Faculty and Assessment Practitioner Needs for Student Learning Outcomes Assessment in Higher Education

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Abstract: This study examined the assessment needs of faculty and assessment practitioners in higher education. Sergiovanni's (2000, 2004) lifeworld-systemsworld framework (LSF) and Clandinin and Connelly's (2006) commonplaces of narrative inquiry (CNI) were the theoretical lenses to investigate this topic. Through 20 in-depth, semi-directed interviews (15 assessment practitioners and 5 faculty), six themes were identified between two research questions: (a) meaningful assessment work takes time; (b) assessment should not interfere with academic freedom; (c) assessment work requires resources; (d) assessment has a long-term orientation; (e) assessment responds to external stakeholders; and (f) assessment was impacted by the pandemic. The discussion spotlights the practical, policy, and theoretical implications of our findings within the broader higher education assessment literature.

Keywords: *institutional assessment, higher education, lifeworld, systemsworld*

Introduction

Student learning outcome (SLO) assessment is a process that involves multiple campus constituencies, including college and university faculty and assessment practitioners. Faculty are uniquely positioned to take part in SLO assessment efforts because of their direct role in assessing student learning through exams, portfolios, capstone projects, theses, etc. (see Middaugh, 2010). Assessment practitioners, often housed in offices of institutional effectiveness, work in tandem with academic programs to collect evidence of student learning to report to accreditors, boards, and legislators (Suskie, 2004, 2009, 2018). Colleges and universities have increasingly turned to student learning data analytics to demonstrate their value (Yanosky & Arroway, 2015). Despite these advances in higher education, many individuals still do not understand *why* SLO assessment data is vital for a college or university (see Good, 2015). Unfamiliarity leads to knowledge gaps about the SLO assessment process (see Haviland, 2009; Hutchings, 2010; Marrs, 2009). With knowledge gaps come *need gaps* among social spaces on campuses. Scholarship has paid less attention to the assessment needs of faculty and assessment practitioners. To fill this void, this study gathers empirical evidence from both constituencies on their assessment needs.

This investigation is guided by two theoretical lenses to examine SLO assessment needs in higher education: (1) the lifeworld-systemsworld framework (LSF; Sergiovanni 2000, 2004) and (2) the commonplaces of narrative inquiry (CNI; Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). LSF posits that the *lifeworld* maintains the social life in educational settings through teaching and learning; whereas the *systemsworld* metaphor depicts the procedures needed for academic operation (Sergiovanni, 2000, 2004). The framework positions both worlds as a symbiotic relationship,

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in which both entities are needed for a successful educational institution. According to Habermas (1987), the lifeworld and the systemsworld are social spaces that are established through communicative experiences. Through human interaction, stories materialize about other people, groups, and processes. Previous research documents that humans are homo-narrans (i.e., natural storytellers; see Fisher, 1984, 1985), and construct social worlds based on the storylines, characters, and actions presented in narratives. Clandinin and Connelly (2006) argue that human narratives are co-located at the intersection of three commonplaces (i.e., temporality, sociality, and place). We use these commonplaces to detail assessment narratives from the lifeworld and the systemsworld.

In what follows, we explicate the LSF and CNI frameworks and their connection to assessment needs from campus constituencies. Next, we outline the methods and display the results of the study. Finally, we end by articulating the implications for theory, practice, and policy in higher education.

Theoretical Frameworks

The LSF Framework

Habermas (1987) contends that the lifeworld and the systemsworld facilitate the human communicative experience. Sergiovanni (2000, 2004) expanded Habermas' ideas to education—noting that collaboration between both worlds is necessary to achieve academic goals. Previous studies have used LSF to investigate topics in K-12 education. Keefe (2003) studied Australian principals and anti-disability discrimination in their schools. Sloan (2006) connected the framework to teacher identity and curriculum policies. Nelson et al. (2008) applied the LSF to further investigate new principal preparation in American schools. Only one published study by Wyk (2009) used LSF to study higher education in Africa. Our study expands LSF's utility to researching institutional assessment in North American higher education (see Bennett, 2022). Below, we expound on the higher education assessment literature relative to LSF and provide two research questions that guide this investigation.

