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Promises, Pitfalls, and Potential of Engaging Students in Assessment

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning
Early View

Abstract: While higher education institutions increasingly claim to value student-centeredness, engaging students as authentic partners in educational assessment remains in many ways an aspirational practice. Grounded in the collective reflections of assessment professionals from diverse institutional contexts within the Student Partners in Assessment Community for Engagement (SPACE), the authors of this article explore the practical realities of student engagement, from consultation to collaboration, in assessment. Through qualitative thematic analyses, we identified profound promises of this work, including developmental benefits for students, enhanced validity of assessment data, and actionable institutional improvement. However, we also pinpointed significant pitfalls, such as resource and cultural barriers, inherent power imbalances, logistical mismatches with student availability, and tensions around quality. To bridge the gap between aspirational partnership and institutional reality, in this paper, we offer actionable strategies for assessment practitioners to mitigate some of these challenges. Within this paper, we provide a realistic, practitioner-oriented guide for cultivating sustainable and impactful student engagement in higher education assessment.

Keywords: *student partnership; students as partners; metacognition; continuous improvement; organizational development; equity*

Engaging Students in Assessment

The extant literature on students as partners in educational assessment stresses that authentic partnerships are a structural and relational commitment to shared authority, reciprocity, and epistemic justice (Cook-Sather, 2011; Felten et al., 2019; Matthews, 2017). For those of us working in assessment roles across higher education institutions, these principles resonate deeply with the daily realities of

our work. Assessment is often positioned within institutional structures and narratives as a compliance-driven activity, yet practitioner scholarship reframes it as a framework of multiple professional roles that involves conceptual grounding and methodological expertise as well as a values-driven mission, communication expertise, political savvy, and academic leadership (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015). If students are welcomed as legitimate contributors to knowledge (Fricker, 2007), then assessment also becomes a relevant and consequential context for authentic engagement and inquiry (Cook-Sather et al., 2023).

Many assessment practitioners and faculty value authentic student partnership because it aligns with their values and commitments to equity, transparency, and shared responsibility for learning. Practically, students offer insights into learning experiences and institutional systems that may otherwise remain invisible when using only faculty perspectives (Chan & Chen, 2023; Cook-Sather et al., 2020). Engaging students meaningfully in assessment can deepen the quality of evidence, strengthen the legitimacy of findings, and foster broader institutional ownership of improvement efforts (Cook-Sather, 2023). It can also improve student learning, educational quality, and students' sense of belonging (Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2021).

Multiple models for faculty–student partnership in assessment are described in assessment scholarship. Healey, Flint, and Harrington's (2014) continuum, ranging from consultation to co-creation, offers a framework for examining the depth of participant/student involvement. At one end of the continuum, more collaborative models might involve students co-designing rubrics, participating in program review committees, or contributing to the interpretation of assessment data (Bovill, 2012; Cook-Sather & Matthews, 2021). Luschen et al.'s (2026) typology further highlights how aligned faculty-student perceptions of their working relationship enhance the individual, relational, and curricular outcomes of their pedagogical partnerships/collaborations.

Implementation of student engagement in assessment varies from consultative to collaborative across our seven institutional contexts. The authors' institutional roles span directors of centers for teaching and learning (CTL), faculty roles, and accreditation liaisons. In these roles, they encounter students who serve on institutional committees, co-analyze evidence of learning, collaborate on rubric or survey design, provide formative feedback to faculty on their teaching practices, or contribute to drafting or revising assessment reports. These variations reflect differences in governance structures, institutional culture, and professional partner positionality. Drawing on extant scholarship on student partnership in teaching, learning, and assessment (Chan & Chen, 2023; Cook-Sather, 2023; Cook-Sather et al., 2023; Luschen et al., 2026), we authors examined our own practices as sites of inquiry: To what extent do our approaches embody authentic partnership? Where do structural or relational barriers persist? And how might intentional design strengthen student engagement in assessment across diverse contexts?

