

Bayraktar, B. (2026). Assessment as a relational ecosystem: What three longitudinal projects reveal through ACCELERATE. *Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning*, 7(2).

Assessment as a Relational Ecosystem: What Three Longitudinal Projects Reveal Through ACCELERATE

Breana Bayraktar Ed.D.

Author Note

Breana Bayraktar, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8557-086X>

"I have no conflicts of interest to disclose."

Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

Vol 7, Issue 2

Abstract: Assessment in higher education is shaped by competing demands for accountability, equity, transparency, and responsiveness amid the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence. Although instructors often espouse learning-centered and equity-motivated assessment values, their practices across feedback, grading, and policy frequently remain misaligned with these commitments. This article synthesizes findings from three longitudinal research and faculty development projects using ACCELERATE as an analytic lens. Across contexts, misalignment emerged not from individual resistance or lack of expertise, but from interconnected institutional and social forces, including workload pressures, institutional systems, disciplinary norms, emotional labor, and uncertainty. The synthesis advances a conceptual model of assessment as a relational ecosystem, demonstrating that assessment reforms endure only when supported by transparency, trust, coherence, and iterative community-based learning. Implications highlight how faculty developers, academic leaders, and assessment offices can strengthen assessment cultures by addressing ecosystem-level conditions rather than relying on isolated technical interventions.

Keywords: *faculty development, feedback literacy, alternative grading, assessment reform*

Introduction

Assessment in higher education is undergoing rapid and uneven transformation. Institutions are navigating rising demands for accountability, persistent achievement gaps, evolving student demographics, and accelerating technological change, especially the influence of generative artificial intelligence on learning and academic integrity. At the same time, students increasingly expect assessment practices that are transparent, equitable, meaningful, and supportive of their development. These pressures surface long-documented tensions in assessment scholarship. Although assessment is widely recognized as central to learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Sambell et al., 2012), researchers have repeatedly documented gaps between learning-centered assessment ideals and enacted assessment practices, particularly in relation to feedback, student agency, transparency, and equity (Boyd & Bloxham, 2007; Carless, 2015; Carless & Winstone, 2020; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Winstone et al., 2022). This moment calls for a reexamination not only of assessment tools and techniques but of the cultural and relational dynamics that enable, or constrain, assessment effectiveness.

The revision of the American Association for Higher Education's (American Association for Higher Education, 1992) widely cited assessment principles into the ACCELERATE framework reflects an attempt to meet these contemporary realities. ACCELERATE positions assessment as aligned, collaborative, equity-motivated, learning-centered, responsive, transparent, and enduring. Unlike purely technical models, ACCELERATE foregrounds the social, cultural, and relational dimensions of assessment work. It emphasizes that effective assessment emerges from consistency across purpose, design, practice, and institutional support. As institutions grapple with questions of equity, trust, and technological disruption, the revised principles offer a timely lens for examining how assessment beliefs and practices evolve and why longstanding misalignments persist (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Carless & Boud, 2018).

Over the past five years (2021-2026), I have been part of three longitudinal research and faculty development initiatives examining distinct but interconnected dimensions of assessment practice: instructor feedback literacy, ethical course policy development for generative AI, and alternative grading reform. Although these projects emerged from different questions, contexts, and methodological approaches, each explored how instructors navigate tensions between learning-centered assessment ideals and the realities of institutional practice. Individually, these projects illuminate specific assessment challenges: the disconnect between feedback intentions and student uptake; the tensions between integrity, equity, and transparency in AI policy creation; and the cultural pressures that shape grading reform. Viewed together, these three longitudinal projects reveal recurring patterns in how instructors navigate assessment amid shifting expectations and constraints. Across contexts, faculty articulated learning-centered, equity-motivated values emphasizing formative feedback, student agency, and transparent expectations, yet often struggled to enact these commitments in sustainable ways. These difficulties were rarely a matter of individual will or expertise; instead, they emerged from intersecting institutional, relational, and technological pressures that complicated sustained enactment. Synthesizing insights across the feedback literacy study, the AI policy initiative, and the alternative grading learning communities makes visible how these pressures shape assessment choices over time and why reforms that appear technically sound can still falter in practice.

In this article, I interpret these cross-project patterns through ACCELERATE as an analytic lens and argue that assessment functions as a relational ecosystem, one in which practices such as feedback, grading structures, and AI policies succeed only when supported by trust, coherence, transparency, and opportunities for shared meaning-making. This model emerged inductively from recurring patterns observed across the three projects, rather than being imposed as a predetermined theoretical framework.

Methodological Orientation for Cross-Project Synthesis

The synthesis draws on findings from three longitudinal research and faculty development initiatives conducted between 2021 and 2026. While each project employed distinct methods and addressed different assessment challenges, all explored how instructors interpret, enact, and adapt assessment practices within complex institutional environments.

Project Contexts

The first project is an international mixed-methods study¹ on instructor feedback literacy, examining how instructors conceptualize their role in the feedback process, how they design feedback to support student learning, and what relational, structural, and disciplinary factors influence their enactment of feedback practices (Bayraktar, Ragupathi, et al., 2025). Data sources include surveys with both Likert and open-ended items, instructor-generated feedback artifacts, and participant reflections during workshops on feedback literacy. The study involved 127 instructors from across North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia, recruited through purposive sampling to represent variation in discipline, career stage, and institutional type.

The second project is a statewide practitioner-inquiry initiative supporting instructors in developing ethical, learning-centered course policies for generative AI (Bayraktar, Henry, et al., 2025; Bayraktar, Henry, & Taggart, 2026; Bayraktar, Henry, Taggart, et al., 2026; Waterfield et al., 2026). Conducted in partnership with multiple institutions, this project engaged faculty in a guided process of drafting, revising, and communicating AI policies through workshops and reflective writing. Data consist of pre/post surveys, chat transcripts from synchronous workshops, and brainstorm artifacts from in-person workshops². Participants included 161 instructors from 35 institutions across the state of Virginia, representing diverse disciplinary backgrounds and institutional contexts ranging from community colleges to research universities.

