



Abstract

What skills and dispositions are most important for higher education assessment professionals to be successful in their work? Emerging professionals and their instructors must be cognizant of what skills and dispositions are necessary in order to be adequately prepared for this work. Utilizing a survey instrument that was developed based on recent research and validated by a panel of experts in higher education assessment, we surveyed 213 higher education assessment professionals from across the United States, assessing their perceptions on the importance of 92 skills and 52 dispositions. We analyzed responses by utilizing descriptive statistics for closed-ended items and thematic analysis of open-ended items. A discussion of the findings, including what skills and dispositions were deemed most important, as well as implications for future research and professional identity are discussed.

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A Snapshot of Needed Skills and Dispositions through the Lens of Assessment Professionals in Higher Education: Findings from a National Survey

Assessment has gained momentum as a key player in higher education over the past two decades. With compliance-driven beginnings, the field of higher education assessment is shifting its focus toward learning improvement while balancing accreditation needs (e.g., Kuh et al., 2015). Currently, higher education assessment professionals come from a variety of educational backgrounds, with the most representation in the social sciences (30%) and education (44%) fields (Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018). Our disciplinary diversity and varied paths toward engaging in this work can be seen as a strength (Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019); at the same time, there is a wide range of professional development needs across the field (Ariovich et al., 2019). Assessment professionals (APs) in higher education continue to fulfill a broad range of responsibilities and roles within and across institutions (Ariovich et al., 2019); however, we have yet to define a collective professional identity. As such, there is tension and a lack of clarity about what competencies, specifically which skills and dispositions, are most important for APs to develop in order to be successful in their work.

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The Roles of Assessment Professionals in Higher Education

To date, few research studies have examined the role of assessment professionals in higher education. Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) developed the Five Role Framework which categorized the major roles APs use in their work: assessment/method expert, narrator/

translator, facilitator/guide, political navigator, and visionary/believer. This framework was developed from reviewing literature and job descriptions, analyzing four interviews with assessment leaders, and the authors' examination of their own experiences as APs. By digging into the multiple hats that APs wear to be effective at their institutions, it also illustrated the "conflicting pressures" and "potentially contested terrains" (p. 96) existing within higher education institutions that define the complex nature of our work. While this study was instrumental in providing a common language for assessment professionals to describe how they exercise their job responsibilities, it did not seek input from a broad representation of practitioners at the national level to verify the skills needed for each of the five roles.

In their national survey, Nicholas and Slotnick (2018) provided the first comprehensive demographic picture of where assessment professionals work, the scope of their skillset, and the tasks that consume their time. The findings shed light on the evolving nature of the assessment professional's role, the limited and often inadequate resources available to them, and the disciplinary diversity within the assessment profession. While this study was crucial for identifying the range of ways that APs accomplish their responsibilities, what matters to them in their work, and the value they provide to higher education institutions, it did not capture APs' perspectives regarding what specific skills are necessary for them to be effective.

Relatedly, Ariovich and colleagues' (2018) white paper, a collaborative work with the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education (AALHE) and Watermark, examined data from two national surveys: the University of Kentucky survey (Combs & Rose, 2015) and the Watermark survey (2017). The purpose was to identify: (1) APs' perceptions of their assessment work; (2) what they liked most and least about their roles and responsibilities; and (3) their professional development needs and interests. The findings of this research offered a greater understanding about the perceived challenges of APs, institutional limitations they face in doing multi-level assessment work, and the need for a responsive approach to professional development. Most importantly, this study identified the wide range of professional development needs that APs have based on the distinctiveness of their positions within institutions nationally. However, one missing aspect from this and previous research studies was an in-depth examination of which specific skills and dispositions are necessary for APs to be successful in their work. In order to better understand this important aspect, as well as attempt to narrow the gap in professional development needs, it seems essential to hear from practitioners themselves. By asking APs, who are currently engaged in this work, to identify an agreed upon set of standards and competencies, the future of professional development in higher education assessment can be directly informed by our work as it continues to grow and evolve.

Important Skills for Assessment Practice

Leadership in higher education assessment practice has been largely informed by practitioners themselves, through sharing case studies, examples of their work, and models that have been successful via professional conferences and publications. While there is a growing body of this scholarship in higher education assessment, it has not yet informed the development of shared skills that govern our practice nationally. Simply put, there is not one universal scope of practice nor set of agreed upon competencies for what an AP in higher education needs to master.

In their recent study, Horst and Prendergast (2020) introduced the Assessment Skills Framework (ASF), outlining what knowledge, skills, and attitudes are essential for assessment work in academic affairs, including learning outcomes for each domain. The ASF is a comprehensive framework for providing professional development to faculty who engage in assessment practices at their institution, outlining three levels of the faculty assessment practitioner-Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced. It was developed in collaboration with their institution's assessment office and other professionals involved in assessment on their campus. The ASF was designed with the professional development needs of faculty members in mind. It offers training facilitators the opportunity to adapt professional development to the varying needs of participants, starting with the foundational knowledge required for assessment work and then moving into eight skill areas which align with different phases of

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the overall assessment process. However, as the authors point out, there may be gaps in some of the requirements depending on institutional context and varying roles/responsibilities for APs at institutions other than where it was developed (Horst & Prendergast, 2020). Therefore, while some of the attendees might one day shift into a full-time assessment role, the ASF may not reflect all of the skills and dispositions necessary for APs to be successful because it was not designed specifically for future APs.

Educational and career backgrounds influence the ways assessment professionals approach and implement best practices. Drawing from knowledge and experience from the authors' shared disciplinary counseling lens, the RARE Model provides a conceptual framework for fostering a positive assessment culture through offering a set of strategies for developing participatory and inclusive relationships with faculty and staff (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). This strengths-based model adopts multiple theories to employ an interpersonal approach that can be used by the assessment practitioner in collaborative assessment practice. The RARE Model identifies interpersonal strategies and relationship-building skills as an inherent part of APs success within four overarching components-Relate, Acknowledge, Reflect, Empower. Strategies within the Relate (R) component focus on building rapport and trust with individual faculty and staff partners. Acknowledge (A) techniques emphasize learning about the challenges stakeholders face while also identifying strengths and resources that will help them achieve their goals in the assessment process. Reflect (R) encompasses facilitating readiness toward change by identifying motivation for an actionable decision-making mindset. Empower (E) strategies promote meaning and self-assurance for the assessment partners as they take steps toward their goals. While informed by previous research and assessment literature that articulated the necessity of developing these skills (Kinzie, Jankowski, & Provezis, 2014) and identified roles that consist of interpersonal tasks (Ariovich et al., 2018; Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015), the RARE Model was developed with the disciplinary/professional training lens of counseling professionals and did not explore other aspects of APs' work that may be important for success, such as non-interpersonal skills or competencies.

