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Best of Both Worlds: Leveraging ACCELERATE Principles to Elevate Applied Practice and Scholarship

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Abstract: This response advocates for assessment’s legitimized disciplinary development via practitioner scholarship by identifying, then synthesizing the tension between the “Enduring and Evolving” ACCELERATE Principle and the “Action-Driven” and “Learning-Centered” ACCELERATE Principles. The ACCELERATE Principles’ publication is a step in the overall growth of assessment as a discipline, however, for assessment to continue to meet the “Enduring and Evolving” call for versatile applicability, it must achieve the perception of legitimacy among its stakeholders. This legitimacy requires both pragmatic applicability and participation in knowledge production ecosystems. The “Learning-Centered” and “Action-Driven” ACCELERATE Principles emphasize context-specificity, which might limit the production of scalable assessment knowledge via research, therefore potentially limiting field-level legitimacy. Comparing two analogous disciplines: Discipline-Based Education Research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through the Organizational Legitimacy Framework, this manuscript explores assessment’s growth toward disciplinary legitimacy using examples from sociology and urges practitioners to build a discipline where assessment honors its context while enduring.

Keywords: *Assessment, ACCELERATE Principles, Professional Development, Research*

Introduction

The ACCELERATE Principles’ publication represents a shift in the establishment of assessment as a profession and discipline: through formalizing and continuing to adapt the ways in which the field articulates best practices; it increases its ability to drive genuine continuous improvement across institutions. This boundary-pushing work allows assessment practitioners to explore uncharted territory. This manuscript surfaces an underlying tension between the “Enduring and Evolving” ACCELERATE Principle’s call for assessment to be evolvable against the focus on immediate application and context-specificity detailed in the “Action-Driven” and “Learning-Centered” ACCELERATE Principles (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025). This manuscript explores and seeks to articulate strategies to resolve that tension by supporting assessment’s ongoing disciplinary development through research and scholarship.

The “Enduring and Evolving” principle identifies that, “if designed assessments are not replicable, evolvable, scalable, and versatile in their applicability and endurance, then the labor involved in engaging in assessment may feel pointless or unproductive. ***The value of an assessment exercise grows exponentially when the assessment can be replicated or adapted across diverse assessment contexts*** for meaningful decision-making and when its effect can be experienced and confirmed short-term and traced long-term (emphasis added)” (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025, p. 7). “Enduring and Evolving’s” focus on value generation and replicability speaks to the impetus for the publication of the ACCELERATE Principles: creating a context in which the impact of assessment reverberates. Expanding impact requires that assessment develop further as a legitimate disciplinary field, which includes contributing to a theorized, published, peer-reviewed, and cited body of knowledge on practice and results, including evidence of implemented changes within classrooms and across institutions (Frias-Navarro et al., 2020).

Because legitimate disciplinary development must include research growth, empirical research is a necessary but not sufficient component of changing the behavior of instructors in the classroom; assessment’s classroom roots make it an ideal candidate for development as a discipline in both the scholarly and pragmatic spaces (Singer, 2013). The dearth in assessment sharing in the scholarly context is complicated by the nature of the practice of assessment itself. Assessment is considered distinct from research. The reasons for this are articulated in the “Action-Driven” and “Learning-Centered” principles: “Action-Driven” identifies that “***assessment is not research*** in that it is meant to serve a clearly articulated purpose that frames it and its findings are meant to be used in a timely and meaningful way right away...(Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025, emphasis added, p. 6),” and “Learning-Centered” identifies that “***assessment is not research*** in that it is a pragmatic, authentic, and context-specific, powerful approach to getting the most useful information to inform decision-making at a given point in time. It is not meant to be perfect but iterative in its own perfection of design and delivery... (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025, emphasis added, p. 5).” The ACCELERATE Principles are not the only authoritative source supporting the distinction of assessment from research; in the context of Student Affairs Assessment, the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders Massive Open Online Course similarly differentiates assessment from research (and evaluation). The identification of assessment as separate from research implies that it is singular in context and not distributable; this distinction has created an environment that discourages the scholarly sharing of the assessment efforts happening within institutions.

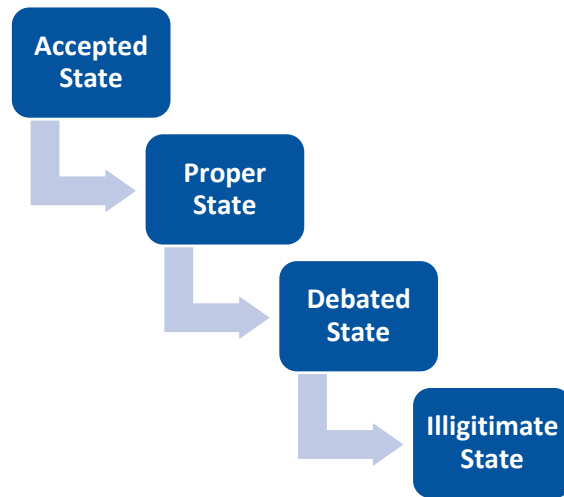
While the ACCELERATE Principles do not explicitly call practitioners to produce a healthy volume of scholarship for assessment, they articulate a need for an increase in the overall use of assessment in all contexts and professionalization of assessment’s practitioner-scholar community in “Enduring and Evolving.” A baseline of theory, methodology, and practice established in scholarly contexts (i.e., both socialization process and epistemological background) is a key route to achieve assessment’s legitimate profession development that is not yet realized (Penn, 2022). For example, the Grand Challenges in Assessment project has produced several literature reviews seeking to promote replicable assessment practices, finding that most practices do not have sufficient body of evidence to be considered broadly recommendable (Abrams et al., 2022; Carney et al., 2022; Dear et al., 2021; Gibbons et al., 2025).

