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Including Authentic Student Voice in your Assessment Story

Kathy S. Kremer, Ph.D.

Author Note

Kathy S. Kremer, ORCID iD: 0009-0007-9472-7807

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Abstract: Authentic student voice within the assessment of student learning requires meaningful student input and institutional support. Previous examinations of this topic have primarily linked student voice with two approaches: student representation and student partnership. This 2023 AALHE Conference session introduced a third approach: student leadership. A case study from a Midwestern college is used to exemplify this approach. It is suggested that student-led assessment improves the authenticity of student voice and the reliability of assessment results. Additionally, for institutions that prioritize leadership development, student-led assessment can demonstrate the achievement of this goal as students fill a leadership role in their institutions.

Keywords: *higher education, assessment, student voice, student leadership, cocurricular assessment*

Introduction

The impetus for this 2023 AALHE Conference session¹ began at the 2022 Higher Learning Commission's Annual Conference where Dr. Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade, whose scholarship explores critical pedagogy in urban education, was an invited speaker. Critical pedagogy responds to locally identified inequalities (Freire, 1970) and supports academic skill development in communities where existing structures and practices have not met the local needs of students and others (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). In his keynote remarks, Duncan-Andrade posed a question (paraphrased here) to the higher education administrators and faculty members present: "*Are we listening to what students need, or telling them what we think they need?*"

This question has application to the assessment of student learning in higher education. Curricular and cocurricular student learning outcomes are almost always developed by faculty and staff members or government and accrediting bodies. Faculty and staff members develop the measures used to determine if students meet the learning outcomes. While the artifacts and assessment data come from our students, it is faculty and staff members who complete the assessment; review and interpret the results; and identify improvements to be made. Although intended to be for their benefit, students are

¹ The Hope College Student Congress Assessment initiative was previously presented as "Student-Designed Assessment of Institutional Effectiveness" at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Higher Learning Commission. This manuscript benefits from the work of Elizabeth Bassett and Joshua Haddad who developed and led the program from 2021-2023, and were presenters at the HLC conference.

rarely included in these processes. Can we honestly say, then, that we have listened to what students need within the assessment of student learning?

Student Voice in Higher Education

The argument that students should shape and contribute to their education is found across higher education practices and publications. In her comprehensive exploration of the literature, Seale (2009) notes that, while the term is used broadly, this has been generally captured in the higher education lexicon as “student voice.”

In their review, Matthews and Dollinger (2022) identify and make distinctions between the two dominant approaches for implementing student voice in higher education: student representation and student partnership. Student representation is primarily found within higher education governance, where it is considered to be a form of citizenship or democratization of decision-making. This often includes the selection or election of one or more students who then represent their peers. Models of this approach vary across different countries, some of which require student representation in decision-making bodies. Overall, student representation reflects “the idea of collective responsibility” (Matthews & Dollinger, 2022, p. 557).

A student partnership approach to including student voice in higher education involves practices where students are co-creators or partners with others, often referred to as students as partners or SaP (Matthews, 2017). The literature identifies an array of practices and numerous benefits to students through SaP. A 2017 review found that 92% of SaP’s were partnerships between students and academics/teaching staff/faculty/tutors (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Both the student representation and student partnership approaches have limitations. Within student representation, those students who are selected or elected may not fully reflect the diversity of the student body they are meant to represent. The complexities and constraints in accessing student-faculty partnerships in higher education can limit whose voices are heard in the student partnership approach (Holen et al., 2021; Marquis et al., 2018).

Bain (2010) notes the value of increasing student voice in higher education and assessment processes. When we increase student voices in education, we move toward students’ taking on responsibility for learning. She challenges traditional practices of teacher-directed and institutionally imposed assessment methods in favor of creating spaces in higher education for dialogue between students and educators that value and validate student experiences, including student perceptions of assessment. However, as Bain notes, “In the dominant discourses of education and assessment there appears to be little place for student voice” (Bain, 2010, p. 18).