Both the ASF and the RARE Model focus on skills they deem important for APs in higher education to be successful in their work. The ASF looks specifically at how to train faculty members to perform assessment through the lens of their program developers; the RARE Model framework focuses specifically on interpersonal skills through the lens of counseling professionals. Both of these frameworks are inherently people-centered, i.e., the practitioner's focus is on collaborating with or serving others. Several people-centered professions assess dispositions in their preparation programs (e.g., K-12 teaching, counseling, social work, nursing; see Diez, 2006; Spurgeon et al., 2012). Dispositions often refer to an individual's character or habits and have been looked at in other people-oriented professions; however, neither framework looked at what dispositions may be important for APs to be successful in their work.

Only two published studies have asked APs in higher education about the skills or competencies they believe are most important in their work. The University of Kentucky survey provided insight about how they spend their time, the types of professional development they engage in, and professional development topics they would like to receive to help them be effective in their work (Combs & Rose, 2015). The AALHE/Watermark study (Ariovich et al., 2018) further examined the roles of APs and identified an additional role, "project manager," which merged two of the previous ones, facilitator/guide and political navigator, and renamed visionary/believer into "change agent", to represent concisely the tasks associated with these roles. While both of these studies concentrated on the perceptions of APs, neither identified competencies or trainable skills beyond adding to, reorganizing, and clarifying the existence of six major roles that comprise our work. Additionally, no study to date has explored what dispositions would be most important for APs' success in their work.

Summary of the Problem and Purpose Statement

Assessment of learning in higher education is working toward establishing itself as a discipline (Curtis et al., 2020; Penn, 2021); however, a few indicators of an established

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discipline have yet to be defined. APs in higher education do not have a collective professional identity, scope of practice across institutions, set competencies or standards, an overarching or governing body that outlines those standards, or a direct educational path of training to enter the profession. In order for our profession to continue advancing and for APs to further enhance their competencies, both doctoral educators and our professional associations need to offer relevant professional development opportunities. Presently, graduate programs geared toward preparing higher education APs are not directly informed by scholarship that defines the most important skills and dispositions that APs need to be successful in their work at various institutions of higher education. Certainly, these programs are considered rigorous and have referred to current literature, best practices, and professional organizations' data in their design, yet the curricula may unintentionally miss some aspects of our roles that could be strengthened in training programs. Horst and Prendergast (2020) noted that their framework, while comprehensive and rigorously developed, may not fit everywhere. To adequately prepare emerging APs, we must first understand what skills and dispositions are most important to cultivate in order to be effective.

Presently, the journey into becoming an AP in higher education may be as "unique as the individual themselves" (Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019, p.1). Because there is not a clear path for entering the profession (Curtis et al., 2020; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018; Polychronopoulos & Clucas Leaderman, 2019), our emerging professionals may vary considerably in their competencies as they begin their assessment career. In order to understand the perceptions APs have about the skills and dispositions necessary for competence in our field, we conducted a study to gather this information from a national sample of both emerging and experienced APs in higher education. Our purpose was to hear from a diverse group of APs about the skills and dispositions that are relevant to our field. These findings will benefit educators of emerging professionals as well as those overseeing professional development opportunities within our professional organizations and graduate training programs. It is incumbent upon APs to grow our field and define our professional identity: understanding the professional competencies that matter most in our assessment work will help us achieve this outcome.

Method

Design and Survey Development

For this study, we collected data from higher education assessment professionals using a cross-sectional survey that was developed by the authors¹. The authors utilized recent literature (Ariovich et al., 2019; ACPA/NASPA, 2015; ALA, 2017; Gregory & Eckert, 2014; Herdlein et al., 2013; Hoffman, 2015; Hoffman & Bresciani, 2012; Holzweiss et al., 2018; Horst & Prendergast, 2020; Janke et al., 2017; Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Lindsay, 2014; Shipman et al., 2003; Simecox & Donat, 2018; Sriram, 2014;) to develop a comprehensive list of skills and dispositions that higher education assessment professionals might need in order to be effective in their job. We then utilized feedback from an expert panel of five higher education assessment professionals/survey methodologists to modify the survey and to establish face and content validity (Colton & Covert, 2007). The final survey contained 92 skills and 52 dispositions that we asked participants to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (0=Not at all important, 1=Slightly important, 2=Important, 3=Moderately important, 4=Very important) the level of importance of higher education assessment professionals having each skill/disposition in order to perform their work. We also included four open-ended questions asking participants to discuss any other skills/dispositions that we may not have asked about that they deemed important for a higher education assessment professional to have. Lastly, we asked participants a series of demographic/background questions in order to describe our sample of respondents.

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¹ A forthcoming article describes the development of our survey in more detail. Please contact the lead author for a copy of the survey.

Participants

A total of 285 participants completed some of the survey. After reviewing the data for completeness and anomalies, the final sample size for this study is 213 participants who completed at least 80% of the survey. Of these 213 participants, 72% reported that their job title was that of an assessment professional director (i.e., assistant director or higher), 22% were assessment professionals, and just 6% reported that their main job title was faculty. Respondents reported conducting assessment activities as part of their job role between 5-100%, with an average of 69% of their work devoted toward assessment. In regards to their experience in higher education assessment, participants' number of years in the field ranged from <1 to 32 years with an average of 10 years in the assessment field.

The majority of participants in the study worked at 4-year institutions (84%) and public institutions (70%). Twenty-three percent of participants reported working at a minority-serving institution. Sixty-six percent of participants reported having a Ph.D. or professional terminal degree. Participants' fields of study for their degrees varied with the majority in the field of Education (55%), Humanities (25%), Psychology (12%), Natural Sciences (6%), and Business (2%).

Procedure

First, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained at the lead author's institution to conduct the expert panel review of the preliminary survey items. Feedback from the expert panelists was reviewed by the research team and survey items were modified accordingly. IRB approval was then obtained to disseminate the survey nationally. We utilized both purposive and snowball sampling to recruit assessment professionals from across the United States of America to complete a confidential online survey. We posted an email announcement that included a URL to the survey (hosted securely on the Qualtrics platform) on a variety of assessment-related listservs (e.g., AALHE, Student Affairs Assessment Leaders) and posted survey recruitment ads on assessment-related Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook feeds. The research team also reached out to personal contacts in the assessment field to assist in disseminating the survey link. We collected data for approximately six weeks.

Assessment is about PEOPLE. Those who believe it's mostly about numbers and data have misunderstood the reason the profession even exists.

Data cleaning and quantitative analyses. Once all data were collected and downloaded from Qualtrics, we performed preliminary data cleaning following Morrow and Skolits' (2017) guidelines. After cleaning all quantitative data, we conducted descriptive analyses (i.e., percentages, measures of central tendency, measures of variability) to summarize the data.

