

# Chapter 1: Understanding Practitioner-Driven Assessment and Evaluation Efforts for Social Justice

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*This chapter presents findings from a national survey that sought to capture the ways practitioners work to integrate both assessment and social justice into their work as central concepts and practices that guide their efforts in student affairs. In so doing, these practitioners are working to reclaim assessment from the traditional, dominant framing of assessment work through neoliberal lenses and advance social justice in higher education.*

A combination of internal and external demands on student affairs has increasingly called the student affairs field to demonstrate that the work they do matters by showing tangible outcomes related to student success. State and federal reporting and accountability mandates are being imposed within an increasingly tight financial environment for public colleges and universities (Kochan & Locke, 2010). The general public has also turned more attention to what students gain out of the college experience, calling for measurable demonstration of the value of higher education (Baker, 2004; Collins & Roberts, 2012).

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This has resulted in increased accountability pressures being imposed on higher education more generally, with student affairs taking center within these debates. Assessment practice, at current, has been accused of holding higher education to goals not centered on serving the public good but instead “risk becoming the tools of a neoliberal push toward the commodification of education more generally” (Hursch & Wall, 2011). One reason that may help explain this is Ewell’s (2009) argument that the paradigms that underlie improvement and accountability differ enough from those of learning that it creates a tension for educators:

Within the ‘Improvement Paradigm,’ the intent is to use the resulting information to enhance teaching and learning. Within the ‘Accountability Paradigm,’ in contrast, the intent is to use information to demonstrate to policy makers and the public that the enterprise they fund is effective and worth supporting. (p. 9)

As student affairs is increasingly situated as a space of learning (Keeling, 2006), Ewell’s explanation helps us understand the ways current accountability systems fail to promote learning or other goals of holistic development which fall greatly on the shoulders of student affairs professionals. More can be done within this arena to reclaim assessment as an internally-driven responsibility and better align it with serving the public good through students’ experiences.

One such area of challenge is within the scope of social justice development within student affairs. Student affairs professionals and leaders can play a vital role in enacting social justice on college campuses through student development and advocacy. Social justice is both a process and a product (Bell, 2007), involving not just outcomes of anti-oppressive work but reflective of the engagements to achieve broader equity goals as well. It requires holistic and deep engagement to push beyond platitudes of diversity and color blindness to work towards inclusion, fairness, equity, and ameliorating the injustices caused by social inequity and

oppression. Such important goals would sensibly also be part of the accountability agenda. However, given how assessment is typically framed, the work of social justice falls periphery to assessment efforts. Further, as the outcomes of social justice and much of the work of student affairs are difficult to quantify, traditional assessment approaches fail to capture the impact of social justice work. However, some research indicates that practitioners are working to merge these concepts to advance and reclaim social justice within assessment work (e.g., Bourke, 2016; Zerquera, Berumen, & Pender, 2017). Yet, more is needed to examine the ways practitioners are working to merge these worlds in their practice.

Thus, the purpose of the study at hand was to examine the ways in which student affairs practitioners are employing social justice in assessment work. This chapter presents findings from a national survey that sought to capture the ways practitioners work to integrate both assessment and social justice into their work as central concepts and practices that guide their efforts in student affairs. In so doing, these practitioners are working to reclaim assessment from the traditional, dominant framing of assessment work through neoliberal lenses and advance social justice in higher education.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For the sake of this chapter, we invoke a similar definition of social justice as employed by the issue editors. Bell's (2007) conceptualization of social justice emphasizes the concept as constituting both a goal as well as process. As a goal, it aims for "full and equal participation" of all groups within a context that is mutually shaped to meet needs, with equitable distribution of resources, whereby all are safe and secure physically and psychologically and able to realize their full selves (p.1). The process for achieving justice is to be democratic, participatory, inclusive, affirming, and collaborative. Thus, as we conceive of it, social justice-focused assessment integrates these aspects of the definition throughout the entire process—in identifying aims of the assessment, in study design, and in how assessment results are interpreted and used to inform change.

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Typically, assessment and social justice are seen as both peripheral and additive to the work of student affairs, as opposed to being central and integrated in the way the work is done. The following captures this situating of assessment within the work of student affairs and is followed by a discussion of the tenuous relationship between social justice and assessment agendas. These tensions are put in communication with social movement theory which provides a theoretical framing for the actions of practitioners who are working to push through these challenges and enact social justice assessment. This derived framework informed the survey content and provided the lens for our analysis.

### **Challenges to Implementing Social Justice-Focused Assessment in Student Affairs**

Professionals may find themselves at a loss when it comes to demonstrating tangible outcomes related to student success. Student affairs practitioners and administrators often lack the proper training to do assessment work, hindering well-intentioned efforts and further exacerbating the dilemma (Seagraves & Dean, 2010; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). Sufficient methodological training and a culture of assessment are essential for the work and often lacking (Bresciani, 2010; Schuh, 2013). Further, campuses do not always provide adequate support for the effective implementation of assessment efforts, lacking sufficient leadership investment and structural resources (Swing & Coogan, 2010).

Professionals in student affairs, institutional research, and campus assessment with an interest and passion for social justice may be at an even greater loss in seeking to assess their work and demonstrate its value to external audiences. Many of the assessment approaches employed today are misaligned with social justice agendas, failing to adequately inform decisions about how best to support marginalized student populations within higher education (Bowman, 2013; Dowd, Sawatzky, & Korn, 2011; Wall, Hursh, & Rodgers, 2014). The political nature of assessment can impede value attributed to results (Sanders, 1994; Wehlberg, 2008; Upcraft, 2003) and foster fear with those trying to make change from the findings (Astin & Lee,

2003). There is insufficient critical reflection in the processes and outcomes of assessment to make findings meaningful for social justice agendas (Ryder & Kimball, 2015; Sadler, 2007).