Lifeworld Needs for Institutional Assessment

The first purpose of this study is to determine the lifeworld needs for institutional assessment in higher education. Crossley and Wang (2010), two systemsworld members at a university, describe lifeworld resistance while attempting to understand their assessment needs. The commentary describes how lifeworld members lacked knowledge about the "concept, process, and methods of outcomes assessment" (p. 274). Despite this obstacle, Crossley and Wang moved forward with a "path of least resistance" technique by using members of the dean's office to design and define SLOs while simultaneously developing an assessment plan through a faculty steering committee. The first-year assessment process received high lifeworld disengagement. Crossley and Wang learned that faculty needed more input into the assessment process in order to get on board with the endeavor. The authors saw this as a legitimate concern and eventually were able to develop a culture of assessment in their law school. Their reflection on the process presents six lessons learned during this experience:

(1) Make the assessment process meaningful
(2) Take small steps
(3) Recognize the limits of assessment--but recognize the range of assessment methods
(4) Engage a broad spectrum of faculty members, and tap outside expertise
(5) Share more information with faculty members; and
(6) Be patient and be willing to have difficult conversations.

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Lifeworld members needing more involvement in the assessment process is not uncommon. It is plausible, though, that improved input is a symptom–not a cause–of a greater need stemming from the perceived systemsworld overhaul of the lifeworld. Further, the lifeworld does not want assessment to be forced upon them by the systemsworld–which is often the perception of assessment (Marrs, 2009). Faculty are not alone in this concern. A survey of chief academic officers found that nearly one-third believed that assessment was conducted to appease politicians and accreditors, and not to improve teaching and learning–while one-fifth did not agree that assessment systems did not lead to improvements in the quality of teaching and learning on their campuses (Jaschik & Lederman, 2020; Singer-Freeman & Robinson, 2020). In fact, Habermas (1987) and Sergiovanni (2000, 2004) both assert that institutions erode when systems overtake lifeworld functions.

Taking small steps in gaining faculty support as noted by Crossley and Wang (2010), though, might prove to be a long-term challenge for the lifeworld. The reality is that higher education will continue to use assessment information to make data-informed decisions regarding the development and modification of academic programs (Picciano, 2012). In previous years, colleges and universities with 20,000 or more students tended to make major investments, but the use of SLO assessment data has become more commonplace at smaller institutions (Parnell et al., 2018). The lifeworld desires that assessment data be used to better promote teaching and learning in higher education (see Jankowski & Marshall, 2017). However, faculty feel left out of the assessment conversation (Hutchings, 2010) --an area of improvement that practitioners agree is necessary for greater lifeworld support (see Smith et al., 2015; Hutchings et al., 2015). Better lifeworld engagement can help with the improved development of SLOs and curriculum design (Driscoll et al., 2021). However, before this can happen it is worthwhile to further explore assessment needs from the lifeworld to advance these efforts. The first research question attempts to further investigate the root of lifeworld assessment needs:

RQ1: What are the assessment needs of the lifeworld from the systemsworld?

Systemsworld Needs for Institutional Assessment

The second purpose of this study is to better understand the systemsworld needs of the lifeworld. In conducting assessment activities, practitioners respond to the requests of regional and professional accrediting agencies. These conversations, often initiated by the systemsworld, require faculty involvement in SLO assessment activities to help with curriculum review and program decision-making (Rickards & Stitt-Bergh, 2016). Having faculty input also helps the systemsworld in providing the campus with student learning data given to employers to demonstrate the institution's value (Polychronopoulos et al., 2021). In other words, SLO assessment provides evidence of student demonstration of course and program objectives (Suskie, 2004). A survey of employers conducted by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (2021) found that ability to work effectively in teams, critical thinking, the ability to analyze and interpret data, and digital literacy were among the top skills that companies desire from current students and recent graduates. In a similar vein, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2022) career readiness competencies include professionalism, problem-solving, oral and written communication, and teamwork as top skills students should cultivate before entering the workforce.

Despite the crucial role of the lifeworld and the systemsworld, faculty have resistance toward SLO assessment activities. These sentiments are reflected in numerous popular press and peer-reviewed articles, such as "The Great Assessment Diversion" (Kelly-Woessner, 2011) and "Outcomes Assessment: No Gain, All Pain" (Fryshman, 2007). Gilbert (2015) wrote an article entitled, "Does Assessment Make Colleges Better? Who Knows?" that echoes SLO assessment concerns. Articles also include criticism of the external mandate from accreditors and external stakeholders (see Powell, 2011). This essay described outcomes assessment as an odd process that creates an external assault on faculty work. Powell further wrote:

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> …Its origins are suspect, its justifications abjure the science we would ordinarily require, it
> demands enormous efforts for very little payoff, it renounces wisdom, it requires yielding to
> misunderstandings, and it displaces and distracts us from more urgent tasks, like the teaching
> and learning it would allegedly help (p. 21).