The third project is a cross-institutional investigation³ of faculty learning communities focused on alternative grading reform. This work followed multiple cohorts of instructors implementing labor-based, specifications, and ungrading-inspired approaches (Bayraktar & Eriksen, 2025, 2026). Data include learning community transcripts, recorded reflections, implementation plans, course artifacts, and end-of-semester interviews. The learning communities engaged 44 instructors across 22 institutions in the United States over two academic terms, selected through open enrollment to ensure disciplinary and institutional diversity.

¹ Reviewed by the IRB at Northern Virginia Community College (“Instructor Feedback Practices and Beliefs”), Trinity University (#277817), and the National University of Singapore (“NUS-IRB-2021-933”).

² Reviewed by the IRB at George Mason University (#2165717).

³ Reviewed by the IRB at George Mason University (#1947625).

Table 1

Summary of Three Longitudinal Projects

Project	Purpose	Participants	Data Collection
Instructor Feedback Literacy (international, mixed-methods)	Examine how instructors conceptualize, design, and enact feedback practices	127 instructors, international	Surveys (Likert + open-ended), feedback artifacts, workshop reflections
Ethical AI Policy Development (statewide, practitioner-inquiry)	Support instructors in drafting and communicating ethical generative AI course policies	161 instructors, 35 institutions, statewide	Pre/post surveys, policy drafts, workshop transcripts, brainstorm artifacts
Alternative Grading Faculty Learning Communities (cross-institutional)	Investigate cultural, structural, and relational conditions shaping grading reform	44 instructors, 22 institutions, North America	FLC transcripts, recorded reflections, implementation plans, interviews

Rationale for Cross-Project Synthesis

Although these projects address different aspects of assessment, they converge around a shared set of questions: How do instructors interpret assessment principles? How do their beliefs translate (or fail to translate) into practice? What contextual dynamics support or constrain assessment change? The diversity of contexts, methods, and institutional settings provides an opportunity to examine assessment not as a discrete technical act but as an ecosystem that manifests across pedagogical domains. Bringing these studies into conversation allows for identification of cross-cutting themes that would remain obscured within any single project.

Analytic Approach

This synthesis employed a reflexive and iterative analytic process grounded in qualitative thematic integration. Drawing on principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022), I reexamined analytic memos, code summaries, workshop reflections, and preliminary reports from each project to identify emergent patterns of meaning. Rather than combining datasets or re-coding all materials, I employed a cross-case strategy informed by pattern matching (Yin, 1994, 2014) focusing on interpretive comparison to surface shared tensions, assumptions, and conditions shaping assessment practice. Initial inductive categories (e.g., alignment gaps, transparency challenges, emotional labor, student trust, and perceptions of risk) were refined through iterative movement between project-specific insights and cross-project thematic structures. Once these patterns stabilized, they were mapped onto the ACCELERATE principles, which were used as an interpretive heuristic rather than a predefined coding scheme. This abductive analytic process (Thompson, 2022) supported movement between empirical patterns and theoretical framing, resulting in the conceptualization of assessment as a relational ecosystem.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As an educational developer and co-lead on all three projects, I bring a practitioner-researcher perspective to this synthesis. My commitments to human-centered assessment, equity, and reflective practice informed both data collection and interpretation. To mitigate potential bias, analytic decisions were grounded in documented project artifacts and iterative memoing rather than retrospective reconstruction. The purpose of this synthesis is conceptual development grounded in practice rather than statistical generalization.

Limitations

This synthesis reflects the contexts of participating institutions, primarily within U.S. higher education, and instructors who self-selected into faculty development initiatives. The analysis emphasizes qualitative insight over causal inference. While these factors limit generalizability, the cross-project patterns identified here provide an interpretive foundation for understanding how assessment practices evolve within institutional ecosystems and how ACCELERATE can illuminate their relational and cultural dimensions.

Results: Cross-Project Findings Through the ACCELERATE Lens

The findings presented in this section synthesize patterns across three longitudinal projects examining instructor feedback literacy, ethical AI policy development, and alternative grading reform. Rather than reporting project-specific results sequentially, the analysis is organized through the ACCELERATE principles to highlight recurring tensions and enabling conditions manifest across assessment contexts. ACCELERATE functions here as an analytic lens rather than a prescriptive framework. The principles are used to examine how assessment practices are shaped by environmental and institutional conditions, and to identify the factors that support or constrain coherence between instructors' pedagogical values and enacted practices. While discussed separately for analytic clarity, the principles frequently overlap in practice, reflecting the interconnected nature of assessment as an ecosystem.

Purposeful Alignment: Beliefs, Practices, and Systemic Constraints

Across all three projects, instructors articulated clear, learning-centered intentions for assessment. They described wanting to promote student agency, support equitable learning opportunities, and design assessment practices aligned with disciplinary ways of thinking. Yet the practices instructors enacted often diverged from these intentions as they navigated institutional systems, workload constraints, and expectations shaped by longstanding assessment norms. Purposeful alignment, as conceptualized within ACCELERATE, thus emerged not as a matter of intention or design quality alone, but as an outcome contingent on interpersonal, structural, and temporal conditions.

Feedback Literacy: Learning-Oriented Intentions, Transmission-Oriented Practices

In the feedback literacy study, instructors consistently framed feedback as a formative practice intended to guide student reflection, revision, and disciplinary development. However, analysis of feedback artifacts and survey responses revealed a persistent tension between these learning-oriented intentions and the feedback practices instructors were able to sustain. Many relied on dense, directive,

or evaluative comments that emphasized correction rather than sensemaking (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989). Instructors frequently attributed this misalignment to time pressure, uncertainty about student engagement, and norms that positioned feedback as justification for grades rather than as part of an ongoing learning process.

Several instructors expressed frustration that students did not use feedback as intended, interpreting disengagement as a motivational problem. Yet closer examination suggested that feedback often lacked explicit articulation of purpose, prioritization, or opportunities for application. Alignment faltered not because instructors misunderstood the role of feedback, but because surrounding course structures and timelines did not support students in interpreting and acting on feedback in meaningful ways. This pattern aligns with prior research demonstrating that instructors frequently conceptualize feedback as formative while operating within assessment structures that position feedback primarily as information transmission rather than dialogue (Carless, 2015; Carless & Winstone, 2020).

