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Assessment Practitioner Leadership of Institutional Assessment Committees: Navigating Common Challenges Across Contexts

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Abstract: Institutional assessment committees play a critical role in supporting student learning assessment, accreditation, and continuous improvement. While scholarship has examined institutional assessment committee structures, faculty participation, and leadership, this paper builds upon insights from a panel discussion at AALHE’s 2026 annual conference to explore the unique perspectives of assessment practitioners. Featured panelists represented diverse institutions, including a public STEM university, a community college, private liberal arts institutions, professional programs, faith-based institutions, and an online university. We propose that a complementary leadership model can support successful assessment. In this model, faculty provide disciplinary and curricular expertise, and assessment practitioners offer infrastructure, continuity, and operational support. Drawing on our collective experiences, we identify five common challenges associated with committee leadership: establishing legitimacy, engaging faculty meaningfully, balancing compliance with improvement, developing sustainable infrastructure, and building assessment expertise. Through the framework of Jankowski and Slotnick’s (2015) five essential roles of assessment practitioners, we highlight how practitioners navigate these responsibilities using relationship-building, mission alignment, and ongoing professional development. We conclude with five practical recommendations for leaders seeking to strengthen their committees and foster sustainable cultures of evidence-informed improvement.

Keywords: *Assessment committees, assessment practitioners, faculty engagement, leadership*

Introduction

Over several decades, institutional assessment committees have become a common feature of higher education governance, supporting assessment and accreditation efforts and promoting the use of evidence to improve student learning. Institutional assessment committees are typically responsible for overseeing all levels of assessment. This oversight supports consistency and alignment with an institution’s mission, values, and priorities (Baker, 2019; Suskie, 2018). Considering institutional-level

assessment activities, these assessment committees offer a way to engage faculty, other diverse representatives across the institution, and external stakeholders (Baker, 2019; Buscher & Humphrey, 2021; Gordon & Smith, 2022). Scholarship on assessment committees has established the importance of faculty engagement in institutional assessment efforts, explored the experience of faculty assessment leaders, and examined how committee composition, shared governance, and institutional culture influence assessment effectiveness (Baker, 2019; Bucher & Humphrey, 2021; Gordon & Smith, 2022). Collectively, this scholarship establishes a strong foundation for understanding how assessment committees can support continuous improvement.

We have seen less attention in the scholarship devoted to the perspectives of assessment practitioners who support, coordinate, and often sustain institutional assessment committees. Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) describe assessment practitioners as serving multiple roles within higher education, including assessment-method expert, narrator-translator, facilitator-guide, political navigator, and visionary-believer. These roles require assessment practitioners to bridge constituencies, help stakeholders make meaning from evidence, facilitate conversations about student learning, navigate organizational structures, and promote a culture of continuous improvement. While their framework considers the broader work of assessment practitioners across institutional contexts, this conference proceedings paper focuses on how assessment practitioners enact these roles through their leadership and support of institutional assessment committees.

Best-practice literature recommends that faculty maintain leadership and ownership of assessment activities (Suskie, 2018). Yet, many institutions rely on assessment practitioners to provide organizational continuity, facilitate committee operations, coordinate assessment processes, support faculty development, communicate assessment findings, and maintain connections among assessment, accreditation, and institutional improvement efforts. In practice, at least in the institutions represented on the panel, assessment practitioners often serve institutional assessment committees simultaneously as facilitators, consultants, translators, mentors, and strategic partners. The discussion that follows highlights five recurring challenges we observed that institutional assessment committees can encounter: (1) establishing legitimacy and shared ownership, (2) engaging faculty meaningfully, (3) balancing compliance and improvement, (4) developing sustainable assessment infrastructure, and (5) building assessment expertise. Through examples from multiple diverse institutions, we offer practical lessons for assessment professionals seeking to support faculty-owned assessment while adapting common assessment principles to local realities.