The spreading of negative assessment sentiment in higher education creates a challenge for the assessment
practitioner. Beyond gathering data for an SLO assessment cycle, they now must engage their lifeworld peers in
myth-busting. Most people on college campuses believe that assessment can have some value to the student
learning experience. However, this general agreement alone may not be enough to satisfy the needs of
systemsworld professionals. For this reason, we ask the following research question:

RQ2: What are the assessment needs of the systemsworld from the lifeworld?

The CNI Framework
Humans use storytelling as a tool to communicate information. In other words, storytelling is a process of sense-
making, meaning-construction, and knowledge-construction (Beigi et al., 2019). Scholars note that "people
shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these
stories…Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about
experience" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2006, p. 375). To that end, narrative inquiry is guided by Dewey's (1938)
philosophical idea that life is education and that storytelling provides an understanding of the lived human
experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly's (2006) CNI framework positions narratives in
three commonplaces. The first commonplace is *temporality*. Temporality pertains to "events under study [that]
are in temporal transition" (p. 480). Lived experiences occur in the past, present, and future. The second
commonplace is *sociality*. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006), "Narrative inquirers are concerned with
personal conditions and, at the same time, with social conditions. By personal conditions we mean the feelings,
hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions" (p. 480). Social conditions connect to the
environmental factors of humans (Clandnin and Connelly, 2006). The final commonplace is *place*. Connelly and
Clandinin (2006), define *place* as "the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or
sequence of places where the inquiry and events take place" (p. 480). The notion of commonplace is embraced
by the understanding that "all events take place in some place" (p. 481). Using narrative inquiry to further
understand assessment experiences in higher education, can be advantageous to highlighting the assessment
needs of the lifeworld and the systemsworld.

Situation the Narratives Within the Theoretical Frameworks
The present study seeks to further understand the assessment needs of the lifeworld and the systemsworld. The
SLO assessment narratives are set within each of the commonplaces. All the lived experiences are narrated
through multiple time points. Some participants described experiences from previous academic semesters,
while others narrated present SLO assessment efforts at their institutions. In addition, the narratives follow a
storyline of positive and negative emotional reactions from collaborations with their lifeworld or systemsworld
colleagues. Given the shift in higher education work modalities, participants detailed assessment experiences
from in-person meetings and communications via technology (e.g., Zoom). The commonplaces help to ground
the lifeworld and systemsworld experiences per the points of inquiry in the present study.

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Methods

We used narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to study the lifeworld and systemsworld's SLO assessment needs in higher education. Participants in this study narrated their assessment work experience at their present college or university. One-on-one, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool. Qualitative interviews allow for rich descriptions of people, places, and conversations not easily handled by statistical procedures (Creswell, 2013). Each participant recruited identified as either a faculty member or an assessment practitioner at a North American college or university. During the interviews, we asked lifeworld and systemsworld members about their participation in SLO assessment and collaboration with members of the other world at their institution.

Procedures

After obtaining institutional review board (IRB) approval at a small, private university in the Southwest region of the United States, we solicited participants for the study. Prior to the interviews, participants were given the study description and a consent form to sign before their interview time slot. Next, participants emailed their signed consent forms back to the study's principal investigator. Then, participants provided demographic information (e.g., race, age, years of assessment experience, etc.) via a Qualtrics survey. Each interview began by confirming the consent of each participant to guarantee that their decision to take part in the study did not change. None of the participants amended their choice to be interviewed. The interviews were audio and video recorded using Zoom. Participants were not compensated for their time in the study.

Data Collection

To qualify for participation in this study, solicited individuals had to be 18 years or older and have taken part in assessment activities at some point in their current institution. Data collection took place during the Spring 2022 semester. We used multiple recruitment strategies to solicit participants. Through initial sampling (Charmaz, 2014), we advertised the study through social media posts on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and listservs. Next, we took a more purposeful recruitment approach (Patton, 2015) by interviewing members of our professional network who fit the study criteria. Toward the conclusion of the interviews, we asked participants to identify other individuals in their professional network for a snowball approach (Creswell, 2013). As a result of these sampling strategies, 20 faculty and assessment practitioners made up the study sample.

Participants

We sought a diverse set of participants. This sample diversity included individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, institutional classifications, institutional sizes, academic disciplinary backgrounds, and regions in the United States of America. The diversity of institutional types adds to the uniqueness of the sample, creating a more holistic understanding of assessment challenges in higher education throughout the nation. To maintain participant anonymity, each participant selected a pseudonym, and their institution was given a fictitious institutional name. The demographic information of participants can be found in Table 1, and the demographic information of institutions can be found in Table 2.