Ethical AI Policy Development: Transparency-Valued Aims, Protective Practices

A similar pattern surfaced in the AI policy initiative. In workshops and reflective writing, instructors articulated commitments to transparency, fairness, and supporting ethical student engagement with generative AI. Nevertheless, initial policy drafts often emphasized prohibition, surveillance, and punitive consequences. These policy choices were shaped by perceived institutional risk, uncertainty about AI's impact on learning outcomes, and concern about maintaining disciplinary standards amid rapid technological change.

Even instructors who conceptualized AI as a learning tool struggled to translate these beliefs into policy language that reflected their pedagogical goals. In the absence of models or shared vocabulary for learning-centered AI policies, instructors defaulted to compliance-oriented templates (Chan, 2023). Purposeful alignment here was undermined not by a lack of ethical clarity, but by institutional contexts that framed AI primarily as a threat to be managed rather than as a pedagogical challenge to be negotiated. Similar tensions have been noted in emerging scholarship on generative AI policy, where uncertainty and institutional risk narratives often produce restrictive policies that are poorly aligned with instructors' broader pedagogical goals (Eaton, 2025; Lodge et al., 2024; Luo, 2024; Perkins et al., 2024).

Alternative Grading Reform: Equity Motivations, Structural Resistance

In the alternative grading learning communities, instructors' equity-oriented motivations were especially explicit. Participants were interested in adopting specifications grading, labor-based grading, or ungrading-inspired approaches to reduce anxiety, disrupt inequitable grading practices, and refocus attention on learning (Blum, 2020; Inoue, 2019). Yet as the learning communities unfolded and instructors considered how to implement a new grading system, they spoke about encountering resistance from institutional systems, including LMS gradebook structures, accreditation requirements, departmental norms, and student expectations shaped by years of points-based grading. These pressures often led instructors to modify or scale back features central to their intended grading reforms, such as revision opportunities or labor-based contracts. In some cases, instructors redesigned their systems mid-semester to better fit LMS constraints, inadvertently reintroducing opacity or

inconsistency. Alignment eroded not because instructors abandoned their values, but because institutional structures made sustained enactment difficult without additional support. These findings echo research on grading reform suggesting that institutional structures and cultural expectations frequently constrain the implementation of equity-oriented grading practices despite strong instructor commitment (Blum, 2020; D. Clark & Talbert, 2023).

Alignment as an Ecosystem Outcome

Across the three projects, purposeful alignment failed when instructors were required to reconcile competing institutional signals without the relational and structural support needed to enact their values. These findings reframe misalignment not as instructor failure, but as a signal of ecosystem-level strain that must be addressed collectively.

Collaboration and Co-Creation: Aspirations Without Infrastructure

Across the three projects, instructors consistently expressed a desire for students to participate actively in assessment processes. They described collaboration and co-creation as pathways to increased student agency, shared responsibility, and deeper engagement with learning. This aspiration aligns with a growing body of scholarship on students as partners, which frames collaborative engagement in assessment design as central to meaningful, learning-oriented education (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Yet meaningful student partnership in assessment remained limited and uneven. Rather than reflecting resistance to collaboration, this pattern revealed the absence of infrastructure needed to support co-creation in practice, consistent with research demonstrating that partnership aspirations regularly outpace the structural conditions necessary to sustain them (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Feedback Literacy: Expectations for Engagement Without Structures for Partnership

In the feedback literacy project, instructors frequently emphasized that students should take ownership of feedback (e.g., reflecting on comments, applying them to revisions, and initiating dialogue about their learning). However, analysis of course practices revealed that few instructors created mechanisms that positioned students as active partners in the feedback process. Opportunities for structured dialogue, student-generated feedback requests, peer discussion, or metacognitive reflection were rare. This finding is consistent with Carless and Boud's (2018) argument that student feedback literacy, the capacity to engage productively with feedback, must be deliberately cultivated rather than assumed, and with Winstone et al.'s (2017) concept of proactive recipience, which holds that students require explicit scaffolding to engage agentially with feedback rather than simply receive it. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) similarly identify dialogue as a structural feature of effective feedback processes, one that was largely absent from the practices examined here.

Many instructors assumed that well-crafted feedback would naturally prompt student engagement. When students did not act on feedback, instructors often interpreted this as a lack of motivation rather than as a signal that students needed explicit scaffolding to participate productively. This misattribution is consistent with patterns documented in the feedback literacy literature, where student disengagement often reflects unclear expectations or underdeveloped feedback structures rather than insufficient effort (Carless & Winstone, 2020; Winstone et al., 2022). Without structures

that clarified expectations or modeled how to use feedback, students remained positioned as recipients rather than collaborators. Uncertainty further constrained collaboration: some instructors worried that inviting dialogue would undermine their authority or require them to justify evaluative judgments, while others felt unprepared to facilitate feedback conversations in large or time-constrained courses.

AI Policy Development: Ethical Intentions Without Student Voice

The AI policy initiative revealed a similar gap between collaborative intentions and enacted practice. Instructors frequently articulated commitments to transparency, fairness, and ethical engagement with generative AI, yet few involved students in shaping the policies that governed AI use in their courses. Policies were developed for students rather than with them, even when instructors acknowledged that students often possessed greater familiarity with AI tools or firsthand experience navigating ethical dilemmas (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). In the absence of models for student-faculty collaboration around emerging technologies, instructors defaulted to crafting policies independently, often relying on compliance-oriented templates that reflected instructor anxieties more than pedagogical intent. Similar patterns have been identified in analyses of institutional AI policies, which frequently prioritize risk mitigation and control over participatory approaches to policy development (Eaton, 2025; Luo, 2024). Instructors cited multiple barriers to co-creation: uncertainty about rapidly evolving technologies, fear of appearing uninformed, concerns about maintaining academic standards, and limited time to engage students in policy dialogue. Some worried that student preferences for permissive AI use would conflict with disciplinary or institutional expectations, creating tensions they felt ill-equipped to manage.