In the context of higher education, assessment's language, background, and ways of knowing originate from educational and psychological measurement (which seeks to identify the extent to which students know and can do tasks identified in desired learning outcomes), as well as program evaluation (which seeks to achieve improvements in implemented activities via empirically tested models). By bridging the gap between these two disciplines, assessment's model for function (i.e., the commonly referenced assessment cycle) has created an infrastructure to build its body of knowledge defined and published in dedicated journals and other mechanisms to share research, moving toward professionalization (Penn, 2022). Since assessment was incorporated into accreditation and other regulatory mechanisms relatively early in its existence, institutions have adapted practice to their situated contexts without there necessarily being the opportunity for models and practices to develop for the discipline (Ewell, 2009). The mid-2020s period in higher education, marked by turmoil and an increased focus on accreditation, provides an opportunity for the ACCELERATE Principles and assessment scholars to create this body of knowledge.

As currently stated, there is a tension between the calls to action in the "Action-Driven" and "Learning-Centered" ACCELERATE Principles, which center pragmatic use of assessment in context, and the "Enduring and Evolving" ACCELERATE Principle, which seeks to optimize the momentum of assessment's ongoing moves for disciplinary development and longevity. Framing assessment as a form of inquiry by expanding practitioner engagement in research production based on embedded assessment work can be a powerful tool to create an environment in which assessment is able to achieve the goal of authority development as articulated in the "Enduring & Evolving" ACCELERATE Principle. We will articulate these needs and the path forward through analyzing Discipline-Based Education Research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning through the lens of the Organizational Legitimacy Framework (Deephouse et al., 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Here, we use the Organizational Legitimacy Framework (OLF, Deephouse et al., 2017; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008) to interpret the actions needed and ways in which assessment can be accepted and legitimized as its own discipline. OLF can be characterized as a structure where the state of legitimacy of an organization (in this case, the "organization" is the practice of assessment in higher education), is assigned to one of four states of legitimacy by stakeholders after evaluating the organization's work through four criteria, articulated in Figures 1 and 2 and mapped in Table 1.

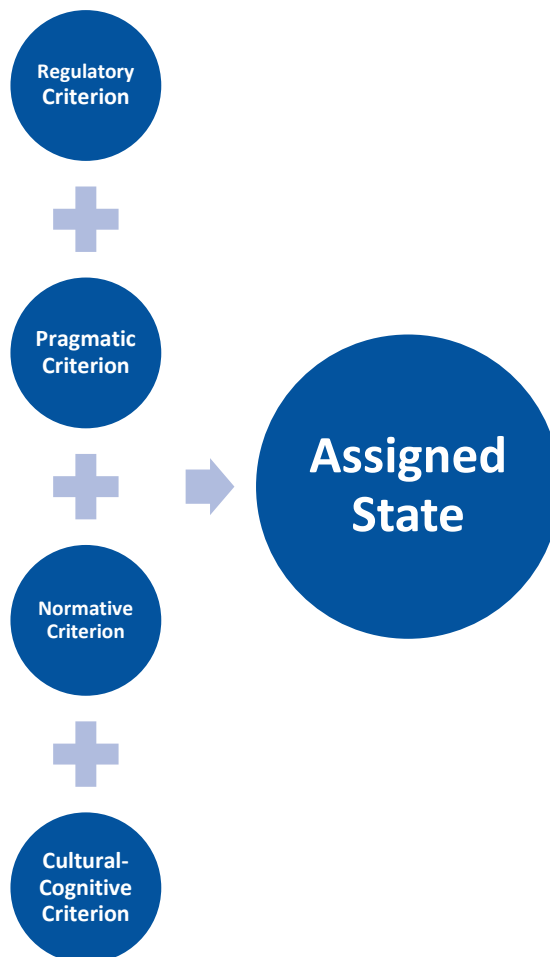
Figure 1*Organizational Legitimacy Framework States**States*

- State four is “Accepted” and interpreted as a passive evaluation that the legitimacy of the organization is taken for granted and unquestioned. If assessment were to be considered at this state of legitimacy, there would be no question of its value, and all assessment work would be grounded in scholarly evidence and adequately incorporated into the responsibilities of all stakeholders.
- State three is “Proper” and defined as a state that is considered correct, appropriate, or in line with established norms and expectations. This state is used for judgments in a deliberative fashion, as in evaluations of propriety where stakeholders actively agree on legitimacy. Assessment could be considered at this state if all stakeholders in an institution, such as faculty and student affairs practitioners, regularly engaged in theory building and testing while successfully and willingly engaged in completing assessment processes cyclically.
- State two is “Debated” and defined as a state where legitimacy is understood through discussion or contestation as different opinions occur among various stakeholders. Differing opinions reflect the presence of active disagreement within the social system and could occur among distinct groups of stakeholders or between dissident stakeholders and the organization. In the case of assessment, this state of legitimacy would be assigned if, with only anecdotal and single-context assessment work occurring, there were some stakeholders (such as policymakers) who did not interpret the time investment in continuous improvement activities as valuable, but others (such as students) perceive its value when they learn more in the classroom.

