ISSN 2688-7207

Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education

AALHE

PROMOTING ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

# INTERSECTION

*A journal at the intersection of assessment and learning*

Spring 2020

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# President's Letter

*By Jane Marie Souza*

*Dear Reader,*

*I truly hope this letter finds you safe and healthy. During this challenging time, we at AALHE know that your priorities have shifted, and demands on your time have increased. We give you a lot of credit for keeping up with professional development activities such as reading this edition of* ***Intersection.*** *Thank you for fitting this into your hectic schedule.*

*The topic of equity in assessment has always been an important one. As we are all learning, the pandemic has only exacerbated inequities existing throughout educational experiences. While not focused on equity in a time of crisis, the thoughtful cases detailed in this edition may prove useful to you in your assessment practice now and in the future.*

*AALHE has launched a* ***Slack*** *site with multiple channels addressing various topics. We just added a channel dedicated to discussing challenges and strategies related to equity in assessment. The articles in this edition may inspire readers to converse with colleagues on this topic, and a Slack channel is wonderful communication vehicle. If you would like to join this online conversation, please email us at info@aalhe.org and request to be added to the Equity and Assessment channel. We will invite our authors to join you there. I hope to connect with you virtually.*

*Be well,*

*Jane Marie*

*Jane Marie Souza, PhD*
*AALHE President, 2019-2020*
*Associate Provost for Academic Administration, University of Rochester*

# Note from the Editor-In-Chief

*By Kathleen Gorski*

Welcome to the spring 2020 edition of AALHE's quarterly publication. Spring 2019, we asked you for articles to present our readers with examples of successful strategies for increasing equity in assessment, including, but not limited to, implementing culturally responsive assessment practices, means for increasing cultural competence in assessment, and approaches for discussing equity in assessment with campus assessment partners/stakeholders. We had so much interest in this topic, we decided to publish another equity edition this spring leading to our 2020 conference with the same theme.

This edition begins with perspectives and key considerations for engaging in socially just assessment in order to move toward equity in assessment practice. Our authors also share strategies to conduct culturally responsive assessment for first-generation students and discuss frameworks for shifting the cultural of assessment away from compliance towards a culturally inclusive model. Additionally, the importance of employing equitable approaches in student services is examined through student conduct processes and our writing centers.

We would like to thank all our authors in this edition. Their work continues to inform and inspire. We hope you will consider submitting an article for a future edition to contribute to scholarship in the assessment of student learning.

**Editorial Board**




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***Disclaimer**: The views and opinions expressed in the articles in this publication reflect those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education.*

# Addressing Equity through Assessment Practice

***By Brian Bourke***

***Abstract:*** In this article, I share perspectives on starting points and key considerations for engaging in socially just assessment in order to move toward equity in assessment practice.

**Introduction**

Assessment is often regarded as a practice that should be overflowing with objectivity. Afterall, how else can data-driven or data-based decisions be made if not through objectivity? Such claims negate the reality that individual lived experiences and identities do come into play within the context of assessment practice. Those committed to integrating social justice into their professional roles in assessment are likely to experience obstacles to truly addressing equity through assessment (Zerquera, Reyes, Pender, & Abbady, 2018).

**Paradigm Shift**

Bell (2018) describes social justice as both a process and a goal, where the process centers on equitable participation in addressing the goal of eliminating systemic oppression. Assessment practice is largely approached as procedural, even in the context of outcomes-based language (MacArthur, 2016). For assessment to be approached as a tool for working toward equity, there has to be a paradigm shift in thinking about the doing of assessment. For some engaging in assessment work, the focus defaults to one of compliance (Amaral, Rosa, & Tavares, 2007). Likewise, efforts to approach socially just assessment through processes and procedures do little to address inequity beyond procedural concerns (Hanesworth, Bracken, & Elkington, 2019).

**Equity Centered Assessment**

With a focus on doing within the context of assessment work, there seems to be a ready-made connection to the action orientation of social justice. Such an action orientation melds nicely with the concept of praxis, which Freire (1970/2008) addressed as a process in which theory meets action. Centering equity in assessment work, and applying the concept of praxis, requires ongoing reflection on the process along with critical questioning of results (Bourke, 2017).