Thematic analysis for open-ended questions. We analyzed the open-ended survey questions for themes, following the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a guide. Employing a theoretical approach and latent level of analysis, two research team members coded through the lens of our research question, searching for "repeated patterns of meaning" (pg. 16), employing a constructionist paradigm and moving beyond description into interpretation of themes. First, we immersed ourselves in the data by reading through all of the responses several times (Phase 1). Next, we generated initial codes in parallel/asynchronously, coming together twice during the process to engage in "consensus" meetings which, in the reflexive approach to thematic analysis, were collaborative discussions between researchers intended to check our assumptions with each other, generate richer interpretations, and more deeply explore meaning (Byrne, 2021). We often used "in-vivo codes" (Saldana, 2016) to maintain participants' voices in the data when possible (Phase 2). After initially coding the data, we began collapsing the codes into broader, potential themes as part of an initial codebook (Phase 3). Then, we created a new column of consensus codes next to the descriptive text, sorted them, and visually mapped the themes to better understand how they may be connected (Phase 4), making sure not to overwrite previous iterations of coding to keep an accurate audit trail. After reviewing themes, we began constructing explanations of the "essence" of each theme, discussed how they fit or did not fit into the overall thematic picture and data story, being mindful that themes did not

overlap too much (Phase 5). We also created a thematic map/visual display using Jamboard (Google application) to demonstrate how themes connected with the quantitative results to represent the data in a mixed methods capacity and holistically capture the data story. We described our process here and highlighted thematic findings throughout the forthcoming results section (Phase 6) using quotes and excerpts to capture participant voice.

Trustworthiness strategies and reflexivity statement. Our strategies for trustworthiness included an audit trail to document our process and maintain rigor throughout the analysis phase, copying the re-categorized data to demonstrate this trail and also maintain data integrity. We created analytic memos during each coding phase including our reactions to the data based on our individual perspectives, disciplinary lenses, and professional experiences as higher education assessment practitioners. We discussed these memos throughout consensus meetings to better understand how our perspectives informed our analysis. The first researcher identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual, white woman. She has a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology and currently is an associate professor in Evaluation Statistics and Methodology at a four-year university. She has worked for over 20 years conducting evaluation and assessment projects in higher education and training emerging applied researchers in research methodology. The second researcher, who identifies as a woman of Mediterranean descent, is a higher education assessment professional at a four-year public university. She has a Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision, has previously engaged in scholarship about professional identity in assessment, and has professional experience in program evaluation, clinical research, mental health counseling, and teaching in higher education. The third researcher, who identifies as a white woman, has an Ed.D in Educational Leadership in Higher Education with a professional background in teaching, assessment, student affairs, and mental health counseling. She actively publishes in the fields of higher education assessment and adult learning and currently works as an assistant dean in a two-year public and minority-serving institution. The fourth researcher identifies as a white, non-hispanic/latino female and is a doctoral student in Evaluation, Statistics, and Methodology. She is employed as an assessment professional at a public four-year institution and is involved in academic program, college, and university-wide assessment practices.

People skills-being able to create connections with and build trust with colleagues/clients. No one wants to hear about assessment unless they feel like they can trust you and that you meet them where they're at.

Findings

Prior to conducting descriptive statistics, we thoroughly inspected and cleaned the original data following the 12-steps of data cleaning (Morrow & Skolits, 2017). Open-ended survey data were sanitized by removing any identifying information as well as to fix any grammatical errors. Closed-ended survey data were reviewed for non-normality, outliers, and missing data. There were no issues with non-normality or outliers and any participants with more than 20% missing data were removed from the sample. There were 242 responses across the four open-ended questions. We only included those that had at least one response to one of the open-ended questions and excluded blank entries and entries that indicated “N/A,” “Nothing,” etc. unless it was meaningful as a response or offered additional narrative.

Perceptions of Needed Skills

Participants rated the importance of 92 distinct skills for higher education assessment professionals in order to perform their work. These skills were organized into nine categories for the electronic survey (disseminating information, interpersonal skills, assessment design, leadership, developing assessment tools, data management, project management, and engaging in assessment activities). In our presentation of the findings below, we have organized participants' responses into broad categories, integrating the closed and open-ended questions thematically.

Interpersonal Skills

By far, the most salient themes we identified throughout the open-ended responses fell into the category of interpersonal skills, often referred to in the data as “people skills,” which included interacting with other people across their institutions for assessment-related activities. One participant explained this theme concisely: “Assessment is about PEOPLE. Those who believe it's mostly about numbers and data have misunderstood the reason the

profession even exists.” APs considered interpersonal skills to be the most important aspect of their work which was also reflected in the closed-ended results. For example, out of the nine interpersonal skills, the two skills that were rated as moderately/very important by nearly all participants were as follows: collaborating with others on assessment-related processes (94%), and developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders (92%). See Table 1a for summary of results.

Table 1a
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal Skills	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
collaborating with others on assessment-related processes	94%	3.68	0.64
developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders	92%	3.67	0.72
working with faculty on assessment projects	84%	3.40	0.97
navigating organizational politics	85%	3.38	0.84
working with administration on assessment projects	84%	3.32	0.83
serving as an assessment consultant	74%	3.09	1.05
resolving conflicts	62%	2.82	0.99
mentoring novice assessment professionals	58%	2.71	1.11
working with students on assessment activities	44%	2.00	1.23

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

Four themes of interpersonal skills resonated throughout participants' descriptions: (1) Building relationships; (2) Collaboration; (3) Facilitation; and (4) Communication. Following, we define and provide examples of each theme from participants' responses to the open-ended questions. Then, we summarize and reflect on the closed-ended questions, noting connections between the findings.

The collaborative aspect is essential, both collaboration within the assessment team, at the institution, and in the assessment community. I can't imagine doing this job without the support and interaction of all three groups.

Building Relationships. This theme referred to APs' perceptions about the necessity of making personal connections with faculty and staff members across the institution to effectively support assessment work. Assessment professionals reported that skills related to developing trust, listening, and empathy are powerful for engaging others in assessment processes. As one AP explained, “People skills--being able to create connections with and build trust with colleagues/clients. No one wants to hear about assessment unless they feel like they can trust you and that you meet them where they're at.” In describing this skill, it seemed that some participants were providing a rationale along with it, perhaps related to misconceptions, either about assessment professionals in general or within their institutions. One participant elaborated:

I think there's a tremendous need for assessment professionals to have soft skills and to focus on the relationship-building aspect of our roles. Too many assessment professionals lack the ability to connect and engage with faculty and staff and instead focus on task behaviors.

The skill of building relationships was not explicitly listed in the closed-ended items; however, it is a precursor to the five most highly-rated interpersonal skills we saw in the quantitative data outlined in Table 1a: (1) collaborating with others on assessment-related processes; (2) developing collaborative relationships with stakeholders; (3) working with faculty on assessment projects; (4) navigating organizational politics; and (5) working with administration on assessment projects.

Collaboration. Aligning with the closed-ended findings in Table 1a, the theme of Collaboration resonated throughout participants' open-ended responses as a necessary skill for assessment professionals. Collaboration refers to working effectively with others, either as part of a team or in conjunction with existing teams, and can involve multiple layers of assessment work. As one participant noted, “the collaborative aspect is essential, both collaboration within the assessment team, at the institution, and in the assessment community. I can't imagine doing this job without the support and interaction of all three groups.” Respondents described specific examples of collaboration that supported success in their work, such as sharing and making sense of data within groups, engaging in on-

going discussions about outcomes to inform evaluation and decision-making, and working in concert with multiple departments across their institutional community. One participant succinctly summarized the greater good of this skill in terms of how they view it helping them as “an arbiter and collaborator in service to the faculty.”