The absence of useful assessment models and a dearth of social-justice focused administrators within higher education compound the barriers of inadequate training and institutional support. Limitations of methodological approaches typically implemented in assessment perpetuates inequities and silence minoritized groups (Nussbaum, 2006; Stage, 2007). There is a risk of unfair evaluation of students when implementing commonly used, highly differentiated evaluation systems (McArthur, 2015). Additionally, standard assessment approaches have masked the experiences of Students of Color on college campuses, silencing distinct, negative experiences which oftentimes differ from those of their white counterparts (Dowd, Sawatzky, & Korn, 2011). At the same time, benchmarks that over-emphasize quantitative data for ease of comparison often fail to account for social justice outcomes and provide metrics that inhibit the methodological creativity possible (Wall et al., 2015).

Alternative models of assessment have been suggested. For instance, several scholars have advocated for centering learning outcomes and foregrounding the beneficiaries of social justice curricula within assessment work (McArthur, 2015; Wall et al., 2014). Others have advocated for the expansion of methodological approaches to assessment work, including the implementation of reflexive praxis (Ryder & Kimball, 2015) and the incorporation of more voices in the design, implementation, and meaning-making related to assessment projects (McArthur, 2015; Schwandt, 2003; Zerquera, Berumen, & Pender, 2017).

Additionally, case studies from institutions across the country demonstrate a growing focus on trying to center assessment within a social justice agenda. For instance, Zerquera and colleagues (2017) describe an assessment approach which utilized participatory action research as a framework. This approach utilized resident advisors as assessors of residential experiences. The process of developing assessment tools and making meaning from the data involved collaboration across the housing department, including students. The findings from

this case study demonstrate how the social justice mission of the housing department could be evaluated and upheld throughout the assessment process via participatory methodology and centering the social justice outcomes being measured.

This example, among others, raises questions about the extent to which others are engaging in similar work within their own individual student affair silos. In light of the many challenges facing those embarking on assessment work, this study seeks to better understand the ways professionals engaged in social justice and assessment work are navigating the political and structural environment to implement a social justice-centered assessment agenda. Some research suggests that this type of work is happening, and it is imperative that these stories are captured and practitioners' challenges and successes inform practice in the field. The lessons that can be learned from existing efforts are essential for pushing forward equity-minded assessment within the field of student affairs and across higher education more broadly.

### **Viewing Social Justice-Focused Assessment Through A Social Movement Lens**

Although higher education institutions often espouse social justice commitments in their rhetoric, the actual work of social justice is often much more contested. As some higher education practitioners move to incorporate social justice as a core part of organizational practice (instead of a peripheral element), they may face resistance from a variety of institutional leaders who see this as incompatible with the status quo. Consequently, these practitioners must engage in varied and complex strategies for creating desired change within their organizational settings. Efforts to challenge normative assessment practices can be likened to the collective action seen in social movements. Social movements are generally defined as groups collectively acting "for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part" (Snow, Soule, & Kriesi, 2004, p. 11). Similarly, those student affairs practitioners who seek to make social justice an integral part of assessment work must also work together to confront barriers to implementing these desired changes. Given their

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embeddedness within the institution, these professionals must both critique the inadequacy of existing assessment practices while also creating space for alternative (i.e., social justice-minded) visions of assessment -- effectively creating a sort of movement for social justice-focused assessment within their divisions. Thus, we use theories of social movements to frame our understanding of the work of practitioners in their assessment and social justice work.

**Applying social movement concepts.** Several theoretical traditions have attempted to explain how such challenges to authority arise and the sustainability of those efforts. Each of the following traditions offers a different conceptual understanding of how collective action for social justice-focused assessment may be realized within and across communities of student affairs practitioners.

The resource mobilization perspective views social movements as political challenges that develop through bureaucratic structures and rational processes instead of as irrational, deviant, and/or socially disorganized moments of protest (Buechler, 2004; McAdam & Scott, 2005; McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This perspective emphasizes that a high level of coordination is needed to sustain entrepreneurial movement activity, arguing that movements must be able to acquire resources and support (McAdam & Scott, 2005). In much the same way, practitioners who seek to center social justice in assessment work will not do so through disorganized and disruptive protest that could threaten their position within their division. Rather, practitioners may seek to bring change by intentionally working through existing structures (e.g., staff training, recruitment and hiring, budget planning) in order to gain such important resources as funding for projects related to social justice awareness or the hiring of more social justice minded personnel in the division.

Another framework for understanding social movements is the political process model, which suggests that social movements encounter a political opportunity structure, or set of political conditions, that shapes the emergence and operation of the movement (Campbell, 2005; Kriesi, 2004; McAdam & Scott, 2005). In addition to creating openings for social

movements to emerge, these political conditions also constrain the repertoire of actions that a social movement can engage – including the movement’s strategy, organizational structure, and chances for achieving its goals (Campbell, 2005; Kriesi, 2004; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). From this angle, efforts by student affairs practitioners to create momentum for social justice-oriented assessment may be hindered or helped by the current political conditions on campus. For example, a hiring freeze across campus divisions could hinder a strategy for recruiting more personnel who have familiarity and expertise with social justice. On the other hand, the presence of student activists fighting for more equity and inclusion, for example, could create a campus zeitgeist in which top leadership are open to changes that directly address social justice. Such political conditions could lead student affairs practitioners to employ different sets of tactics in their pursuit of social justice-centered changes to assessment practices.