Background to the Conversation

The Student Partners in Assessment Community of Engagement (SPACE) group was launched in late spring 2022 after a WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) Accreditation Resource Conference (ARC) presentation on the topic of student partnership in assessment by two of the founding members (Bachen & Amore, 2022). Since then, the group has met monthly to cultivate an

ongoing community of practice focused on authentic student engagement in assessment. Meetings have included rotating case study presentations, journal club discussions, member-led presentations, and open dialogue driven by participant interests and institutional contexts. SPACE members explore both emerging scholarship and lived institutional experiences, creating a supportive environment for critical reflection and working through practical challenges faced in varied roles and campuses. A subset of seven members, the "writing group," expressed interest in writing this piece for practitioners. (See appendix for authors' biographical sketches.) Among the seven of us, we represent both faculty and staff, and all have an assessment role on our campus–from within an assessment office, a CTL, or an academic program. The institutions vary in size from large, public R1s to private liberal arts colleges to a community college, some religiously affiliated and others not.

SPACE meetings naturally converged around *promises, pitfalls*, and *potential* of student partnership in assessment. That is, most members joined the group with existing expectations of the positive potential from engaging students in assessment, but less certainty about how to implement student partnership meaningfully given diverse constraints in their specific contexts. One founding member framed this tension as*: Student partnership in assessment: great idea, but how?* Thus, meetings typically focused on sharing successes and challenges (i.e., *promises* and *pitfalls*) to learn from and support each other. Collectively, those conversations organically developed our *promises*, *pitfalls*, and *potential* framework, which focused the writing group's work. The authors recognize that SPACE members are at different stages of implementation and working within varied scopes, from course-level initiatives to program-level improvements to broader institutional efforts. Integrating students into assessment practices within institutions of higher education provides deeper learning, scholarship, and greater value to the continuous improvement of post-secondary education.

Method

To better understand the patterns of this promises, pitfalls, and potential framework within our student partnership practices, we engaged in a multi-stage qualitative analysis of collective reflections generated within our practitioner community. Our writers group initially drafted written reflections in April 2025 in response to the following prompt: *Explore the spectrum of ways to engage students in assessment, using the 'promises, pitfalls, potential' framework. What are the challenges? Where is there an invitation to consider where potential lies?*

Drs. Strickland-Hughes and Brewster reviewed the group's written reflections, and Dr. Brewster conducted an initial thematic analysis, organizing emerging ideas into the broad categories of promises, pitfalls, and potential. She then identified themes relevant to each of the three broad categories. Drs. Strickland-Hughes reviewed and verified these preliminary themes to ensure alignment with the written reflections and to strengthen analytic credibility.

Next, we completed member checking to further test the reliability of these categories and emerging themes—particularly within the pitfalls category. Drs. Strickland-Hughes and Brewster co-facilitated a structured group conversation in a recorded Zoom focus group format in July 2025. Participants who