Facilitation. Facilitation was another salient interpersonal skill that we identified in participants’ open-ended responses. This theme referred to one’s ability to support and encourage others in decision-making, solving a problem, or working toward a conclusion without exerting authority over the process. Based on participants’ language and filling in gaps from our experiences, we inferred that this skill can involve a delicate balance for the AP, depending on the specific individual or group of individuals involved, and seems particularly necessary when the aim is working to link assessment findings toward action, from one cycle to the next. One participant included their explanation of this as:

An ability to guide individuals (especially faculty and administrators) toward a conclusion or a decision. Not necessarily the one you think is correct—just getting them to commit to action or a determination; otherwise, they can often spend months or even years discussing assessment results without acting upon them.

Participants’ responses to the open-ended questions shed light on a new interpretation of the skill of facilitation. In the closed-ended responses, the items that referenced facilitation were about facilitating workshops, facilitating change in an organization, and problem-solving. The closed-ended questions, as written, did not tap into the group dynamics aspect of facilitating others in their decision-making processes, which adds to our understanding of what this important skill fully entails for APs.

Communication. Communication was a dominant theme throughout participant responses, referring to one’s ability to share and explain information to various stakeholders, including oral and written methods. In the open-ended responses, participants described the need to translate information to diverse audiences, finding a way to help others understand assessment findings in a way that makes sense specifically for them, being able to have an awareness of another’s perspective, and adapt their delivery to meet the needs of other perspectives. One participant clarified the tension involved in this specific type of communication skill as “be creative but be careful to make sure you first understand your audience’s needs and capacities to receive your information.” Another summarized this as a type of conversational code-switching between various departments and levels of positions:

At an administrative level, I think it's very important to be able to translate information... being able to communicate to people with differing communication styles. There is a distinct difference in how you communicate with someone who teaches Philosophy, someone who teaches Physics, and the President of the institution.

In the closed-ended items, we asked participants to rate the importance of 17 skills related to disseminating information. The five most highly rated skills that participants deemed important for assessment professionals to have to conduct their job were: (1) communicating assessment results to stakeholders; (2) communicating assessment results in writing; (3) disseminating assessment results; (4) presenting assessment results to stakeholders; and (5) summarizing quantitative assessment results. Throughout participants’ responses, it was clear that various forms of communication, including written and oral, were most important in their work. See Table 1b for additional information.

When it came to scholarship and research activities, perceptions of importance were mixed. Few participants rated writing a scholarly article on an assessment topic for publication (only 17% moderately/very important; 17% not at all important) and delivering a scholarly presentation (34% moderately/very important; 7% not at all important) as important skills for an assessment professional to have.

Leadership. Participants indicated the importance of several skills related to leadership. Two themes became apparent in the open-ended responses: 1) advocating

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Table 1b
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Disseminating Information

Disseminating Information	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
communicating assessment results to stakeholders	94%	3.76	0.57
communicating assessment results in writing	93%	3.67	0.63
disseminating assessment results	93%	3.67	0.63
presenting assessment results to stakeholders	86%	3.40	0.75
summarizing quantitative assessment results	85%	3.39	0.82
communicating assessment results orally	84%	3.38	0.84
writing an assessment report	83%	3.38	0.82
developing a communication system for assessment results	82%	3.27	0.93
summarizing qualitative assessment results	80%	3.27	0.83
writing assessment report narratives	82%	3.23	0.86
creating a presentation of assessment results	78%	3.17	0.89
facilitating workshops or trainings on assessment topics	72%	3.12	1.04
writing an assessment executive summary	73%	3.09	1.00
creating an assessment results infographic	66%	2.87	1.02
synthesizing assessment and research literature	50%	2.49	1.04
delivering a scholarly presentation	34%	2.00	1.05
writing a scholarly article on an assessment topic for publication	17%	1.49	1.04

for the value of assessment, and 2) awareness. In the closed-ended items, participants rated several skills related to leadership and project management which we consider to be thematically similar to leadership. The sub-headings in this section highlight the interconnectedness and complexity of the themes related to the overarching category of leadership. In the following discussion, we describe each theme with examples from participants' responses to the open-ended items and note connections with their responses to the closed-ended items related to leadership.

One person shouldn't have to do it all; collaborative efforts yield the most effective and meaningful assessment practices.

Advocating for the value of assessment. Throughout the open-ended responses, participants described advocating for the value of assessment practices and related leadership skills as some of the most important aspects of their positions. Advocacy skills were best exemplified through an “evangelist” (Kawasaki, 2015) style of communicating the merits and advantages of assessment with faculty and staff. In other words, bringing the good assessment news minus the sales feel. One participant summarized that APs “must find ways to keep moving assessment forward whether valued by a culture of assessment or not. Assessment matters.” Another participant shared this as, “Helping faculty to see the purpose of assessment and how it can improve their instruction and student learning is huge.” From the ways this theme was described, it appears that this competency is used frequently and on-going, especially in working to create changes in their institution's assessment culture and allocating resources for assessment. One participant expressed:

It's important to be able to articulate why assessments are important and to connect their importance back to institutional effectiveness and quality assurance and accreditation. I have encountered a number of faculty members who do not make this connection, which is reflected in the assessments they complete (i.e., poor quality).

In the closed-ended responses, participants rated 11 items related to leadership skills. Of those, the five that were rated most highly (by 85% or more) were: (1) developing a culture of assessment within an organization; (2) leading assessment efforts and initiatives; (3) facilitating change in an organization using assessment data; (4) advocating for assessment initiatives; and (5) advocating for assessment resources. The theme of advocating for the value of assessment resonated throughout the open-ended responses and it aligned with two of the most highly rated items in the closed-ended responses related to leadership: (4) advocating for assessment initiatives; and (5) advocating for assessment resources (86% and 85% respectively) (see Table 1c).

Awareness. Throughout the open-ended responses, participants often referred to the importance of awareness: of one's own position in relation to others, institutional context, and the ability to shift one's perspective to that of other stakeholders. One

Table 1c
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Leadership Skills

Leadership	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
developing a culture of assessment within an organization	94%	3.67	0.72
leading assessment efforts and initiatives	92%	3.62	0.62
facilitating change in an organization using assessment data	88%	3.41	0.80
advocating for assessment initiatives	86%	3.35	0.85
advocating for assessment resources	85%	3.35	0.82
tracking assessment activities across an organization	81%	3.28	0.88
identifying relevant stakeholders	80%	3.27	0.88
managing an organization-wide assessment team	67%	2.95	1.05
strategic planning at the institutional level	66%	2.84	0.99
managing assessment staff	58%	2.69	1.12
advocating for the higher education assessment profession	57%	2.66	1.07

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

participant explained the central role that awareness skills play as it pertains to developing assessment plans:

Tailor assessment plans to meet the needs in different contexts. Could also be ‘design assessment plans that take context into consideration.’ Especially at large campuses, cannot have a one-size fits all so being able to use context to guide the development of an assessment plan is crucial to being effective.