Alternative Grading Reform: Co-Creation Emerging Only in Community

In contrast to the other two contexts, co-creation emerged more visibly within the alternative grading learning communities, though it remained contingent on structured support. Instructors experimented with co-writing labor-based contracts, negotiating revision policies, or collaboratively discussing criteria for satisfactory work. These practices parallel recommendations in the alternative grading literature: Clark and Talbert (2023) and Blum (2020) each emphasize that student buy-in in non-traditional grading systems depends on transparent, collaborative negotiation of expectations with students. Where these practices took hold, instructors reported increased student buy-in, stronger classroom community, and reduced conflict around grades.

However, even within learning communities, instructors expressed hesitation about how much authority to share with students. Concerns about fairness, rigor, and ambiguity persisted, particularly in institutions where grading norms were tightly regulated or culturally entrenched. Outside the learning community context, co-creation efforts often waned. Without peer accountability, shared language, or practical templates, instructors reverted to more instructor-centered designs. These patterns are consistent with research demonstrating how sustained change requires not only individual commitment but the shared repertoires, mutual accountability, and collective sense-making that emerge within supportive communities (e.g., Bond & Lockee, 2018; Clark et al., 2023; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2014). They underscore that collaboration does not emerge organically from belief alone; it

requires sustained relational and structural reinforcement that Boud and Soler (2016) identify as a prerequisite for sustainable assessment practices.

Collaboration as an Ecosystem Practice

When co-creation succeeded, it did so under specific conditions: clear frameworks for shared decision-making, transparent communication about purpose and boundaries, opportunities for instructors to discuss risks with peers, and institutional or community support for iterative experimentation. Under these conditions, collaboration strengthened alignment, enhanced transparency, and deepened student engagement. ACCELERATE thus positions collaboration not as a technique to be selectively applied, but as an ecosystem-level practice that depends on trust, shared language, and institutional coherence.

Equity and Empowerment: Intentions Strained by Context

Collaboration determines who participates in assessment design; equity determines whose needs those designs actually serve. Across all three projects, instructors articulated strong commitments to equity, fairness, and supporting diverse learners. They described assessment as a site where inequities could be mitigated rather than reproduced and emphasized the importance of reducing barriers, honoring varied student backgrounds, and fostering student agency. This framing reflects principles central to assessment for learning scholarship, which positions equitable participation and student empowerment as foundational to sound assessment design (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Sambell et al., 2012). Yet despite these intentions, equity-oriented assessment practices were difficult to sustain, impacted as much by relational, cultural, and institutional conditions largely outside of individual instructors' control as by individual choices.

Feedback Literacy: Equity Aspirations Without Attention to Affective and Cultural Dimensions

In the feedback literacy project, instructors frequently acknowledged that students bring varied cultural, linguistic, and educational experiences to the interpretation of feedback. Many expressed concern that feedback practices could unintentionally discourage or marginalize students, consistent with research on teacher feedback literacy that highlights cultural and emotional responsiveness as a professional responsibility (Carless & Winstone, 2020). However, analysis of feedback artifacts revealed that equity considerations were rarely operationalized in feedback design. Comments often assumed shared familiarity with academic norms, disciplinary language, or revision practices, positioning students who lacked this familiarity at a disadvantage and reinforcing existing academic hierarchies (Winstone et al., 2022).

Instructors recognized that students' emotional responses to feedback shaped learning yet felt constrained in addressing these affective dimensions. Carless (2015) identifies trust as a prerequisite for feedback to function as a genuine learning resource, and Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) include supporting students' motivational beliefs and self-esteem as a core principle of good feedback practice. Time pressure, large enrollments, and uncertainty about appropriate boundaries limited instructors' willingness to engage dialogically or provide individualized support. As a result, feedback practices often reinforced hierarchical dynamics, even when instructors intended to promote

empowerment. The gap here was not awareness of equity concerns, but the absence of relational and structural scaffolds that would allow equity to be enacted as a sustained practice.

AI Policy Development: Ethical Intentions Compromised by Surveillance Logics and Uneven Access

Equity tensions were particularly visible in the AI policy initiative. Instructors expressed concern that generative AI could exacerbate inequities related to access, prior experience, disability, or linguistic background (Chan, 2023). Many sought to craft policies that balanced academic integrity with compassion and flexibility. However, under conditions of uncertainty and institutional pressure, policies often defaulted to restrictive or surveillance-oriented approaches that disproportionately burdened marginalized students, a concern other researchers have noted (e.g., Eaton, 2025).

Examples included requirements for detailed disclosure of AI use, reliance on detection tools, or blanket prohibitions that removed potentially supportive uses of AI, such as language scaffolding or organizational support. These choices were shaped less by pedagogical intent than by risk aversion, inconsistent institutional guidance, and fear of disciplinary consequences. In retrospect, several instructors recognized that their policies assumed stable access to technology and fluency with institutional language, inadvertently reinforcing the very inequities they sought to address. Equity, in this context, was constrained by institutional logics that prioritized control over care.

Alternative Grading Reform: Justice-Oriented Ideals Challenged by Structural Fatigue and Cultural Resistance

In the alternative grading learning communities, equity motivations were especially explicit. Instructors adopted specifications grading, labor-based grading, or ungrading-inspired approaches to reduce stress, decenter performance, and challenge inequitable grading norms, approaches grounded in scholarship that frames alternative grading as explicitly justice-oriented (Blum, 2020; D. Clark & Talbert, 2023; Inoue, 2019). While these approaches initially aligned closely with instructors' justice-oriented goals, sustaining them proved difficult within institutional environments not designed to support the relational and emotional labor they required.

Participants described encountering skepticism from colleagues, concerns about rigor, and workload pressures that made ongoing revision and dialogue difficult. Over time, some instructors scaled back features central to their equity commitments, such as flexible deadlines or iterative revision, in order to manage exhaustion or conform to departmental expectations. These patterns echo Boud and Soler's (2016) argument that sustainable assessment practices require coherent institutional conditions rather than individual commitment alone. Where equity-oriented grading practices endured, they were supported by peer communities, transparent communication with students, and institutional permission to experiment. The findings suggest that equity in assessment is fragile when instructors are left to shoulder its labor alone.