- State one is “Illegitimate” and defined as widespread rejection by relevant stakeholders. This state of legitimacy refers to actions or practices that are unlawful, improper, or not sanctioned by the organization or its environment. In the case of assessment, this state of legitimacy could be assigned if data are not collected at all, outcomes not identified, etc., or also the situation in which data is collected, but not used for the fundamental purpose of continuous improvement.

Figure 2

Organizational Legitimacy Framework Criteria



Criteria

- Criterion four is “Cultural-Cognitive.” Similarly to how the “Accepted” state is defined, this criterion for evaluating legitimacy arises when an organization’s actions and practice are seen as taken for granted or aligned with cultural beliefs and assumptions. Stakeholders determine the extent to which they perceive the organization’s actions are natural, reasonable, and fitting within the social context. In the case of assessment, this would refer to the extent to which the

practice is “Aligned Purposefully” (to reference another ACCELERATE Principle) with cultural institutional behaviors.

- Criterion three is “Normative” and defined as the organization’s acceptance or approval based on its alignment with societal norms, values, and ethical expectations, and focuses on moral and ethical considerations. Stakeholders identify whether the organization’s actions are morally right and appropriate. In the case of assessment, this is indicated by the extent to which stakeholders would respond positively if asked whether they should use empirically based practice in their work.
- Criterion two is “Pragmatic” and is based on an organization’s ability to meet the needs and expectations of its stakeholders, who evaluate the extent to which the organization’s actions serve their interests. In the case of assessment, this could refer to the extent to which faculty find the examples of improvements they might make based on data useful.
- Criterion one is “Regulatory” and is rooted in formal rules, laws, and regulations set by authoritative bodies. Stakeholders consider the organization's actions as either lawful and following established procedures or not. In the case of assessment, this is most clearly aligned with accreditors’ expectations.

Table 1

Organizational Legitimacy Framework Evaluative Criteria

	Accepted	Proper	Debated	Illegitimate
Regulatory	Well-defined, taken-for-granted expectations of authority	Authority support is documented and widely understood	Not all bodies have an expectation	No mandate or expectation
Pragmatic	Understood to be a benefit	Demonstrates benefits uniformly	Serves only the needs of some stakeholders, or only some of the time	No perceived value
Normative	Clearly well-aligned with moral expectations	Affirmed as appropriate	Value conflict	Actively violates values and norms
Cultural-Cognitive	Unquestioned	Importance is widely understood	Meaning alignment is questionable	Incomprehensible or rejected

As demonstrated in Table 1, the ways in which a stakeholder evaluates the work of an organization along each criterion can produce differing interpretations of the overall state of legitimacy. In the case of disciplinary knowledge in the academic context, legitimacy is often derived from the increased

perception of rigor associated with research and practice (i.e., scholarship) delivered through the mechanism of peer-reviewed journals, books, and conference communications and the existence of formal degree programs for training/socializing professionals. For example, if being evaluated through the “Pragmatic” criterion, open-access peer-reviewed journal publications highlighting the results of an assessment project or method would be at the “Proper” state of legitimacy, because the information is widely available and perceived as trustworthy. Publications in journals with high perceived quality identified by metrics such as Impact Factor would require less deliberative determination of legitimacy and be considered “Accepted.” On the other hand, an example of an assessment project that is posted on an institutional website, while helpful to showcase potential promising strategies, would be in the “Debated” state of legitimacy regarding scholarship because it has not been supported through an evaluative procedure.

The utility of the OLF to understand disciplinary development will be demonstrated here through the lens of two other disciplines: Discipline-Based Education Research (DBER) and the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (SoTL) which grew into academic disciplines in the late 20th century (Boyer, 1990; Cooper & Stowe, 2018). Both fields emerged from dissatisfaction with educational quality, much like assessment (Cooper & Stowe, 2018; McKinney, 2004). An analysis using the OLF showcases how the two fields gained and lost legitimacy in different ways, providing a lens through which this manuscript will then explore the growth of assessment through the sociology literature. Using the strategies identified herein, assessment can continue to build an independent discipline, utilizing the best techniques from each of the fields explored in this manuscript.

Interpreting and comparing the growth of DBER and SoTL to assessment through the OLF allows us to provide direction to the field to achieve the “Enduring and Evolving” ACCELERATE Principle while overcoming the identified limitations to scholarly productivity articulated in the “Action-Driven” and “Learning-Centered” ACCELERATE Principles.

Discipline-Based Education Research (DBER)

DBER is a successful disciplinary field that emerged in the 1980s-90s that investigates teaching and learning within science and engineering. DBER builds basic and applied knowledge through educational research methods and is deeply embedded in the context of the content being learned. DBER has analogous beginnings to assessment – it was inspired by genuine faculty dissatisfaction with learning (Cooper & Stowe, 2018). Coupled with recognized gaps in the preparation of and workplace need for scientists and engineers, DBER has the support of disciplinary and governmental bodies (National Research Council et al., 2012), analogous to the way that assessment is codified in regulatory (i.e., accreditation) expectations.