Because institutional assessment efforts are conducted by professionals from a variety of academic disciplines, identifying which disciplines individuals obtained their degrees prior to participating in the institutional assessment process. The following academic disciplines were represented in the sample: higher education (n = 6); educational measurement and statistics (n = 4); educational leadership (n = 3); communication (n = 2); business (n = 2); public policy (n = 1); political science (n = 1); and psychology (n = 1).

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Table 1

Participant Demographics

	n	*%*
Gender		
Female	15	75
Male	5	25
Degree Attainment		
Master's	7	35
Doctoral	11	55
Professional	2	10
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	13	65
Black	6	30
Hispanic	1	5
State		
Texas	7	35
Georgia	2	10
Pennsylvania	2	10
Virginia	2	10
Arkansas	1	5
Louisiana	1	5
Minnesota	1	5
New Jersey	1	5
New Hampshire	1	5
Washington, DC	1	5
Washington State	1	5

Note. N = 20. The average age of the participants was 45.15, with a range of 29-59 and SD of 9.61.

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Table 2

Institutional Demographics

	n	*%*
Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (by degrees offered)		
Doctoral universities	7	35
Master's colleges/universities	7	35
Baccalaureate colleges	3	15
Associate's colleges	3	15
Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education (by institutional type)		
Doctoral research universities	7	35
Liberal arts colleges	5	25
Master's only institutions	4	20
Community/technical colleges	3	15
Historically Black colleges and universities	1	5
Institutional Size		
≥ 30,000	5	25
15,000-29,999	4	20
5,000-14,999	3	15
≤ 4,999	8	40

Data Analysis

The data were fully transcribed and analyzed in Spring and Summer 2022. We transcribed the conversations while listening to the audio recordings. This was done to ensure transcription accuracy. This process was duplicated one interview and transcription at a time. Upon the initial reading of each transcript, we highlighted specific quotations from participants. To identify narratives from the participants' stories, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a technique, "thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Because we used thematic analysis, our main aim was to make sense of shared meanings or experiences. Thematic analysis is an inductive process that "allow[s] research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2003, p. 238). Given our positionality to the research topic, an inductive approach was selected to make sense of the data without preconceived ideas about others' lived experiences.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was implemented for this study and involves the following steps: "(1) familiarize yourself with the data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) define and name themes; and (5) produce the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). We became familiarized with the data by re-listening to the audio recordings. Also, we made a second set of comments to critically think about the data. Next, we began coding the data at the semantic level (i.e., sticking close to what was reported by participants; Braun & Clark, 2006). Each code was entered in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet along with exemplars from the data. This process led to the identification of narratives by engaging in multiple readings of every transcript. The narratives that emerged from this dataset related to lifeworld and systemsworld experiences with institutional assessment.

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Trustworthiness

Because of the subjective nature of qualitative research, it is plausible that the researcher might introduce their personal beliefs and bias in the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This can occur at any stage of the research process, which results in the researcher's voice dominating the participant's voice (Mason, 2002). To reduce this possibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed a concept called "member checking" (p. 2). The member-checking process occurred by returning the transcribed verbatim transcripts to participants (Doyle, 2007). We also invited each participant to edit, add, delete, or modify any part of their narrative. This allowed participants to re-construct their narrative if they felt that any part of the transcript no longer represented their lived experience. One participant added an additional narrative to the transcript. Another participant edited a statement in their transcript to reflect their narrative more accurately. The other 18 participants confirmed via email that the transcript was accurate.

Saturation

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed the concept of saturation in qualitative research. The concept originally focused on "theoretical saturation" and defined the term as "...at which no additional data are being found whereby the [researcher] can develop properties of the category" (p. 61). Over time, researchers shifted to a focus of "data saturation" wherein little or no new information is emerging during the data collection process (Creswell, 2013). In the present study, saturation was determined by reading and re-reading participant transcripts and reviewing interview notes for new information. It is worth mentioning that saturation was reached among the faculty participants more quickly than the assessment administrator population. In other words, no new insights emerged from the faculty interviews after those 5 participants. This aspect of the data relates directly to the sample size of 15 assessment administrators and 5 faculty participants. All in all, data saturation was reached by thoroughly inspecting the components of the data collected in the study.

Positionality

Patel (2016) called on education scholars to be good stewards of knowledge produced from academic research. In doing so researchers should ask themselves three questions: Why this? Why me (and us)? Why now? We frame our positionality to this study using these three questions. First, academic leaders are increasingly making data-informed decisions using institutional assessment data. Learning about the assessment needs of different campus constituencies is vital to supporting an institution to best demonstrate academic quality. Second, we come to this study through our own professional experiences. The first author has been a member of both worlds as an assessment practitioner and a faculty member. The second and third authors both are lifeworld members having worked alongside the systemsworld taking part in campus-wide assessment efforts. Having both worlds represented in the development of this study adds to our expertise and interest in the subject matter. Finally, this topic is timely given higher education's increased reliance on SLO assessment data to inform communications with multiple internal and external audiences.