Context and Approach

This paper emerged from our panel session entitled “Leading Assessment Committees: Strategies for Navigating Universal Mandates in Distinct Campus Contexts,” presented virtually at the 2026 annual conference for the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE). Our panel brought together assessment practitioners (the authors of this paper) from six institutions. Our institutions represent diverse sectors of higher education, including a public R1 STEM university, community college, private liberal arts institutions, professional education programs, a faith-based institution, and an online university. As such, our institutions also vary in mission, size, governance, structure, accreditation environment, and assessment maturity. Please refer to the appended author positionality for additional details about our professional backgrounds and experiences.

We (the panelists and this paper's authors) organized the panel discussion around a series of structured questions focused on the who, what, why, and how of assessment committee leadership and operation. Topics included committee structure and governance, faculty engagement, assessment reporting processes, relationships with institutional leaders, strategies for balancing compliance and improvement, professional development, and lessons learned from leading assessment efforts in different institutional contexts. We prepared responses in advance and expanded upon those reflections through discussion with one another and with conference participants. In this conference proceedings paper, we share insights that emerged across our responses rather than presenting detailed case studies or a transcript of the conversation. We highlight some common challenges we observed from our perspectives as assessment practitioners working in diverse institutional contexts, and we offer some recommendations based on our experiences. We aim to provide practical guidance for assessment practitioners who lead, support, or partner with institutional assessment committees.

Common Committee Challenges and Leadership Strategies

Who Owns Assessment? Establishing Legitimacy and Shared Ownership

Assessment committees are effective when faculty maintain ownership of assessment processes and educational decision-making (Baker, 2019; Kuh et al., 2015; Suskie, 2018). However, creating structures that support faculty ownership and ensure institutional coordination is a practical challenge. Each of us values positioning assessment as a faculty-driven endeavor. In our presentation, several of us explicitly described assessment committees as vehicles for shared governance and faculty ownership. Tracey Frey noted that assessment responsibilities at Loyola University Maryland are grounded in the principle that faculty own the curriculum and therefore own assessment of curriculum. Underscoring this point, Colleen Flewelling shared that she conceptualizes the purpose of the Education Assessment Committee at Cecil College as administration helping faculty do their work, not faculty doing work for the administration.

At the same time, our experiences suggest that faculty ownership alone is often insufficient to sustain institutional assessment processes. Faculty, assessment practitioners, and university leadership bring complementary expertise to the work. While faculty leadership contributes legitimacy and disciplinary expertise, the day-to-day work to maintain assessment systems often depends upon assessment practitioners. In our experiences, assessment practitioners provide organizational continuity, facilitate committee work, develop resources, and support implementation activities between meetings. Our effort allows faculty leaders and committee members to focus their efforts on interpretation, decision making, and educational improvement.

Institutional leaders play an important role in establishing legitimacy for assessment work. Across our institutions, leadership involvement took different forms depending on organizational culture and governance structures. At Colorado School of Mines, for example, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies serves as co-chair of the assessment committee with an assessment practitioner from the teaching and learning center. The Dean helps connect committee activities to broader academic priorities and brings authority to the committee's work. The co-chairs regularly communicate with the Faculty Senate, Department Head Council, and other academic leaders to align assessment work with institutional priorities. Similarly, Jay Kahl engages executives through institutional priorities, strategic plans, and key performance indicators; he positions assessment as a tool for solving institutional problems. Colleen Flewelling described an alternative model in which senior leaders remain somewhat peripheral to

committee operations, providing expectations and input while allowing committees to maintain primary responsibility for assessment processes. We have found leadership support is effective when it reinforces the importance of assessment and reserves faculty ownership of educational decisions.

As described, our experiences suggest that successful assessment committees are neither purely faculty-driven nor purely administrator-driven. This is reflected in joint leadership of some of our assessment committees. In addition to the co-chair structure at Colorado School of Mines, the assessment committee at Loyola University Maryland is co-chaired by a faculty member and the Assistant Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness and Academic Assessment. At the University of the Pacific, a Faculty Fellow of Assessment on a three-year appointment partners closely with the full-time Director of Academic Assessment. Even without this formal shared leadership, we have found that successful assessment committees depend on a complementary leadership model. Faculty provide disciplinary expertise and curricular authority. Faculty and university leaders bring academic legitimacy. Assessment practitioners provide continuity, infrastructure, facilitation, and operational support (as well as assessment expertise, of course!). Our experiences extend recommendations from Baker (2019) and Suskie (2018) by suggesting that faculty ownership, while essential, is most sustainable when supported by assessment practitioners and institutional leaders who contribute complementary forms of expertise and authority.