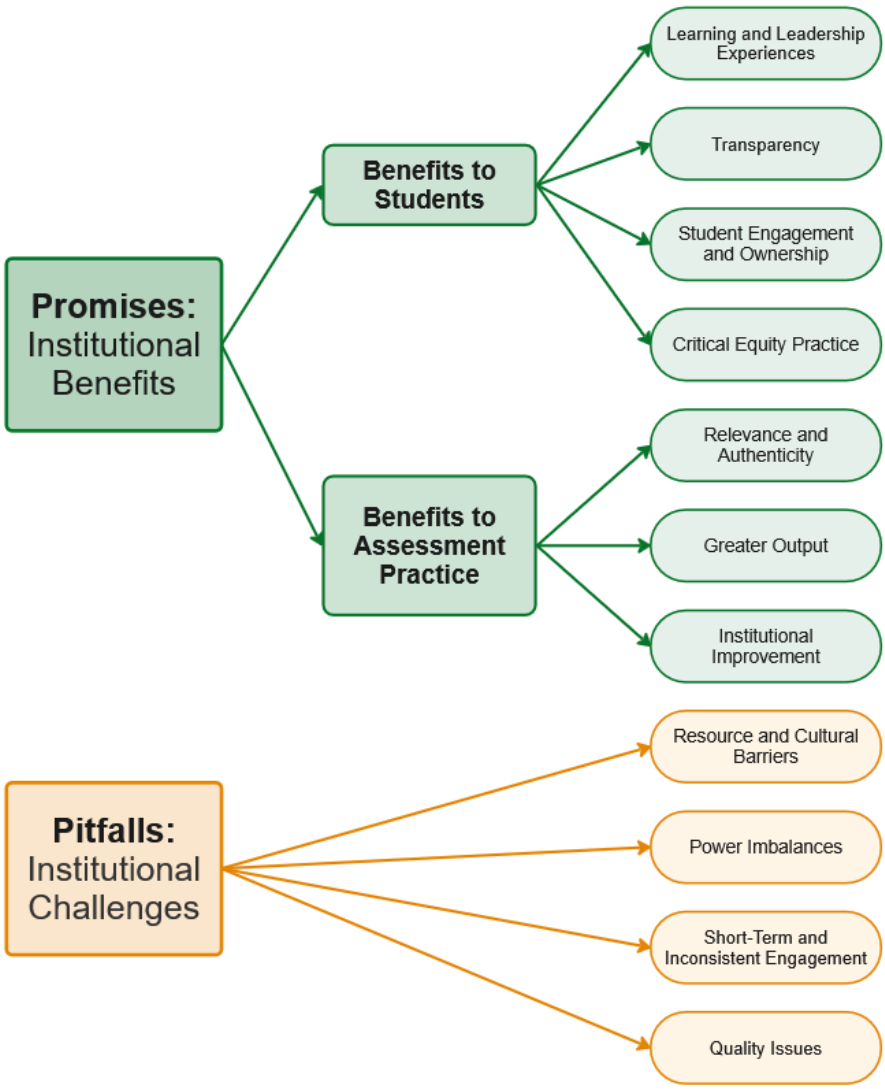
contributed to the initial round of written reflections were invited to engage in a second round of reflection on the themes, deepening and clarifying earlier insights.

Drs. Strickland-Hughes and Brewster analyzed the focus group content separately. They then revisited the two sources of data side by side (the initial written reflections and the second-round focus group data, using both the audio recording of the session and the focus group transcript) to generate a set of themes within each category. These themes were shared with the remaining authors for emendation, elaboration, and validation of interpretation. The group also presented these early findings at the 13th COACHes Symposium in January 2026 (Brewster et al., 2026). Drs. Strickland-Hughes and Brewster drew on learnings from these collective analyses to refine the themes (subsumption) for clarity, coherence, and concision into the final set. This iterative, reflexive process, which is consistent with principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) and qualitative rigor in survey-based inquiry (Guest et al., 2012), enabled us to generate shared patterns while preserving the complexity and nuance of participants' individual experiences. The final set of themes, arranged by promises (including direct benefits to students and to assessment work, which indirectly benefit the institutions) and by pitfalls, is presented in Figure 1 and described in the following sections. Alternative text for Figure 1 is provided in the supplemental materials.

Positionality within the Analysis

Researcher positionality is often disclosed when researchers analyze and interpret data to invite the researcher(s) to reflect critically on the potential limitations of one's perspective on that data, given one's personal lived identity and experiences. Dr. Brewster, who did the initial thematic analysis, would like to disclose that readers may cite her professional role and history as well as her personal white, cisgender identity as lenses that could have affected the coding. However, to mitigate against this, all co-authors reviewed the initial analysis (and the subsequent rounds of inquiry and analysis) multiple times to confirm the representativeness of collective perspectives. Also, it's worth noting that with a shared identity as academic professionals with educational assessment responsibilities at our various institutions, we engaged horizontally as colleagues within the writing group, thus also mitigating against within-group power differentials or viewpoint privileges.

Figure 1. Themes of promises and pitfalls derived from our collective inquiry.



Findings

Promises

In our collective inquiry, we discovered two overarching themes about the promises we perceived in this work. Namely, we believed in promises that benefited the student participants directly and promises that benefited the products of our assessment work, both of which indirectly benefited our institutions. Further, after the presentation at COACHes (Brewster et al., 2026), we observed considerable direct benefits to our institutions. In some cases, we had personal experiences or observations that supported these beliefs that these promises are met. Common sources of evidence we used included written reflections, goal-based performance reviews, and exit interviews with student partners, as well as feedback from constituencies, about our assessment products. However,

we noted that empirical evidence evaluating the extent to which these promises were met in different contexts was limited. Critically, we noted that we believe in these promises, and that is what motivates us to engage with students in our assessment work and to strive towards authentic, meaningful partnerships.