When evaluating DBER’s legitimacy through the “Normative” criterion, its research productivity is perceived as contributing to its societal expectations of traditional indicators of scholarship (Boyer, 1990). DBER values the empirical production of knowledge built on the methods of educational psychology, cognitive science, and learning; examples of review studies on evidence-based instructional practices arising from DBER demonstrate the foundations of peer-led team learning (Wilson & Varma-Nelson, 2016), the flipped classroom (Jasman et al., 2024), and process-oriented

guided inquiry learning (Walker & Warfa, 2017). To use the language of the ACCELERATE Principles, alignment with the positivist empirical principles of social scientific/psychological modes of inquiry has produced an “Enduring and Evolving” (i.e., “can be replicated or adapted across diverse contexts”) body of knowledge that remains “Action-Driven” (i.e., “grounded in deep understanding of needs and priorities”) and “Learning-Centered” (i.e., “pragmatic and authentic”).

The OLF Criterion “Cultural-Cognitive” is evidenced in DBER research through publications emerging in journals with such longevity and standards of quality that scientists and engineers take for granted, such as *Science* (Manduca et al., 2017; Ruiz-Primo et al., 2011; Stains et al., 2018) and the *Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences* (Dasgupta et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2014). While prestigious publications add to the evaluated level of success of DBER, its reach into hosting its own journals such as the *Journal of Chemical Education*, *CBE – Life Sciences Education*, *Physical Review Special Topics-Physics Education Research*, and *IEEE Transactions on Education*, allow disciplines to build their own knowledges, analogous to the concepts articulated in the “Learning-Centered” ACCELERATE Principle (i.e., broad, deep, and practice-based), while the *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* and *International Journal of STEM Education* showcase shared knowledge-building. Through these two criteria, the growth of DBER showcases the achievement of its ability to endure and evolve.

DBER’s legitimacy as evaluated through the “Regulatory” criterion is strong. A President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology Report is DBER’s primary call to action because it calls for a substantial increase in the production of a highly knowledgeable and skilled workforce (Olson & Riordan, 2012). This is supported by ongoing calls from professional organizations that hold the respect and authority of disciplinary bodies, such as biology’s *Vision and Change* (AAAS, 2009), the American Physical Society’s *Education Statement* (American Physical Society, 1999), and the emphasis on outcomes for student knowledge and skill development by engineering’s primary disciplinary accreditor, ABET (ABET, 2025). The National Science Foundation has historically included opportunities to fund DBER work through its Division of Undergraduate Education, further providing authoritative support. Formal degree programs to produce DBER researchers have existed since the mid-/late-20th century (National Research Council et al., 2012), and departmental tenure-track faculty roles for DBER within chemistry, biology, etc. departments (rather than only within colleges or departments of education) showcase that institutions value this work (Henderson et al., 2011). These regulatory bodies established support for DBER while not mandating it as a practice, which increases the “Enduring and Evolving” nature of DBER work (i.e., traces the work in the long-term).

When evaluating its legitimacy via the “Pragmatic” criterion, DBER’s legitimacy is stymied because its impact on classroom practice has not spanned widely (Borrego et al., 2010; Dancy et al., 2016; Stains et al., 2018), demonstrated in real time at a recent Workshop on the Status of DBER hosted by the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) in which the distribution of evidence-based instructional practices were discussed more than base theories or methods (NSEM, 2026). Ergo, empirical research is a necessary but not sufficient component of changing the behavior of instructors in the classroom (Singer, 2013), and “personal empiricism” is still prominent in the distribution of teaching strategies (Cooper & Stowe, 2018; Stains et al., 2018), limiting the extent to which DBER is “Action-Driven” (i.e., less “purposeful use”). This limitation is evident even in the ethos

of DBER work, with one prominent scholar indicating “while the opinions and experiences of chemistry faculty are important, they are typically not systematic investigations into a topic of interest guided by data collected and analyzed via appropriate methods (i.e., they are not research)” (Cooper & Stowe, 2018).

After exploring each criterion, DBER’s legitimacy can be considered at a “Debated” state: its ability to discover and establish evidence-based strategies for effective instruction is supported by institutions funding positions, organizations providing funds to pursue the work, and governmental and regulatory agencies calling for improvements in undergraduate STEM education, yet these research-based instructional practices are not yet widely applied across classrooms. DBER’s analogous establishment to assessment and differences in trajectory provides a unique lens to achieve the “Enduring and Evolving” ACCELERATE Principle while maintaining a focus on the “Action-Driven” and “Learning-Centered” ACCELERATE Principles. Assessment must move the needle toward a larger established body of literature without losing its crucial connection to practice. To discover how to tread this territory, we examine SoTL, which seeks to bridge the gap between knowledge generation in classrooms and practice.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

While emerging over similar timeframes and within similar contexts, SoTL is a unique field when juxtaposed against assessment and DBER. SoTL is a key analogue to assessment and DBER because it similarly pulls information from within classrooms to inform decision-making. SoTL work emerged from the genuine interest of faculty in improving their individual classroom contexts or the perceived need for institutions to take a hand in remediating what students report to be poor instruction (Felten, 2013; Trigwell, 2013). SoTL’s intellectual origins are often traced to Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* (Boyer, 1990), which reframed scholarship as inclusive of discovery, integration, application, and teaching. This reframing provided a foundation for faculty to systematically investigate their teaching practices while remaining anchored in disciplinary contexts. Because of its similar aims and different inspiration, it is valuable to seek to understand the ways in which SoTL became “Enduring and Evolving,” remaining supported by institutions without a regulatory requirement, and use those lessons to maximize assessment’s journey to legitimacy.