More recent social movement work emphasizes understanding and analyzing the role of culture in shaping the nature of social movements (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995; Williams, 2004). Whereas the resource mobilization and political process models place an emphasis on *how* structural conditions provide collective actors with the resources to act, culturalist models place emphasis on *why* collective actors come together (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Williams, 2004). This tradition concerns itself with how movements use cultural resources (e.g., language, discourse, symbols) to mobilize movement participants (Swidler, 1995; Williams, 2004). Of particular interest is the study of collective action framing, or how movement actors work to create and sustain meaning for the range of individuals located in and around the social movement (Snow & Benford, 1988). Drawing on Goffman’s (1974) seminal work, framing processes enable individuals to interpret the activities of a social movement, and to “mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). The collective action framing perspective sheds light on the type of cultural work that student affairs practitioners may need to engage in order to build buy-in for foregrounding social justice in assessment work. In a student affairs division where the organizational culture highly values innovation, for example, mobilizing practitioners

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may choose to frame changes to assessment as a unique and signature innovation rather than framing those changes as a “diversity” initiative. Framing desired changes in ways that resonate with either the campus culture or the culture in a student affairs division could be a strategy for disarming possible opponents and recruiting more individuals to the cause.

Collectively, these theoretical traditions assert that both structural and cultural elements catalyze and sustain collective action for social change, and also for organizational change. According to the resource mobilization and political process traditions, challenges to authority may arise from unique configurations in the sociopolitical context, and they derive important resources, strategies, and tactics from the institutional and organizational structures in the environment. Beyond structural considerations, however, culturalist perspectives address the importance of collective identity construction, the framing processes that help both insiders and outsiders make meaning of the movement. Collectively, these perspectives are useful for understanding the work of student affairs practitioners advocating for social justice-centered assessment work. Given that normative assessment practices often lack substantive attention to social justice, efforts to change the status quo require practitioners to challenge authority in thoughtful and strategic ways. For practitioners to navigate this terrain, based on the literature just presented, the assumptions of this study are that they will seek varied resources for supporting social justice in assessment work, pay careful attention to structural and political conditions that may impact their efforts, and draw on cultural aspects of their organizational settings to build buy-in amongst key stakeholders.

### **Methodology**

This framing helps to situate the work of student affairs practitioners to advance social justice within the tensions inherent in assessment work and provides an informative and analytical lens for this study. Given the lack of research on these experiences, the current study captures and examines the ways student affairs practitioners are employing social justice through assessment. The following research questions guided this work: What barriers are

encountered by practitioners in implementing social justice-centered assessment practices in their work? What strategies do practitioners employ in implementing assessment as a part of a social justice agenda in their work in student affairs?

To address these research questions, this study employed an online survey with targeted professionals who currently work in student affairs. Applying our own social justice-centered lens to this research, we were guided by a critical and anti-oppressive research approach (Potts & Brown, 2005; Stage, 2007). Amongst other aims, this body of work acknowledges the ways power structures mediate knowledge and manifest within the research process, centers the revealing of inequities in the aims of research, foregrounds power relationships within research, engages critical reflexivity in the process, and centers the needs of communities being served by the work. In our own work we intentionally included this lens to guide the process in terms of how we defined the aims of the work and whose experiences we centered (i.e., individuals working for justice), incorporating reflexivity across a team with diverse experiences (i.e., research team meetings and conversations across a team that included faculty, researcher, practitioner, and graduate student), decentering of power (i.e., all members' perspectives were included in the framing of the study, the survey design, and meaning making from the data), and focusing on the needs of the community being served (i.e., centering individuals working for justice to meet needs of marginalized populations).

The survey development process was informed by the methodological approaches of DeVellis (2012). This included a robust review of the literature followed by a process of construct development from which survey items were derived and then vetted through the entire research team for multiple rounds of drafting and revision. In this way, the survey grounded our conceptual framework, setting the implementation of a social-justice focused assessment practice as part of broader movements for social justice in student affairs (see Figure 1). Thus, items were developed that captured challenges to social justice work and navigational strategies. Participants were asked, for instance, to assess their perceptions of

colleague and supervisors' understandings of concepts like social justice, oppression, and privilege to gauge a better understanding of how shared definitions of justice may support or impede advancement of social justice within assessment. Other challenges, such as time, resources, and support were also asked about. On the other end, participants were further asked to describe the types of strategies they employed to garner greater support in employing social justice-centered assessment, such as working to garner resources, interjecting in the hiring process, and utilizing networks within and outside of their institution.

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Figure 1 About Here

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The survey was then compiled and sent to a panel of three reviewers who have survey methodology or assessment and social justice expertise; the panel provided one round of reviews for insight into the survey design. After revisions based on their feedback, the survey was then piloted to a small group of student affairs practitioners. They took the survey, which provided meaningful information around survey structure, and were also asked to provide feedback on clarity within the questions themselves. After these two review processes, the final survey was developed and distributed online via Qualtrics.

Participants were recruited nationwide via professional and personal networks. Invitations were sent through a number of student affairs and assessment list-serves, including knowledge communities of the association of Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA) and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), as well as other student affairs organizations like the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) and the association of Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL). Additionally, public messages were posted on social media outlets and personal invitations to professional colleagues extended. The survey was opened in February of 2017 and after three

waves of recruitment, closed in June. Data were analyzed descriptively to highlight trends and note key experiences of barriers and strategies. Data were disaggregated by personal demographics, professional roles, and institutional type. These categories were employed to note key differences across the personal and professional contexts of participants and highlight ways systematic oppression may play out within their own experiences trying to address injustices within their work. Research team meetings supported meaning making of emerging trends and provide direction for further analysis.