Awareness also encompassed having a deep understanding of how different parts of the institution connect and acumen for bringing in other departments when necessary. One participant expressed this as “understanding your institution-how do traditions or various activities impact results.” This skill is somewhat related and perhaps adjacent to good collaboration skills. As one participant shared, “the ability to identify and collaborate with the appropriate stakeholders at the institution depending on the task (e.g., student affairs, IR office, center for teaching & learning, university libraries, registrar).” Institutional awareness was described as a necessary ingredient for assessment professionals’ prosperity.

Participants articulated that awareness is a crucial part of obtaining and sharing data effectively. As one AP stated, “where to go to have access to information needed (student demographics for example), and who to share information with so the ‘right’ people have the information to make data-driven decisions.” Inherent throughout the theme of awareness was the ability to shift one’s perspective to understand the needs of others, as another participant stated, “The ability to meet faculty/departments where they are,” which was especially important to support effective communication with diverse stakeholders. The importance of awareness only became apparent through analyzing the open-ended items; there were no closed-ended items that aligned with this theme, adding to our understanding of what aids APs to be successful.

Project Management. Participants did not specifically reference project management in the open-ended responses, although these skills were rated highly in the closed-ended items and are a relevant aspect of leadership. The majority of participants (85% or greater) rated four of the project management skills as highly important skills for an assessment professional to have. Managing time (93%), managing assessment projects (92%), managing multiple assessment projects (90%), and project management (85%) were all rated highly. Only managing fiscal resources was rated as less important (only 40% of participants rated this highly). See Table 1d.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data highlight the importance of advocacy, leadership, and management skills. While assessment practitioners rated these skills as overwhelmingly essential, from the qualitative data, they also voiced the necessity of having institutional influence, or persuasiveness, without institutional power. One participant described managing this conflict precisely, “when data is collected that admin doesn’t care to address, the practitioner sometimes must be the gadfly that ensures that the data isn’t

The challenge remains: if we are to advance the assessment profession as a discipline, our necessary competencies and roles need to be more consistent across the milieu of higher education and not be dependent upon where we land a job.

Table 1d
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Project Management

Project Management	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
managing time	93%	3.65	0.65
managing assessment projects	92%	3.61	0.72
managing multiple assessment projects	90%	3.53	0.72
project management	85%	3.46	0.85
managing fiscal resources	40%	2.18	1.15

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

shelved and ignored.” All of these skills require a balance of being assertive while also tactful, skills which are inherently interpersonal in nature.

Assessment Design, Tools, and Data

The most commonly understood aspects of assessment work, developing the nuts and bolts of learning outcomes and assessment planning, were identified solely through the closed-ended data. Of the 10 skills related to assessment design, there were four skills that were rated as moderately/very important by at least 80% of participants—creating an assessment plan, creating program outcomes, creating student learning outcomes, and mapping learning outcomes. Only 32% of participants rated conducting a research study on an assessment-related topic as a highly important skill for assessment professionals to have and 10% rated this as not at all important. Of the 8 skills related to developing assessment tools, only one (evaluating existing assessment tools) was rated as highly important (84% of participants). Creating assessment databases and creating assessment dashboards were two skills that fewer than 50% of participants rated as highly important. There were three skills related to data management that were rated as highly important by at least 80% of participants. These are selecting appropriate data points/assessment measures (87%), measuring student learning outcomes (84%), and analyzing quantitative data (82%). There were two skills that fewer than 40% of participants rated as moderately/very important—conducting univariate statistics (12% rated as not at all important) and conducting advanced multivariate statistics (13% rated as not at all important). Within the open-ended questions there was no new information or overlapping themes related to these sets of skills. See Tables 1e through 1g.

Table 1e
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Assessment Design

Assessment Design	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
creating an assessment plan	93%	3.67	0.65
creating program outcomes	83%	3.45	0.91
creating student learning outcomes	83%	3.44	0.90
mapping learning outcomes	85%	3.42	0.84
conducting a program review	76%	3.16	0.98
conducting a program evaluation	75%	3.12	1.03
conducting curricular or program mapping	72%	3.08	0.90
conducting a needs assessment	65%	2.81	1.08
conducting mixed methods assessment projects	63%	2.76	1.05
conducting a research study on an assessment-related topic	32%	1.95	1.15

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

Finally, participants rated 17 different skills related to engaging in assessment activities on how important these were for an assessment professional to have in order to do their job. Five of these were rated highly by at least 85% of participants: engaging in ethical assessment (92%); engaging in critical thinking (95%); utilizing data to inform policy and practice (93%); using assessment data to make decisions (91%); and solving problems (88%). Skills such as managing an assessment dashboard (40%), improving curricula (57%), and

It is unrealistic to expect that an AP can “do it all,” which could explain why collaboration is so important to success in assessment work

Table 1f
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Developing Assessment Tools

Developing Assessment Tools	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
evaluating existing assessment tools	84%	3.32	0.84
developing survey instruments	73%	3.01	1.01
creating assessment reporting templates	71%	3.00	0.96
developing assessment instruments	66%	2.92	1.05
creating rubrics	67%	2.90	1.04
developing an assessment management system for an organization	59%	2.72	1.17
creating assessment databases	45%	2.40	1.15
creating assessment dashboards	40%	2.22	1.09

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

Table 1g
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Data Management

Data Management	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
selecting appropriate data points/assessment measures	87%	3.49	0.75
measuring student learning outcomes	84%	3.42	0.87
analyzing quantitative data	82%	3.35	0.87
disaggregating data	76%	3.18	1.00
creating visual representations of data	74%	3.15	0.95
analyzing qualitative data	75%	3.14	0.96
conducting descriptive statistics	72%	3.08	1.13
collecting survey data for assessment purposes	72%	3.06	0.97
administering assessment instruments	60%	2.76	1.15
collecting focus group data for assessment purposes	56%	2.61	1.08
conducting a focus group	49%	2.46	1.10
conducting interviews	44%	2.27	1.14
conducting data mining for assessment purposes	42%	2.15	1.18
conducting univariate statistics	40%	2.13	1.31
conducting advanced multivariate statistics	29%	1.87	1.18

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

Table 1h
Perceptions of Needed Skills: Engaging in Assessment Activities

Engaging in Assessment Activities	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
engaging in ethical assessment	92%	3.66	0.63
engaging in critical thinking	95%	3.65	0.65
using assessment data to make decisions	91%	3.52	0.73
utilizing data to inform policy and practice	93%	3.52	0.70
solving problems	88%	3.45	0.77
employing assessment in an equitable way	83%	3.42	0.84
reflecting on assessment practice	82%	3.38	0.82
understanding accreditation standards and state policies	80%	3.34	0.88
using assessment results to foster equity	82%	3.30	0.90
explaining accreditation needs and expectations to faculty	79%	3.28	1.01
utilizing rubrics for assessment purposes	73%	3.05	0.99
managing ethical risks	64%	2.97	1.08
evaluating the quality of previous assessment studies and research	67%	2.95	1.00
understand characteristics of effective instruction	62%	2.74	1.06
using an assessment management system	56%	2.65	1.17
improving curricula	57%	2.59	1.12
managing an assessment dashboard	40%	2.23	1.16

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

using an assessment management system (56%) were not seen as highly important skills for an assessment professional to have. See Table 1h for additional information.

