	Affective	31%	38%	12%	32%
	Affirmation-oriented	21%	43%	59%	29%
Influence	Improved Student Learning	53%	50%	47%	52%
	Personal Transformation	8%	22%	0%	12%

	Communities of Practice	10%	32%	35%	17%
	Symbolic or Political	22%	35%	53%	27%
Time	Immediate	13%	37%	24%	20%
	End of Cycle	30%	29%	71%	33%
	Long-term	28%	43%	6%	31%

Source of Influence

Across all three institutions, findings-based use of assessment results was more prevalent than process-based use. OCU reported the highest proportion of findings-based use (67%), suggesting a stronger orientation toward interpreting student learning outcomes and other direct results. BHU, in contrast, demonstrated a more balanced pattern (52% findings-based; 34% process-based), indicating a greater recognition of the assessment process itself as a source of learning. ERU's nearly even distribution (50% process-based) reflects a local culture that values the act of engaging in assessment as much as the findings themselves. The distribution varied across evidence sources as well. Observations showed overwhelmingly findings-based use (94%), while focus groups similarly leaned toward findings (75%). Document analysis, however, revealed a more balanced pattern (47% findings-based; 47% process-based), suggesting that institutional artifacts capture a fuller representation of the processes of assessment activities.

Table 3

Distribution of Instances of Use Across Sources

Domain	Sub-domain	ERU (n=133)	OCU (n=48)	BHU (n=71)	Combined Sites (n=252)
Source	Findings-based	58%	67%	52%	58%
	Process-based	50%	38%	34%	43%
Effects	Instrumental	56%	46%	34%	48%
	Cognitive/Conceptual	26%	15%	35%	26%
	Affective	33%	33%	30%	32%
	Affirmation-oriented	31%	29%	27%	29%
Influence	Improved Student Learning	53%	56%	46%	52%
	Personal Transformation	17%	8%	3%	12%
	Communities of Practice	17%	17%	20%	17%
	Symbolic or Political	27%	27%	28%	27%
Time	Immediate	24%	19%	14%	20%
	End of Cycle	30%	46%	28%	33%
	Long-term	45%	10%	17%	31%

Effects of Influence

Across institutions, instrumental influence (direct action or decision-making) was the most common effect, particularly at ERU (56%). This suggests that assessment often informs tangible changes to programs, services, or decision-making processes. BHU demonstrated the strongest presence of conceptual/cognitive influence (35%), reflecting a context where assessment prompts shift in understanding and sensemaking for participants and stakeholders. Across evidence sources, patterns were similar: instrumental influence appeared most frequently in documents (50%), conceptual influence was steady across all sources (24–29%), and affective influence appeared consistently across institutions (30–33%), indicating that assessment also shapes motivation, confidence, and emotional engagement. Affective influence was most common in focus groups (38%), where emotional and narrative dimensions were more readily surfaced. Affirmation-oriented influence, while slightly less frequent, still played a notable role in validating existing practices or reinforcing institutional narratives. Affirmation-oriented influence was most prominent in observations (59%), suggesting that in practice-based settings, assessment frequently reinforced ongoing norms or validated established approaches.

Results of Influence

Improved student learning was the most frequently identified outcome across institutions, with OCU reporting the highest proportion (56%). Symbolic or political influence, that used assessment to demonstrate accountability or justify resources, was remarkably consistent across institutions (27–28%). Personal transformation and the emergence of communities of practice were less frequently reported, particularly at BHU. Across evidence sources, communities of practice and personal transformation were most evident in focus groups and observations, settings where collaborative and meaning-making processes were more visible and more salient, indicating that these influences may be less likely to appear in institutional documents but more present in lived experience.

Timing of Influence

The timing of the use of assessment results varied across institutions and sources. ERU demonstrated the highest proportion of long-term use (45%), suggesting a strategic and sustained orientation toward assessment-driven improvement. OCU showed a strong emphasis on end-of-cycle use (46%), likely reflecting predictable reporting and planning cycles. Immediate influence was least common overall, suggesting that assessment informs change over time rather than producing rapid responses. Temporal patterns across sources further underscore that collaborative settings (focus groups) revealed more long-term influence, while observations captured more end-of-cycle use.