### **Findings**

To best address our research questions, our approach to making meaning of the data collected was to focus on describing the richness of the shared experiences captured as opposed to testing relationships and differences between constructs and individual participant experiences. In total, 69 student affairs practitioners and leaders participated, with just 27 participants responding to every question. The lower-than-expected response made it so that we had to carefully consider the extent to which data were disaggregated and crosstabulated, or the relationships analyzed, and how we made sense of the findings. Because of response rates, we position this study as exploratory but informative to starting what necessitates a much deeper conversation and greater attention to the bringing together of social justice and assessment in the field more broadly.

Participants reflected great diversity in where they work and their own personal identities. They largely worked at public (67%) or private (21%) colleges or universities, working in the field on average for 10 years, within their current institutions on average for five years, and within their current positions on average for two years. Just under half of all participants were White (49%), about a quarter were Black and African American (22%), and the remaining third Latinx (10%), Native American (6%), or Asian American or Pacific Islander (14%). Half of participating professionals identify as female, while men made up 39 percent of participants, and the remaining 11 percent identified as gender nonconforming, gender fluid, or

genderqueer. While the majority identified as heterosexual (58%), many participants identified along the sexual orientation spectrum as either gay/lesbian (11%), bisexual (7%), or fluid or queer in their orientation (20%).

**Barriers in Understanding Social Justice**

The barriers that participants encountered in their efforts centered on the overall understanding across their institution of social justice concepts: social justice, oppression, privilege, and power. Overall, participants responded that they felt at least moderately or largely comfortable with these topics. However, participants did not always perceive a shared understanding of these topics amongst their student affairs colleagues. For instance, when asked about their perceptions of immediate colleagues’ understanding of social justice concepts, about a fifth of participants responded that their colleagues did not understand these concepts at all or only to a small extent (see Table 1). This differs from participants’ perceptions of campus administrators—those largely charged with mandating assessment. For this group, almost or more than half of participants thought administrators had no or little understanding of these concepts (see Table 2).

*Table 1. Extent to which perceive colleagues work closely with understand specific social justice concepts*

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	Unsure
Social justice	0%	17%	49%	34%	0%
Oppression	6%	14%	46%	34%	0%
Privilege	3%	14%	51%	31%	0%
Power	6%	11%	54%	29%	0%

*Note: n=35*

*Table 2. Extent to which perceive campus administrators understand specific social justice concepts*

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	Unsure
Social justice	3%	37%	49%	11%	0%
Oppression	6%	49%	40%	6%	0%
Privilege	3%	46%	34%	14%	3%
Power	9%	40%	37%	11%	3%

Note: n=35

### Barriers in Espousing and Enacting Social Justice

The extent to which these understandings of social justice were espoused and enacted by the institution and its actors presented another unique type of barrier. Overall, there were generally high levels of perceived espousal of a social justice mission across the institution, as more than half of all participants saw at least moderate levels of public commitments to social justice (e.g., institutional documents, public addresses, within the institutional mission statement itself). Student affairs leaders, in particular, were largely seen to espouse commitments to social justice in their interactions with students and families (80%) (see Table 3).

Table 3. Extent to which see social justice espoused by institution.

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	Unsure
Institutional mission statement (i.e. as expressed on your institution website)	9%	29%	37%	26%	0%
Institutional public documents (e.g. recruitment brochures, website, etc.)	14%	29%	43%	14%	0%
Public addresses and statements by upper university administration (e.g. president, vice president(s), provost)	11%	20%	46%	23%	0%

Your division leader(s) (e.g. Vice President for Student Affairs, Dean of Students) in public addresses to students, families, etc.	11%	6%	51%	29%	3%
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Note: n=35

Enactment, however, was a different story, as demonstrated in Table 4. Cultural centers were largely perceived as the space where social justice happens (69%), contributing to overall siloing of social justice efforts on college campuses. On the contrary, staff training, workplace policies, and academic support services were areas where social justice was noted to be particularly absent, with more than 60% in each area indicating nonexistent or low levels of enactment. Notably, the lack of emphasis on social justice in these structural aspects of the institution encourages ignorance in the workplace and impedes the enactment of a social justice agenda on campus. Consequently, the presence of social justice is dependent on the agency and social justice awareness that individual student affairs professionals bring to their work.

Table 4. Extent to which see social justice enacted by institution.

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	Unsure
Staff trainings (e.g. for new staff, annual retreats, etc.)	11%	49%	26%	14%	0%
Student staff trainings	14%	26%	29%	29%	3%
Regular student programming in a department other than culture centers (e.g. resident hall programming, student leadership programming, etc.)	11%	34%	46%	9%	0%
Programming within cultural centers (i.e. for students, staff, and faculty, developed and/or hosted by cultural center staff)	6%	6%	20%	66%	3%
Academic support services (e.g.	20%	40%	29%	0%	11%

tutoring services, academic advising)					
Workplace policies	12%	53%	26%	6%	3%
Student-staff exchanges (e.g. one-on-one meetings, advising – formal and informal, group meetings, etc.)	3%	26%	54%	9%	9%
Administrative responses to contention on campus (e.g. emails and public announcement following bias incidents)	11%	26%	43%	20%	0%
Meetings and discussions with immediate colleagues	3%	29%	32%	32%	3%

*Note: n=35*

Thus, while institutions may be presenting themselves as having a commitment to social justice, the ways in which they are actually putting that commitment into practice is not as strongly demonstrated. Discursive commitments to social justice present a barrier for those student affairs professionals seeking more substantive commitments to social justice.