When evaluated through the OLF “Regulatory” criterion, SoTL occupies a comparatively weak position. There are no formal regulatory bodies requiring SoTL activity, no accreditation standards explicitly mandating participation, and no governmental calls to action. Instead, institutional policy and professional norms provide authoritative support. Institutions incorporated SoTL into promotion and tenure guidelines, faculty development expectations, and internal grant programs. Teaching and learning centers became structural homes for SoTL work, providing funding, methodological support, and dissemination venues. These mechanisms constitute formal organizational rules that confer legitimacy within local contexts; this is a helpful lesson for assessment in the interest of achieving the “Aligned Purposefully” ACCELERATE Principle—maintaining consistent progress toward mission and strategic objectives can support disciplinary development.

The “Pragmatic” criterion provides robust evidence for SoTL’s legitimacy. SoTL directly serves the interests of its primary stakeholders, namely faculty and students, by producing actionable insights into teaching and learning that can be implemented immediately within classrooms. Faculty engaged in SoTL frequently study their own courses, students, and pedagogical interventions, producing findings that are immediately relevant to their instructional environments. By collapsing the distance between knowledge generation and implementation, SoTL satisfies the expectations of stakeholders who seek tangible improvements. This pragmatic strength introduces a tension that mirrors challenges faced by assessment: the highly contextual nature of SoTL work can limit transferability and generalizability. Critics have argued that SoTL risks becoming anecdotal or insular when findings are not situated within broader theoretical or empirical models (Boshier, 2009; Canning & Masika, 2022; Kreber, 2002; Macfarlane, 2011), and that its impact is limited when work remains insufficiently public, cumulative, or peer-engaged (Shulman, 1998). In response, SoTL has increasingly emphasized methodological rigor, transparency, and theoretical grounding, while still resisting rigid methodological prescriptions. This balance reflects a deliberate choice to prioritize usefulness without abandoning scholarly credibility.

Legitimacy through the “Normative” criterion for SoTL has grown steadily as the field has aligned itself with widely held academic values related to reflective practice, student-centered learning, and continuous improvement (Trigwell, 2013). Institutions increasingly view effective teaching as a moral and professional obligation, particularly in contexts characterized by rising tuition costs and heightened attention to student success. SoTL provides a mechanism through which faculty can demonstrate ethical commitment to improving teaching, grounded in evidence rather than intuition alone. Journals such as *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, *The International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, and disciplinary teaching journals have normalized SoTL as a legitimate form of scholarly contribution. Conferences and professional societies dedicated to SoTL further reinforce its normative standing by creating shared expectations about quality, contribution, and impact. The sharing of these insights through widespread communication mechanisms is a route by which SoTL achieves the aim of the “Enduring and Evolving” ACCELERATE Principle, a crucial strategy for assessment to maintain its progress.

The “Cultural-Cognitive” criterion reveals the foundation of SoTL’s legitimacy as a discipline. In many institutional contexts, SoTL has become taken for granted as a natural extension of good teaching. Faculty development programming routinely includes SoTL workshops, and institutional leaders often encourage participation without the need for justification. Importantly, SoTL’s taken-for-granted acceptance is grounded not in universal methodological standards but in shared beliefs about the value of reflective, evidence-informed teaching; that is, in the language of the ACCELERATE Principles, it is “Equity and Empowerment-Minded.” This suggests that a field can achieve legitimacy when practices align closely with the lived experiences and values of practitioners.

From the OLF perspective, its balance of strengths and limitations across the four criteria constrains SoTL’s ability to move from the “Proper” to the “Accepted” state across the academy. While classroom-level implementation is widespread, the field has struggled to produce a cumulative, theory-driven body of knowledge comparable to DBER. SoTL gained traction by formally documenting inquiries already occurring in classrooms and by lowering the methodological and epistemological

barriers to participation. Studies are then, by their nature, context-bound, and some scholars find them insufficiently connected to one another. Meta-analyses and systematic reviews are less common, and the fragmentation of publication venues across disciplines can inhibit synthesis; this limits its ability to “Continuously Cultivate” improvement across contexts. As a result, SoTL’s contribution to disciplinary knowledge remains diffuse, while its classroom utility, institutional policy and structure integration, and accessibility to faculty make it an invaluable contribution to the quality of higher education.

This tension mirrors the central challenge facing assessment. Like SoTL, assessment is action-oriented, context-specific, and embedded in practice, and is often framed as distinct from research to preserve its timeliness and usefulness. However, SoTL demonstrates that such distinctions need not preclude scholarly engagement. By developing shared venues, common language, and norms for rigor that respect contextual variation, SoTL established a legitimate scholarly space without abandoning its practitioner roots. Assessment can draw directly from this trajectory: the “Action-Driven” and “Learning-Centered” ACCELERATE Principles align with SoTL’s ethos, while the call to be “Enduring and Evolving” highlights the need for mechanisms that connect local work to broader conversations.