Equity as Relational and Contextual

Across the three projects, equity functioned less as a discrete assessment strategy and more as an emergent property of relational trust, transparency, and institutional alignment. Equity was most compromised when assessment practices were opaque, risk-driven, or emotionally distancing, and

most supported when instructors had the time, tools, and institutional backing to engage students as partners in learning. These findings underscore that equity cannot be added to assessment through isolated design choices; it is enacted when ecosystems foster emotional safety, shared understanding, and coherent support structures that allow instructors to align their values with practice.

Learning-Centered Transparency: The Mechanism That Makes Assessment Work

Across the three projects, transparency emerged as one of the most consequential yet least consistently enacted features of assessment practice. Instructors frequently described wanting students to understand expectations, engage meaningfully with feedback, and navigate assessment with confidence, but acknowledge that students often encountered assessment criteria, policies, and feedback messages as difficult to interpret. Through ACCELERATE's principles of Learning-Centered and Transparent & Trustworthy, transparency appears not as an accessory to assessment design but as the mechanism through which assessment becomes usable for learning. When transparency was absent, even well-intentioned practices failed to function as intended; when it was present, alignment, collaboration, and equity became possible.

Feedback Literacy: When Purpose and Process Remain Implicit

In the feedback literacy project, instructors consistently emphasized that feedback should guide learning rather than merely justify grades. However, analysis of feedback artifacts revealed that transparency about the purpose, priority, and use of feedback was often underdeveloped. Comments frequently focused on what was wrong without clarifying what students should do next, how feedback related to learning outcomes, or how revisions should be prioritized.

Students encountering such feedback were left to infer its meaning and significance, often interpreting comments through emotional or deficit-oriented lenses. Instructors, in turn, expressed frustration when students failed to act on feedback, interpreting disengagement as lack of effort rather than as a breakdown in communicative clarity. Where instructors explicitly articulated the purpose of feedback, modeled revision strategies, or incorporated structured opportunities for application, students were more likely to engage productively. Transparency here functioned as an instructional practice that translated evaluative information into learning action.

Ethical AI Policy Development: Ambiguity as a Source of Anxiety and Mistrust

The AI policy initiative demonstrated how opacity around emerging technologies magnifies uncertainty for both instructors and students. Early policy drafts often relied on vague language such as "appropriate use," "unauthorized assistance," or "AI is not permitted unless specified," leaving students unsure how policies aligned with learning goals or how AI tools could be used responsibly. This ambiguity placed the burden of interpretation on students, disproportionately disadvantaging those with less familiarity navigating academic norms.

Instructors frequently recognized these shortcomings but lacked models for articulating clear, learning-centered AI expectations amid rapidly evolving tools and inconsistent institutional guidance. Policies became more transparent when instructors engaged in reflective dialogue about purpose: what learning outcomes they sought to protect, where AI could support learning, and how fairness could be

enacted in practice. When transparency was achieved, policies shifted from deterrence-focused statements toward communicative documents that supported shared understanding and ethical engagement.

Alternative Grading Reform: Transparency as a Prerequisite for Trust

In the alternative grading learning communities, transparency proved essential for student trust and buy-in. Instructors implementing specifications grading, labor-based grading, or ungrading often assumed that students would welcome systems designed to reduce anxiety or increase agency. Yet without explicit explanation of how these systems worked, and why they were adopted, students frequently experienced confusion or skepticism, particularly early in the term.

Instructors who invested time in explaining the rationale behind grading reforms, clarifying expectations for satisfactory work, and visually mapping how labor, revision, and deadlines interacted reported greater student confidence and engagement. Conversely, when transparency was insufficient, students perceived grading systems as risky or unpredictable, prompting instructors to retreat toward more conventional practices. These cases illustrate that transparency is not merely informational but relational: it establishes the conditions under which students are willing to trust unfamiliar assessment structures.

Transparency as Relational Work

Across all three projects, transparency functioned as a relational practice that signaled instructor intent, invited student participation, and reduced uncertainty in assessment. When instructors made their reasoning visible (i.e., why an assessment was designed a certain way, how feedback should be used, or what policies were intended to support) students were more likely to interpret assessment as oriented toward learning rather than surveillance or control. Transparency mitigated emotional responses to feedback, reduced anxiety around AI expectations, and stabilized grading systems that challenged entrenched norms. ACCELERATE positions transparency as foundational because it enables other assessment principles to function: alignment depends on students understanding purpose, collaboration depends on shared expectations, equity depends on clarity rather than implicit norms, and responsiveness depends on open communication. Yet transparency frequently broke down under conditions of time pressure, compliance-driven templates, instructor discomfort with explaining nontraditional practices, and fears that clarity might invite negotiation or challenge. These breakdowns were not individual failures but symptoms of assessment cultures that treat clarity as optional rather than essential. Taken together, the findings indicate that transparency is the mechanism that makes assessment learning-centered, trustworthy, and equitable in practice; without it, even well-intentioned assessment remains inaccessible, while with it, students gain the interpretive tools needed to engage, reflect, and take responsibility for their learning.

Responsiveness and Enduring Change: How Assessment Evolves Through Iteration and Community

Across the three projects, the most durable shifts in assessment practice emerged through iterative cycles of reflection, experimentation, and adjustment supported by peer community. Instructors routinely expressed a desire to respond to student needs, disciplinary demands, and changing

contexts; however, their ability to do so depended less on individual flexibility than on the presence of structures that normalized revision over time. Through ACCELERATE's principles of Responsiveness-Oriented and Enduring and Evolving, responsiveness appears not as rapid reaction or constant change, but as a sustained capacity to adapt assessment practices thoughtfully in dialogue with others.

Feedback Literacy: Iteration as the Engine of Practice Development

In the feedback literacy project, instructors' understanding of feedback evolved most when they engaged in repeated cycles of practice and reflection. Participants who experimented with new approaches, such as dialogic feedback routines, revision plans, or student-generated action steps, reported that early attempts often felt awkward or ineffective. Over time, however, iterative refinement enabled instructors to align feedback practices more closely with their learning intentions.