**Equitable Participation**

Socially just assessment should be participatory (Zerquera, Pender, & Berumen, 2017), involving those from whom data is sought so they are able to engage in the assessment process beyond the data they provide. The equitable approach to participatory assessment is to decenter hierarchical decision making that draws on participants' data. Opening space for equitable participation, especially in the use of assessment in decision making, is a critical step in socially just assessment (Cazden, 2012).

It would be inappropriate to suggest that those committed to socially just assessment should ignore procedural concerns. Participatory socially just assessment has to include integration of those affected by the ultimate uses of assessment throughout the assessment cycle, from defining the scope of assessment, the research design and data collection approaches to be used, the interpretation of results and findings, and, as already noted, in the application of those interpretations in decision making (Zerquera et al., 2018). Students who identify as members of oppressed groups experience barriers to equitable engagement throughout their college experiences, and assessment is often no different (Dorimé-Williams, 2018).

How do assessment practices within the institution aid in advancing toward justice? Assessment efforts will do little to advance toward equity and social justice within institutions of higher learning without careful consideration of involvement of partners and stakeholders. All too often, those engaged in assessment efforts become so mired in attending to procedural requirements, that it can be easy to overlook stakeholder engagement beyond perfunctory advisory group meetings. Working toward equity and social justice through assessment means that stakeholder engagement has to center participation. Similar to involving students as participants, all stakeholders should have opportunities to engage in the assessment process, not simply as receptors of end of process reporting.

The process of engaging in socially just assessment in order to work toward equity can be complicated. It is complicated not due to conceptual complexity, but rather in attending to multiple elements across the assessment process. Most important in making this move is to center the subjectivities of everyone's' humanity. By eschewing the strictures of objectivity, the ranks of those engaged and invested in assessment will swell.

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# Collective Strength: A Culturally Responsive Assessment Project on First-Generation Students

***By Amanda Kulp, Chadwick Lockley and Matthew Grandstaff***

***Abstract:*** In this paper, we describe three strategies used by the University of North Florida (UNF) Office of Assessment to conduct a culturally responsive assessment project focused on first-generation students. We analyzed data from the *Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement* (BCSSE) to better understand the college expectations of our first-year, first-generation students, which make up over a third of all incoming students at UNF. This paper provides a practical example from the field that describes how assessment professionals can apply culturally responsive assessment principles to projects on their own campuses. Readers can adapt these ideas to help ground their own institutional data analyses, interpretations, and storytelling in an equity-based framework.

## Introduction

Like so many terms we use in higher education, the term *first-generation student* is pervasively used, yet is frequently confused. Defining what being a *first-generation student* means is challenging, as various authors can attest (e.g., Sharpe, November 3 2017; Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slaton, 2018). At the University of North Florida (UNF) and for the purpose of this article, we define *first-generation students* as those who come from families where neither parent nor guardian completed a four-year college degree.

One reason the term *first-generation* tends to be slippery is because, too often, staff and faculty use it as a placeholder implying that students lack something important. As the first in their families to complete college, first-generation students (FGS) might lack the cultural capital college-educated parents often pass on to their children about how to succeed in college (e.g., Pike & Kuh, 2005). Or, FGS might lack a sufficient degree of academic or social integration to feel like campus is a place they truly belong (e.g., Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). As a label, FGS can also become tangled up with other intersecting identities, as FGS are disproportionately female, students of color, and from low-income backgrounds (Miyazaki & Janosik, 2009; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012).

However, as many of us who are and who work with FGS know, being first-gen is not a combination of deficiencies. Increasingly, campus staff and a growing body of research are moving toward using a strengths-based, cultural wealth perspective to consider the assets FGS bring with them to college (e.g., Sarcedo, Matias, Montoya, & Nishi, 2015; Yosso, 2005). When UNF began administering the *Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement* (BCSSE) to all incoming first-time, first-year students, it offered a fresh opportunity for UNF to collect data on the unique perceived needs and college expectations of first-year FGS.