Ultimately, the findings from the first round of coding affirm Jonson et al.'s (2014) assertion that assessment use is multidimensional and cannot be fully understood through narrow definitions of use. However, Jonson's model only highlights assessment's influence, not the conditions that cultivate such influence. Applying the Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al.'s (2025) ACCELERATE Principles to these same discrete examples of assessment use offers yet another lens for understanding assessment use.

ACCELERATE Principles

Across all cases and sources of evidence, alignment with individual ACCELERATE principles appeared selective rather than comprehensive. No single principle was present in more than one-quarter of instances of assessment influence, and most principles appeared in fewer than 20% of cases. The most frequently observed principles were Collaborative and Co-Creative (23.81%), Action-Driven (21.03%), and Enduring and Evolving (19.05%), suggesting that assessment use was most often articulated through relational engagement, purposeful action, and long-term orientation. Principles emphasizing Equity and Empowerment (17.06%) and Continuous Cultivation (16.27%) appeared with moderate frequency, while Learning-Centered, Aligned Purposefully, and Responsiveness-Oriented practices were less commonly identified.

Principles associated with technical legitimacy, such as Energized by Expertise (7.94%) and Transparent and Trustworthy (8.73%), were the least frequently observed across all instances. This pattern suggests that while assessment use was commonly experienced and described through interaction, advocacy, and action, the methodological or credibility-based dimensions of assessment were less likely to be explicitly named when participants discussed assessment use. The cumulative distribution of principle alignment further illustrates this pattern. Most instances of assessment use aligned with one principle (37.70%) or two principles (22.62%), while fewer than 5% aligned with four or more principles. These findings indicate that examples of assessment use typically have partial alignments with ACCELERATE values, rather than fully articulated enactments of the framework. Tables 4-6 reveal how the ACCELERATE Principles emerged across my dataset, including differences by source and site.

Table 4

Distribution of ACCELERATE Principles in Dataset

Frequency of each ACCELERATE Principle	Percent	Number of ACCELERATE Principles Present in Each Discrete Example of Use	Percent
Aligned Purposefully	15.87%	0	17.46%
Continuously Cultivating	16.27%	1	37.70%
Collaborative and Co-Creative	23.81%	2	22.62%
Equity and Empowerment-Motivated	17.06%	3	17.86%
Learning-Centered	14.68%	4	3.97%
Energized by Expertise	7.94%	5	0.40%
Responsiveness-Oriented	9.92%		
Action-Driven	21.03%		
Transparent & Trustworthy	8.73%		
Enduring and Evolving	19.05%		

ACCELERATE Principles by Evidence Source

Alignment with ACCELERATE principles varied meaningfully by source of evidence, revealing differences in how assessment values were expressed across institutional artifacts, conversational spaces, and observed practice. Document analysis demonstrated the highest levels of alignment with Learning-Centered (52.94%), Aligned Purposefully (35.29%), and Enduring and Evolving (35.29%) principles, suggesting that institutional documents tend to portray assessment as aligned, reflective, and oriented toward long-term improvement for learning. Documents more frequently referenced transparency and trustworthiness. In contrast, focus groups most frequently reflected Collaborative and Co-Creative (30.14%) and Action-Driven (30.14%) principles, highlighting the relational and decision-oriented dimensions of use of assessment as experienced by practitioners. These conversational settings also surfaced fewer instances aligned with learning-centered or transparency-focused principles which suggests that such values may be less explicitly articulated in narrative accounts of assessment use.