How Do We Motivate Participation? Engaging Faculty Assessment Committee Members

Faculty engagement is a challenge identified in the assessment literature that we have also experienced. Concerns about workload, initiative fatigue, competing priorities, perceptions of assessment as a bureaucratic exercise, and insufficient training can impede faculty engagement with institutional assessment work (Gordon & Smith, 2022; Kuh et al., 2015; Wheeler, 2024). We facilitate faculty engagement through relationship-building, intentional alignment, strategic structure, and recognition of faculty's work. We refer the reader who would like to further explore strategies for engaging faculty in assessment to Kuh et al. (2015) and Driscoll et al. (2021).

When considering faculty engagement, relationship-building emerged as a strong theme across our panel discussion. We build trust through listening, responsiveness, and a demonstrated commitment to helping faculty improve student learning (as opposed to completing reporting requirements). Sandra Hiebert described this as: "the more I understand about them, what they care about and what they are dealing with, the more I can engage them in effective work." Similarly, Carla M. Strickland-Hughes emphasized putting people first by considering the perspectives of students, faculty, and administrators and working collaboratively to solve problems.

Committee members are more likely to invest meaningful effort when they can see how their contributions are consequential. How can we highlight the impact of committee work on assessment processes, workload expectations, institutional priorities, or educational outcomes? How can we align the assessment committee work with the critical work of teaching and learning and other issues faculty care about? Tracey Frey accomplishes this in part by involving faculty committee members in policy development, rubric design, and strategic assessment decisions. At Cecil College, Colleen Flewelling intentionally reinforces this value by making sure to take committee members' perspectives seriously whenever she has encouraged their input. She has also found that faculty appreciate that the decisions they make will impact their workload and the workload of their colleagues. Over his career, Jay Kahl's

focus helpfully shifted to supporting faculty and their interests from “winning the argument” about assessment. Across our institutions, faculty engagement is strongest when committee members view assessment work as connected to teaching, learning, and student success rather than as an isolated reporting exercise.

Even with unlimited interest and motivation, faculty workload and time constraints limit their ability to engage in institutional assessment. Thus, we strategically structure committee work to maximize efficiency and focus faculty’s contributions on the most important issues for their unique expertise. For example, the committee at University of the Pacific uses subcommittees that allow members to contribute at varying levels depending upon their available time and expertise. At McPherson College, instead of presenting committee members with broad requests for feedback, Sandra Hiebert provides concrete proposals for committee members to react to and refine. We also provide consistency in timeline, reporting expectations, and committee processes to reduce cognitive burden. We want faculty members to be able to focus their attention on interpreting evidence and identifying improvements.

To motivate faculty engagement and to foster institutional cultures of assessment, we have found different ways to recognize faculty for their assessment committee service, depending on our institutional contexts. Examples shared during our panel included documenting assessment contributions for promotion and tenure processes, acknowledging accomplishments publicly, and fostering community through informal relationship-building activities. While such strategies do not eliminate workload concerns, they can reinforce the value of assessment work and the contributions of committee members. Overall, our experiences closely mirror Kuh et al.’s (2015) recommendation that assessment be embedded within commitments faculty already hold instead of being presented as an additional obligation.

Why Are We Doing Assessment? Balancing Compliance and Improvement

Some assessment practitioners must navigate a tension between assessment for compliance and assessment for genuine learning improvement (Kuh et al., 2015; Wheeler, 2024). Our experiences suggest this tension is real, but perhaps not as oppositional as it is sometimes portrayed. Accreditation expectations, annual reporting cycles, and institutional accountability processes establish important structures and expectations that support assessment of learning and assessment for learning. At several of our institutions, leaders intentionally frame accreditation and accountability requirements as mechanisms that support improvement and part of a broader commitment to educational quality. We recommend Cogswell and Henning (2025) to readers seeking to harness change management frameworks to steer their institution toward use of assessment evidence to make meaningful changes.

