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Reimagining Professional Development: Creating a Sustainable Assessment Learning Model for Student Affairs Staff

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Author Note

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

Early View

Abstract: The Division of Student Affairs at a large, public, land-grant institution in the southeastern United States has invested nearly a decade in building assessment capacity through structured professional development initiatives. Declining participation in a three-tier, 27-session in-person model prompted a redesign to a 10-module, hybrid curriculum delivered via Canvas. Guided by staff feedback and examined through the lens of the ACCELERATE principles (Aligned Purposefully, Continuously Cultivating, Co-Creative, and Learning-Centered), this mixed-methods program evaluation explores outcomes from pre- and post-surveys, module reflections, and focus groups across two cohorts. Findings indicate increased participant confidence across assessment domains, with the greatest gains in applied skills. Qualitative insights highlight enhanced conceptual clarity, stronger alignment with professional responsibilities, and a preference for the hybrid format, alongside considerations related to pacing and guided practice. Findings demonstrate the effectiveness of applying ACCELERATE principles to support adaptable, learner-centered professional development that strengthens assessment capacity in Student Affairs.

Keywords: *Student Affairs Assessment; Professional Development; ACCELERATE Framework; Mixed-Methods Program Evaluation*

Introduction

Assessment has become an integral component of Student Affairs practice, with increasing expectations for evidence-informed decision-making, accountability, and continuous improvement (Kremer, 2023; Roberts, 2012; Roper, 2015; Strietzel et al., 2020). This emphasis has been shaped over time by the leadership of professional organizations such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), and the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE), as well as by the emergence of dedicated assessment roles and units within Student Affairs divisions (Roper, 2015). As a result, Student Affairs professionals are increasingly expected to demonstrate how programs and services contribute to student learning, engagement, and success. Despite these expectations, many practitioners enter the field with

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little to no formal preparation in assessment and face ongoing challenges related to time, workload, and access to professional development opportunities (Bettencourt et al., 2017).

In response, many institutions have implemented assessment training and workshops (Strietzel et al., 2020). Nonetheless, prospects for cross-institutional exchange of assessment practices and methodologies remain limited (Hatfield & Haley, 2017), hindering the overall advancement of effective strategies. As professional responsibilities continue to expand and demands on Student Affairs practitioners intensify (Schuh et al., 2016), practical, scalable, and embedded professional development models are increasingly essential to mitigate barriers to engagement and facilitate sustained learning. This tension highlights the need for assessment professional development strategies that are flexible, learner-centered, and intentionally aligned with institutional priorities.

The Division of Student Affairs at a large, public, land-grant institution in the southeastern United States has invested in building assessment capacity for nearly a decade through structured professional development initiatives led by the Assessment & Strategic Planning office. In 2025, this effort resulted in a redesign of the Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum to better reflect how practitioners learn, apply, and sustain assessment practices within their roles. This redesign was driven primarily by participant feedback and evolving professional development needs, with ACCELERATE principles later used to conceptualize and articulate the curriculum's alignment with broader assessment practice.

This paper offers a mixed-methods evaluation of the redesigned curriculum, examining early outcomes related to participants' confidence in assessment practice, self-reported growth and application of assessment skills, and learning experiences within a hybrid, learner-centered professional development model.

Conceptual Framework: ACCELERATE and Learning-Centered Assessment

This study draws on ACCELERATE: Assessment Principles for Best Practice, a framework developed by Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al. (2025), as a conceptual lens to interpret the redesigned curriculum. ACCELERATE conceptualizes assessment as an ongoing, collaborative process that promotes learning, improvement, and evidence-informed decision making rather than a compliance-driven exercise. This perspective aligns with longstanding scholarship in Student Affairs assessment, which emphasizes the use of assessment to enhance educational practice, strengthen student learning, and inform organizational effectiveness (Roper, 2015; Schuh et al., 2016). Banta and Palomba (2015) further describe assessment as a systematic process of gathering and using evidence to improve programs and services, reinforcing ACCELERATE's emphasis on assessment as a tool for learning and continuous improvement rather than compliance. Furthermore, the framework reflects the historical commitment of the Student Affairs profession to fostering learning and development through intentional practice and reflection (Roberts, 2012). Within this context, ACCELERATE principles offer a

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contemporary framework for understanding how assessment capacity can be developed through structured professional learning experiences.

Several ACCELERATE principles are particularly relevant to professional development in Student Affairs. Learning-Centered assessment prioritizes authentic, practice-based learning experiences that support skill development through application and reflection. This emphasis aligns with Banta and Palomba's (2015) assertion that assessment is most meaningful when practitioners connect assessment processes directly to program improvement and decision-making. Rather than learning assessment as a technical exercise, professionals develop assessment competence most effectively by engaging in applied learning experiences connected to their daily work (Schuh et al., 2016; Strietzel et al., 2020). Continuously Cultivating highlights assessment as an iterative process that evolves over time, reinforcing improvement as a habit rather than a one-time task. This principle aligns with Roper's (2015) characterization of assessment as an ongoing journey toward improved practice and organizational learning. Aligned Purposefully emphasizes coherence between assessment activities, institutional priorities, and professional standards, reflecting broader calls for assessment efforts that demonstrate meaningful connections to institutional effectiveness and student success outcomes (Schuh et al., 2016). Finally, Collaborative and Co-Creative underscores the shared responsibility for assessment across units and roles. Prior research suggests that collaborative inquiry and scholar-practitioner learning communities can strengthen assessment knowledge, professional identity, and the application of evidence-based practice (Bettencourt et al., 2017; Strietzel et al., 2020). This perspective is further supported by Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice, which argues that learning occurs through participation in collaborative communities where members exchange ideas, share experiences, and collectively develop expertise.