Benefits to Students

Perhaps the most profound promise of engaging students as partners in assessment work for us lied in our perception of its capacity to transform each student's relationship with the institution from one of passive consumption to active engagement. Within this overarching theme, we perceived this partnership to benefit students through hands-on learning and leadership development, institutional transparency, student engagement and agency, and the potential to enact equity within our workplaces. Perhaps the most obvious but also meaningful promise for student partners is the tangible learning and leadership experiences they had, which in our practices go beyond traditional student employment. Students gain technical and soft skills related to project management, develop effective data visualization and communication, and glean collaboration skills and leadership strategies. Beyond that, we found that the transparency regarding higher education administration provided to students can be transformational. One of us described this as "peeking behind the curtain." By demystifying the "black box" of academic decision-making, by explaining funding, accreditation, and policy, we help students understand the constraints and logic of higher education. In some cases, this helped students see that their feedback can lead to action. Another promise of engaging students in assessment relates to student engagement and agency. For example, when students co-design rubrics or lead focus groups, they shift from objects to actors in assessment. We observed that students' sense of ownership can promote belonging and institutional citizenship. Finally, we viewed partnership as a critical equity practice. By actively flattening hierarchies and ensuring fair compensation (e.g., through pay or academic credit), we created structures where diverse, underrepresented voices were not just extracted for data but are empowered to sit at the decision-making table. We believe enabling students to shape the design of inquiry and the interpretation is important, as those are non-neutral acts and decisions. Similarly, for those lacking resources to compensate students for their service to the university, official student leadership roles provide more opportunities for faculty or staff to offer mentorship and support.

Benefits to Our Assessment Practice

The value of engaging students in the design, creation, or administration of assessment tools or processes extends to benefit the products of our assessment work (Cook-Sather et al., 2023). Perhaps the most immediate promise is the relevance and authenticity of our assessment inquiry. Students provided a lens that staff and faculty often lack, serving as a necessary "reality check" on our assumptions and biases. One of us noted that student partners can interpret nuances in the data, such as the "vibe" of a focus group response, that might otherwise be lost in our own "echo chamber." Because students generally trust students, most of us have observed that peer-led inquiries can yield more honest, less performative responses than those led by faculty or staff. Beyond these enhancements to the validity of our assessment work, we have found that engaging with students can

increase the capacity of our assessment offices. In addition to more accurate work, we can have greater output than possible with our professional staff alone, which is especially influential for our often resource-constrained offices. One of us highlighted that a trained student team allows us to scale qualitative data collection significantly, while also yielding richer insights than we might gather from external consultants. For example, students participating in an assessment committee suggested strategic changes to the wording of general education student learning outcomes. We believe that this enhanced validity and increased capacity support, another promise of continuous improvement. Involving students in our analyses and dissemination supported us in "closing the loop," ensuring the data did not sit on the shelf. We, the authors of this paper, have seen instances where student-led findings directly catalyzed concrete changes in curriculum and policy, ensuring that assessment leads to action rather than just reporting. Relatedly, most of us have observed that appeals to institutional leadership from students are received differently than those from faculty and staff assessment professionals.

Benefits to the Institution

The measurable benefits to students and the assessment process improve institutions, including an increased sense of community and belonging, enhanced accreditation results, and enriched continuous improvement processes. We perceived this partnership to benefit the institution through increased ability to fulfill its mission, through increased relevance and authenticity of data, greater operational output, and tangible actions toward institutional improvement. Student voice in assessment integrates the perspective of the student as a consumer, but also as a contributor and generator of knowledge. Assessment practices integrating student voice reflect how the role of the student in higher education has evolved from passive recipient to active agent and partner. Ensuring and improving the quality of education occurs when data from assessment informs decisions about curriculum and education policies. Through the accreditation process, institutions use self-evaluation and peer evaluation to establish quality assurance and drive continuous improvement. This process is essential not only for determining student eligibility for credit transferability but also for financial aid, professional licensure, and communicating the meaning and value of the degree to potential employers. Shaping student learning, instructional quality, and institutional effectiveness, the impact of student partnership in assessment goes beyond monitoring learning to aligning student goals with academic and professional success. By informing strategic planning, budget allocations, and program improvement, assessment in partnership with students is a lever that can influence the metrics that matter for institutions: student success, teaching quality, and operational efficiency.