Table 5

ACCELERATE Principles by Evidence Source

Indicator	Doc	Document Analysis (n=167)	Focus Groups (n=68)	Observations (n=17)	Combined Sources (n=252)
Aligned Purposefully	20.00%	35.29%	5.48%	5.88%	15.87%
Continuously Cultivating	15.86%	17.65%	15.07%	23.53%	16.27%
Collaborative and Co-Creative	20.00%	29.41%	30.14%	23.53%	23.81%
Equity and Empowerment-Motivated	24.14%	5.88%	9.59%	0.00%	17.06%
Learning-Centered	12.41%	52.94%	13.70%	0.00%	14.68%
Energized by Expertise	9.66%	11.76%	5.48%	0.00%	7.94%
Responsiveness-Oriented	11.03%	17.65%	5.48%	11.76%	9.92%
Action-Driven	13.10%	23.53%	30.14%	47.06%	21.03%
Transparent & Trustworthy	8.97%	23.53%	6.85%	0.00%	8.73%
Enduring and Evolving	22.76%	35.29%	5.48%	29.41%	19.05%

Observations showed the strongest alignment with Action-Driven assessment (47.06%), suggesting that assessment use was most visibly enacted through coordinated action and decision-making in practice-based settings. However, observational data showed little to no alignment with equity, learning-centeredness, or transparency, underscoring that many assessment values may remain implicit during routine assessment activities. Across all sources, most instances aligned with only one or two principles, reinforcing the finding that use of assessment is distributed unevenly across contexts and modes of representation.

Table 6

ACCELERATE Principles by Site

Indicator	ERU (n=133)	OCU (n=48)	BHU (n=71)	Combined Sites (n=252)
Aligned Purposefully	15.79%	14.58%	16.90%	15.87%
Continuously Cultivating	18.05%	20.83%	9.86%	16.27%
Collaborative and Co-Creative	24.81%	25.00%	21.13%	23.81%
Equity and Empowerment-Motivated	25.56%	12.50%	4.23%	17.06%
Learning-Centered	12.03%	31.25%	8.45%	14.68%
Energized by Expertise	7.52%	12.50%	5.63%	7.94%
Responsiveness-Oriented	12.03%	12.50%	4.23%	9.92%
Action-Driven	21.05%	22.92%	19.72%	21.03%
Transparent & Trustworthy	10.53%	16.67%	0.00%	8.73%
Enduring and Evolving	18.80%	22.92%	16.90%	19.05%

ACCELERATE Principles by Site

While the overall pattern of principle alignment was consistent across sites, notable differences in emphasis emerged. Across all three institutions, Collaborative and Co-Creative, Action-Driven, and Enduring and Evolving principles were among the most frequently observed, suggesting shared, sector-wide norms that frame assessment as a collective, action-oriented, and temporally unfolding in practice. Conversely, Energized by Expertise, Transparent and Trustworthy, and Responsiveness-Oriented principles remained infrequent across all sites, indicating that technical and credibility-focused dimensions of assessment were rarely foregrounded in accounts of use.

Despite these similarities, each site demonstrated distinct patterns. ERU showed the highest alignment with Equity and Empowerment-Motivated assessment (25.56%), suggesting a context in which assessment was frequently used to advocate for institutional priorities and legitimize resource decisions. Orange Coast University demonstrated the strongest alignment with Learning-Centered principles (31.25%) and had the highest proportion of instances aligned with multiple ACCELERATE principles simultaneously, indicating a more integrated articulation of assessment values. BHU, by contrast, exhibited the highest proportion of instances aligned with zero or only one principle, suggesting a narrower or more fragmented framing of assessment use.

The cumulative distribution of principle alignment further highlights these differences. Instances from OCU were more likely to align with three or more principles, whereas BHU showed the highest proportion of instances with no alignment with the ACCELERATE principles. These findings suggest that while assessment use was present across all sites, the extent to which that use was framed through multiple ACCELERATE values varied by institutional context.

Discussion

The expanded findings illustrate that much of assessment's genuine cultivation through reflective dialogue, shared interpretation, and sensemaking that lead to sustained action occurs outside of formal documentation. When interpreted through the complementary lens of the ACCELERATE framework, the data illuminates how institutional cultures, collaborative practices, and assessment values shape not only what assessment influences but how use unfolds.