In this study, ACCELERATE serves as a conceptual framework for interpreting the curriculum's design, delivery, and evaluation, rather than as a framework that directly informed the curriculum's original development. The curriculum was redesigned in response to staff feedback, institutional needs, and professional development priorities. However, ACCELERATE provides a useful lens for examining how the resulting model reflects emerging best practices in assessment (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025). These principles guide the conceptual framing of this paper and shape the interpretation of participants' experiences and reported outcomes. Figure 1 visually illustrates how the ACCELERATE principles are operationalized in the redesigned Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum.

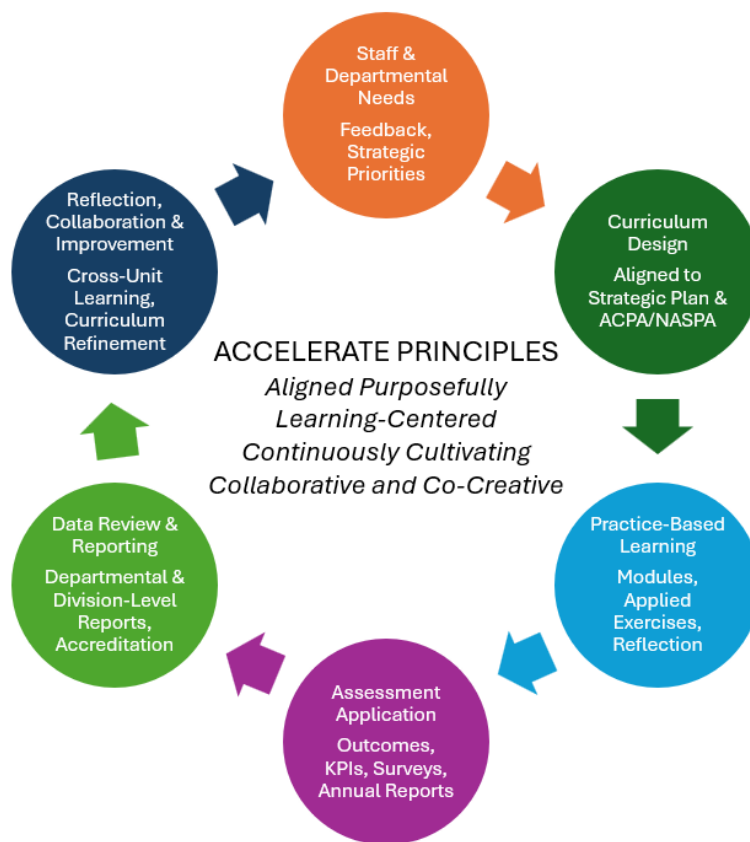
The four main ACCELERATE principles that guide the conceptual framing of this work are shown in the inner circle, while the outer ring illustrates the cyclical processes through which these principles are enacted in practice. Specifically, the components in the outer-ring show stages in curriculum design, practice-based learning, assessment application, data evaluation, and iterative revision that support continuous learning and improvement across units. The focus on

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practical exercises and quizzes, weekly reflections, and opportunities for participants to link assessment ideas directly to their roles reflects Learning-Centered principles. Continuously Cultivating is evident in the curriculum's modular structure and its iterative use across cohorts, supporting ongoing skill development rather than one-time training. Feedback from post-course surveys and focus groups after each cohort was used to improve the curriculum over time. For example, participant feedback from the summer cohort indicated a need for optional in-person interaction in some modules, leading to the incorporation of optional in-person sessions in subsequent cohorts. Aligned Purposefully is reflected in the alignment of curriculum content, divisional assessment expectations, and professional competency requirements. It is also evident in the evaluation's focus on confidence, perceived growth, and the application of assessment practices. Optional in-person practice sessions, focus groups, and reflective components that engaged participants as active contributors to the learning process demonstrate the concepts of collaboration and co-creation. These principles collectively offer a framework for understanding the implementation and experience of assessment capacity-building within this professional development model.

Figure 1

Operationalizing ACCELERATE Principles in a Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum



Institutional Context and Curriculum Redesign

The Division of Student Affairs comprises 21 departments at a large, public, land-grant institution, including student-facing and support departments. These departments offer programs and services that support student learning, engagement, and success. Through annual reporting processes, departments are expected to articulate outcomes, assess effectiveness, demonstrate continuous improvement, and align with divisional and institutional strategic goals. The Assessment & Strategic Planning office supports these efforts by leading assessment education, consultation, and reporting across the division.

Since 2016, the office has provided professional staff and graduate students with assessment training aligned with the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas, specifically Assessment, Evaluation, and Research (AER). While these efforts strengthened assessment awareness and capacity, earlier versions of the Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum, delivered through a three-tier, 27-session in-person model, proved difficult to sustain. Despite being well-received, participation and completion rates declined over time, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff cited scheduling conflicts, heavy workload, and challenges maintaining engagement across an extended sequence. These patterns did not reflect diminished interest in assessment, but rather suggested a misalignment between the training format and staff's professional realities. A program evaluation subsequently underscored the need for a professional development model that prioritizes flexibility, accessibility, and practice-based application.