Findings

The findings from the present investigation revealed that the lifeworld and the systemsworld both have assessment needs in higher education. Because of these needs, participants were able to identify their desires to overcome obstacles. In the following sections, we present these findings and situate them within LSF, CNI, and the larger literature on assessment in higher education.

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Lifeworld assessment needs from the systemsworld

The first research question (RQ1) asked about the assessment needs of the lifeworld from their systemsworld colleagues. Three themes were revealed through the data analysis process: (1) meaningful assessment work takes time; (2) assessment should not interfere with academic freedom; (3) assessment work requires resources. Below, we describe each theme and provide exemplars that reflect lifeworld and systemsworld experiences of communication barriers.

Meaningful assessment work takes time

This first theme connects with time spent with faculty during the assessment process. Faculty want assessment practitioners to engage and communicate with them through the assessment process (see Swart & Wrynn, 2018). Such engagement makes the work meaningful for campus stakeholders. Shacara, 57, a department chair and full professor at the University of Highland Park, a large, public institution of over 30,000 students said:

> …The faculty really do care. They have enormous research pressures, but they really do care about doing quality [assessment] work…and I keep telling the university administrators it's more important to me that [assessment] is meaningful because our faculty don't have time to play tick-the-box games. We just don't have time.

But what does a meaningful assessment process look like? What is the systemsworld's role in the experience? Bob, 54, a full professor at Mid-Atlantic College, a private, liberal arts institution of less than 5,000 students helps to answer these questions:

> This year, the administration brought 6 or 7 departments together to volunteer in scoring artifacts. Through this process, we noticed one huge gap was we had poorly written outcome statements. So, we are moving in the right direction…it's important to see people valuing [assessment], we just need the tools and resources to make it easier.

Unfortunately, all lifeworld members do not perceive their assessment experiences to be meaningful. Daphne, 53, is an associate professor at St. Ezekiel University, a small, private liberal arts university with fewer than 5,000 students describes her encounters with the systemsworld at her institution: "I spent three days doing assessment and don't know what we learned…We don't want to bombard with information but, I didn't spend time doing it to not know what the results were."

Assessment should not interfere with academic freedom

This second theme emerged as a reflection of the academic environment and its relationship to policies. Academic freedom is a component of the professoriate that supports the teaching, research, and service rights of faculty in higher education (see Fuchs, 1963). According to the American Association of University Professors (1940), "Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition" (p. 14). As it pertains to teaching, the notion of academic freedom applies to faculty having the right to teach whatever content related to their subject (American Association of University Professors, 1940). Because institution-level assessment involves examining the quality of student learning facilitated by faculty, professors might be concerned with the role assessment plays in their classroom. J'Dos, 59, is a full professor and chair at West-East University, a small liberal arts institution that educates less than 5,000 students. He shares his concerns with institution-level assessment and its possible interference with academic freedom:

> Faculty really like to have a sense of ownership in what we do, more than perhaps, you know, K-12 teachers do…although they do, certainly as well, but like more in designing the curriculum. [Higher education faculty don't] take a standardized curriculum [approach] which means we give our own touch to it…You've got to be careful how you ask them to do assessment in certain ways. I think it's important to convince them to be active participants in the assessment process, rather than 'we've decided this with the Assessment Committee has decided and now we're handing this down to you…'

J'Dos' narration provides insight into the faculty perspective regarding "ownership" and "freedom" and their link to institution-level assessment. These concerns also occur at the individual classroom level. Daphne described her experience with the challenge of classroom-level assessment demands and academic freedom:

> The only time I ever got a little bit annoyed was when I was working on a study abroad [course] and [the assessment office] was like 'Oh, we have a rubric for your study abroad [course]' and I'm like 'So you created a rubric for study abroad [course] and I'm supposed to create my class around your rubric rather than…' It was almost like 'You have to use this and then it was like oh no it's just available if you want to use it later.' But it was not worded that way at first… it wasn't worded that way at first like 'Here's something that could be helpful to you.'

Daphne's lived experience provides evidence that assessment administrators can lead faculty to perceive that such efforts inhibit their sometimes hamper academic freedom. Faculty do have a right to design their own rubrics to fit their course needs. In practice, explicitly requiring or implicitly suggesting that a faculty member must use a certain rubric to fulfill assessment obligations, is a hindrance to academic freedom.