Jay Kahl frequently describes the compliance-improvement relationship through the classic “stick and carrot” analogy, which we might rename the “accreditation and continuous improvement” analogy. Accreditation requirements provide external accountability. Institutional effectiveness and student success provide a larger purpose that motivates the work. He encourages the committee to question whether assessment activities contribute meaningful value to programs. At the same time, he openly discusses accreditation expectations with committee members, occasionally playing “devil’s advocate” because peer reviewers may not subscribe to each of their same values about student learning and

what constitutes good evidence. His approach allows compliance expectations to remain visible without becoming the primary focus of assessment work.

Tracey Frey works to connect assessment activities to institutional mission and values. At Loyola University Maryland, assessment discussions are intentionally framed through their Jesuit, Catholic traditions, including the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm (a framework focused on developing the student as a whole person and promoting transformational learning) and the university's commitment to academic excellence and continuous improvement. Tracey reinforces the message that assessment is conducted foremost for the university and its students, not for the institutional accrediting body. When discussing assessment practices, she often asks: "What would make it meaningful for you to take action to improve student learning?" This directs the conversations toward educational decisions that assessment evidence can inform.

Sandra Hiebert's experience at McPherson College illustrates how institutions can move toward an improvement-oriented approach. When she started, she had to rebuild assessment processes and ensure compliance standards were met because her position had been vacant for a couple of years. However, she recognized that some decisions had been made for compliance's sake in the previous round of accreditation. Faculty were frustrated by the amount of work that went into assessment practices without getting useful results and not making any changes. More compliance for compliance's sake was not going to help anyone. Therefore, she focused on making changes that were mission-focused and done in a collaborative manner. Their regional accreditor wants to ensure that institution's assessment practices support their ability to meet their mission. On their decennial review, Sandra emphasized changes being made to improve these assessment processes and how those processes can improve student learning and experience. Critically, this work was guided by her office's motto, "Mission Driven, Data Informed, Collaborative Improvement."

These examples suggest that the compliance-improvement tension is not resolved by choosing one priority over the other. Effective assessment committee leaders help stakeholders see requirements, institutional accountability, and educational improvement as interconnected components of the same effort to enhance student learning.

How Do We Make the Work Endure? Developing Sustainable Assessment Infrastructure

Another challenge that emerged across our institutions was creating assessment systems that remain effective even as committee membership, institutional priorities, and personnel change over time. Consistent with recommendations from Baker (2019), our experiences suggest that sustainable assessment depends not only on engaged people but also on structures that support their work.

We believe that sustainable assessment infrastructure is about creating functional, not necessarily sophisticated, systems. Carla M. Strickland-Hughes described efforts at Colorado School of Mines to create consistent annual reporting processes, templates, and shared resources that make participation easier for programs regardless of their assessment maturity. She also noted that assessment efforts are most successful when responsibility extends beyond a single committee representative and is supported through departmental structures for communication, accountability, and evaluation. Templates, timelines, documented processes, strategic planning, onboarding support, and shared responsibility all help assessment committees remain effective despite inevitable institutional change.

Organizational continuity can also sustain assessment processes. At the University of the Pacific, much of the committee's stability relies on close collaboration between the Faculty Fellow of Assessment and the Director of Academic Assessment, who provide continuity across rotating faculty appointments. At Cecil College, Colleen Flewelling noted that new members require support to become effective contributors and onboarding them is one of the greatest opportunities for improvement within her committee's work. We have found documenting processes, preserving institutional memory, and preparing future committee leaders are critical strategies to support this assessment continuity.

How Do People Learn to Do the Work Well? Building Assessment Expertise

Developing capacity – assessment knowledge and skill necessary for meaningful participation in institutional assessment – was a final challenge we discussed in our AALHE panel. Gordon and Smith (2022) found that many faculty assessment leaders receive little formal preparation in assessment and often develop expertise through informal learning, mentorship, and experience. Similarly, Kuh et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development to support effective assessment practice.