### **Engagement in Assessment**

Turning the focus on assessment generally, Tables 5 through 7 present engagement in assessment, capturing collaboration, initiative, and type of assessment conducted. Table 5 demonstrates a fairly even distribution of how participants perceived the assessment work of supervisors, colleagues, and of themselves to be collaborative or individual. Of note, supervisor and colleague approaches were reported to be more largely collaborative, but this could be a consequence of what participants are exposed to—assessment may seem more collaborative because they are more aware of the projects that they are involved in. However, this could also suggest that individual assessment is not always shared and communicated with colleagues across one's own division, raising questions as to the impact of assessments for which data is not shared. The extent to which data from both individual and collaborative assessments is

actually communicated has potential implications for students being over-assessed and information being underutilized to better serve students.

*Table 5. Approaches to assessment practice: Collaborative vs. Individual*

	Collaborative (i.e. reflects collective effort from people within your office or across the division)	Individual (i.e. done by single people alone)
By you	52%	48%
By supervisor(s)	59%	41%
By colleagues/counterparts across the division	59%	41%

*Note: n=29*

The perception of assessment efforts varied in terms of the mode of assessment, or the source of the motivation behind assessment efforts (See Table 6). Perhaps not surprisingly, assessment by participants themselves was reported to be conducted through a proactive disposition, where assessment was employed as a tool for responsible student affairs practice. To a slightly lesser degree, supervisors were also perceived to conduct assessment proactively. In contrast, colleagues were seen to conduct assessment reactively, as either a product of institutional compliance or as a follow-up to campus incident. The misalignment between modes of assessment used by each of the groups demonstrates a disconnect between supervisors and more junior practitioners. Even though a majority of supervisors were perceived to be conducting proactive assessment, this mode did not seem to trickle down to others under their supervision.

*Table 6. Mode of assessment on campus*

	Reactive (i.e. done in response to incidents and/or mandates)	Proactive (i.e. done in preparation or for intervention)
By you	14%	86%

By supervisor(s)	39%	61%
By colleagues/counterparts across the division	55%	45%

*Note: n=29*

Further, participants largely reported that the majority of the assessment they conducted was centered on measuring student growth and learning, as compared to their perceptions of colleagues which were mostly focused on satisfaction (See Table 7). Again, the data demonstrates that supervisors, to a lesser degree than participants themselves, do conduct learning-based versus satisfaction-based assessment. However, this pattern doesn't seem to be replicated by other colleagues in the workplace.

*Table 7. Type of assessment conducted*

	Learning-Based (i.e. centered around student learning)	Satisfaction-Based (i.e. centered around participants being pleased with programs and services)	Usage-Based (e.g. frequency, headcount)
By you	68%	7%	25%
By supervisor(s)	43%	21%	36%
By colleagues/counterparts across the division	36%	43%	21%

*Note: n=28*

These findings point to ways a large proportion of participants see themselves as uniquely conducting assessment within their institutions—collaboratively, proactively, and centered on student learning—providing the foundation for these individuals to conduct engage in social justice-centered assessment, but raising questions as to how these efforts are regarded and supported on their campus.

### Support for Assessment

The survey asked participants to share their perceptions of how they are supported to do assessment on their campus. Across all areas (see Table 8), participants largely feel under-supported. While there is greater prevalence of in-house workshops and trainings on assessment—41% of participants reported that these resources were available—other key resources were largely limited, including financial and professional support for conducting assessment activities. Of particular note was the unmet need for additional staff support, suggesting that assessment may too often be treated as an individual responsibility instead of a complex task for which multiple team members are required.

*Table 8. Types of resources provided*

	Yes	No	Unsure
In-house workshops and trainings around assessment	41%	52%	7%
Support (financial, time away from work) to attend assessment-focused conferences and trainings)	28%	59%	14%
Budget allocation for assessment tools	34%	62%	3%
Shifted responsibilities to allow more time in schedule to conduct assessment work	28%	69%	3%
Additional staff to support assessment work	21%	76%	3%

*Note: n=30*

Participants were also asked to report on their perceptions of support for the assessment work they do. Interestingly, while there were greater levels of reported support for the centering of social justice in the general practice of these participants, there were low levels reported of both bringing social justice into assessment and bringing assessment into social justice.

Table 9. Perceptions of support in assessment work

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	Not applicable
Developing assessment	7%	29%	32%	32%	0%
Carrying out assessment	11%	32%	21%	32%	4%
Integrating assessment into your work	11%	29%	32%	25%	4%
Innovating assessment policies	18%	25%	29%	21%	7%
Centering social justice within your work	11%	18%	21%	43%	7%
Incorporating assessment within social justice work	14%	32%	18%	21%	14%
Centering social justice within assessment	29%	18%	29%	14%	11%

Note: n=29

Taken together, these two sets of findings highlight that while overall there may be expressed support for individuals to conduct assessment, the resources to employ these assessments are not similarly present. This reifies an overall narrative across the survey data regarding the difference between social justice commitments that institutions might espouse and the extent to which they enact these expressed goals. The depth of these challenges is examined in the next section.

### Assessment and Social Justice Practice

Participants' perceptions of the nature of assessment and social justice practice are reported in Table 10 below. Largely, participants confirmed what the literature suggests: that

social justice and assessment are seen as separate efforts on college campuses (54% large or moderate extent). Assessment is not seen as key part of social justice work (79% not at all or to a small extent) and social justice not centrally integrated within assessment work (61% not at all or to a small extent). Additionally, these findings highlight the tensions between what can be conceptualized as two disparate camps on campus—the “assessment people” and the “social justice people,” with generally neither camp encouraging integration of efforts.