The redesigned Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum was structured as a 10-module sequence to progressively build assessment knowledge and skills, from foundational concepts to applied tools and data-informed decision-making. Consistent with a learner-centered approach, modules were delivered asynchronously on Canvas to support flexible engagement and accommodate professional workloads. Based on feedback from the first cohort, optional in-person practice sessions were incorporated into subsequent offerings to provide opportunities for collaborative learning. The curriculum aligns with divisional assessment expectations and ACCELERATE principles, emphasizing practice-based learning, reflection, and relevance to professional roles.

The selection and development of module topics for the redesigned Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum were informed by two primary sources. First, the curriculum continued to align with the ACPA/NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs professionals, specifically the AER competency area, to ensure coverage of foundational knowledge and skills expected of Student Affairs professionals. For example, early modules such as Assessment 101 were designed to establish a baseline understanding of assessment principles and the assessment cycle, consistent with foundational competency expectations.

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Second, module topics were shaped by ongoing feedback from staff and senior leadership on areas of interest and professional development needs. This feedback, gathered through program evaluation and consultation efforts, highlighted demand for applied, tool-based learning opportunities, including survey design, data visualization, and the use of platforms such as Qualtrics and Power BI. Together, these inputs helped to form a curriculum that balances foundational concepts with practical application, therefore aligning professional standards with the day-to-day realities of Student Affairs practice. Table 1 provides an overview of the curriculum modules and their primary focus areas.

Table 1

Overview of Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum

Module	Focus Area	Key Learning Objectives
Assessment 101: Building a Culture of Evidence	Foundations of assessment	Understand the role of assessment in Student Affairs; apply the assessment cycle; align reporting with accreditation and effectiveness expectations
Designing an Assessment Project	Assessment planning	Plan and implement assessment projects aligned with departmental goals and continuous improvement
Outcome Writing	Outcome development	Develop clear, purposeful outcomes using common Student Affairs language
Survey Design	Quantitative methods	Design effective surveys and select appropriate sampling methods
Qualtrics 101	Survey tools	Create, distribute, and analyze surveys using Qualtrics
Focus Groups & Interviews	Qualitative methods	Collect and interpret qualitative data using focus groups and interviews
Data Security, Ethics, & IRB	Ethical practice	Apply FERPA, HIPAA, data security, and ethical principles in assessment
Data-Informed Decision Making	Using results	Translate assessment findings into strategic action
Interpreting Results & Sharing Findings	Data interpretation & communication	Interpret quantitative and qualitative results and communicate findings to stakeholders
Power BI for Data Visualization	Data visualization	Create and share visualizations to support data storytelling and decision-making

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to assess the preliminary outcomes of the redesigned Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum during its initial implementation. Using a mixed-methods program evaluation framework, this study examined participants' confidence in assessment practices, self-reported growth and application of assessment skills, and learning experiences across curriculum modules and delivery formats. This study, informed by ACCELERATE principles for assessment professional development, addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do participants' confidence in key areas of assessment practice differ between pre-course and post-course responses?

RQ2: How do participants describe their perceived growth in assessment knowledge and skills and the professional value of the curriculum?

RQ3: How do participants report changes in their engagement with assessment practices following completion of the curriculum?

RQ4: How do participants describe their learning experiences across curriculum modules and delivery formats?

Methods

Study Design

We employed a mixed-methods program evaluation design to assess the implementation and early outcomes of a redesigned Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum. The evaluation utilized quantitative survey and qualitative reflective data to assess participants' confidence, perceived growth, application of assessment skills, and learning experiences within a learner-centered professional development model. Ethical considerations, including participant anonymity, guided all aspects of data collection and analysis. The project was reviewed by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and determined to be a program evaluation that did not meet the definition of human subjects research under DHHS and FDA regulations.

Participants

Participants included Student Affairs professional staff and graduate students who enrolled in the curriculum during two implementation cohorts: Summer and Fall 2025. Participation in the evaluation was voluntary. Surveys were administered anonymously to encourage candid responses. Demographic information gathered included participants' professional roles, years of experience in Student Affairs, and prior participation in assessment training.

Quantitative & Qualitative Components

We collected quantitative data through pre- and post-course surveys (see Appendices A and B), administered separately for the Summer and Fall cohorts (Table 2). Qualitative data were drawn from:

1. Module-level reflections, completed at the end of each curriculum module
2. Open-ended survey responses
3. End-of-course focus groups, conducted separately with Summer and Fall cohorts

These data sources captured participants' learning experiences, perceptions of curriculum design and delivery, and reflections on how the curriculum supported their professional practice.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses were conducted using descriptive and comparative methods suitable for independent, anonymous samples. Because pre- and post-course surveys could not be linked at the individual level, confidence ratings were compared at the cohort level using Welch's independent-samples *t* tests and summarized using means, standard deviations, and effect sizes (Cohen's *d*). Given the anonymous survey design and small sample sizes, findings are interpreted as exploratory and descriptive rather than evidence of actual change. We used frequencies and percentages to understand perceived growth, tool use, engagement in assessment projects, and perceived value.