Pitfalls: Common Challenges and Suggested Solutions

While we strive to embrace Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) vision of partnership as a "reciprocal process" built on respect and shared responsibility, we have all observed friction between our aspirations and the reality of higher education. We have identified four primary "pitfalls," recurring themes of tension we collectively observed in our engagement with students in assessment. Even with our distinct institutional contexts and backgrounds, the identified consensus of these challenges among us suggests they are structural rather than incidental. The pitfalls seem to stem from both the

institutional environment and the professional requirements of assessment. In this section, we first identify challenges related to the structural context of higher education institutions, namely (1) resource and cultural barriers, characterizing the dissonance between institutional rhetoric and actual support, and (2) power imbalances, where inherent hierarchies and baked-in authority can stifle student agency. Then, we describe challenges related to the professional nature of assessment, specifically (3) short-term and inconsistent engagement, reflecting the logistical mismatch between student and assessment timelines, and (4) quality issues, where we balance the developmental reality of mentoring students with high-stakes and workload expectations. In this section, we describe our experiences with these challenges and offer practical strategies we have used to navigate them.

Resource and Cultural Barriers

In our observations, limited material investment and lack of cultural buy-in can present a challenge for authentic, meaningful engagement with students in assessment. That is, there can be dissonance between a stated desire for student perspective and student-centeredness and the reality of limited structural support for that goal. Unsurprisingly, funding models are where most of us see this inconsistency manifest. For example, one of the authors noted that while student tuition continues to rise, the budget for student assessment roles often remains stagnant or non-existent, signaling that student partnership may be an "add-on" rather than a core function. Institutional culture can undermine the value of student assessment partners even when funding is secured. Another author experienced a recurring dynamic in which initial enthusiasm for working with student partners gave way to competing demands, sometimes leaving students without departmental collaborators once the project begins. In other instances, the devaluation was operational and the students were viewed merely as "extra hands" to churn out data entry or manage clerical tasks. This pitfall can threaten the sustainability of student assessment partnerships and risk students' disengagement, as they recognize when they are treated like a check-box and not a partner.

We have developed some strategies to navigate these structural and cultural barriers. Some of our suggested solutions include the following:

- Frame requests for resources by highlighting the cost-benefit *advantage*, demonstrating to administration that a student-led focus group or analysis team can often yield richer, more authentic data than expensive external consultants or additional staff lines.
- *Increase the visibility of student contributions* through public dashboards, website profiles, or institutional awards, thereby elevating their professional status in the eyes of the institution, faculty, and staff.
- With scarce or unstable financial resources, *formalize student roles through academic credit or internship structures*. When framing assessment work as an internship or research experience, many of us replace the transactional nature of an hourly wage with the value of faculty mentorship and transcript recognition of time spent and skills developed. Enrolling in credits for this work can alleviate the burden on their schedule by replacing a course in a specific term. With faculty instructor partnership, an assessment project could be an option for project work in relevant courses, such as a research methods or capstone course.

- To address the "lip service" dynamic where a faculty member might express enthusiasm but fail to follow through, consider *active vetting*: using early planning meetings to evaluate whether a potential faculty partner is willing to slow down, build trust, and communicate effectively with the students.

Power Imbalances

Power imbalances were a specific cultural barrier we have experienced. This pitfall captures the conflict between our goal of collaborating with students as equal partners and the structural hierarchies inherent to higher education. While we strive for reciprocity, power was often "baked in" to our relationships, such as through employment/supervision and grading/providing references. In our observations, this tension might stifle student agency or could widen a confidence gap. For example, one of us noticed that student partners, particularly those from underrepresented groups, sometimes doubted their expertise or sought our approval rather than acting autonomously. This pitfall can also manifest when we, as staff, coordinate partnerships between students and faculty. One author noted that faculty can be "dismissive" or defensive about their teaching when receiving feedback from student partners. Feeling intimidated and silenced, the students then reverted to a more passive role to avoid conflict. Another author introduced faculty and students as partners, but the student may have been left out of the most critical decisions or given an unfair timeline. Power imbalances can also impact assessment teams. One author observed that when a team included both first-year students and senior-level and graduate students, the difference in academic seniority created friction, where the more experienced students unintentionally dominated the workflow, unintentionally disengaging the newer students.