The Student Leadership Approach

This conference session proposed an expansion to the framework of incorporating student voice that goes beyond student representation and student partnership. What is proposed is a third approach, student leadership, which can address the limitations of student representation and student

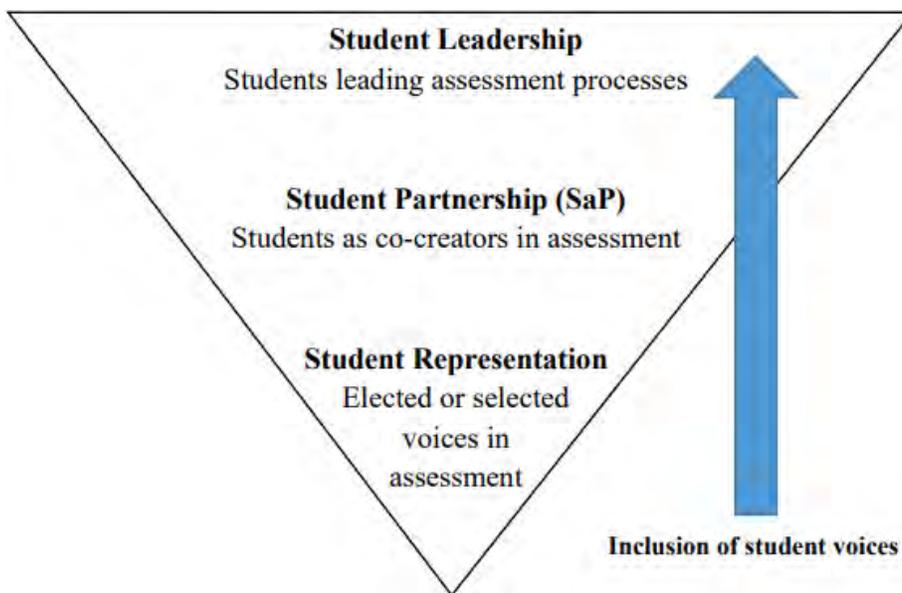


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partnership. Within student leadership, as illustrated in this case study, students proactively and inclusively develop and lead assessment activities for the institution in a process that increases student voices and removes the power dynamics that can be present within the other two approaches.

Figure 1

Framework of approaches to including student voice in assessment processes



The student leadership approach is grounded in critical pedagogy and participatory action research and draws from elements of community-based research. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) provide a set of core principles for effective critical pedagogy, which apply to the proposed student leadership approach to assessment.

1. The project or research must be compelling and clarify why students should invest their time and energy
2. The critical counter-culture in which the project or research is embedded must include high expectations/excellence and social justice with connections to local and national issues
3. Students must be able to identify and use what they are learning to directly act upon and impact their lives
4. Students must have opportunities to reflect upon and evaluate their work, and move forward based on what they have learned with an understanding that they are creating a momentum that is larger than a single project

The student leadership approach to assessment also draws from participatory action research (PAR). PAR uses non-hierarchical partnerships of community members and their community-based knowledge to research real-life community issues. PAR within student leadership expands the number

of students engaged in assessment processes – addressing the participation limitations of the student representation approach. PAR relies upon the real-life experiences of students to interpret assessment results and identify improvements - addressing the power structures that can be found in student- faculty partnerships. The student leadership approach also draws from community-based research methods. Specifically, developing research models that democratize knowledge and de-emphasize hierarchy (including the faculty-student power differential) with the goal of social change.

Consistent with the conference theme, this session began with the story of one Michigan college where students took action to develop and lead the institutional assessment of cocurricular programs and student support services. Session participants were challenged to consider this approach and explore opportunities for student-led assessment at their institutions.

An Assessment Story

Hope College, located in Michigan, is a private Christian liberal arts college. The college has approximately 3,200 students who are primarily full-time, reside in college housing, and actively participate in various cocurricular and extracurricular activities including the Student Congress.