Crucially, this development occurred within collaborative structures that encouraged sensemaking rather than evaluation. Workshops, peer discussions, and reflective prompts provided opportunities to examine assumptions, interpret student responses, and adjust practices without framing initial missteps as failure. In contrast, instructors who encountered feedback strategies through one-time sessions without follow-up tended to revert to familiar, corrective modes under time pressure. Responsiveness, in this context, required temporal space and psychological safety to treat feedback as a learnable practice.

Ethical AI Policy Development: Responsiveness Amid Rapid Change

The AI policy initiative highlighted responsiveness under conditions of heightened uncertainty. Instructors were tasked with developing policies in a rapidly evolving technological landscape, often without clear institutional guidance. Policies drafted early in the process frequently became misaligned as AI tools, student practices, or institutional expectations shifted.

Instructors who participated in drafting policies, discussing dilemmas with peers, revising language, and reflecting on emerging challenges reported greater confidence. The iterative structure allowed them to refine policies in response to new insights rather than freezing decisions prematurely. Faculty described this collective sensemaking as stabilizing, enabling them to respond to change without defaulting to rigid or punitive approaches. By contrast, instructors working in isolation often produced static policies that quickly became outdated or misaligned with learning goals. Here, responsiveness functioned less as keeping pace with technology and more as maintaining alignment between ethical commitments, student realities, and institutional contexts over time.

Alternative Grading Reform: Sustaining Change Through Reflective Community

Alternative grading reform posed the greatest challenge to endurance. Instructors adopting specifications grading, ungrading, or labor-based approaches encountered cultural resistance, workload strain, and skepticism regarding rigor. Under these pressures, grading systems frequently drifted away from their initial equity- and learning-centered designs.

Learning community participation proved critical in sustaining change. Regular meetings created space for instructors to troubleshoot challenges, recalibrate expectations, and reaffirm the values motivating

their reforms. Faculty refined grading practices incrementally, adjusting revision cycles, clarifying criteria, or renegotiating workload expectations, in response to student feedback and peer dialogue. This ongoing support helped instructors maintain alignment between values and practice despite institutional constraints. Where such communities were absent, grading reforms were more likely to regress toward conventional practices. Instructors cited exhaustion, uncertainty, and pressure to conform as reasons for retreat. These patterns reinforce that responsiveness is not an individual trait but a collective capacity.

Responsiveness as a Condition for Endurance

Across projects, responsiveness broke down when instructors lacked time to reflect, opportunities for shared problem-solving, and psychological safety to experiment. In contrast, longer-term learning communities, iterative design cycles, and institutional contexts that permitted mid-course adaptation allowed assessment practices to evolve in alignment with instructor values and student needs. Enduring assessment change is not the product of initial design excellence but of sustained structures for reflection, dialogue, and revision.

Summary of Findings

While the findings are organized around selected ACCELERATE principles for analytic clarity, other principles operate across the sections rather than within discrete domains. Continuously Cultivating is reflected in instructors' engagement in iterative reflection, revision, and learning over time, particularly through sustained communities of practice that supported experimentation and sensemaking. Energized by Expertise appears in the collective development of pedagogical knowledge through peer dialogue, faculty development structures, and shared inquiry, where expertise was cultivated dialogically rather than assumed individually. Action-Driven is evident in moments when instructors translated reflection into enactment (e.g., revising feedback practices, reframing AI policies, or redesigning grading systems). Together, these cross-cutting principles reinforce that ACCELERATE functions as an integrated framework, with multiple principles often activated simultaneously within assessment ecosystems rather than appearing as isolated features.

Conceptual Model: Assessment as Relational Ecosystem

The conceptual model proposed here reframes assessment not as a set of discrete techniques or instruments, but as a relational ecosystem shaped by interactions among beliefs, structures, relationships, and cultural norms. This framing draws on broader ecological and systems-oriented perspectives in higher education, which emphasize that educational practices emerge through interactions among individuals, structures, cultures, and technologies rather than through isolated interventions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Davis & Sumara, 2006). It also aligns with scholarship on sustainable assessment, which argues that assessment effectiveness depends on interconnected relationships among learners, instructors, assessment practices, and institutional contexts (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Boud & Soler, 2016). Efforts to improve assessment often focus on refining individual components (e.g., feedback strategies, grading systems, policy language) yet these reforms frequently stall because they fail to account for the conditions in which practices are enacted. By foregrounding multi-layer causality, the ecosystem model explains why well-designed assessment reforms so often

falter and why sustainable change requires attention to the relational and structural conditions that support practice over time.

Core Components of the Assessment Ecosystem

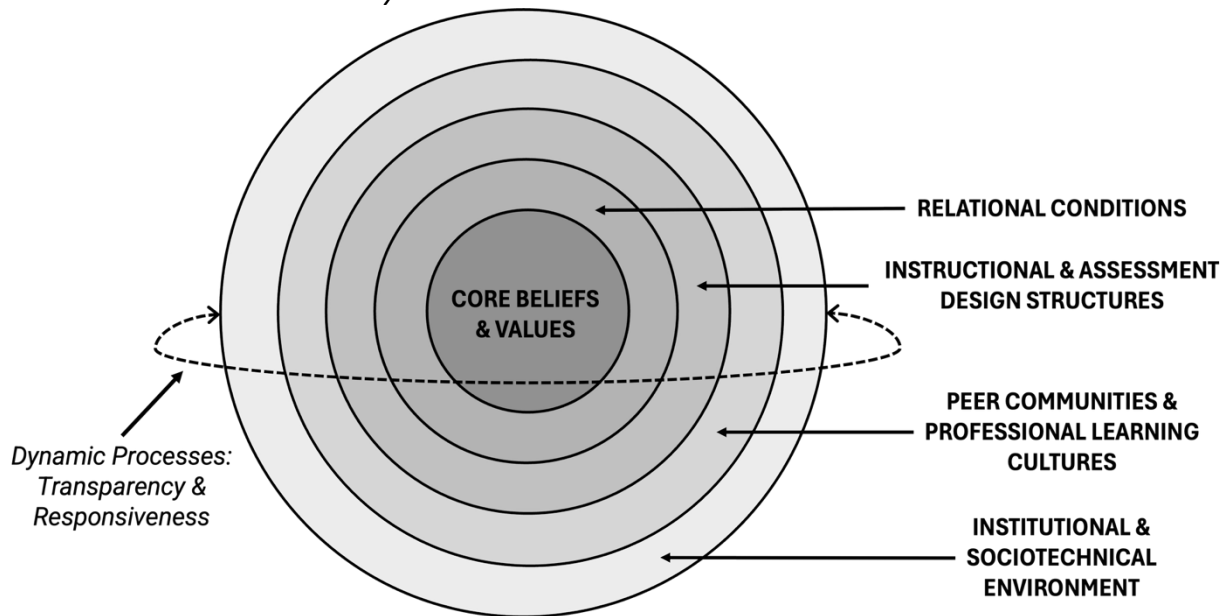
The ecosystem model (Figure 1) consists of five interacting layers; assessment practices emerge through interactions among these layers rather than through isolated instructional decisions. Transparency and responsiveness operate across all layers as dynamic processes that support shared understanding, adaptation, and trust.