Importantly, SoTL’s success suggests that legitimacy does not depend on universal adoption of experimental or quasi-experimental designs. Instead, it can emerge from inquiry that is systematic, transparent, and situated within a community of practice committed to evidence-informed improvement (Felten, 2013; Chick, 2018). Participatory, action-oriented, and mixed-methods approaches have flourished under these conditions, reinforcing that methodological pluralism can coexist with scholarly standards. Assessment scholarship, particularly when grounded in participatory and action research traditions (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), is well positioned to follow a similar path. By articulating how local assessment work contributes to shared understandings of improvement, equity, and student learning, assessment can leverage SoTL’s model to strengthen its own epistemological foundations.

The comparison between DBER and SoTL thus illuminates two viable but incomplete pathways to legitimacy. DBER demonstrates how rigorous research traditions and external validation can build a respected disciplinary base, even when practice lags. SoTL demonstrates how embedded practice and cultural acceptance can drive widespread implementation, even with limited theoretical alignment. Assessment occupies a liminal space between these models. The ACCELERATE Principles explicitly acknowledge assessment’s distinctiveness from research (in “Learning-Centered” and “Action-Driven”) while simultaneously calling for growth, endurance, and evolution (in “Enduring and Evolving”). The lesson from SoTL is that this tension is not a barrier but a design challenge. With intentional structures for dissemination, synthesis, and collaboration, assessment can achieve legitimacy through pragmatic impact while contributing to a cumulative scholarly enterprise.

How assessment work can scope and endure through embedded disciplinary educational literature: Sociology

Based on the ways in which both DBER and SoTL assert their legitimacy in the life of higher education, we explore what the OLF looks like when compared to the field of assessment through the lens of the sociology discipline. From the mid-1980s onward, accrediting bodies and state legislatures increased

assessment standards across higher education. Not coincidentally, faculty publications called for a strengthening of teaching and curricula through intentional assessment (Weiss, 2002). In reflection of faculty sentiment toward assessment regulations, Palomba and Banta (1999) expressed concern that if assessment were to continue outside of the colleges, it would become equivalent to “a thin veneer of compliance” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, as cited in Weiss et al., 2002, p. 399). What assessment needed was a way to legitimize itself, alongside the compliance mandates (which achieves the “Regulatory” criterion), to meet stakeholder needs (i.e., students; “Pragmatic”), and appropriately designed activities to meet the social contexts and values of the institutions (“Normative” and “Cultural-Cognitive”).

Weiss (2002), seeking empirical evidence related to sociology faculty sentiment and the institutional commitments toward assessment at that time, surveyed 150 sociology faculty in the spring of 1999 on their implementation and use of purpose statements, learning outcomes, and measure variety, as well as perceived benefits to student learning, and institutional support for assessment efforts. Weiss (2002) found that most of the collected samples lacked quality and revealed a gap in the understanding of the usefulness, operationalization, and effectiveness of assessment in academic programs. This is further supported by evidence that 83.8 percent had written and developed their outcomes within five years of when the survey was disseminated. While sociology faculty reported seeing the benefits of assessment, they lacked discipline-level approaches to doing assessment, institutional resource support, and all at once, there were pressures from external bodies requiring evidence of their effectiveness.

In response, Weiss (2002) urged sociology faculty to increase communication and collaboration within institutions and across professional organizations, calling for more examples and research on best practices to reclaim academia’s commitment to understanding student learning and shaping curricula, through faculty autonomy and greater institutional support. This is rooted in the “Pragmatic” criterion, which measures an entity’s ability to meet the needs and expectations of its stakeholders. In the case of program-level assessment, the stakeholders are the students, a priority upon which Weiss and others urge faculty to center their continuous improvement efforts.

Echoing Weiss’ (2002) call for more examples and shared resources, Wagenaar (2002) collected evidence on the methods used, noting that while 59.4 percent of participants reported being engaged in “learning outcomes assessment,” alumni and senior surveys were the top indirect measure identified, with capstone projects being the primary source for direct assessment (p. 407). However, only one-fifth of respondents reported seeing a “substantial impact” in curriculum and teaching resulting from the assessment process (Wagenaar, 2002, p. 410).

What Wagenaar (2002) found was that not all respondents and subsequently their institutions had prioritized faculty input, collaboration, and autonomy, leaving assessment on the path to actualizing Palomba and Banta’s (1999) concerns of an assessment culture of a “thin veneer of compliance” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, as cited in Weiss et al., 2002, p. 399). There is a deep and important conversation that happens at this point, in which sociology faculty hypothesized and envisioned that the long-term effects of mandated assessment would erode faculty’s genuine desire to improve

teaching and learning, as well as academic autonomy (i.e., stray away from the “Transparent & Trustworthy” ACCELERATE Principle and toward an “Illegitimate” OLF state). Based on the findings of Weiss (2002) and Wagenaar (2002), many sociology faculty began to publish reviews, case studies, and conversation articles on the embedded use of assessment across the discipline and how, as a collective group, assessment could shift from a mandate to a point of greater understanding and learning.

Jennings et al. (2006) found evidence of a lack of application of theory to “everyday life” and worked with colleagues to not only revise the assessment method but also redevelop program goals and curriculum design (p. 287). Clark and Filinson (2011) implemented a simplified assessment process based on “commonsense principles” in an era of “limited resources” that demonstrated further faculty-led involvement and an “unexpected outcome” of “new-found levels of local, regional, and national notoriety for the program” (p. 45). Pedersen and White (2011) trialed various assessment methods to understand if key skill targets were being met throughout the program. The study indicated a need for cross-disciplinary alignment and “coherent course curriculum” for student success (Pedersen & White, 2011, p. 36).