Hope has a highly engaged representative student governance structure that holds weekly open meetings. The Student Congress represents and promotes the welfare of the student body and initiates policy in areas of student concern, including academics, administrative relations, the quality of student life, and allocating budgets for student organizations. For example, Student Congress added a Culture and Inclusion Committee in 2019 which has created initiatives to empower student organizations and bridge the gap between inclusion and representation.

Student Congress is the 40+ member official liaison between the student body and the administration. Members include a President and Vice-President elected by the student body with additional officers selected by the Congress; representatives elected by each undergraduate class; 28 representatives elected by residence halls and neighborhoods; and up to 5 general campus representatives.

Hope College has taken steps to incorporate student voice in campus processes. Each year the Student Congress appoints representatives to each college/faculty governance committee. The wording of college learning outcomes was recently updated to be more easily applied to students' real-world experiences, and administration and faculty meet with Student Congress for feedback on curricular and cocurricular matters. These steps, however, are primarily driven by the administration, faculty, and staff and are not led by students.



From 2018 to 2021, the college faculty engaged in a revision of the long-standing general education core. The committee charged with this work - without student representation - began conversations with the Student Congress in 2020 to gain their feedback on the revised general education proposal. Congress members were dissatisfied with the diversity and inclusion requirements in the proposed revision and also with the late date of including student input. Their proposals to the General Education Revision Task Force requested an expansion of the diversity and inclusion requirements including increased expectations for courses designated as meeting the diversity and inclusion requirement. In the end, some components of the Student Congress requests were incorporated into the revised 2021 general education plan, while others were not.

This experience proved to be pivotal for student governance. In early 2021, the Student Congress developed the Student Congress Assessment process: an opportunity for all students to assess how well they are being served in support of their education. The Congress' stated reasons for this new initiative included positioning Student Congress as proactive rather than reactive and ensuring equity and inclusion for student access and benefit.² Individual Congress leaders at that time indicated their feelings of being in the position of reacting to things brought to them by the faculty and staff rather than being involved from the beginning. They also felt they were in the position of reacting to students who brought them their issues with programs and services, rather than being involved in improving those programs and services to better meet student needs.

The administration's response to the introduction of this student-led assessment process was mixed, with some college leaders expressing that students would not have enough information to adequately assess the programs and services that supported their education. But in the end, and following much discussion, the college administration chose to view this as an opportunity for students to live our mission and advance cocurricular assessment – an area for growth at the college. The new initiative was developed and implemented in the summer and fall of 2021.

At the beginning of each semester, the Student Congress administers an indirect assessment of three cocurricular programs or student support services. The process is guided by the Student Congress Assessment Committee which works with an undergraduate student researcher from the college social science research center to develop and administer the questionnaire to all students. Items are developed using national standards from the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). Each assessment includes an item asking about discrimination the student may have experienced in their interactions with each of the three areas being assessed and an open-ended question for students to share any additional information regarding each program or

² Student Congress Assessment Committee Mission, 2020. The Student Congress Assessment Committee serves to evaluate the ways that Hope College's co-curricular structures and services serve students. The Assessment Committee, Frost Center for Data and Research, and Student Congress task forces will partner with various departments to assess Hope College's structures and services to determine how effectively they are serving all students at Hope College. The Assessment Committee will utilize a transparent and sustainable structure to make Hope College an institution that proactively prevents discrimination or bias on the basis of race; color; national origin; sex; disability; age; cultural identity; ethnicity; nationality; citizenship; family educational history; political or religious affiliation; sexual orientation; gender identity and expression; marital, family, social, or economic status.

service. To increase awareness of the opportunity and support response rates, the Student Congress has shortened the assessment administration to one week with a high level of social media and outreach to students.

The undergraduate researcher from the social science research center supports survey development, administers the survey, and prepares a report of aggregate survey findings. Student demographic data are embedded in the online survey to aid in the comparison of responses by sex, year in college, race

and ethnicity, and socio-economic indicators. The only component of the assessment administration and analysis that is not completed by students is removing personally identifiable information (PII), which is completed by Institutional Research.