To navigate these inherent hierarchies and disrupt traditional hierarchies, many of us attempted to actively engineer psychological safety and authority for our student partners. We have found success with these strategies:

- Counter the "confidence gap" with a *"Plus 1" strategy*, ensuring students never enter a committee meeting or difficult feedback session alone but rather in pairs or small teams to provide peer support. For example, one of us evaluates whether potential faculty partners are appropriate and assesses whether they might be more likely to be effective and respectful partners who care about the student experience. This information guides decisions regarding partnership arrangements, and she sometimes serves as a "buffer," mediating communication with them to protect the student.
- Help prepare student partners for difficult interactions by *providing scripts and practicing interactions* with difficult feedback or interruptions with the students.
- Ensure *students never assess faculty who are currently teaching them or have supervisory responsibilities* for them to avoid conflicts of interest and alleviate power dynamics.
- *Create opportunities for students to engage that do not require immediate, face-to-face competition with faculty voices,* as committee work or meetings often do. This strategy can take the form of shared documents, voting forms, or discussion boards, allowing students to formulate their thoughts without pressure and providing a record that we could reinforce.

- To resolve team tension, *reframe skill discrepancies as near-peer mentoring opportunities.* For example, we guided the more advanced students in mentorship and created structures for them to lead aspects of the project, providing training for the team on those specific parts. This helped engage all the students and gave the advanced students leadership practice.

Short-Term and Inconsistent Engagement

This pitfall reflects a common logistical mismatch between the continuous, long-term nature of institutional assessment and the episodic, short-term availability of student partners. Additionally, students operate on a lifecycle of an academic term or year, within which their schedules vary dramatically with the ebb and flow of demands for their courses, extracurricular activities, and other priorities. In this balance, students should prioritize their academic success over assessment engagement. Unfortunately, this can lead to superficial engagement, where students might struggle to contribute deeply due to a lack of sustained context or impending deadlines. With the fluctuating demands on students within a term, one author has experienced students who were highly engaged at the start of a term but were unavailable for the project during midterms or finals. Another author noted a "revolving door" dynamic, where just as student partners gain the confidence and skills to contribute deeply, they often graduate or their schedules shift, resetting the training clock. As such, this pitfall may challenge the sustainability of ongoing or continuous student partnerships.

We have developed strategies to address the limitations of short-term work and fluctuations in students' availability within a term. Based on our experiences, we suggest the following:

- *Offer a structured onboarding* to maximize student engagement within a term. Use standardized practices, training packages, or "standard operating procedures" to streamline onboarding activities.
- *Explicitly chunk projects into discrete parts that fit within a single academic term*, so that students can feel satisfaction completing a full phase of the work.
- Consider using *succession recruitment*, where outgoing students train the incoming cohort.
- *Maintain an informal alumni network* of past partners who can return for specific tasks, extending their engagement.
- *Offer flexible scheduling and asynchronous, remote work options* to accommodate the natural ebb and flow of students' availability. This helps students schedule their work when it works best for them, rather than forcing it into our standard workday or work week.
- *Explicitly connect assessment tasks and students' specific career goals* to increase their motivation to sustain engagement despite competing priorities.

Quality Issues

Each of us deeply values the learning and professional development opportunities students absorb from engaging in assessment work with us and the unique perspectives students bring to this work. However, institutional demand for rigorous, reliable, and valid assessment data with high stakes on strict timelines can be in tension with the developmental reality of working with students as assessment partners. Students are often novices in social science research or data analysis. Student