Teaching Experience

Teaching was not a specific skill that we asked about in the closed-ended questions; the most relevant item was “facilitating workshops and training on assessment topics (74%

of respondents perceived this skill as moderately to very important). However, teaching experience resonated strongly throughout the open-ended responses. Participants frequently described having teaching or classroom experience as important to the assessment process:

You didn't ask if I had taught in the classroom as a faculty member. I think this is VERY important. As a former full-time faculty member, I understand that faculty experience so that I can relate to them and 'speak their language'.

Many participants mentioned how having this experience helped them to better understand faculty perspectives supporting the assessment process: "I've found that having background as a former faculty member has helped me understand assessment from multiple different angles and to be empathetic and understanding of faculty concerns when it comes to assessment and evaluation." Some participants related having this kind of experience to credibility and relatability in working with faculty members:

Though it is unspoken, I think it greatly helps an assessment professional to have some kind of teaching experience/background. I was never a full time faculty member, but have taught as an adjunct for many years and that helps me to relate to faculty members and gives me what I call 'street cred'.

The closed-ended items related to teaching and instruction received more mixed ratings of importance from participants—understanding the characteristics of effective instruction (60%) and improving curricula (57%). This variability could point to the range of roles and responsibilities APs fulfill across institutions ("It Depends" theme described further below) as well as the importance of collaboration and awareness/shifting perspective (previously described).

Perceptions of Needed Dispositions

Participants rated the importance of 52 distinct dispositions for higher education assessment professionals in order to perform their work. These dispositions were organized into four categories for the online survey: interpersonal, responsiveness, work approach, expression. Below we summarize participants' ratings on the closed-ended items for dispositions and integrate related themes that researchers identified from responses to the open-ended questions. Refer to Tables 2a and 2b for additional information.

Personally, I feel dispositions are more vital than technical skills- You can learn the techniques but without the personality, you will have trouble motivating others!

In the closed-ended items, participants rated most of the 15 interpersonal dispositions as rather important for higher education APs (i.e., all of the dispositions had ratings above 65%). This was also true in the qualitative data as many of the dispositions were reflected throughout the major themes. As one participant noted: "Personally, I feel dispositions are more vital than technical skills. You can learn the techniques but without the personality, you will have trouble motivating others!"

In the interpersonal category, collaborative, honest, helpful, inclusive, and supportive were rated as highly important dispositions to have (90% or higher rated as moderately/very important). All of the 14 dispositions related to responsiveness were rated very highly by participants (>80% rated as moderately/very important) with problem solver (95%) and adaptable (95%) being rated the highest. See Table 2a.

Helpful was one of the highest rated dispositions with 95% of participants rating it as moderately to very important, and this importance was also reflected in the open-ended responses. As one participant concisely summarized, "Helping people -- teachers, students, admins, community stakeholders -- is the core of what I do." Another participant summarized the importance of honesty and transparency which were rated as moderately/very important in the closed-ended items by almost all participants (96% and 94%, respectively):

It's important to be honest about what we know and don't know as an assessment field. There are many recommendations and 'best practices' that do not have any empirical evidence to support them. We need to be honest about that when we communicate to others.

Table 2a
 Perceptions of Needed Dispositions: Interpersonal and Responsiveness

Dispositions	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
Interpersonal			
collaborative	97%	3.86	0.50
honest	97%	3.76	0.54
helpful	96%	3.70	0.58
inclusive	92%	3.61	0.74
supportive	92%	3.51	0.67
team player	89%	3.43	0.74
effective leader	88%	3.33	0.81
encouraging	87%	3.44	0.84
relational	87%	3.44	0.76
tactful	83%	3.43	0.79
politically savvy	79%	3.19	0.96
persuasive	77%	3.20	0.93
empathic	75%	3.03	0.89
compassionate	70%	2.95	0.94
kind	68%	2.94	1.00
Responsiveness			
problem-solver	95%	3.71	0.58
adaptable	95%	3.70	0.58
openness to feedback	93%	3.58	0.67
flexible	93%	3.60	0.64
resourceful	92%	3.55	0.69
reflective	91%	3.57	0.69
inquisitive	90%	3.49	0.76
comfortable with ambiguity or chaos	90%	3.51	0.76
thoughtful	89%	3.47	0.74
life-long learner	86%	3.44	0.77
curious	86%	3.43	0.78
self-aware	85%	3.39	0.80
resilient	85%	3.42	0.80
growth mindset	82%	3.38	0.91

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

Six out of 13 dispositions related to work approach (trustworthy, reliable, ethical, analytical, detail oriented, and strategic) were rated as moderately/very important by more than 90% of participants. Being fiscally responsible was the lowest rated disposition with only 57% of participants rating this as moderately/very important. Of the 10 dispositions related to expression, transparent (94%), articulate (92%), and professional (90%) were rated the highest. Passionate, humble, optimistic, while still rated highly by the majority of participants (>65% rated as moderately/very important), received lower ratings compared to other expression dispositions (See Table 2b). In the open-ended data, we saw complexity related to expression similarly represented through the need to balance several types of communication and leadership skills, with attention to knowing which approach will work best depending on the context of the situation.

Flexibility. In the closed-ended responses, 95% of participants rated Problem-solver and Adaptable as moderately/very important, but these specific terms were not referenced in the open-ended questions. Relatedly, participants described flexibility as a crucial disposition for APs in multiple areas of their work. Some described flexibility as a skill one practices, e.g., “Be(ing) flexible in presenting data/assessment results and information), and others referenced it more like a disposition one has: “Having flexibility to work with a variety of people within an institution from staff and faculty to admin.” Through their words, participants revealed a multilayered definition of flexibility that encompassed both problem-solving and adaptability. As one participant stated,

We are practitioners, and every department we work with is unique. We need to be flexible and take stock of the opportunities and limitations in the department and at the university, so that we help faculty develop feasible, sustainable assessment, not perfect assessment.

Helping people - teachers, students, admins, community stakeholders - is the core of what I do.