Valerie F. McDaniel described her own pathway into assessment leadership through participation in the Assessment Leadership Institute at the University of Hawai'i and the WASC Accreditation Leadership Academy. Drawing from those experiences, she emphasized the value of investing in conferences, workshops, and leadership-development programs that help committee members understand assessment processes and their broader institutional purposes. Valerie also noted that professional growth can occur when committee members are asked to facilitate workshops or share knowledge with colleagues. This allows them to recognize what they already know and what they need to learn immediately, and to share relevant assessment knowledge to create a legacy at the institution. Similarly, Jay Kahl highlighted the value of professional conferences, including AALHE meetings and discipline-specific accreditation conferences. Exposure to broader assessment communities allows faculty members to see how colleagues at other institutions approach similar challenges and helps normalize assessment as a scholarly and professional activity.

Professional development extends beyond formal training opportunities. We have found that our assessment committees serve as important sites for professional learning. For example, the assessment committee at Colorado School of Mines is formally charged to "review and discuss best practices on developing assessment plans, gathering assessment evidence, and identifying potential actions for continuous improvement." As assessment committee leaders, each of us authors create training resources, offer consultations, develop templates, facilitate conversations about student learning, and share examples of effective practice. These activities help committee members build confidence while creating a common language for discussing assessment across disciplines and institutional units. We create opportunities for members to develop knowledge through participation, reflection, and collaboration.

Our overall experiences suggest that building assessment expertise is an ongoing developmental process. Assessment committees can play an important role in fostering this growth by serving as communities where members learn with and from one another while engaging in the practical work of

improving student learning. These committees are hubs where we build rapport with our colleagues. Committee service itself becomes a form of professional development.

Discussion

While assessment scholarship has largely examined assessment committees through the perspective of faculty participants and faculty assessment leaders, our experiences highlight the important role assessment practitioners play in supporting, sustaining, and leading institutional assessment committees. Across diverse institutional contexts, we identified common challenges related to ownership, engagement, accountability, sustainability, and expertise, even though our specific solutions varied by context.

Our experiences suggest that institutional assessment committee leadership provides a particularly visible setting in which the five essential roles of assessment practitioners conceptualized by Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) intersect. As demonstrated by the examples we shared in this paper, we function as facilitator-guides by building relationships, mentoring committee members, and creating conditions for meaningful faculty engagement. We operate as political navigators when balancing faculty ownership, accreditation expectations, governance structures, and institutional priorities. We act as visionary-believers when connecting assessment activities to institutional mission, culture, and commitments to student learning improvement. We serve as assessment-method experts by providing training, resources, onboarding, consultation, and technical guidance for our committees. Finally, as narrator-translators, we communicate findings and help stakeholders find meaning in assessment results. In these ways, assessment committees are contexts where we move among these roles in service of sustainable improvement in student learning.

Recommendations for Assessment Committee Leaders

Based on our collective experiences, we offer five recommendations for assessment practitioners who lead, support, or partner with institutional assessment committees:

1. Anchor assessment in faculty ownership and partnership. Create opportunities for faculty to use their expertise, shape assessment priorities, and influence decision-making.
2. Invest in relationships before processes. Understand the priorities, concerns, and motivations of faculty, staff, students, and institutional leaders. Foster curiosity, empathy, responsiveness, and trust-building.
3. Connect assessment to mission, purpose, and student learning. Frame assessment around institutional mission, educational values, and student success to shift conversations toward meaningful improvement. Connect institutional assessment to the questions faculty have about student learning and their curricula.
4. Build simple, sustainable systems. Keep processes manageable with realistic timelines and clear documentation. Use templates and examples for consistency and training.
5. Create opportunities for learning, mentorship, and professional growth. Conceptualize the assessment committee as a professional learning community and encourage near-peer mentorship. Identify and develop relevant professional development opportunities such as conferences and workshops.

Conclusion

Based on our experiences, we identified some challenges common to assessment committees across varied institutional contexts. These challenges relate to establishing the value of this work for both compliance and improvement, motivating engagement from faculty and diverse stakeholders, and supporting sustainability of the work with simple systems and professional development. We have found that leadership of institutional assessment committees requires flexibility, openness to change, and a willingness to learn. Faculty ownership of institutional learning outcomes assessment is vital, as is the support assessment practitioners bring across their varied roles. As committee leaders, assessment practitioners strategically align assessment work with institutional mission and faculty interest, develop and maintain infrastructure and systems for consistency and sustainability, create opportunities for professional development, build relationships, and promote a culture of assessment for the purpose of continuous improvement.