Qualitative data were collected through open-ended survey questions, weekly module reflections, and end-of-course focus groups. Open-ended survey responses were reviewed descriptively because the number of responses was limited. Weekly module reflections and focus group transcripts were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring ideas and concepts across participants' responses. Responses were read in their entirety, compared within and across cohorts, and grouped into broader descriptive categories based on common patterns. Examples of recurring concepts included developing a clearer understanding of assessment, applying assessment within participants' professional roles, increasing confidence with assessment tools, recognizing assessment as an ongoing process, using AI to support assessment activities, and identifying opportunities for continued learning. Representative quotations were selected to illustrate these themes, and examples of how participants' reflections aligned with the ACCELERATE principles are presented in Table 4.

Table 2

Overview of Quantitative Survey Measures

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	Survey Question	Response Scale
Assessment Confidence Areas	Please rate your confidence in the following areas upon completing the Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum: Understanding the purpose of assessment in Student Affairs Writing clear & measurable learning outcomes Designing & distributing surveys Using Qualtrics for data collection Conducting focus groups or interviews Understanding FERPA, ethics and IRB processes Interpreting & using data to inform decisions Creating data visualizations	1 (Not at all confident) to 5 (Very confident)
Applied Assessment Skills	How would you describe your growth in assessment knowledge and skills as a result of this course What was the most valuable outcome of this course for you?	Significant growth; Moderate growth; Minimal growth; No growth; Not sure Enhanced professional skills; Fulfilled a requirement from supervisor or department; Deepened personal interest in the topic; Prepared me for a new role; Other(s)
Engagement with Assessment Practice	How often do you use assessment data in your current role? Since starting the course, which of the following tools have you used in your work? (Select all that apply)	Regularly; Occasionally; Rarely; Never Qualtrics; Excel; Power BI; None; Other(s)

Findings

Participant Characteristics

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Two cohorts participated in the Assessment Curriculum evaluation: a Summer (10 pre-course respondents; 4 post-course respondents) and a Fall cohort (13 pre-course respondents; 7 post-course respondents). Participants from both cohorts identified as entry-level professionals, mid-level professionals, and administrative support staff. Participants also reported varied levels of professional experience in higher education. In the Summer cohort, the average experience was 7.35 years ($SD = 6.09$; range = 0-19 years). Similarly, the Fall cohort reported a mean of 6.73 years of experience ($SD = 7.66$; range = 0-23 years). Prior exposure to assessment training differed across cohorts. In the Summer, half the participants reported no prior training in assessment, while the remaining respondents reported having either taken workshops or coursework related to assessment or program evaluation. Conversely, most Fall cohort participants (~ 62%) indicated no prior assessment training. The sample represents a broad set of Student Affairs professionals with varying responsibilities, levels of expertise, and prior experience with assessment, providing a significant context for the exploratory findings of this program evaluation.

Confidence in key areas of assessment practice

To examine differences in confidence across internally defined, curriculum-aligned assessment domains, we compared pre- and post-course responses as independent samples because the surveys were anonymous. Welch's independent-samples t tests were conducted for each domain, and effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to describe the magnitude of observed differences between respondent groups. Across cohorts, post-course respondents consistently reported higher mean confidence in all eight assessment domains than pre-course respondents. Within the Summer cohort, the largest descriptive differences between pre- and post-respondent groups were observed in applied and tool-based assessment skills (Table 3). Confidence related to Qualtrics use, focus group and interview facilitation, and data visualization was associated with large descriptive effect sizes. A moderate effect size was observed for survey design and distribution. Conversely, minimal differences were noted in the domains of outcome writing, FERPA/ethics/IRB, data interpretation and utilization, and assessment purpose, indicating a relatively steady level of confidence in these areas within the initial cohort.

A similar descriptive pattern was observed in the Fall cohort, with post-course respondents reporting higher confidence across multiple domains. Large descriptive effect sizes were observed for both applied and tool-based skills (e.g., Qualtrics use, focus groups/interviews, and data visualization), as well as for foundational domains, including assessment purpose, outcome writing, survey design, and FERPA/Ethics/IRB (Table 3).

Perceived Growth and Professional Value of the Assessment Curriculum

Post-course respondents were asked to reflect on their perceived growth in assessment knowledge and skills and to identify the aspects of the curriculum they found most valuable. Across cohorts, respondents retrospectively reported positive perceptions of their own growth in assessment knowledge and skills. In the Summer cohort, all respondents ($n = 4$) indicated

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moderate growth in assessment knowledge and skills. In the Fall cohort ($n = 7$), the majority of respondents reported moderate growth, while a minority reported significant growth, suggesting variability in participants' perceived depth of learning. When asked to identify the most valuable outcome of the curriculum, both cohorts agreed that professional skill development was the most valuable outcome. The majority of respondents selected enhanced professional skills as the most valuable outcome, with one individual from the Fall cohort identifying deepened personal interest in assessment as their primary takeaway. These descriptive findings indicate that post-course respondents generally viewed the curriculum as professionally relevant and believed it supported their development of assessment skills.

Engagement with Assessment Practices

Engagement in assessment practices was examined using self-reported frequency of assessment data use (pre- and post-course) and post-course reports of assessment tools used. Across cohorts, pre-course respondents reported using assessment data at least occasionally in their current roles, with fewer reporting regular use. Post-course respondents reported a more varied pattern of assessment data use, indicating a mix of regular, occasional, and rare use. They also commonly identified Qualtrics, Excel, and Power BI as tools used in assessment-related work, while one respondent also reported using Menti and Microsoft Forms. Although respondents differed in how frequently they reported using assessment data, post-course responses indicated that several participants were incorporating a variety of assessment tools into their work.