Across all three sites, the relative ordering of ACCELERATE principles was largely consistent. Transparent and Trustworthy remained among the least frequently observed principles across all sites, suggesting that technical credibility and transparency were rarely foregrounded when participants described how assessment influenced practice. Kuh et al. (2015) argue that transparency is often misconstrued as simply providing access to information, noting that decontextualized disclosure or an overemphasis on technical reporting does little to promote understanding or use. As a result, practitioners may foreground collaboration, communications, and action while giving less explicit attention to expertise-driven validation or formal transparency, even when those elements are present in institutional assessment infrastructures. As such, it is important to consider that absence in this dataset does not necessarily suggest absence of a principle within a particular institution's practices. At the same time, meaningful differences of emphasis emerged across sites. These differences affirm that while institutions may share broad norms about assessment use, local cultures shape which values are made visible, named, and sustained in assessment narratives (Jankowski & Fulcher, 2025).

The cumulative distribution of principles across the instances of use, across cases, and across sources offers a key insight: assessment influence is rarely fully aligned with ACCELERATE principles – at least not as captured in this study. Across all sites and sources, most instances aligned with only one or two principles, and relatively few aligned with four or more. This pattern suggests that the current state of applying best practices in assessment – in this case captured through the ACCELERATE principles -is more of a constellation of values that surface unevenly depending on context, purpose, and audience than a checklist to be completed.

Rather than indicating weak assessment practice, this partial alignment highlights the selective visibility of assessment values. Many of the principles ACCELERATE emphasizes may operate as background conditions, enabling assessment use without being explicitly narrated as part of describing an instance of use. In contrast, relational and action-oriented principles may be more likely to be articulated because they are directly experienced through interaction and decision-making. Institutional assessment systems may systematically underrepresent the forms of influence most likely to support learning and sustained improvement, particularly those that unfold through dialogue and relationship-building rather than formal reporting. As such, institutions relying solely on reports to evaluate assessment best practices are likely undervaluing the way in which constellation-like ACCELERATE principles may emerge throughout an entire assessment process. Assessment leaders should recognize that influence may be present but undocumented, not absent.

Linking ACCELERATE and Jonson's Framework

This study examined how institutional actors describe their use of assessment information and whether those descriptions differ from how assessment use is documented. Across three public universities recognized for excellence in assessment, the findings reveal a persistent divergence between where assessment influence occurs and where it is made visible. When viewed through Jonson et al.'s (2014) multidimensional framework of influence, assessment use emerged as relational, affective, and strategically situated as much as it was instrumental. However, when interpreted through the complementary lens of ACCELERATE, the data suggests that assessment values are enacted selectively and unevenly, surfacing differently across documents, conversations, and enacted practice. Taken together, ACCELERATE and Jonson et al.'s (2014) framework help explain not only whether assessment is influential, but also how particular assessment practices generate different forms of influence. For example, the Continuously Cultivating principle aligns with Jonson's process and conceptual dimensions of influence. Across the data, institutions frequently described assessment as an ongoing cycle of refinement and learning rather than a one-time activity. One assessment report noted that "CAPS continues to refine its clinical service delivery" and recommended "ongoing assessment for efficacy," illustrating how continuous engagement with evidence can shape thinking and practice over time.

Similarly, the Collaborative & Co-Creative principle aligns with process-based and conceptual influence. In several examples, institutions sought additional stakeholder input to better understand findings and inform future action. For instance, one unit planned to "gather information from student leaders, as well as students attending referral services," demonstrating how assessment influence can emerge through participation, dialogue, and shared interpretation rather than solely through formal decisions. Finally, the Equity & Empowerment-Motivated principle aligns with conceptual and symbolic forms of influence. Multiple assessment reports emphasized the importance of disaggregating data to better understand the experiences of different student populations. One report described plans to "develop assessments that make it more accessible to disaggregate data to understand nuances of experiences among students," reflecting how assessment can influence institutional priorities and ways of understanding student success, even when immediate actions are not yet evident. Table 7 highlights how these connections between ACCELERATE principles and dimensions of influence provide a more nuanced understanding of how assessment shapes institutional practice.