availability changes significantly across a term. Students must also navigate a complex web of other responsibilities with deliverables for each of their classes and extracurricular activities, with varied timelines and inconsistent expectations. This gap between the professional's need for "decision-grade" data and the students' learning curve and variable, part-time availability can create some anxiety regarding final products and meeting timelines. We have seen this pitfall arise in different contexts depending on the model we have used to engage students in our assessment work. For example, one of us observed that when student partners were tasked with rating artifacts, they demonstrated a leniency bias, inflating ratings. Quality issues can also arise from variability within a student cohort. When one of us worked with a mixed team that included first-year students and graduate students, divergence in their baseline skills meant that producing a consistent, high-quality report required significant scaffolding that created an imbalance in the team dynamic. Given volatility in students' availability, one of us had historically hesitated to assign "mission-critical" work to students in her center (e.g., time-sensitive academic program review reporting), which had ensured on-time, quality deliverables. However, this decision prevented the students from engaging in some assessment activities, limiting their contributions. Ultimately, we have seen that a fear of compromised quality can drive assessment professionals like ourselves to over-function as editors or managers, unintentionally reinforcing the hierarchies that student partnership aims to dismantle.

While this administrative load, such as managing schedules, scaffolding tasks, and refining deliverables, can be substantial, we maintain that the unique insights students provide justify this investment, provided we employ strategies to make the workload sustainable. Through our collective inquiry, we have identified several strategies to mitigate these quality concerns and navigate the tension between rigor and student development:

- Offer *calibration or rehearsal sessions with practice scoring and discussion* to address specific validity threats like leniency bias in rating.
- *Involve students in the co-design of the rubrics* to help them understand the "why" behind the criteria, rather than just the "how."
- *Reframe skill variability* within a team as a strength.
- Utilize *near-peer mentoring models* where experienced students support newer partners.
- *Strategically chunk project work into distinct tasks* to assign specific components that align with individual students' interests, areas where they want to grow, and their current skills. This chunking also enables students to own appropriate portions of high-stakes and time-sensitive projects.
- *Build a safety net for students to participate in the "mission-critical" reporting* by assigning work to small teams or having a second student or staff member cross-check critical data points and contribute to the tasks.
- Use *templates, exemplars, and protocols* to address quality issues, promote consistency, and increase efficiency. Students can iterate and adapt best practices when provided past examples of successful reports or data visualizations.
- *Standardize onboarding practices with a set of "go to" package of materials*, including specific trainings (e.g., FERPA, CITI, "what are learning outcomes") and standards (e.g., formatting

conventions, institutional branding) to help students quickly and adeptly engage in assessment work.
- *Provide just-in-time training with specific check-ins throughout the project and with iterative feedback loops* so students can immediately apply the skills they are learning.

Discussion

Across the variety of the seven institutions that served as sites of inquiry, we examined three questions drawn from scholarship on partnering with students, largely in pedagogical contexts, and extended the inquiry to contexts inclusive of and beyond the scholarship of teaching and learning, from an assessment practitioner perspective. To revisit those questions, we reflect on: (1) To what extent do our approaches embody authentic partnership?, (2) Where do structural or relational barriers persist?, and, (3) How might intentional design strengthen student engagement in assessment across diverse contexts?

Embracing Authentic Partnership

In this review, we adopted values found in the literature and considered "authentic partnership" to promote equity, transparency, shared responsibility for learning, and recognition that students offer insights into learning experiences and institutional systems. As assessment practitioners, we aspire to create the environment and conditions for authentic student partnership. We lead with mutual respect as the north star to deepen the quality of assessment evidence, strengthen the legitimacy of assessment findings, and broaden institutional ownership for continuous improvement. With that positionality in mind, our sites of inquiry reflected mixed results, inter- and intra-institutionally, regarding the extent to which our approaches embody authentic partnership.

Positively, our review revealed tangible results for student partners: We have observed them gain technical and soft skills, a demystified understanding of the operations of higher education, and ownership in advancing continuous improvement at their institutions. However, we note these are our perceptions of benefits to students; we did not have direct input from student partners for this paper. Some other scholarship has examined students' perceptions and experiences in pedagogical partnerships (Luschen et al., 2026; Signorini et al., 2026), and we recommend additional research in this area. For example, this work might assess student partners' attitudes and skills and gather their input through interviews, focus groups, or surveys.

Likewise, our observations suggested that institutions benefit from student partnerships in assessment, such as gains in inter-relational connections that offer faculty and staff a more relevant and authentic understanding of the student experience and perspectives, increased cost-effective capacity to conduct assessment work on a larger scale, and enhanced ability to take evidence-informed action for continuous improvement. Challenges remain, though, and are categorized below as structural and relational barriers to authentic partnership.