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Appendix 1: Author Positionality

Carla M. Strickland-Hughes is an Assessment Associate in the Trefny Innovative Instruction Center at the Colorado School of Mines. Mines is a public, R1 STEM university with approximately 5,850 undergraduate and 1,750 graduate students. Drawing on her Ph.D. in Psychology and expertise in learning and memory, Carla approaches academic assessment and accreditation as applied, data-informed interventions designed to demonstrably improve student outcomes. Her perspective bridges the gap between faculty experience and institutional strategy, informed by her previous roles as an Associate Professor of Psychology and Faculty Fellow of Assessment at a private, liberal arts university, and by her current work guiding programmatic assessment. She completed the Accreditation Leadership Academy (ALA) through WASC Senior College and University Commission (Cohort 12). She uses qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to empower educators and departments to evaluate their curricula and make meaningful, evidence-based changes. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to carla.strickland-hughes@mines.edu.

Colleen Flewelling is the Associate Dean of Academic Assessment and Development at Cecil College. Cecil is a comprehensive, open admission, learner-centered community college providing career, transfer and continuing education coursework and programs to approximately 2,200 credit students and 2,900 non-credit students, annually. Colleen started her higher education career in institutional research and added assessment to her portfolio as it became clear that assessment had become an accreditation requirement. Her philosophy degrees and teaching experience have led her to approach assessment with an open mind to differences in pedagogy across disciplines. She has served as a volunteer peer evaluator with Middle States on eight team visits.

Tracey Frey is the Assistant Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness and Academic Assessment at Loyola University Maryland. Loyola is a medium-sized, private non-profit, Jesuit, Catholic liberal arts comprehensive university in Baltimore, Maryland, with approximately 4,000 undergraduate and 1,000

graduate students. Seventeen years of experience with institutional accreditation introduced Tracey to student learning assessment and then to institutional effectiveness assessment. Tracey provides support to faculty in all graduate and undergraduate degree programs for their annual program assessment planning and reporting. She co-chairs two university committees: the committee for the assessment of student learning and the committee on institutional effectiveness. In all cases, she frames their assessment work in alignment with Loyola's core values, namely the "Constant Challenge to Improve" and "Academic Excellence."

Sandra Hiebert is the Director of Institutional Assessment and Academic Compliance at McPherson College. McPherson is a small-sized, private, career-oriented liberal arts school in central Kansas with just under 1,000 students. Sandra's eight years in Higher Education have included a variety of assessment work and multiple HLC accreditation visits and change processes. Prior to this, Sandra spent ten years in campus ministry and ten years in state government program evaluation and federal grant compliance. She brings a strong data background combined with a human focus to the assessment/improvement process.

Jay Kahl currently serves as Associate Dean I, Assessment, at Walden University. Walden is an online, open admission institution known for graduate programming with an enrollment of over 37,000 students. Jay supports three Colleges (Education, Management, and Health/Public Policy). Jay entered higher education at an institution that was gaining Higher Learning Commission (HLC) accreditation and helped usher in a significant change in both culture and reporting of assessment outcomes. He has been engaged with HLC since and has been a Peer Reviewer for them for ten years. Jay has worked for public, private, faith-based, community colleges and Universities.

Valerie F. McDaniel is Faculty Fellow of Assessment and Assistant Professor of Speech-Language Pathology at the University of the Pacific. Pacific is a private liberal arts university with undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs spanning three campuses in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Stockton, California, and an overall enrollment of almost 7,000 students. Valerie is a "newbie to accreditation and assessment." But she took a long road with relevant experience to land in her current appointment as Faculty Fellow of Assessment (starting 2025). She started out as a data and pattern recognition nerd, crossed paths with tying educational outcomes to curriculum planning in high school, completed doctoral training after practicing clinically as a music and speech therapist, and wanted to continue to let the data do the talking. She completed the Accreditation Leadership Academy (ALA) through WASC Senior College and University Commission (Cohort 15) in April 2026 and previously completed assessment training with the University of Hawaii – Manoa in August 2023.