*Table 10. Perceptions of assessment and social justice practice*

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent
Social justice is a key value within my institution	7%	50%	29%	14%
Social justice is something that is added onto the work that we do in student affairs	21%	36%	21%	21%
Social justice work is something that is integrated into the work we do in student affairs	7%	46%	18%	29%
Social justice is centered within the work of assessment in my institution	32%	29%	29%	11%
Assessment is valued by my colleagues	11%	39%	39%	11%
Assessment is seen as a key part of social justice work	36%	43%	14%	7%
Social justice and assessment are viewed as separate efforts within my institution	7%	39%	11%	43%

*Note: n=28*

### **Challenges to Social Justice Assessment**

The greatest challenge reported to enacting assessment as part of a social justice agenda points to what research says about the incorporation of assessment in student affairs generally— the importance of time. Almost 60% of participants reported that time constraints

were a great challenge to them (See Table 11). Perhaps surprisingly, supervisors generally did not seem to present a challenge to this work, as 67% of participants reported that supervisors posed no or a small challenge to their work. However, that these supervisors are not structuring time for participants to do the work they are seeking to do with social justice and assessment signals again the tension in espoused versus enacted goals. Further, the disconnect in the perception between how work is structured and the power of supervisors to create structures that support this work continues to be an important finding across the data. This disconnect also suggests that participants may not perceive themselves as having the necessary power or ability to shift the structure.

Asking a similar question through a different angle highlighted some differences but largely reflect similar trends. The next question asked participants to report on challenges in bringing assessment into a social justice agenda. Time constraints remained as the greatest challenge, and participants largely reiterated that supervisors do not pose a great challenge to the work. However, a third of participants did identify a lack of support from senior administration as a major perceived challenge (See Table 11).

*Table 11. Challenges to enacting assessment as part of social justice agenda*

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent
Time limitations	0%	7%	33%	59%
Scarce financial resources	11%	33%	26%	30%
Insufficient expertise	7%	37%	30%	26%
Lack of support from colleagues	15%	37%	30%	19%
Lack of support from supervisor(s)	30%	37%	11%	22%
Lack of support from upper administration	12%	40%	16%	32%

*Note: n=27*

## Strategies for Implementing Assessment

Given these challenges, how participants work to overcome and implement their social justice assessment agendas is of key interest to this work. First, understanding the ways participants work to just implement assessment is important context. Table 12 presents these results. The most largely reported strategy was collaborating with others, with 50% reporting doing so to a large extent. Additional strategies include serving on hiring committees (56% large or moderate extent), advocating for resources (67% large or moderate extent), joining identity-based groups (69% large or moderate extent), and modifying existing programs (80% large or moderate extent). Additionally, the strategic actions of reframing work and using others' language to describe one's own social justice efforts were largely reported (63% each large or moderate extent).

The strategies employed may reflect the range of power these practitioners perceive themselves as holding, whether that be actual or misunderstood. For instance, while the majority of participants reported largely participating on hiring committees, large proportions did not engage in restructuring hiring practices. Similar juxtapositions are captured with the comparison of advocating for resources, but not seeking outside resources or reallocating resources.

*Table 12. Strategies to implementing assessment*

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent
Volunteered to serve on hiring committees	17%	27%	23%	33%
Restructured hiring practices	37%	33%	20%	10%
Advocated for additional resources	13%	20%	37%	30%

Sough resources from external sources	30%	30%	17%	23%
Reallocated resources across programs and efforts	27%	30%	17%	27%
Joined identity-based committees and campus groups	20%	13%	23%	43%
Modified existing programs	7%	13%	43%	37%
Revised standing curriculum	20%	23%	23%	33%
Collaborated with others across your campus	3%	20%	27%	50%
Reformed your work to align with others' priorities	10%	27%	43%	20%
Intentionally used others' language to describe your programs	13%	23%	40%	23%

*Note: n=25*

With regard to strategies specifically intended for implementing social justice assessment (Table 13), the greatest strategy was centered on expanding the network of institutional colleagues similarly aligned with social justice. Sixty-seven percent of participants reported advocating for the hiring of candidates with strong social justice orientations to a large extent in their work as an effort for implementing social justice assessment. Working to obtain more resources was another key strategy (41% to a large extent), a complement to the perception of lack of resources as key challenge reported earlier. However, this strategy also had a great proportion of participants reporting it as not being part of their strategy at all—19%, more than in any other category. This dichotomy potentially reflects a divide in the perceived role of resources as being a necessary but insufficient strategy for upholding social justice-centered assessment practice. Working within social justice networks on campus also captured a large part of practitioners' efforts (81% to a moderate or large extent), suggesting the importance of idea-sharing across like-minded practitioners on campus, and of identifying with a collective social justice effort across campus. We also noted that nearly half of

participants indicated that aligning their own work with the priorities of senior administration was an important strategy. This finding affirms that Student affairs professionals are highly attuned to the political hierarchies on their campuses, and are open and willing to find creative ways to find legitimacy for social justice-based assessment work. Relatedly, a majority of participants (30% to a moderate extent and 33% to a large extent) reported that the reshaping of existing programs and efforts was an important strategy for bridging social justice with assessment. This type of strategy again shows that Student affairs professionals understand that programs that already have cultural cache within the organization are good sites for legitimizing their work.