Persistence of Structural or Relational Barriers

Despite the different contexts of the sites of inquiry, consistent themes emerged in reflections on barriers to mutually beneficial and authentic partnership with students in assessment practice. Some of these barriers may be entrenched in the very organization of higher education institutions, while others may be malleable. This group of practitioners relies on creative and intentional solutions to ameliorate the impact of the barriers, which are summarized in the next section.

Cultural hierarchies that are baked into the very organization of higher education positions can pose interpersonal barriers to authentic partnership, whether through power-imbalance between faculty and students, or misalignment of goals for the engagement of students. Indeed, some scholarship has highlighted how persistent power asymmetries, institutional constraint, selective participation, and tokenistic implementation of Students-As-Partners practices can limit the transformative potential of partnership practices (Dewaele et al., 2023; Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bovill, 2023). Structurally, constrained material investment and variable levels of prioritization of student partnership in assessment practice remain challenges experienced universally among the different institutions in this study. In addition, the very pace and schedule of terms for faculty and students misalign with year-round administrative workflows and mandated assessment product deadlines, be they internal or external to the institution. This misalignment can interfere with the promise and potential of student partnership in assessment practices. This goes, too, for the ability to develop students' strengths in assessment work for the demands of rigorous decision-grade assessment output in the punctuated and time-limited availability of student partners.

Intentional Design to Strengthen Student Engagement

A variety of approaches shared by different inquiry sites found success in overcoming some of the barriers described above and might have broader application, as appropriate to or modified by institutional context. Thematically, the approaches that brought success attended to the alignment of the experience to the intended purpose for student engagement in assessment activities and focused on initiative design, professional development, and process.

At the strategic level, formalization and elevation of the professional status of student engagement strengthened the experience by creating compensated structures, whether they be for academic credit, internship experience, or hourly wages. The group leaned most favorably toward more formative approaches rather than transactional ones, so capstone courses, student-faculty research experiences, or internships were highlighted for their ability to afford students with personal/professional development, mentorship, and transcript recognition while mutually benefitting the institution through accountability for rigorous quality promoted by grading or research criteria. A critical element for success includes alignment of stakeholder goals and commitments, including those of the faculty participants, student participants, and assessment practitioners.

Supporting students in their interpersonal communication and professional development enhanced their skills for professional collaboration. Tactics included communication tools, coaching, and near-peer mentoring by more experienced students to increase newer students' abilities to provide clear,

constructive feedback to faculty partners or student team members and to build competence and confidence in their collaborative work.

Finally, student-centered project management crafted achievable time-bound goals that students could achieve within the scope of a semester, addressing student availability with flexibility that could be leveraged by the benefits of asynchronous, remote work. Assessment practitioners learned to maximize the scarce amount of time in a term for students to complete their assessment work by standardizing and streamlining the onboarding of students, thereby reserving as much time as possible for the heart of the work.

Conclusion

Ultimately, engaging students as partners in assessment is both a profound pedagogical promise and a complex operational challenge. As our collective reflections across diverse contexts reveal, the promises of this work are undeniable. Promises ranged from enhanced data authenticity and institutional improvement to transformative student empowerment and enhancing equity in our practices. Yet, realizing these benefits requires navigating significant pitfalls, including systematic resource barriers, baked-in power imbalances, logistical mismatches, and the persistent tension between rigorous data demands and student development. The true potential of student-staff-faculty partnerships, therefore, does not lie in achieving a flawless, frictionless execution of shared authority, but in our willingness to anticipate and adapt to these challenges. By implementing flexible, intentional strategies, assessment professionals can bridge the gap between theoretical ideals and everyday practice. Examples of these strategies include project chunking, standardized onboarding, and near-peer mentoring. Through planning and proactive boundary-setting, assessment professionals can reduce friction. While the friction between rigid institutional structures and authentic partnership may never fully dissolve, embracing this messy, iterative work is essential. In doing so, we not only elevate the validity and impact of our assessment efforts, but we also fulfill higher education's deepest commitment to cultivating student agency, equity, and learning.

Readers interested in joining the Student Partners in Assessment Community for Engagement are encouraged to reach out to the corresponding author or email spaceassessment@gmail.com.

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