Learning Experiences

Format

Participants' learning experiences related to the delivery format were examined through post-course responses on preferred formats for future assessment training. Across cohorts, respondents expressed a clear preference for flexible learning structures. In the Summer cohort, most respondents preferred a blended format combining asynchronous and synchronous components, with fewer preferring exclusively live virtual sessions. Similarly, in the Fall cohort, participants most frequently selected self-paced online modules, followed by blended learning formats. These findings suggest that participants valued flexibility in how content was delivered, while still recognizing the benefit of opportunities for interaction and applied learning.

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Table 3

Pre- & Post-Course Differences in Confidence Across Curriculum-Aligned Assessment Domains

Domain	Cohort	Pre Mean (SD)	Post Mean (SD)	Cohen's <i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Assessment Purpose	Summer	3.8 (1.3)	4.3 (1.0)	0.36	-0.71	7.77	.499
	Fall	3.5 (1.0)	4.8 (0.4)	1.61	-4.34	17.03	<.001
Outcome Writing	Summer	3.2 (1.3)	3.3 (0.5)	0.04	-0.10	11.99	.920
	Fall	3.0 (1.1)	4.1 (0.7)	1.18	-2.88	17.26	.010
Survey Design & Distribution	Summer	3.1 (1.2)	3.8 (0.5)	0.61	-1.43	11.82	.178
	Fall	3.0 (1.2)	4.3 (0.8)	1.18	-2.90	17.48	.010
Qualtrics Use	Summer	2.6 (1.8)	4.0 (0.8)	0.88	-2.02	11.44	.068
	Fall	2.7 (1.5)	4.3 (0.8)	1.23	-3.17	17.99	.005
Focus Groups/Interviews	Summer	2.5 (1.3)	3.5 (0.6)	0.88	-2.02	11.49	.067
	Fall	2.4 (1.0)	3.6 (1.0)	1.16	-2.53	13.17	.025
FERPA/Ethics/IRB	Summer	3.2 (1.2)	3.3 (0.5)	0.05	-0.11	11.89	.916
	Fall	2.6 (1.4)	4.4 (0.5)	1.47	-4.04	16.71	.001
Interpretation & Using Data	Summer	3.2 (1.5)	3.3 (0.5)	0.04	-0.09	11.95	.926
	Fall	3.4 (1.1)	4.1 (0.8)	0.72	-1.65	14.99	.121
Data Visualization	Summer	2.1 (1.3)	3.0 (0.0)	0.81	-2.21	9.00	.054
	Fall	2.8 (1.4)	3.9 (0.7)	0.83	-2.16	17.95	.045

Note. Pre- and post-course responses were analyzed as independent samples because surveys were anonymous and respondents could not be matched across time points. Sample sizes were as follows: Summer cohort ($n = 10$ pre-course; $n = 4$ post-course) and Fall cohort ($n = 13$ pre-course; $n = 7$ post-course). Confidence ratings were measured on a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all confident, 5 = Very confident). Means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), Welch's *t*-statistics, and Cohen's *d* values are presented descriptively to illustrate response patterns across cohorts. Exact *p*-values are reported. Analyses are intended to illustrate exploratory trends rather than provide evidence of individual-level change.

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Challenges

Participants' learning experiences related to assessment challenges were examined using open-ended responses collected before and after course participation across the Summer and Fall cohorts. Prior to participation, respondents in both cohorts described similar challenges, including limited understanding of assessment concepts, uncertainty about how to assess programs or services, and difficulties related to data collection, interpretation, and communicating assessment findings. Participants frequently noted challenges in obtaining meaningful and honest feedback, measuring outcomes that felt intangible, distinguishing between correlation and causation, and translating data into actionable decisions. In post-course feedback, most participants across cohorts indicated that their initial challenges had been resolved. Respondents emphasized increased clarity about what assessment entails, greater familiarity with tools such as Qualtrics and Power BI, and improved understanding of how assessment strategies could be incorporated into their work. One respondent stated:

“At the beginning of the course I wasn't really sure what assessment was referring to or how we use it in SA. Now I have a clear understanding and ready to use it in my current role.”

Participants in both cohorts described assessment as feeling more manageable and iterative, supported by institutional resources and structured guidance. In each cohort, one participant indicated that initial challenges still remained.

Module Reflections

Review of participants' reflections across curriculum modules identified several recurring themes related to conceptual understanding, applied engagement, and reflective growth (see Table 4). Across early modules, participants described gaining a clearer understanding of what assessment entails and how it operates as an ongoing, iterative process rather than a one-time task. Reflections often referenced assessment as a tool to “see how we’re doing over time” and to be intentional about improvement. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of applying assessment concepts in their own professional roles, describing clear connections between course content and day-to-day responsibilities, and noting how module insights could be used to tell the story more clearly, support program improvement, and communicate impact more effectively. Learning was reinforced through applied activities and reflection prompts, which participants described as helpful for translating abstract concepts into practical steps. Participants reported increased comfort and usability with assessment tools, particularly in data visualization and survey platforms. References to creating “*visual graphs to communicate results*” and interest in using tools such as AI to “*help assess the data*” suggest growing awareness of how technology can support assessment workflows. At the same time, reflections frequently framed learning as introductory or foundational rather than exhaustive. Participants highlighted the curriculum as an entry point that supported confidence and understanding while recognizing the need for continued practice, role-specific application, and ongoing support.