Institutional Support and Context

Further evidence of legitimization through application of assessment in sociology came in the early 2010s when publications included examples of institutional support and resource allocation to support assessment efforts. Clark and Filinson (2011) discuss the role the department chair played in developing the program’s assessment strategy, including method criteria. The “Learning-Centered” ACCELERATE Principle highlights and recognizes a focus on faculty discipline-specific autonomy for assessment choices; as outlined by Clark and Filinson (2011), this is also a formula for long term success and legitimacy. Muñoz et al. (2012) note that “employee productivity is enhanced when management regard[s] product quality to be important” when successfully creating and implementing an assessment plan. It was only after acquiring external funding and also with the support of centralized institutional assessment expertise that Muñoz et al. (2012) were able to find assessment useful for program distinction and improvement and addressed that an institution can facilitate assessment efforts going from unfunded metrics for compliance to being funded and administratively supported. Institutional support provides evidence in support of assessment’s movement to the “Proper” and “Accepted” state of legitimacy. All the ACCELERATE Principles, and especially the “Enduring and Evolving” ACCELERATE Principle, seek to avoid under-resourced assessment focused on compliance.

Moving toward cognitive assessment

After the discussion of structural needs, the sociologists were able to dig deeper into the nature and assessment of student learning. Seeking to understand the cross-curriculum influences on sociology students, Hudd et al. (2013) assessed the research behind the act of writing as both skill and cognitive development. Utilizing distributed cognition theory, Hudd et al. (2013) emphasized the need for faculty to “be purposive” when assigning written work, including a call for investigation into student learning as a faculty role (p. 33). Nearly ten years after Weiss (2002) noted the frequency with which departments in the early stages of establishing their assessment practices were relying on final grades, Hudd et al. (2013) critically evaluated the cognitive process behind skill development and the spectrum

with which the skill might be assessed. Evolving the discipline-led assessment practices toward well-tested and described outcomes that say, “here is how we assessed this cognitive ability” (Hudd et al., 2013, p.36), is an achievement toward legitimacy and consolidation of faculty autonomy and expertise in student learning and curricula development.

Moving toward formal research structures

Discipline-directed assessment in sociology continued to evolve. In this example, we transition to an institution that sought formal IRB approval to study and publish findings related to program learning outcomes for the purpose of broader learning, discipline-led innovation, and (while not a stated purpose, we assert), legitimacy (Crockett et al., 2018). In transitioning away from an exam-based model for program-level assessment to a portfolio-based model, the sociology department at Kutztown University (KU) faculty began with an exploration of the literature, efforts to identify knowledge about other programs’ outcomes, as well as structures and general disciplinary guidance (demonstrating how through research, the legitimacy of assessment can build across institutions; Crockett et al., 2018). Unsurprisingly, the group found and reported that the limited faculty at KU was a leading contributor to the lower-than-desired targets of student performance on a portfolio assessment tool. However, this group was able to consider and implement continuous improvement efforts individually and then collectively to revise the assessment tool and strengthen the curricula.

What assessment can learn from the sociologists

The literature showcases how through sharing, perceptions of assessment changed over time: Clark and Filinson (2011) remarked how “mandatory assessment reminded us of our relative powerlessness as employees” and how, when assessment practices were left to the discretion of the faculty, time was not as much of an issue as it was when assessment was mandated, unsupported, and unfunded (p. 135), and Muñoz et al. (2012) described the initial state of their assessment project as “fraught with resentment and misgiving” (p. 34), but resolved that “commonsense principles” such as can be found in their contribution to the literature can ease processes for programs with budgetary constraints (p. 45). KU’s focus on methods proposed, researched, and reported by other faculty within the discipline showcases that the challenges faced by faculty in completing assessment is not always institution-specific, and broader research and evidence of practice could be utilized to further legitimize the field and ultimately move institutions toward receiving the benefits of assessment (Crockett et al., 2018). This work builds upon the work of Pedersen and White (2011) which not only demonstrates the effectiveness of faculty-led program-level assessment, but also empirically documents the benefit to viewing assessment as an iterative research process.

In this exploration of the literature, faculty stakeholders within the sociology field generated assessment knowledge through the field’s recognized mechanisms for sharing valuable information (i.e., disciplinary publications), rather than sharing this information in assessment journals more broadly. This is analogous to DBER, as deeply embedded disciplinary experts created and shared the knowledge through their own epistemological lens (Cooper & Stowe, 2018), and like SoTL because these publications used data from embedded contexts. The case of discipline-directed assessment in sociology shows that engaging in scholarly assessment work can enhance the call found in the tension between the ACCELERATE Principle “Enduring and Evolving:” assessment as a field is further

professionalized and legitimized, becoming "replicable, evolvable, scalable, and versatile" and where the "value of an assessment exercise grows exponentially" through assessment that "can be replicated or adapted across diverse assessment contexts" (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025, p. 7). In this case, the connection to disciplinary work by detailing the experiences of departments working within the purview of the common challenge of assessment catalyzed the creation of assessment knowledge, overcoming the limited classroom connection of DBER work (Stains et al., 2018) as well as the limited scholarly legitimacy earned by SoTL work (Canning & Masika, 2022).