The Student Congress Assessment Committee works closely with the programs and services being assessed and conducts staff interviews during the semester regarding the challenges staff are facing as they serve our students. At the end of the semester, final reports with recommendations for action are prepared by the Student Congress Assessment Committee for each unit being assessed. The recommendations for action are based on results from the indirect assessment completed by the student body and the information gathered in interviews with the program or service. Draft reports are first shared with the program or service being assessed and then the full Student Congress reviews and approves the reports. Programs and services being assessed respond in writing within three months with an improvement plan. Reports and plans for improvement are posted to the Student Congress Assessment Committee website for all students to read and for other members of the campus community to access. Each semester, the Student Congress Assessment Committee leadership and Student Congress President present the assessment results to the 28-member college Cabinet. They also make assessment presentations to the college Board of Trustees.

The Student Congress cocurricular program and student support services assessments are scheduled on a three-year cycle. The first round of assessments will be completed at the end of the 2023-24 academic year with assessments completed for 24 programs and services. The second three-year assessment cycle will begin in the Fall Semester of 2024 using the reports and plans for improvement developed in the first assessment cycle.

Institutional Benefits of Authentic Study Voice

The student leadership approach to assessment, as exemplified in this case study, has had benefits for students and the institution.

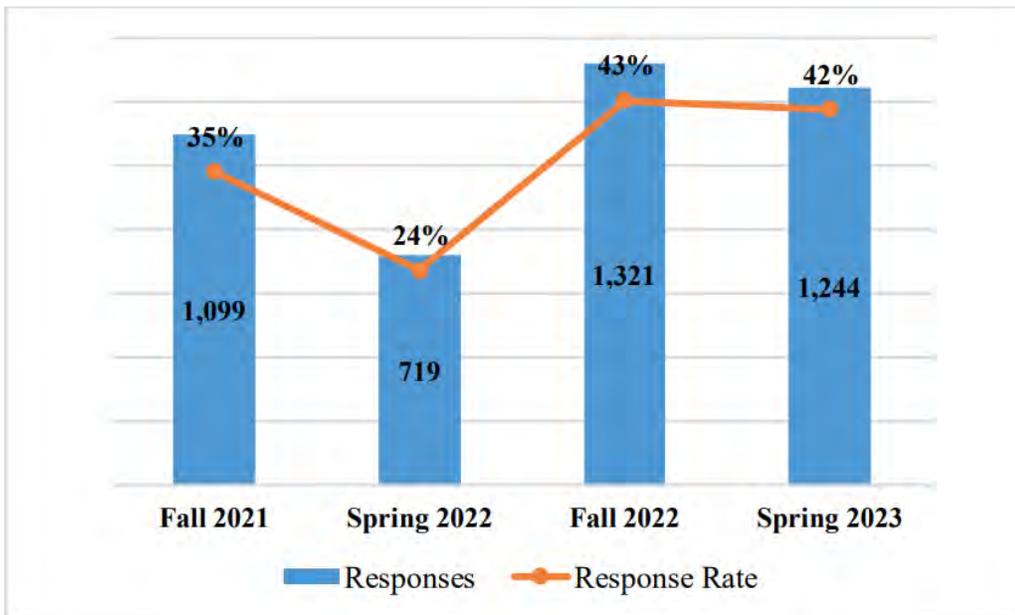
1. This assessment process was initiated by students, designed by students, is led by students, and leads to a set of recommendations for institutional action from our students. This changes the direction of standard assessment practice in higher education. In a new way, students have stepped into an institutional leadership role.

Leadership development has emerged as a priority in higher education (Devies & Guthrie, 2022), including at Hope College.³ When students lead assessment processes, they are taking on responsibility for their education. Their leadership also contributes to and benefits the institution. At Hope, they are living the mission and demonstrating they are prepared for “lives of leadership and service” – what our mission intends for them.