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Focus Group

Focus group feedback collected at the conclusion of the curriculum provided additional insight into participants' learning experiences and perceptions of course design across cohorts.

Participants consistently identified the flexibility of the asynchronous, Canvas-based format as a key strength, noting its compatibility with staff realities and availability. They also suggested that incorporating limited in-person or synchronous sessions, particularly for tool-based modules or at key points in the curriculum, could support community building, guided practice, and shared learning. Participants described the curriculum content as broadly relevant to their roles in Student Affairs, with tool-focused modules such as Qualtrics and Power BI frequently identified as especially valuable. Feedback indicated that additional troubleshooting support and structured practice during these modules could further enhance application, particularly for features such as survey logic, data visualization, and software access. While some participants reported applying assessment strategies in their work, others noted that opportunities for immediate application varied depending on role and context.

Reflections on course structure emphasized the importance of clear expectations and pacing. Participants recommended providing estimated completion times for modules, allowing greater flexibility to work ahead, consolidating downloadable resources, and improving the clarity and functionality of course interfaces. Overall, focus group feedback reinforced the curriculum's alignment with participants' learning needs while offering constructive guidance to strengthen usability, engagement, and sustained application.

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Table 4

Application of ACCELERATE Principles

ACCELERATE Principle	In Action	Reflections from Participants
Aligned Purposefully	Student Affairs staff recognize how assessment aligns with organizational goals and supports strategic planning.	<i>"I'm excited to apply the assessment cycle to our next campus dining project or initiative. While we typically address all the key areas, I now better understand the rationale behind each step and the optimal sequence for implementation. A significant part of our role involves effectively communicating the university's goals and expectations to our food contractors and subcontractors. By pairing the assessment cycle with AI tools, we can quickly generate visual insights that illustrate the impact of decisions/ This will save valuable office time while enhancing strategic planning."</i>
Learning-Centered	Student Affairs staff shift toward a deeper conceptual understanding and emerging proficiency in assessment.	<i>"I'm getting a clearer sense of how assessment works-not just how it's different from research, but how to design, run, and interpret it. I'm becoming comfortable with the ideas presented, using surveys and focus groups, and starting to look into AI tools for analysis. Still figuring out how to better visualize data and apply it across different areas."</i>
Continuously Cultivating	Student Affairs staff demonstrate a desire for ongoing practice and iterative skill-building.	<i>"I loved learning about Qualtrics and PowerBI. These two tools are very incredible and allow you a systematic and professional application of the assessment process..... As much as I hate to suggest more work, creating a sample Power BI project using a premade Excel document would have been beneficial."</i>
Collaborative and Co-creative	Student Affairs staff describe how peer reflections expanded their thinking, underscoring collaboration and co-creation as part of the learning process.	<i>"After reading my peer's takeaway from section 3, I believe it was in line with my takeaway as well. I think something helpful they said was being intentional about what the program offers students and making it a point to align programs with what the students want to get out of their involvement with the program. Improving the leadership program should involve expanding the programs' ability to foster community and make sure everyone has a part in the program so that they can make sure everyone is being heard."</i>

Discussion

We examined preliminary findings associated with the initial implementation of a redesigned Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum aligned with ACCELERATE principles. Rather than assessing efficacy in a causal sense, this study offers insight into how participants experienced the curriculum and how early patterns of confidence, growth, and engagement emerged across two cohorts. Quantitative findings revealed a consistent directional pattern: post-course respondents reported higher levels of confidence than pre-course respondents across curriculum-aligned assessment domains, particularly in applied and tool-based areas. Rather than interpreting these differences as evidence of curriculum impact, these descriptive patterns reflect the areas participants perceived as most useful and relevant to their professional responsibilities. Applied skills such as Qualtrics use, data visualization, and qualitative methods were repeatedly emphasized in both survey responses and qualitative feedback. These findings are consistent with prior scholarship suggesting that Student Affairs professionals are more likely to develop assessment competence when learning opportunities are directly connected to practice, hands-on, and allow for application within their organizational contexts (Schuh et al., 2016; Strietzel et al., 2020). The prominence of tool-based and practice-oriented learning in participant reinforces the importance of authentic engagement and skill development through application (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025).

Qualitative findings from module reflections and focus groups provide a deeper understanding of participants' interpretations of their learning experiences. In both cohorts, participants reported increased understanding of what assessment entails and emphasized the curriculum's relevance to their professional roles. They noted how modules supported reflection on their own programs and responsibilities. Participants consistently framed the curriculum as foundational rather than comprehensive, viewing learning as an entrance point that needed ongoing practice, support, and improvement. This finding aligns with Roper's (2015) characterization of assessment as an ongoing developmental journey rather than a discrete skill set that can be mastered through a single training experience. Viewed through this lens, the curriculum may be best understood as an entry point into a sustained assessment learning trajectory rather than an endpoint of professional development.