*Table 13. Strategies for implementing social justice assessment*

	Not at all	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	Not applicable
Advocated for hiring of candidates with strong social justice orientation	7%	7%	11%	67%	7%
Lobbying for resources to specifically support your work	19%	11%	22%	41%	7%
Engaging with existing social justice-centered assessment work	11%	7%	44%	37%	0%
Reshaping existing programs and efforts towards social justice-centered assessment work	15%	22%	30%	33%	0%
Collaborating with faculty or senior administrators	11%	37%	19%	33%	0%
Aligned your own work with upper administration priorities	4%	33%	48%	15%	0%

*Note: n=25*

## A Deeper Perspective of Participant Voice

Open-ended responses offered participants the opportunity to explain their responses more deeply if they wanted. These provide insight into the deeper experiences of participants, and help point to the need for deeper conversations with practitioners regarding how they navigate the tensions of social justice and assessment. Some participants used this as an opportunity to reflect on their own personal relationship to the work. For instance, take the following quotes from these open responses:

*I do not believe assessment cannot be integrated with social justice work, but without that being the priority of most of the division, it just doesn't get done.*

*assessment is still new to me, but I am beginning to see how it is united with social justice work I am doing*

*I have the student assistants enter my assessment data so it doesn't detract from my other responsibilities.*

*Social justice has to be at the center of any assessment I do*

*I think I could do more if I took charge of it*

These personal reflections point to the ways that social justice assessment, like social justice work generally, necessitates spaces for critical reflexivity. They also highlight the real and tangible challenges to doing this work, even for those who are aligned with the vision of what this could be.

Other quotes offered more depth to the trends captured in the survey data, highlighting in particular challenges of time. For instance, one participant shared: “[a]ssessment was

resisted by the majority of staff in the student affairs division, mostly because it was such an add-on mandate by upper administration, and staff are already swamped with multiple added responsibilities and no resources". Another added "colleagues are overworked", noting that this additional effort fits within a broader context of challenge within student affairs regarding work balance. Others spoke to structural challenges. "Nobody is seeking this information" reported one participant, eluding to why this work doesn't occur—because it isn't mandated. Another elaborated, "Social justice integration into assessment practices was just never talked about at my institution, even though it is a place that is known for being really into social justice." This last quote largely underscores trends captured in the survey data between espousal and enactment, and points to the conceptual divide in how social justice and assessment are considered in higher education.

### **Discussion**

Collectively, the findings from this work tell an important story regarding ways individuals and organizations are impeding the deepened integration of social justice and assessment in the practice of student affairs. Further, participants' responses highlight the important efforts they are engaging in to advance this work, despite the barriers presented to them in doing so. The following centers on making meaning of these findings for research and the field.

#### **Understanding the Divide Between Social Justice and Assessment**

As discussed earlier in this manuscript, there are standard barriers working to impede the advancement of assessment culture within student affairs—limited training and professional development, lack of administrative support, and serving external demands rather than internally-driven purposes. These barriers were widely confirmed by participants' responses that highlighted lack of resources and misalignment of values. This work contributes to this body of work to point to ways assessment culture is further inhibited by solo efforts for proactive assessment work centered on deeper outcomes of learning as opposed to reactive

assessment that prioritizes satisfaction and usage. The disconnect largely observed between the type of work engaged in by participants and that of those they work with point to potential isolation and lack of support for their assessment work, which provides a foundation to engagement in assessment centered within social justice.

The findings of this study highlight how these barriers are compounded when working to integrate social justice and these efforts. Resources for social justice-centered assessment were even more lacking than those perceived by participants available for assessment work generally. While the responsibility is placed on certain individuals to carry out assessment or social justice missions, the support in the form of resources, time, and encouragement are missing. Given the lack of models and training to advance social justice-centered assessment in the field more broadly, the lack of support at the institutional level demonstrates a confluence of barriers to advancing the role of assessment in social justice work.

### **Espousing and Enacting Social Justice**

The divide between social justice and assessment may be attributed to, or at least in part influenced by, a disconnect in what institutions say they value and are committed to and what they put into practice. While this survey intentionally sought out and may have attracted participants with greater levels of awareness and commitment to social justice, their perceptions of their campuses are significant. Participants' perceptions of their colleagues' and campus leaders' lack of understanding of general social justice concepts and lack of commitment to social justice demonstrate implications on the ways social justice is understood as a siloed effort, relegated to cultural centers but not centered within the structural aspects of the institution.

Thus, these individuals are being charged, either directly or indirectly, to carry out the social justice work of the institution. Further, they are having to do so with others who know little about fundamental concepts for social justice work. Building on the discussion point above,

what these findings point to are the tensions within campus spaces between two siloed groups on campus—those who do assessment and those who do social justice, with generally lack of integration of efforts between the two or integration within the overall activities of the institution. This may also point to strong cultural barriers within the organization themselves that impede action.

### **Range of Influence of Strategic Action**

While the participants here reported their own strategies to advance their work to implement social justice-centered assessment, findings were mixed and do not point to one specific social movement strategy, but rather, a combination of efforts. Generally, the data show that resources are a necessary but not sufficient strategy to advance this *movement* on campuses. Framing strategies were also not employed as greatly or uniformly as we anticipated. The key strategies employed reflected not necessarily working within the institution to shift focus via trainings or collaboration, but rather focused on creating a critical mass of social justice-minded individuals and centering this group on assessment.

These findings might reflect a broad range of power participants perceive themselves holding as the single assessment and/or social justice voice within the organization. Whether this perception be actual or misunderstood, that they experience the culture of their campus in this way is particularly telling, and points to where the root source of barriers may lie. The open responses help illuminate some deeper insights regarding participants' sense of personal responsibility to do the work, but perceived limitations for how or when to do it. However, the work must fall on individuals and leaders at all levels of the campus and the field more broadly to address these barriers.

### **Recommendations**

For the professionals who share experiences with the participants of our study, it is important to leverage personal and professional networks to connect with and through to

implement change. Individual efforts are not sufficient to shift an organizational culture. And often times those charged to do assessment work and/or social justice work do not have the positional power to leverage organizational structures for large-scale change.