Table 2b
 Perceptions of Needed Dispositions: Work Approach and Expression

Dispositions	% Moderately/Very Important*	Mean	SD
Work Approach			
trustworthy	96%	3.75	0.52
reliable	95%	3.71	0.57
ethical	93%	3.75	0.57
analytical	92%	3.60	0.68
strategic	91%	3.51	0.73
detail oriented	91%	3.62	0.67
equity-minded	87%	3.38	0.90
culturally responsive	85%	3.32	0.82
motivated	84%	3.39	0.76
committed	84%	3.39	0.77
autonomous	78%	3.20	0.94
creative	74%	3.10	0.91
fiscally responsible	57%	2.67	1.04
Expression			
transparent	94%	3.60	0.59
articulate	92%	3.57	0.70
professional	90%	3.62	0.70
engaged	90%	3.46	0.70
genuine	89%	3.48	0.72
positive attitude	85%	3.33	0.85
confident	82%	3.19	0.83
passionate	69%	2.93	1.00
humble	69%	2.87	1.10
optimistic	66%	2.85	1.06

*% of respondents that selected moderately important or very important

You need a thick skin - don't take it personally when people don't make assessment work their priority.

Patience. Participants frequently referred to the importance of patience in assessment work whether describing it as a skill one practices (i.e., being patient) or a disposition one has (patience). This theme only became apparent in participants' responses to the open-ended questions as it was not listed in the closed-ended items for participants to rank. Some responses referred to more systemic concerns, such as the "patience to deal with slow-moving change and cyclical activities," and others referenced patience in working with other people. Patience with people involved adapting to a multitude of unique challenges based on the individual or group. One AP identified:

Patience is key for the assessment professional. You have to be patient with individuals who are not computer literate, do not understand assessment, miss deadlines, want their hands held, and believe that you are just adding work to their plate.

One participant described how patience can differ from flexibility because an assessment professional may need to accept actions that are outside of their control:

I think having patience or being a patient person is important for the assessment professional. I think it's more than just being flexible. I think flexible means going along with changes to a plan that you agree with. Patience is needed when there are changes to a plan that you don't necessarily think are beneficial but due to circumstances may need to occur (for example, campus politics).

"Thick Skin." Throughout the open-ended responses, participants frequently described that having a "thick skin" is an extremely important disposition in assessment work. This theme referred to the AP not feeling personally offended when engaging with other stakeholders who may criticize or not consider assessment work to be a priority. One participant shared, "You need a thick skin -- don't take it personally when people don't make assessment work their priority." And another similarly noted, "This is the place to include thick-skinned. [It's] crucially important not to take things personally." Most of the responses within this theme also referred to the need to hear feedback from others in their work,

whether it was warranted or not. One participant strongly stated, “They [APs] also need to be “thick-skinned” with comments and criticism from those who do not understand or like assessment.” Aligning with the closed-ended responses, this theme most closely aligns with Resilience which was rated as moderately to very important by 85% of participants.

It Depends

Finally, one overarching theme became apparent while analyzing the open-ended questions that extended beyond the skills and dispositions items: It depends. This theme encapsulated multiple challenges that exist for the AP in taking on all of these varying roles and responsibilities, often with insufficient resources, time, and staff. Some had difficulty condensing this into a response that we could easily understand and noted that it was due to several factors at their institution. We noticed that these responses indicated a unique institution type or position structure, and that their roles were often changing, depending on the day or task to be completed.

Assessment, while it has some common ground among institutions, also has unique implementation or nuances depending upon the institution type (i.e. assessment doesn't always look exactly the same in a community college as a four year; certain assessment assumed practices don't fit exactly the same in all settings).

From the prescriptive language participants used, they also seemed to be pushing back against the notion that all of these expectations should fall on one (or two) individuals in an assessment capacity. One participant eloquently stated, “One person shouldn't have to do it all; collaborative efforts yield the most effective and meaningful assessment practices.” To make matters more complex, they also reminded us that differing levels, areas of expertise, and learning backgrounds exist within our profession, making these questions challenging to answer in a one-size-fits-all approach. One participant summed this up as:

Many of us come from very different paths into our current roles - therefore, training, knowledge, skills, etc. are all very individualized (...) it is not only what type of position they currently hold/their knowledge of various assessment professional types, but also their road to get there (what they have and have not been required to do/learn).

While there were no specific items in the closed-ended questions that reflected the theme of It Depends, we noticed that some skills received more disparate ratings of importance. For example, conducting univariate and advanced multivariate statistics, writing a scholarly article, delivering a scholarly presentation, synthesizing assessment and research literature, and managing fiscal resources all received a broader range of responses as to how important they are for APs to be successful in their work (i.e., the number of participants who responded “not at all important,” “slightly important,” “important,” “moderately important,” and “very important” were more evenly spread out). This variability in ratings aligns with the It Depends theme which may imply that certain skills are more or less important for APs to be successful, depending on the context of their role and institution.

Discussion

There were a number of noteworthy findings obtained from this study. Overwhelmingly, the importance of interpersonal skills resonated throughout the data. One needs to display strong interpersonal skills and the ability to build collaborative relationships in order to support success in working with stakeholders on assessment processes. The RARE Model supports this finding as it positions building relationships and interpersonal strategies as foundational for APs' success in their collaborative work (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). Participants considered collaborative skills and developing collaborative relationships to be essential for an AP in higher education to be successful which is supported by previous research. Ariovich et al. (2018, 2019) and Jankowski and Slotnick (2015) highlighted the key roles of facilitator/guide and political navigator which describe collaborating on assessment activities as an integral part of an AP's role.

One needs to display strong interpersonal skills and the ability to build collaborative relationships in order to support success in working with stakeholders on assessment processes.

Communicating with stakeholders and disseminating assessment results effectively was also deemed as very important by many respondents. APs cannot simply regurgitate assessment data back to stakeholders; they must be able to understand the context and connect with diverse stakeholders, communicating in a way that makes sense to them, which Jankowski and Slotnick referred to as the “translator” role (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015). The newly apparent theme of Awareness was closely related to both communication skills and leadership skills, emphasizing the need to be able to understand context as well as shift one’s perspective, in order to more effectively communicate with others.

The interpersonal and responsiveness dispositions were more salient throughout the open-ended data and rated as highly important in the closed-ended questions. Being flexible was widely referenced as essential to assessment work, particularly in relation to interpersonal skills such as communication and collaboration, and the dispositions of problem-solver and adaptable. Patience and having a “thick skin” also resonated as important dispositions for APs to have. Most of the highly-rated dispositions described how one interacts with and responds to others, further emphasizing the importance of interpersonal strategies in assessment work. In the closed-ended questions, Collaborative was the highest rated disposition; but is being collaborative a disposition or is it a teachable skill? The RARE Model, informed by counseling and psychology theories, leverages interpersonal and collaborative strategies as foundational for APs to be successful (Clucas Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019), which are skills that can be trained and refined. The authors did not, however, outline important dispositions in their framework. Some practitioner-based professions (e.g., counseling, nursing, law enforcement, social work) assess dispositions throughout their training programs; therefore, a greater understanding of the important dispositions for APs would be helpful in preparing future APs for assessment work. Because the current study is the first to explore what dispositions are most important for APs in higher education, further research is necessary.