Feedback from the focus group further underscored how delivery format shaped participants' learning experiences. Participants in the Summer Cohort generally appreciated the adaptability of the asynchronous, Canvas-based format, emphasizing that it facilitated engagement while managing conflicting professional obligations. At the same time, participants said they wanted more planned opportunities for synchronous engagement, especially in modules that were focused on practice. To help with applied learning in the Fall Cohort, optional in-person sessions were added for certain practice-based modules. These findings suggest that participants valued professional development approaches that combined flexibility and accessibility with opportunities for focused synchronous interaction, particularly within practice-oriented modules. Findings on involvement in assessment procedures highlight the significance of contextual and structural factors in shaping the translation of learning into practice. While participants reported engaging with assessment tools and discussed practical competencies emphasized throughout the curriculum, opportunities to apply assessment varied across roles and responsibilities. This reinforces existing scholarship emphasizing that sustained

assessment practice depends not only on individual capacity, but also on supervisory support, role alignment, and organizational infrastructure (Hatfield & Haley, 2017; Schuh et al., 2016).

These findings suggest that the redesigned curriculum may provide a promising foundation for assessment capacity building within Student Affairs. Participants described gains in confidence, understanding of assessment concepts, and practical skill development, while also identifying areas requiring ongoing practice and refinement. This aligns with previous studies demonstrating that structured professional development can support assessment knowledge, promote professional growth, and support engagement with evidence-informed practice among Student Affairs practitioners (Strietzel et al., 2020). More broadly, the findings support longstanding observations that effective assessment cultures emerge not through compliance-focused activities, but through continuous learning, reflection, and organizational commitment to improvement (Roper, 2015; Schuh et al., 2016). As an ACCELERATE-aligned model, the curriculum demonstrates how professional development can be intentionally designed to connect assessment principles with everyday practice, structured to balance flexibility, relevance, and practice, while remaining responsive to participant feedback and institutional context.

ACCELERATE and the Organizational Value of Assessment Professional Development

These findings, as understood through ACCELERATE, emphasize the importance of evaluating professional development within organizations. While ACCELERATE articulates principles for learning-centered, collaborative, and purposefully aligned assessment, implementing these principles within Student Affairs requires intentional professional development infrastructure. Assessment curricula, such as the model examined in this study, serve as an important mechanism for making assessment principles accessible, actionable, and embedded in everyday practice. This perspective aligns with Banta and Palomba's (2015) view of assessment as a systematic process that promotes continuous improvement through the intentional use of evidence. Professional development provides a structure that may empower practitioners to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to apply assessment meaningfully in their daily work. Learning-centered professional development emphasizes relevance, application, and reflection. This supports a shift in how assessment is understood, from a burdensome task to be completed to an ongoing process of inquiry and improvement. ACCELERATE's focus on continual cultivation also highlights the need for professional development models that encourage continuous learning and adaptability rather than one-time training sessions, aligning assessment capacity-building with the realities of busy professional roles (Samuga_Gyaanam+Bheda et al., 2025).

Collaborative and *Co-Creative* approaches further highlight the importance of organizational structures that foster shared learning across departments and relationship-building while maintaining flexibility. Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice suggests that learning is strengthened when practitioners engage in collective reflection, problem-solving, and knowledge sharing around common challenges. Participants' interest in optional in-person sessions and opportunities for interaction with peers suggests that assessment learning may be enhanced when professional development extends beyond content delivery. Institutions can support these opportunities by positioning assessment offices as partners in learning, securing leadership buy-in for the value of assessment, and designing

professional development models that combine asynchronous access with intentional opportunities for connection and guided practice (Roberts, 2007; Willis et al., 2024). In this sense, professional development for assessment goes beyond just helping people learn new skills. It also helps create long-lasting, ACCELERATE-aligned assessment cultures based on shared accountability.

Limitations

The anonymity of survey responses prevented linking pre- and post-course responses at the individual level, requiring analyses to be conducted on independent samples. Given the low post-course response rates, which further constrained statistical power and increased sensitivity to individual variation, the findings should be interpreted as exploratory and descriptive. Self-report. While self-reported confidence is a meaningful outcome in professional development contexts, it may not directly correspond to observed practice. Finally, findings reflect early outcomes from a single institutional context, which may limit transferability to other settings or professional development models.

Implications and Recommendations for Program Refinement

Despite these limitations, findings offer several practical implications for Student Affairs assessment professional development. Results suggest that hybrid, learning-centered models that integrate asynchronous content with applied exercises and reflections, and optional synchronous support, may support increased confidence, particularly in practice-oriented assessment skills. Institutions aiming to enhance assessment capability may find it advantageous to emphasize flexibility and relevance to roles in the design of professional development initiatives. Supervisory support, workload considerations, and integration of assessment responsibilities into job expectations may be necessary to sustain participation and completion rates. Finally, participant feedback underscores the importance of clear pacing, estimated time commitments, and enhanced guided practice for tool-based modules, particularly for staff with limited prior assessment experience.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are offered to strengthen future iterations of the curriculum:

1. To improve guided practice for tool-based modules, especially Qualtrics and data visualization, offer more demonstrations, troubleshooting sessions, or optional workshops.
2. Provide clearer pacing and time expectations for modules to support planning and sustained engagement.
3. Expand opportunities for synchronous interaction, particularly at the beginning or midpoint of the curriculum, to support shared learning, collaboration, and co-creation.
4. Strengthen post-course support structures, including opportunities to apply assessment skills within departmental projects or reporting processes.