In response to the first research question focusing on how institutional actors describe their use of assessment information, the findings suggest that participants most often framed assessment use in terms of collaboration, action, and long-term influence, aligning most frequently with ACCELERATE's Collaborative and Co-Creative, Action-Driven, and Enduring and Evolving principles. These descriptions emphasized advocacy, coordination, affirmation, and sensemaking rather than technical rigor or methodological transparency. This pattern affirms that assessment influence is experienced primarily as a social and organizational process, where learning unfolds through dialogue and participation and action emerges through relationships, not formal reporting mechanisms (Coburn & Turner, 2011; Jonson, 2014). The relatively infrequent articulation of principles such as Energized by Expertise or Transparent and Trustworthy further indicates that technical credibility may be more of a background

condition for assessment influence rather than a salient feature of how practitioners understand and narrate their understanding of how assessment is used.

Table 7

Aligning ACCELERATE Principles with Jonson et al.'s (2014) dimensions

ACCELERATE Principle	Jonson Influence Type(s)	Rationale
Aligned Purposefully	Instrumental	Purpose-driven design increases the likelihood that findings trigger decisions or changes.
Continuously Cultivating	Process; Conceptual; Long-term influence	Ongoing engagement produces learning-through-participation and conceptual shifts over time.
Collaborative & Co-Creative	Process; Conceptual	Stakeholder participation and shared interpretation mirror Jonson's process-based and conceptual effects.
Equity & Empowerment-Motivated	Conceptual; Symbolic/Affirmation	Equity lenses reshape understanding and are often used symbolically to advocate for institutional priorities.
Learning-Centered	Conceptual; Process	Fosters cognitive reframing about student learning and learning among participants.
Energized by Expertise	Instrumental; Symbolic	Credible evidence is more actionable and more easily legitimizes decisions.
Responsiveness-Oriented	Instrumental	Timely, context-appropriate information is more likely to drive direct action.
Action-Driven	Instrumental	Aligns explicitly with Jonson's instrumental effect pathway.
Transparent & Trustworthy	Symbolic/Affirmation; Conceptual	Transparency increases legitimacy, trust, and conceptual uptake.
Enduring & Evolving	Long-term conceptual; Symbolic; Process	Reinforces Jonson's temporal dimension and acknowledges cumulative cultural influence.

The second research question related to whether the way assessment is documented differs from how it is discussed is answered unequivocally in the affirmative. Institutional documents were more likely to emphasize purposeful alignment, learning-centeredness, and long-term sustainability, reflecting an effort to present assessment as coherent, intentional, and improvement-oriented. . This divergence suggests that documentation practices privilege forms of assessment influence that are legible to external audiences, while overlooking the relational and process-based work that sustains organizational assessment cultures internally.

In ACCELERATE terms, principles such as Continuously Cultivating and Equity & Empowerment-Motivated were more evident in observations and focus groups than in formal artifacts, raising questions about what kinds of assessment work institutions choose to represent and pointing to the limitations of current documentation expectations, often compliance-driven. This pattern is consistent with broader critiques of assessment documentation practices, which note that formal reports are often shaped as much by external accountability demands as by internal learning priorities. For example, Singer-Freeman and Robinson (2020) caution that aggregated assessment reports can inadvertently obscure variation in student performance across courses, programs, or disciplines, resulting in partial representations of student learning that limit institutions' ability to respond to the needs of diverse learners. Similarly, concerns about the prescriptiveness of accreditation requirements suggest that documentation practices may prioritize compliance over meaningful integration of assessment into teaching and learning. Flateby and Sweetland (2025) note that when accreditors impose rigid reporting formats, institutions may be compelled to sacrifice contextualized, learning-centered narratives in favor of standardized templates, increasing workload while diminishing interpretive value. They argue that more open and non-prescriptive accreditation standards, such as approaches that encourage programs to tell "assessment or learning stories" highlighting identified challenges, responsive changes, and resulting benefits, may better support authentic assessment integration and reflective practice. Viewed in this light, the strong alignment with learning- and purpose-oriented principles in institutional documents may reflect both genuine commitments to improvement and strategic efforts to render assessment legible within compliance-driven documentation environments.