Assessment work requires resources

Colleges and universities are frequently susceptible to a lack of resources. Faculty members consistently deal with burnout (Sabagh et al., 2018; Kolomitro et al., 2020). To that end, the additional service load to participate in the assessment process can become a burden. In this theme, we see how the members of the lifeworld desire their systemsworld colleagues to better understand that resources are essential to gaining assessment buy-in. Sophie, 54, an endowed professor and chair of the faculty council at John's University, a large, public institution with over 30,000 students noted:

> [In getting my faculty on board with assessment] I saw the way that [we] approach people as if there are adversaries. I said, 'Oh no I'm not going to do that. I'm going to approach them as if we're all in this together.'

The mental capacity to engage her lifeworld constituents is an additional hurdle in successfully completing an assessment cycle. This additional work is a mental resource that should not go unnoticed by the systemsworld. Similarly, Daphne stated: "I think sometimes the assessment committees get overwhelmed…I don't hate assessment. I think it's valuable. I think it's important, but, for it to be relevant to everyone, we really need to communicate better across campus." The mental resource that the lifeworld provides to the assessment process is invaluable, and faculty desire that acknowledgment. At the same time, financial resources are another tool that the lifeworld desires from the systemsworld as a demonstration of appreciation for their participation. Shacara mentioned that:

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> As a department chair, [I must answer the question of], 'What am I going to take off their plate?' Do I have money in my budget to give them stipends? Not to motivate them, but to say thank you. This is hard work. Yes, it's part of the job, but so a lot of other things have become a part of their job and there's been no remuneration for that.

Systemsworld needs from the lifeworld

The second research question (RQ2) inquired about the assessment needs of the systemsworld from the lifeworld. Analysis of the data revealed three broad themes of needs: (1) assessment has a long-term orientation; (2) assessment responds to external stakeholders; and (3) assessment was impacted by the pandemic. Below, we describe each theme and provide exemplars that reflect lifeworld and systemsworld experiences of communication barriers.

Assessment has a long-term orientation

The first theme of systemsworld assessment needs from the lifeworld is situated in time. SLO assessment is a process that requires a long-term focus to best support students and higher education. Systemsworld members narrated that the lifeworld could neglect the continuing importance of assessment. For example, Kim, 29, assistant director of assessment at Peach Mountain State University, a public, mid-sized institution with an enrollment of just under 20,000 students, said:

> I think about the long-term goals. One issue we're seeing is [that] departments have the same course being taught by different faculty and it's like the idea of making sure that students are learning certain things, hasn't really crossed their mind. They're thinking that 'I want [students] to learn this or that,' but we must have some sort of standardization. We must make sure that all students are learning what they need them to learn to graduate and become successful outside of the university.

Kim's response is not surprising. She, like many assessment administrators, struggles with having the lifeworld understand that assessment is bigger than their individual classroom. When faculty successfully perform assessment efforts in their classes, it helps to demonstrate the value of the individual course. At the same time, it is important to align institution-level assessment with matters of student success at the college or university level (see Suskie, 2009). Leah, 27, assessment coordinator at Douglass University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) with a little over 12,000 students elaborated on this point by saying:

> ...[assessment] is vital to student success. That's the bullet point. Assessment Is vital to student success! If there is no measurement, if there is no evaluation of student learning, how can we as educators comfortably say we have taught OR that our students have learned a set of concepts? Or [even] one conceptual item. If we're not measuring that beyond a test… [This can occur] in multiple forms in a qualitative and or a quantitative grading situation. So, I think that would be the biggest overarching theme, and I think it needs to be communicated.

Such statements are powerful because they describe assessment's role in helping an institution move forward. River, 33, associate dean at Common Good College, a community college that serves 13,000 students said: "In this administrative role, I recognize [that assessment efforts] collectively moves students in [right] direction…and the College towards being more successful towards how it affects completion rates. I really appreciate that [perspective that] you sometimes don't get to see as a faculty member." The long-term orientation that River describes is connected to the institution's long-term vitality (see Barnett & Cho, 2023).

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With an increased focus on institutional data to demonstrate value, systemsworld members agree that the lifeworld should engage in the assessment process with a long-term focus.