These recommendations align with principles of continuous learning, collaboration, and learner-centered assessment practice.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing literature on assessment professional development in Student Affairs by examining early outcomes of a redesigned, learning-centered assessment curriculum. Guided by the ACCELERATE framework, findings suggest that participants experienced increased confidence in

key assessment domains, perceived meaningful professional growth, and valued the curriculum's relevance, flexibility, and opportunities for applied learning. These findings align with broader scholarship emphasizing that assessment capacity is strengthened through authentic practice, continuous learning, and collaborative engagement (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Strietzel et al., 2020; Wenger, 1998). While findings should be viewed as preliminary, they suggest that strategically aligned, hybrid professional development models may help build long-term assessment capability when paired with ongoing institutional support. Future research should examine longer-term outcomes, sustained application of assessment practices, and the transferability of this model across institutional contexts.

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Appendix A

Pre-Course Survey: Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum

Section 1: Background & Experience

Q1 What is your current role in Student Affairs?

- ☐ Graduate Assistant
- ☐ Entry-Level Professional (e.g., Coordinator, Specialist)
- ☐ Mid-Level Professional (e.g., Assistant/Associate Director)
- ☐ Senior-Level Professional (e.g., Director, Executive Director)
- ☐ Administrative Support Staff
- ☐ New Professional (less than 1 year in the field)
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Q2 How many years of experience do you have in higher education? _____

Q3 Have you previously participated in any formal assessment training?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ If yes, please briefly describe: _____

Section 2: Self-Assessment of Knowledge & Skills

Q4 Please rate your confidence in the following areas on a scale from 1 (Not at all confident) to 5 (Very confident)	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding the purpose of assessment in Student Affairs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Writing clear and measurable learning outcomes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Designing and distributing surveys	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Using Qualtrics for data collection	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conducting focus groups or interviews	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Understanding FERPA, ethics, and IRB processes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Interpreting and using data to inform decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Creating data visualizations (e.g., in Power BI)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Section 3: Self- Application & Practice

Q5 Which of the following tools have you used in your assessment work? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Qualtrics
- ☐ Excel
- ☐ Power BI
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Q6 Have you ever led or co-led an assessment project?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not Sure

Q7 How often do you use assessment data in your current role?

- ☐ Regularly
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never

Section 4: Motivation & Goals

Q8 What motivated you to enroll in this course?

- ☐ Professional development
- ☐ Required by supervisor or department
- ☐ Personal interest
- ☐ Preparing for a new role
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Q9 What is one challenge you've faced when trying to assess a program or service?

Section 5: Expectations & Preferences

Q10 What topics are you most excited to learn about? _____

Q11 What format do you prefer for learning new skills?

- ☐ Videos
- ☐ Readings
- ☐ Interactive activities
- ☐ Group discussions
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Appendix B

Post-Course Survey: Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum

Section 1: Background & Experience (Follow-up)

Q1 Has your role or responsibilities in student affairs changed since starting this course?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ If yes, please describe _____

Q2 Since beginning the course, have you been involved in any new assessment-related initiatives or projects?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ If yes, please briefly describe _____

Section 2: Self-Assessment of Knowledge & Skills

Q3 Please rate your confidence in the following areas after completing the Student Affairs Assessment Curriculum, using a scale from 1 (Not at all confident) to 5 (Very confident):	1	2	3	4	5
Understanding the purpose of assessment in Student Affairs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Writing clear and measurable learning outcomes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Designing and distributing surveys	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Using Qualtrics for data collection	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Conducting focus groups or interviews	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Understanding FERPA, ethics, and IRB processes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Interpreting and using data to inform decisions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Creating data visualizations (e.g., in Power BI)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q4 How would you describe your growth in assessment knowledge and skills as a result of this course?

- ☐ Significant Growth
- ☐ Moderate Growth
- ☐ Minimal Growth
- ☐ No Growth
- ☐ Not Sure

Section 3: Self- Application & Practice

Q5 Since starting the course, which of the following tools have you used in your work?

(Select all that apply)

- ☐ Qualtrics
- ☐ Excel
- ☐ Power BI
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Q6 Have you led or contributed to an assessment project during or after this course?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not Sure

Q7 How often do you use assessment data in your current role?

- ☐ Regularly
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never

Q8 Has your use of assessment in your current role changed since starting this course?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ If yes, how? _____

Section 4: Motivation & Goals

Q9 What was the most valuable outcome of this course for you?

- ☐ Enhanced professional skills
- ☐ Fulfilled a requirement from supervisor or department
- ☐ Deepened personal interest in the topic
- ☐ Prepared me for a new role
- ☐ Other, please describe: _____

Q10 Have any of your initial challenges with assessment been addressed through this course?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

- If yes, please explain _____
- If not, what challenges remain? _____

Section 5: Expectations & Preferences

Q11 What topics or modules did you find most helpful or relevant to your work? Why?

Q12 What topics or modules did you find most helpful or relevant to your work? Why?

Q13 Were there any topics you wished had been covered more in-depth or were missing?

- Yes
- No
- If yes, please explain further _____

Q14 How satisfied are you with the course format?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied

Q15 What format of learning would you prefer for future assessment training?

- Self-paced online modules
- Live virtual workshops
- In-person sessions
- Blended (a mix of the above)
- Other _____