Discussion

When seeking to achieve the goals of the ACCELERATE Principles for Best Practice in Assessment, these cases of DBER and SoTL and the OLF present an obligation to increase the volume of scholarly products with direct practical implications in assessment, furthering its journey into legitimacy as a discipline. By explicitly distancing assessment from research, the "Learning-Centered" and "Action-Driven" ACCELERATE Principles privilege immediacy and contextual utility, reinforcing legitimacy through the "Pragmatic" criterion. However, the "Enduring and Evolving" ACCELERATE Principle implicitly requires the accumulation, transfer, and institutionalization of knowledge across contexts to achieve cultural-cognitive legitimacy. The growth of knowledge is conducted through processes that, within academia, are primarily achieved through research and scholarly dissemination. This creates a structural tension: in the ACCELERATE Principles, assessment is positioned as non-research, yet its disciplinary legitimacy as a field depends on research-like practices.

This tension is not merely theoretical; it is already being resolved in practice when assessment is taken up as a form of scholarly work within disciplinary communities. The sociologists examined here did not abandon the action-oriented nature of assessment but instead embedded it within their field's established mechanisms for knowledge production. In doing so, they transformed locally generated evidence of improvement into contributions to a broader disciplinary conversation. The implication for assessment is not that it must adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs, but that it must be rendered systematic, transparent, and shareable. When assessment evidence is documented and disseminated through conferences, peer-reviewed publications, and other durable scholarly outlets, it moves from isolated practice to cumulative knowledge.

Framed in this way, scholarly assessment dissemination becomes the mechanism through which action-oriented, contextually grounded work ("Action-Driven" and "Learning-Centered") achieves durability and transferability ("Enduring and Evolving"). The ACCELERATE Principles, when enacted through communities of practice such as the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) and the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL), can catalyze this shift by supporting practitioners in translating local assessment efforts into shared scholarly contributions (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025).

In this model, legitimacy emerges not from distancing assessment from practice, but from embedding practice within systems of scholarly exchange. As demonstrated in sociology, discipline-directed engagement allows assessment knowledge to accumulate, adapt, and scale without losing its grounding in local improvement work.

Because discipline-building is a socialization process, the growth of assessment professionals' ability to engage in best practice can and should be informed by and continue to produce scholarship (Coppola & Krajcik, 2013). Further action, such as that being taken currently by the leadership of various assessment journals like the re-launch of the *Journal of Assessment in Higher Education* and restructuring of the *Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry, Improvement, and Impact*, and independent scholars such as the leadership of the Grand Challenges in Assessment, are promoting the continued development of our shared body of knowledge. By leveraging knowledge of the successes and challenges faced by both DBER and SoTL, creating a highly-regarded evidence base of good practice by embracing disciplinary interests and ways of knowing as demonstrated by the sociologists and connecting with faculty development initiatives that leverage faculty's natural curiosities can allow assessment to achieve growth in both scholarship and practice, achieving (as articulated here) all of the ACCELERATE Principles.

Topics of growth in assessment literature in recent years include the now-ubiquitous engagement of educational technology and artificial intelligence tools into practice. Assessment professionals and faculty alike are considering the ways in which they can leverage the technological tools available, in resource-limited contexts, to promote improvements; not only learning how to use tools, but also how to optimize their use, an area requiring additional empirical investigation. The second is seeking strategies to enhance the quality of measurements of student learning in the interest of designing improvement strategies with trustworthy data. Key considerations in the quality of measurement include the importance of meaningful disaggregation and the availability and governance of data to indicate composite learner complexity. Emerging ideas on the relevance of course grades to learning outcomes assessment processes, the importance of validity and reliability evidence when interpreting the results of both rubric-scored and multiple-choice criteria assessments, and accuracy in the level of learning associated with different assessment methods pervade the space. Assessment's placement in the organizational and political structure of institutions, as a responsibility for faculty within departments, student affairs educators within units, and sometimes centralized staff, complicates scholarly productivity, is another important area for further investigation.

Because assessment practice is rarely linear and often conducted in time-limited conditions, engaging in action and participatory action research methodologies is another strategy for achieving the faculty collaboration required for the call for scholarship articulated here. Action research is a cyclical process of inquiry conducted by faculty or academic practitioners to improve teaching practices and student learning outcomes within their own institutional context. It integrates planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in iterative cycles, emphasizing collaboration, evidence-based decision-making, and continuous improvement. Unlike traditional research, its purpose is practical change and professional growth, not just theory-building (Jensen & Dikilitas, 2025). Action research is enhanced through experiential knowledge/lived experience in participatory action research models, all of which can serve to promote the kind of knowledge production we call for in this manuscript. Scholarship can promote the field to achieve legitimacy as a disciplinary way of knowing through formal publication (such as for DBER) and promote practitioner insight to achieve legitimacy as a genuine strategy for continuous improvement (such as for SoTL).

These cases of other disciplines' legitimacy development and application of the OLF to assessment in sociology have identified the ways in which assessment can create a context where it retains its heart of evidencing improvements bounded by situational context, as centered in the "Action-Driven" and "Learning-Centered" ACCELERATE Principles, while "Enduring and Evolving" through "replicat[ability] and adapt[ability]" (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025) as a standalone discipline, considered legitimate by its stakeholders.

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