2. In the first four semesters of this assessment, student response rates have averaged 36 percent, with the two most recent surveys receiving 43 and 42 percent response rates respectively. This response rate is higher than most college all-student assessments and survey administrations and provides a higher level of confidence in the results.

Figure 2

Student Congress Assessment responses and response rates across four semesters



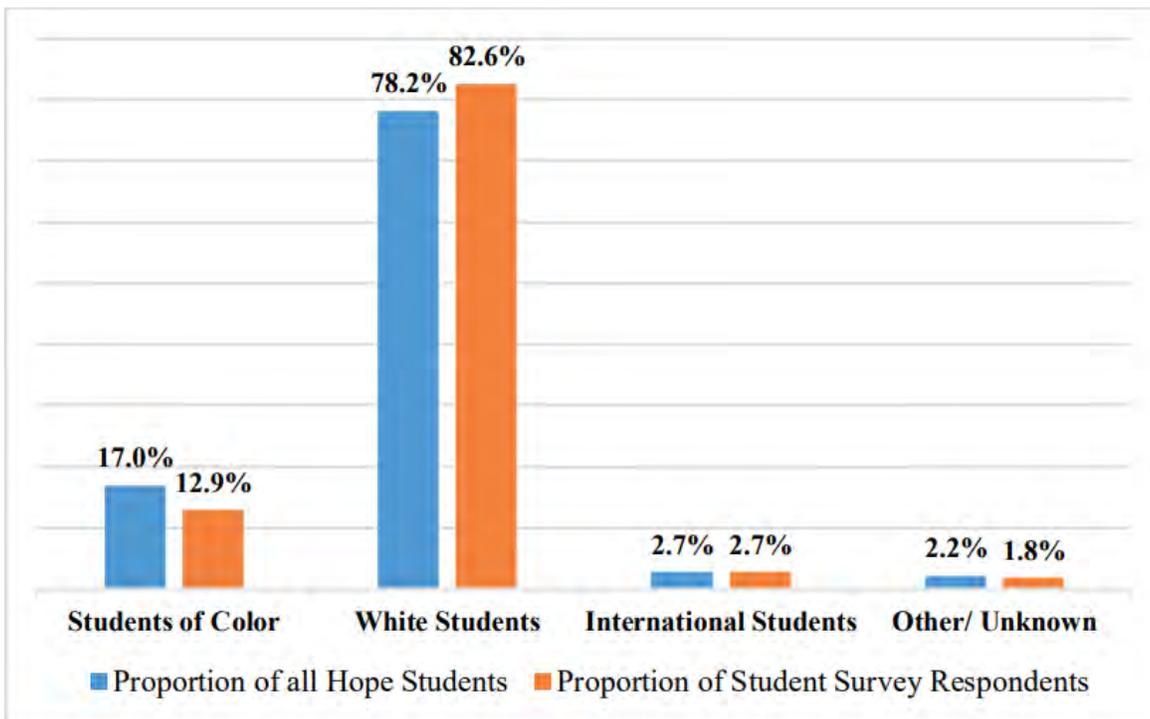
3. In support of their commitment to include all student voices, the Student Congress conducts social media outreach across the one-week assessment administration and encourages participation through multicultural student organizations. While not perfectly representative, responses to the Student Congress Assessments are generally more representative of our student body than other all-student assessments and surveys, including those administered by external vendors. As the Spring 2023 Student Congress Assessment data demonstrate, the response rates from international students and students of color are at or close to the proportions of our overall student population

³ “The mission of Hope College is to educate students for lives of leadership and service in a global society through academic and co-curricular programs of recognized excellence in the liberal arts and in the context of the historic Christian faith.” www.hope.edu/about

and the data can be analyzed in ways that include the voices of all students. This is an improvement from the student representation approach to student voice where those students selected or elected may not reflect the diversity of the full student body they are meant to represent. It is also an improvement from college attempts at including all voices through surveys where low response rates from international students and students of color limit the voices being considered in institutional decisions and change.