At the center are instructors' *beliefs and values*, including commitments related to learning, equity, rigor, student agency, and the purposes of assessment. These beliefs influence assessment design but do not determine practice on their own. Their enactment depends on *relational conditions*, particularly trust between instructors and students and the psychological safety needed to engage in dialogue, experimentation, and shared decision-making. Assessment practices gain meaning through these relationships, which shape how feedback, grading systems, and policies are interpreted and experienced.

Assessment design structures, including syllabi, feedback routines, grading systems, learning outcomes, policies, and opportunities for revision, mediate the translation of values into practice. These structures are shaped and sustained through *peer communities and professional learning cultures* that provide opportunities for sensemaking, reflection, troubleshooting, and collective learning. When such communities are absent, instructors often revert to familiar practices even when those practices conflict with their stated goals.

Surrounding these layers are broader *institutional and sociotechnical conditions*, including workload policies, learning management systems, accreditation requirements, departmental cultures, emerging technologies, and societal expectations. These forces influence which assessment practices appear feasible, legitimate, or risky. Within the ecosystem, transparency and responsiveness function as cross-cutting processes that connect all layers, enabling assessment practices to adapt while maintaining coherence with learning goals and institutional contexts.

The ecosystem model treats *transparency and responsiveness* not as static components but as dynamic processes that move across all layers. Transparency clarifies expectations, signals purpose, and builds trust. Responsiveness enables instructors to adapt to new insights, student feedback, and evolving contexts. As cross-cutting processes, transparency and responsiveness regulate how information, trust, and adaptation circulate across the ecosystem.

Figure 1*Assessment as Relational Ecosystem***Integration with ACCELERATE**

The relational ecosystem model clarifies how the ACCELERATE principles function not as discrete domains, but as interdependent cultural commitments that operate across multiple layers of assessment practice. Alignment emerges through coherence between instructor beliefs, design structures, peer norms, and institutional expectations; collaboration and co-creation are enabled by trust and community learning; and equity and empowerment depend on transparency, emotional safety, and structural support rather than on isolated techniques. Learning-centered assessment is sustained when design and relational conditions work in concert, while responsiveness and endurance reflect the ecosystem's capacity for iterative adaptation over time. Within this model, transparency functions as a core mechanism that enables shared understanding, action-driven practice depends on institutional permission and support, and expertise is cultivated through collective inquiry rather than individual mastery. Rather than mapping each principle to a single component, the model demonstrates how ACCELERATE operates as an integrated cultural framework that strengthens connections across relational, structural, and institutional layers.

Implications for Strengthening Assessment Ecosystems

By shifting attention from isolated techniques to the conditions that shape assessment, the model highlights the shared responsibility of instructors, faculty developers, academic leaders, and assessment offices in cultivating consistency across the ecosystem. The implications that follow focus on strengthening alignment, transparency, equity, and responsiveness across institutional roles.

Implications for Assessment Developers: Cultivating the Middle Layer of the Ecosystem

Assessment developers play a critical role in shaping the relational and cultural conditions that determine whether assessment change is possible. The findings suggest that meaningful assessment improvement is most likely when developers prioritize longitudinal, community-based learning over isolated workshops. Instructors benefited from sustained communities of practice that supported iterative experimentation, collective sensemaking, and the emotional labor of pedagogical change. Embedding cycles of reflection, feedback, and adaptation into development programming allows assessment practices to evolve rather than stall at the level of intention.

ACCELERATE can function most productively as a reflective scaffold for faculty inquiry rather than as a prescriptive checklist. When used diagnostically, the framework helps instructors surface misalignment, identify tensions, and examine the institutional and cultural forces shaping their assessment decisions. Assessment developers can support this process by offering concrete models, templates, and shared language for transparent communication and co-creative practices, while also normalizing conversations about trust, vulnerability, and risk. By creating intentional spaces for instructors to articulate concerns, rehearse decisions, and navigate uncertainty, particularly around alternative grading and generative AI, assessment developers cultivate the “middle layer” of the ecosystem: peer community, shared norms, and reflective capacity that enables assessment reforms to take root.

To support this work, developers can help faculty members conduct “ecosystem audits” with structured reflections posing questions such as: Where do students receive mixed messages about assessment? Which institutional policies make desired practices difficult? What assumptions about grades, rigor, or AI are shaping decisions? Which relationships (student-instructor, instructor-program, peer-to-peer) are supporting or undermining change? Single interventions are insufficient to shift the relational and cultural conditions that shape assessment; developers should instead design longitudinal structures that build trust, shared language, and iterative reflection over time.

Implications for Academic Leaders: Aligning Structures with Assessment Values

Academic leaders (e.g., department chairs, deans, provosts) shape the institutional conditions that determine whether instructors can enact learning-centered assessment in practice. The findings underscore the importance of aligning workload expectations and evaluation structures with the labor that effective assessment requires. Practices such as providing meaningful feedback, supporting revision, and communicating transparently demand time and emotional investment; when these forms of labor are unrecognized, instructors are effectively penalized for pedagogically sound practices.