APs also need to weave an assessment story as well as provide guidance to stakeholders on how to utilize their assessment results. APs should be skilled at data storytelling, the ability to present data that facilitates decision making (Knaflie, 2015). Being able to engage faculty, effectively communicate assessment results, and facilitate professional development training encompass the narrator/translator role described by Ariovich et al. (2018, 2019) and Jankowski and Slotnick (2015). Also, in order to be seen as a change agent (as described in Ariovich et al., 2018, 2019), an AP needs these interpersonal skills to assist stakeholders with utilizing their results to inform decision making. Employing these skills can further support APs in advocating for the value of assessment, which participants referenced as important throughout their responses as a necessary leadership skill for APs to be successful in their work. These descriptions of advocacy skills are consistent with and build upon our understanding of Horst and Prendergast’s (2020) framework and Jankowski and Slotnick’s (2015) “visionary/believer” role that has been articulated in previous literature on assessment director leadership (Bresciani, 2012; Sayegh, 2013; Smith, 2013).

Most of the highly-rated dispositions described how one interacts with and responds to others, further emphasizing the importance of interpersonal strategies in assessment work.

Many APs indicated that having teaching experience was helpful to better understand the faculty perspective, gain trust or credibility, or maintain a closer connection to classroom learning when conducting assessment activities. Teaching experience enhanced the AP’s ability to collaborate more effectively with faculty on assessment teams, especially because of their awareness (i.e., the ability to shift their perspectives) which was a strongly related theme. This finding further portrays APs in higher education as “blended professionals,” who toe the line between academic and administrative roles (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Whitchurch, 2009).

APs and faculty often work closely together, suggesting that assessment and faculty development should be closely aligned within and across an institution (Kinzie et al., 2019); however, regardless of where they are positioned, it is important for APs to have a deep understanding of the faculty experience and how the goals of assessment intersect with the goals of instruction (Jankowski, 2017).

Finally, participants emphasized that the essential skills and dispositions for APs to have greatly depends on the AP’s role, available resources, and type of institution.

Certain clusters of skills received mixed perceptions of importance, notably those related to scholarship and research activities, developing assessment tools, data management (e.g., collection and analysis), and improving curriculum/instruction. It is unrealistic to expect that an AP can “do it all,” which could explain why collaboration is so important to success in assessment work. Previous research studies noted the disparity in our roles across institutions and contexts (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015; Nicholas & Slotnick, 2018) which resonated strongly throughout the findings of this study. The challenge remains: if we are to advance the assessment profession as a discipline, our necessary competencies and roles need to be more consistent across the milieu of higher education and not be dependent upon where we land a job. It is essential to define our voice and position within the higher education leadership landscape so that our collective professional identity can provide a clearer path toward this work. Establishing a shared set of competencies can prepare future APs more consistently and adequately, narrowing the gap in professional development needs.

Limitations

While our results offer a glimpse into how APs perceive the importance of a variety of skills and dispositions, our study is not without limitations. First, while we made every effort to obtain data from a representative sample of APs, it is unknown if all voices were represented within our data. Also, while we had a lot of diversity in regard to job titles, it was unclear what their specific roles looked like and if those roles were consistent across different types of institutions. Another limitation of our study is that the data were collected at one point in time utilizing just one method—a survey. A mixed-methods design encompassing multiple data collection time points from multiple relevant stakeholders, not just current assessment professionals, would offer a more comprehensive picture regarding needed skills and dispositions for our field. Our results are a general summary of our sample of APs’ perceptions; without previous research, we did not have a lens to inform us how to differentiate or delve deeper into the rich descriptive data that we obtained. More in-depth analyses of this data are needed to fully understand what APs deem as important skills and dispositions for our professionals to have in our field, both within and across institutions. Lastly, it is important to note that this data capture an important point in time: during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic; when the enrollment and retention challenges that exist for institutions of higher education are significant; the value of formal education is being questioned in new ways; and the assessment profession is situated to adaptively respond.

Implications and Future Research

The current study is the first to ask APs in higher education what skills and dispositions they believe are most important to be successful. Building upon previous research, the findings offer further evidence of what competencies APs deem as essential for preparing future APs for a career in this field. As of yet, the higher education assessment field does not have an agreed upon set of professional competencies recommended for those in our field. Unlike other related professions (e.g., Evaluation, Students Affairs), there is not a governing body for higher education APs to provide guidance for graduate educators or practicing professionals as to what competencies are required in order to be competent in our field. A unified set of competencies is sorely needed in order to advance the profession and refine best practices. There needs to be a diversity of voices having a seat at the table as we craft and agree upon these competencies and construct our collective professional identity.

It is also apparent that we need to better understand the professional development needs of our emerging and practicing APs. Graduate programs that train emerging APs can utilize this information, along with previous research, to review how their curricula address these various skills and dispositions. However, because the path to becoming an AP varies widely in regard to discipline and type of degree, it is not enough for graduate programs alone to be tasked with developing and enhancing these skills in our emerging APs. Rather, our assessment-related organizations and home institutions need to assess the current professional development needs of their members and offer relevant training to address the demand. Many APs learn about the roles and activities around assessment at their institutions

A unified set of competencies is sorely needed in order to advance the profession and refine best practice. There needs to be a diversity of voices having a seat at the table as we craft and agree upon these competencies and construct our collective professional identity.

while ‘on the job,’ having access to on-demand and applicable training to enhance specific competencies would greatly benefit APs and their organizations. Assessment organizations and home institutions should consider intensifying their professional development beyond conference workshops and brief webinars. Similar to ACPA’s Student Affairs Assessment Institute (<https://myacpa.org/event/saai-2021/>), organizations can offer in-person or virtual week-long assessment ‘boot camps’ for APs. The availability of meaningful professional development (PD) and support from supervisors to engage in PD may not only entice some to join our field but also assist in retaining already practicing APs who may be considering leaving the profession due to stagnation.

While this initial study answered some of the questions we had about needed skills and dispositions in the higher education assessment field, the authors were left with more questions than clear answers. A more in-depth analysis of this data, as well as other data sources (e.g., job descriptions, organizational membership data), would offer additional clarification as to what competencies are most important in our work. Do perceived needed competencies differ based on job role (e.g., college assessment coordinator, university assessment professional, director of assessment), type of institution (e.g., 2-year vs 4-year), field of discipline, or availability of institutional resources focused on assessment? What characteristics influence APs’ perceptions of needed competencies, and what internal/external forces influence an AP’s competencies? Exploring these questions further can offer greater insight for those designing professional development opportunities as well as enhance APs’ self-reflection regarding their own competencies.

Conclusion

It was our intent to conduct this study in order to better understand the key competencies for higher education APs. As educators and practicing APs, we have a vested interest in moving our field forward, calling attention to our existing and often untapped leadership in higher education institutions while working to define a clearer professional identity and pathway toward this profession. Not only do we want our future colleagues to be successful, we also want them to stay, grow, and contribute to the evolution of our field. Our hope is that this work elevates the urgency regarding needed competencies for APs and encourages others to delve further into this topic.

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