Figure 3

Student Congress Assessment responses and response rates across four semesters



4. Student Congress has developed systems to sustain its assessment work. They have formalized in their constitution the leadership positions of Chief of Assessment and Chief of Assessment- Elect. The Student Congress Assessment Committee includes additional students who work with them on the initiative while preparing to step into those leadership roles. Two members of the Student Congress Assessment Committee serve on the college governance Assessment Committee, serving as liaisons between student and faculty governance. The leadership of the Student Congress Assessment initiative regularly conveys process updates to the Dean of Students and Sr. Director for Assessment and Accreditation.

Contributions of Conference Colleagues

Participants in this conference dialogue session submitted questions before and during the session. While the questions and conversation were far-reaching, there were two particular areas of contribution.

After sharing the case of Hope College and our experience with students leading cocurricular and support services assessment, the dialogue session participants paired and shared experiences from their institutions. Most of their examples and possibilities for students to lead assessment processes were curricular rather than cocurricular. Session participants primarily identified opportunities at their institutions for students to lead the assessment of general education and program learning outcomes.

This was interesting given that at Hope College it was the cocurricular where students entered assessment leadership, despite the influence of their 2020 experience with the general education revision on the development of Student Congress Assessment. When queried on this difference after the conference, one former Hope student leader indicated that this came down to jurisdiction: Student Congress works primarily with administrative matters rather than academic matters. This leader also pointed to considerations of power dynamics between students and faculty and that “faculty own the curricula.” Students anticipated pushback from faculty if they entered curricular assessment leadership. While this former student supported curricular student assessment leadership, they anticipated it would come with political complications around who “owns” academic decisions. At the outset, Hope’s Student Congress recognized the difficulty of making space for student voice within institutional structures and perceived that cocurricular and student support programs would be more receptive to student voice, data, and recommendations. Given the roles of AALHE Conference participants (e.g. assessment professionals, academic leaders, faculty members) these considerations may not have been at the top of mind as they would be among students at their home institutions.

Most questions posed before and within the session were pragmatic: “how to” questions. This led to a conversation around the need to seize naturally occurring opportunities to engage student voice in assessment rather than developing “a program for students.” This is where the core principles for effective critical pedagogy proposed by Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) might provide guidance as institutions look for opportunities on their campuses. It seemed that theoretically including student voice in assessment processes was easier to process for session participants than identifying process implementation in a way that preserves the integrity of student leadership and authentic student voice.

Summary and Next Steps

This session provided a case study from one Midwestern college and posited an extension of the framework for including student voice in higher education: the student leadership approach. Just as we continue to do with the student representation and student partnership approaches to including student voice, identifying additional examples and refining the student leadership approach are needed. Application of all three approaches specifically to assessment processes is worthy of additional focus. One example of note is the student partnership work focused on authentic student voice reported by Burke Reifman et al. (2022).

Leadership development has emerged as a priority in higher education (Devies & Guthrie, 2022), and student leadership in assessment can demonstrate the achievement of leadership-based student learning outcomes. Devies and Guthrie (2022) identified 842 U.S. college and university mission

statements that included 'leader(s)' and/or 'leadership,' suggesting that the Hope College case could have application to other institutions.

This discussion also linked authentic student voice through student leadership to critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008; Freire 1970). Connecting elements of critical pedagogy to the practice of assessment differentiates the student leadership approach from the previously identified approaches to including student voice which originate from the administration or faculty. Student leaders' decisions regarding entry points into the assessment of student learning and considerations of power dynamics are additional areas for exploration.

The author appreciates the positive reception of the student leadership approach and its applicability to assessment processes. Conversations within the 2023 AALHE Conference session and with assessment professionals during and after the conference continue to shape this extension of our framework for including student voice in higher education assessment.

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About the Author

Kathy S. Kremer, Senior Director of Assessment and Accreditation, Hope College, kremerk@hope.edu