Assessment responds to external stakeholders

This second theme is situated in the sociality of the current American higher education environment–and its relation to external stakeholders. Public trust in higher education is down from 69% to 55% between the years 2019 and 2022 (Fishman et al., 2022). As a result, colleges and universities strongly rely on institution-level assessment data to demonstrate their value. Christopher, 41, an executive director for institutional effectiveness at John Adams University, a large public institution educating over 30,000 students said:

> The [assessment] data that we're using today is used to show external stakeholders, the politicians, the legislators, the businesses…how wonderfully our students are critically thinking, communicating orally, and writing to external audiences. [So, then] we need to demonstrate that. They can't just take our word for it…and I think that is particularly important in today's political environment. We are trying to give the institution [as much student learning data as possible] …And the faculty have the tools to answer the questions that external stakeholders are asking, because they want us to show the value of a university education and show us why [our] graduates are uniquely qualified to do X, Y or Z. That's what the assessment is doing.

Responding to the needs of external stakeholders is part of today's higher education landscape. Not doing so might result in additional declines in support (e.g., funding) to successfully manage an institution. Since the Great Recession (2007-2009) state funding for public higher education has declined precipitously with a 6.6-billion-dollar gap (Mitchell et al., 2019). Regional accreditors are also an external stakeholder group that heavily influences assessment activity. Morris, 43, assistant vice president for institutional effectiveness and assessment at Jack University, a mid-size public institution that enrolls over 23,000 students said: "If you're in the SACSCOC region, all institutions received the email noting that a pandemic is not a reason to stop doing assessment, so we [put our faculty] on notice we have to continue assessments." The present higher education environment involves responding to the needs–and sometimes demands–of constituency groups outside of the institution. The systemsworld described their desire for lifeworld members to appreciate the larger impact of assessment in higher education. Externally, using assessment data to document student learning helps to gain the support of donors, and, in the case of public colleges and universities, gain the support of the legislators who determine state budgets with monies allocated to institutions.

Assessment was impacted by the pandemic

This third theme relates to the place of assessment. Traditionally, qualitative research considered "place" to be primarily physical in nature (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2006). During the COVID-19 pandemic, college and university operations around the world shifted from mostly in-person to virtual. It is crucial, then, to expand the notion of place to virtual experiences. As noted by Morris, assessment work did not stop during the pandemic. Betty, 52, assistant vice chancellor for institutional effectiveness at Knight Spring State University, a mid-size-public institution with over 30,000 students, said:

> ...I like to say that our institutions are just one crisis away from the next crisis. This could happen again–something else could happen again. So, we want to make sure that [faculty] use and collect our assessment properly, if there is another crisis. [Ultimately,] you learn from this crisis.

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While the pandemic years negatively impacted some institutions, other colleges and universities still managed to successfully complete their assessment cycles. Joyce, 45, director of assessment at Westland State University, a large, public institution serving close to 30,000 students presented a counter-narrative by stating:

> ...In spring 2020, we sent out an email [to faculty] saying that we understood the quick switch to online, so all our assessment reporting for everything was optional. Not many took that option, most of them were still able to assess their programs.

The pandemic was a difficult time for all institutions of higher education, but for the systemsworld, it presented new challenges for the assessment of student learning. In some instances, the assessment process ran smoothly during COVID-19, but some systemsworld members had difficulty getting the lifeworld on board with the switch to SLO assessment for online assignments.

Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

The LSF and CNI were unique lenses to investigate assessment needs from institutional constituencies in higher education. The results from the present study provide practical insights and policy implications and expand theoretical knowledge in the field of assessment. Below, we discuss the study's significance for practitioners, policy framers, and scholars.

Practice

Our findings serve as a tool for practitioners to better advance assessment efforts at their college or university. First, the themes from RQ1 demonstrate that the lifeworld wants assessment work to be a meaningful experience and not a time waster. Sharaca, Bob, and Daphne all contend that at times the systemsworld does not recognize the time commitment beyond teaching and research to serve the institution through assessment. From this theme, we see that a purposeful assessment process does not stop at lifeworld participation but extends to sharing assessment results with the lifeworld (see Suskie, 2004, 2009, 2018). In addition, meaningful assessment experiences can be linked to the resources that the institution respects, and in some cases, provides to the lifeworld for completing this task. The mental resources of persuasion were evident in Sophie's narrative as she worked to get her lifeworld colleagues on board with the assessment process. Systemsworld professionals should be conscious of the labor that the lifeworld endures, especially at institutions wherein assessment is perceived negatively. Monetary resources are also a tool that institutions can further explore to support the additional time and labor. Shacara's story articulates the need for financial compensation for the lifeworld, as an incentive to remain active participants in the assessment process.