Campus leaders must hear these experiences of isolation and uphold the efforts and intentions of those professionals who carry the burden of social justice and assessment work on their campuses. These are the leaders for the campuses of tomorrow. Supervisors and administrators in positions of power must invest in the capacity of the professionals like those in this study to be able to implement change within their campus spaces. Organizations such as NASPA, ACPA, and the Association for Institutional Research, as well as graduate programs share a responsibility to develop this capacity, for instance, via workshops and explicit foci within curricula. The social movement framework highlights the potential of grassroots strategies to empower change from within organizations and by those not within campus leadership positions. This training must not just focus on development of social justice and assessment understanding, but how to use this understanding to implement change through institutional structures.

Lastly, campus leaders and professionals, professional organizations, graduate preparation programs, and scholars in the field must work collaboratively to address the pernicious additive approaches to assessment and social justice to the work of student affairs. Without thinking of and enacting these efforts in an integrative and synergistic way, we perpetuate these divides. The disparate knowledge communities of NASPA and ACPA for instance might consider coming together for special sessions; on campuses, the assessment professionals and those carrying the bulk of the social justice work of the institution must have facilitated conversations to better understand the work of one another and support the advancing of a unified vision for the field.

Change is not just needed to address the challenges of our times, but possible. We are facing great challenges in advancing evidence-based social justice practices in higher education.

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However, the experiences of the participants in this study provide a counter to the dominant discourse that assessment and social justice do not coexist. However, in order to advance it, it will take a critical reshifting of the field. It must happen from within and led by those who best know how.

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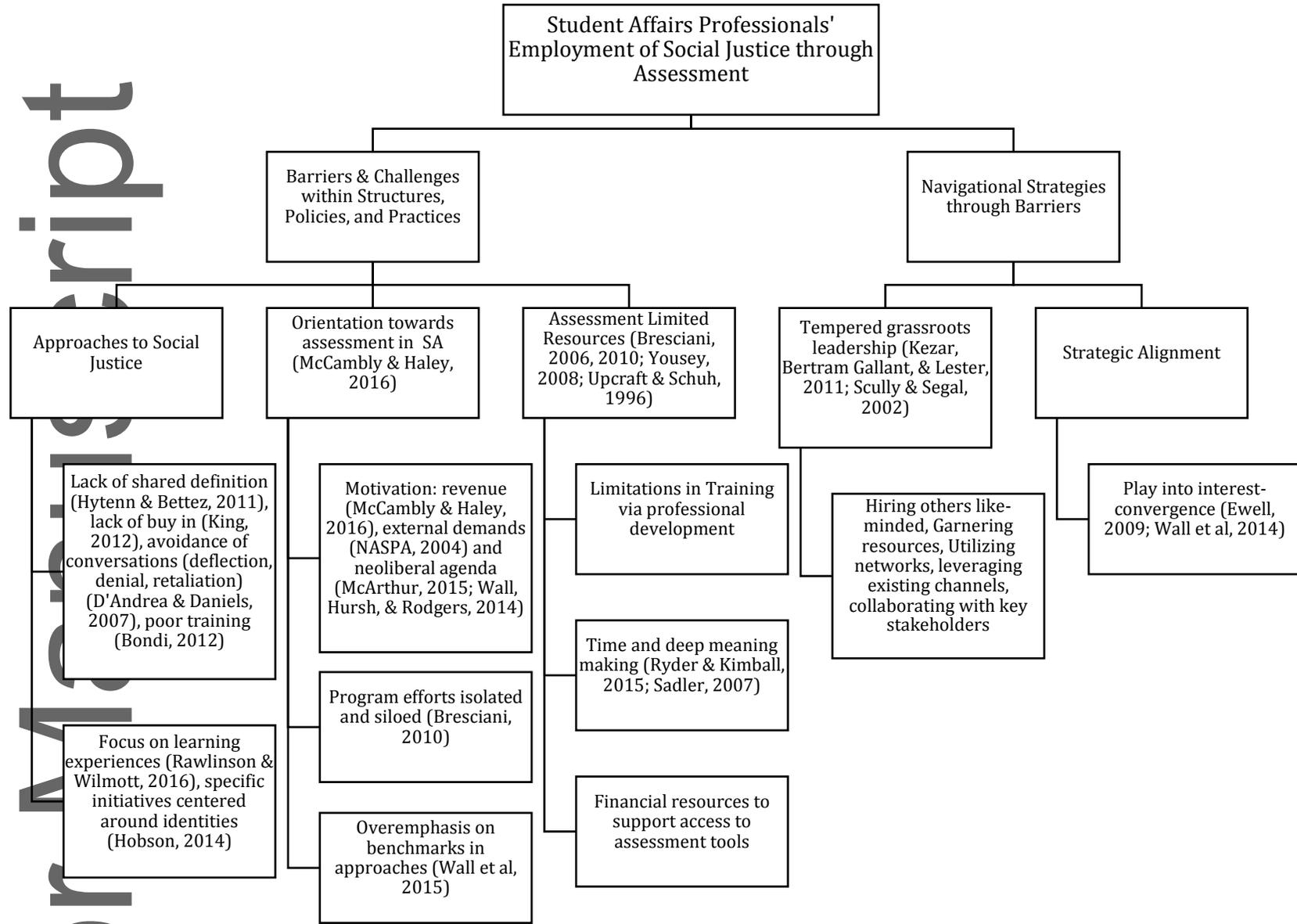
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*Figure 1. Conceptual model guiding survey construct and item development*