Beyond workload alignment, leaders influence assessment culture through institutional systems and messaging. Learning management platforms, policy frameworks, and accreditation processes can either enable or constrain assessment innovation. When these structures privilege efficiency, standardization, or risk avoidance, instructors often revert to traditional practices even when they conflict with institutional values. Leaders can mitigate these pressures by modeling transparency in decision-making, clearly articulating rationales for assessment-related policies, and explicitly legitimizing pedagogical experimentation. Recognizing assessment innovation in evaluation and

promotion processes signals that iterative refinement is a marker of professional responsibility rather than deviation. From this perspective, sustainable assessment reform depends less on individual ingenuity than on institutional alignment that supports principled practice.

To support this work, leaders should periodically audit the assessment ecosystem, examining grading policies, LMS defaults, class sizes, teaching modalities, and workload expectations to identify structural barriers to innovation. This includes reducing course loads during reform implementation, recognizing assessment redesign in promotion and tenure review, and recognizing the challenges that asynchronous teaching modalities pose for instructors engaging in dialogue with students.

Implications for Assessment Offices: From Compliance to Cultural Stewardship

Assessment offices have historically been positioned as engines of reporting and accountability, yet the ecosystem model suggests a broader and more generative role. By reframing assessment as a learning- and relationship-centered practice, offices can shift attention from compliance to coherence.

Embedding ACCELERATE principles into program review and reporting processes, prompting reflection on alignment, transparency, collaboration, equity, and responsiveness, positions assessment as an internal process of sensemaking and improvement rather than an external mandate.

Assessment offices are also well positioned to partner with faculty development offices in supporting iterative practice over time. By providing data-informed feedback loops at the course, program, and institutional levels, offices can help instructors and units refine assessment practices while remaining attentive to context. Their cross-program visibility puts them in a unique position to surface structural barriers, such as misaligned workload policies or conflicting expectations, and elevate these as institutional issues rather than local faculty problems.

For institutions navigating generative AI, these findings reinforce calls for flexible, values-informed policy frameworks that support local adaptation rather than centralized restrictions or detection-based approaches (Lodge et al., 2024; Luo, 2024). Rather than issuing top-down mandates, institutions should invest in shared sense-making processes that allow instructors to develop contextually appropriate responses while maintaining coherence around core values of transparency and equity. Finally, rather than using assessment data to document achievement gaps, these offices could investigate whether, and how, assessment practices differ across programs, where transparency varies, and where students have unequal opportunities for revision or feedback.

Cross-Cutting Implications: Supporting Coherence Across the Ecosystem

Across instructional, developmental, leadership, and assessment roles, the ecosystem perspective suggests that assessment challenges should not be understood primarily as failures of individual instructors or isolated assessment techniques. Assessment practices emerge through interactions among people, policies, technologies, cultures, and institutional structures, and improving them requires attention to what instructors do and to the conditions that shape what is possible.

A central implication of the ACCELERATE framework is the importance of diagnosis before intervention. When assessment practices appear misaligned with institutional goals, stakeholders should examine

the broader ecosystem surrounding those practices rather than immediately prescribing new tools, policies, or professional development. Questions about transparency, equity, feedback, grading, or generative AI often reflect deeper tensions involving workload, disciplinary norms, institutional incentives, technological systems, and competing understandings of learning. Sustainable improvement depends on making these underlying dynamics visible and open to collective reflection.

Assessment reform should also be understood as an ongoing process of adaptation rather than a problem solved through one-time interventions. Meaningful change emerges through cycles of experimentation, feedback, sensemaking, and revision involving multiple stakeholders. The primary challenge is not identifying the "right" assessment practice but cultivating conditions that allow assessment systems to remain responsive, coherent, and aligned with evolving educational goals, shifting attention from isolated reforms toward the relational, cultural, and structural capacities that make continuous improvement possible.

Conclusion

Across three distinct but interrelated projects, this study demonstrates that assessment in higher education functions less as a collection of techniques and more as a dynamic ecosystem. Instructors consistently articulated learning-centered, equity-oriented values, yet their practices often diverged from these commitments, not due to unwillingness, but because of structural pressures, cultural norms, emotional labor, and limited opportunities for sustained support. Applying the ACCELERATE principles to this cross-project synthesis clarifies that alignment, collaboration, transparency, and responsiveness emerge not from isolated instructional choices, but from the interaction of beliefs, relationships, institutional structures, and sociotechnical conditions. Misalignment arises when these elements conflict; enduring change becomes possible when instructors have the time, trust, clarity, and collegial support necessary to experiment, reflect, and revise. Across projects, the most meaningful improvements were iterative and community-driven, reinforcing the importance of shared sensemaking in assessment reform.

This ecosystem perspective offers a more generative approach to strengthening assessment cultures. Rather than focusing on correcting individual practices, it redirects attention toward the conditions that make aligned, equitable, and learning-centered assessment possible. In doing so, it positions ACCELERATE not as a checklist of best practices, but as a framework for understanding and cultivating coherence across the systems that shape assessment work.

This synthesis suggests several directions for future inquiry. Research should examine whether the relational ecosystem patterns identified here hold across different institutional types, disciplinary cultures, and national contexts, and longitudinal studies are needed that track how students from varied backgrounds experience equity-oriented assessment designs over time. Instructional modality also warrants attention: the dialogic practices central to this synthesis, formative feedback, co-creation of expectations, and AI policy negotiation, may be more readily facilitated in face-to-face settings than in online or hybrid environments, where sustaining relational assessment culture presents additional structural and technological challenges. Finally, research that follows instructors and students across AI policy cycles would illuminate how assessment ecosystems adapt under conditions of rapid disruption.

In a higher education landscape marked by accelerating technological change, shifting student needs, and institutional precarity, such an ecological view is increasingly necessary. As generative AI and other disruptions continue to reshape teaching and learning, assessment systems must be capable of evolving with purpose and integrity. By understanding assessment as a relational ecosystem, educators and institutions can move beyond piecemeal reforms toward more coherent, equitable, and sustainable approaches that genuinely support student learning.

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About the Authors

Breana Bayraktar, Educational Developer, George Mason University, breana@breanabayraktar.com