The results from RQ2 paint a different picture regarding systemsworld assessment needs. Assessment practitioners want their lifeworld counterparts to understand that assessment has a long-term focus. Kim, Leah, and River point to assessment's usefulness in long-term student success. Colleges and universities have a mandate to provide evidence of student achievement, and assessment helps to tell student success stories. At a time when public trust in higher education is in decline (see Fishman et al., 2022), institutions should use student learning data to articulate the value of higher education. However, the lifeworld faculty members must first support their systemsworld counterparts in this endeavor. Responding to the public's opinion about higher education's worth is not the only aspect of viewing assessment as bigger than one individual instructor. Christopher noted that systemsworld professionals also must concern themselves with the demands from legislatures, alumni, and donors. These stakeholder groups are essential to ensuring the success of an institution. The commentary displayed in both RQs provides an opportunity for the lifeworld and the systemsworld. Perhaps, the systemsworld can better educate their campus communities about ways that

assessment serves the greater ethos and operations of a college or university. Doing so could be a large step in helping the lifeworld members see their role in supporting the institution.

Policy

The most immediate policy implication comes from RQ1 as it relates to academic freedom. With recent challenges to faculty tenure in several states, including Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and Texas (see Stein, 2023), lifeworld members are genuinely concerned about how administrative required activities (e.g., assessment) might influence their standing within the institution. Reasonably, the lifeworld wants to know–how does assessment hinder academic freedom, and what does the institution's policy say about the matter? J'Dos and Daphne were troubled by the systemsworld demanding student learning assessment changes in their classroom, without respecting the sense of ownership that higher education faculty have in their classrooms. Therefore, the systemsworld must exercise assessment efforts with caution. It would be beneficial for colleges and universities to include assessment "boundaries" in their academic freedom policies. Such boundaries can include explicit statements about assessment's role in the classroom, and how it will not interfere with academic freedom or one's tenure status at the institution. This effort can subsequently reduce faculty resistance to assessment and create a more holistic assessment culture in higher education.

Theory

Every field of study has the responsibility of extending its own theoretical knowledge. In our research, we expanded Sergiovanni's (2000, 2004) LSF to study American higher education. Other frameworks exist in the assessment literature, such as the Relate, Acknowledge, Reflect, and Empower (RARE) Model (see Leaderman & Polychronopoulos, 2019). Fulcher et al. (2014) developed the assess, intervene, and re-assess framework. As colleges and universities continue to use assessment data to articulate their missions and value to the world, theoretical scholarship will become more important. The understanding gleaned from this study can initiate a promising path in this direction. For instance, constructing an interdisciplinary framework for responding to assessment needs might serve a field of assessment in a productive manner. Our findings indicate interdisciplinary thought and perspectives from multiple points of inquiry, such as business, communication, education, and psychology. These unique perspectives in the data reflected the disciplinary experiences of assessment professionals and faculty. Indeed, assessment participants come to the assessment space from a variety of backgrounds, which influences the way that individuals conceptualize assessment in higher education and how to address assessment challenges on college campuses. All in all, the theoretical voids in the present literature led to our interest in studying this topic. Expanding theoretical knowledge is important for advancing the field of institutional assessment in higher education.

Limitations and Recommendations for Research

This study is not without limitations. The limitations in this study serve as a guide for future research. First, this study is limited by the number of lifeworld participants. We only had 5 lifeworld professionals take part in the study, which does not include the full spectrum of lifeworld experiences in higher education. Our intention was to expand that portion of our sample, but we reached saturation (Creswell, 2013) where no new data emerged after those interviews. At the same time, narrative inquiry samples are generally smaller in size, but to expand research on this topic, future research should interview more faculty (around 15-20). A second major limitation surrounds the ranking of the representatives from the lifeworld. We only interview tenured and tenure-track faculty. Non-tenure-track faculty members are an important percentage of the professoriate and often play a significant role in the assessment process. This group is more likely to teach general education courses in which members of the systemsworld gather data to assess foundational skills desired by employers. Moving forward, scholars should explore the lived experiences of non-tenure-track lifeworld members, as their insights may yield

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different findings from their tenure-track and tenured counterparts. Finally, we only gathered assessment experiences that were retrospective or in the moment. It is possible that these experiences change due to a variety of factors, and it would be advantageous to conduct longitudinal research on this topic.

Conclusion

Institutional assessment processes are most meaningful when campus stakeholders can learn about each other's needs in this effort. The two core narratives emerged as keen insights from representatives of the lifeworld and the systemsworld. Both parties must work together to have a successful assessment experience. The lived experiences in this study demonstrate the concern that both parties have for one another. Findings from the present study have implications for practice, policy, and theory. It is our hope that these findings help colleges and universities to build a stronger culture of assessment in higher education.

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