These findings complicate prevailing critiques that assessment fails to be "used" by demonstrating that influence does occur, but often in ways that exceed narrow definitions of use. Assessment influence, as illustrated here, is less a closed loop than an evolving, iterative process, shaped by many factors. ACCELERATE offers a useful vocabulary for naming these conditions, not as a checklist against which practice should be evaluated, but as a constellation-like framework for understanding how assessment values can be practiced.

At the same time, the findings complicate the enactment of these principles by demonstrating that interpretive and relational forms of assessment use are often underrepresented in formal documentation, despite the fact that the relational and dialogic nature of assessment experienced by practitioners are indeed useful strategies for improving use (Coburn & Turner, 2011; Jankowski & Marshall, 2017; Blaich & Wise, 2011). In this sense, the findings do not contradict ACCELERATE, instead revealing the more structural (documented) conditions that constrain its full visibility in assessment practice. Institutions seeking to strengthen assessment practice may therefore benefit from expanding how assessment practices and their ultimate influence is made visible, particularly for the principles surfaced more through observations and focus groups than in documentation, as these principles nurture important relational and reflective work.

Limitations

While the focus groups, observations, document analysis, and reflective activities yielded rich evidence of how assessment use was described and enacted, they do not capture the full scope of assessment activity at each institution. The study necessarily reflects a bounded set of assessment practices that were visible during the data collection period and accessible through the selected methods. Participants' accounts were shaped by recall and salience; individuals shared instances of assessment use that they could readily remember, which may privilege more recent, relational, or personally meaningful examples over routine or less visible forms of use. Furthermore, coding was limited only to the example as pulled from the original data source.

Additionally, the Excellence in Assessment designation served as a pragmatic case selection criterion to identify institutions with established assessment infrastructures, though the designation itself reflects assessment practices at a particular point in time and may not fully represent current conditions or recent shifts in institutional priorities. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as illustrative of how assessment use is experienced and articulated within recognized assessment contexts, rather than as comprehensive inventories or evaluative judgments of institutional assessment practice.

Conclusion

Greater awareness and intentional application of the ACCELERATE Assessment Principles for Best Practice can meaningfully strengthen assessment practice by helping professionals more fully recognize, articulate, and sustain promising practices in assessment and while more fully realizing assessment use as it occurs in lived institutional contexts. Scholars have long called for greater attention to how assessment leads to improvement, noting that while institutions often document assessment processes, they rarely articulate the mechanisms through which assessment supports learning and change (Baker et al., 2012; Blaich & Wise, 2011). Despite widespread agreement about the importance of assessment use, the literature offers few “plug-and-play” strategies, leaving practitioners without clear roadmaps for translating insights into action. Within this context, ACCELERATE responds to what Taylor (2022) describes as a broader “how” turn in student success and assessment scholarship by foregrounding the conditions, practices, and values that support meaningful assessment practice and use.

Across sites, much of assessment's most consequential use unfolded through conversation and sensemaking opportunities—forms of assessment use that were frequently underrepresented in formal documentation. ACCELERATE offers assessment professionals a shared language for legitimizing these relational and process-based forms of use, enabling them to name work that we know matters but is often rendered invisible by compliance-oriented reporting structures.

Importantly, ACCELERATE can also function as a translation framework, helping practitioners bridge the persistent gap between discussing and documenting assessment influence. Aligning everyday assessment practices with principles such as Learning-Centered, Collaborative and Co-Creative, and Continuously Cultivating, may enable assessment professionals to more accurately represent how learning and action emerge over time, rather than forcing complex processes into narrow, episodic

narratives of “closing the loop.” In this way, ACCELERATE principles could support changes in documentation practices towards processes that actually reflect how assessment influence unfolds. Moreover, ACCELERATE can help practitioners set realistic expectations for assessment work, frame action as cumulative rather than immediate, and advocate for the time and space required for reflective and equity-minded practice. Ultimately, the value of ACCELERATE lies not in prescribing what assessment should look like, but in helping institutions do greater justice to the assessment work they are already doing through recognizing and nurturing meaningful assessment practices that might otherwise remain unseen.

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