Students typically complete the BCSSE between graduating high school and arriving on campus, when they are on the cusp of launching into college life (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2020). In essence, the BCSSE helps capture students' impressions of what college might be like before they even step foot on campus. The timing of the BCSSE combined with the difficult-to-define qualities of FGS made the data an ideal choice for an institutional-level, culturally responsive assessment project at UNF. Culturally responsive assessment focuses on the student populations the institution serves and involves using assessment results to improve the conditions for learning and success for all students, not just the majority (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). This article describes how UNF designed and executed a study framed in culturally responsive assessment principles to understand the perspectives of incoming first-year FGS. Assessment professionals can adapt and add to these strategies to carry out culturally responsive assessment projects on their own campuses.

## Project in Brief

UNF administered the BCSSE survey through email to all incoming first-time, first-year students in the 2019-20 fall cohort. The participants for this study came from UNF's 2019-20 incoming first-year cohort, which included 2,747 first-time-in-college, degree-seeking undergraduate students. Of those, 1,173 respondents completed all items on the BCSSE survey, producing a response rate of 43%. In all, 36% of respondents (n=417) were FGS. After data collection ended in summer 2019, the Office of Assessment formed a team of individuals across the campus community to analyze and interpret the survey data from a culturally responsive viewpoint, with the goal of distributing its findings to the UNF community when faculty and staff returned in fall 2019.

The analysis process was guided by four research questions drawing heavily from the mean-scaled items built into the BCSSE (view a description of the BCSSE scales and component items):

1) What are the demographic characteristics of FGS and non-FGS at UNF?

2) How do FGS and non-FGS compare in terms of their perceived academic perseverance, academic difficulty, preparedness to learn, and planned college study habits?

3) How do FGS and non-FGS compare in terms of their employment plans, co-curricular plans, and financial stress?

4) How do FGS and non-FGS students compare in terms of their expectations of support from UNF?

To investigate these questions, the committee used a variety of statistical analyses, namely means tests, t-tests, chi-squared tests of association, and one-way analysis of variance depending on the nature of the variables. The committee reviewed, discussed, and collectively interpreted the findings at stages throughout the project.

At UNF, the Office of Assessment is a one-person unit, and virtually all of the institutional-level assessment work on student outcomes occurs as the result of collaborative partnerships with faculty and staff. For this project, members on the committee were recruited via email, and emails were sent to campus units that directly served FGS or had an interest in serving FGS. The project was posed as an ad-hoc applied research and assessment project on FGS using an equity-based approach. The group was named the First-Generation Collective, and in all, 15 participants agreed to engage in the project.

The Collective met iteratively over the course of the summer for one-hour dialogues. We took an inquiry-based approach, first outlining the goals of the project, defining research questions, establishing hypotheses, examining the mean-scaled and component items of interest from the BCSSE, and identifying areas of potential intersectionality, as well as variables that could confound or compound our interpretations. The documentation of our inquiry took the form of a “one-sheet” visual report (see appendix) highlighting the key findings of our study for administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as a long-form report with the detailed statistical findings, which we shared with the campus community.

As a result, the findings have been threaded into various aspects of campus. Staff and faculty have used the findings to make changes to beginning-of-year communications, outreach efforts, classroom procedures, academic support services, and student services programming. For instance, one finding from this project (see appendix) was that FGS plan to major in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields at the same rate as non-FGS: around 53% of both groups planned to major in STEM. However, UNF FGS come in with lower confidence in their quantitative analysis skills compared non-FGS, and they are less likely to have taken high school pre-calculus or calculus courses. These characteristics could contribute to a gap in the accessibility of STEM majors for FGS as well as more long-term outcomes like grades, persistence, retention, and time-to-degree. Upon learning this, a group of faculty teaching first-year courses created a Canvas course devoted to helping first-years understand the academic resources available to them in an effort to make navigating these resources more transparent and accessible to all students. In addition, academic support services staff members sent personalized invitations about academic workshops and tutoring to FGS (the informed consent process for the BCSSE allows institutional staff to reach out to individual students with targeted support services, see BCSSE).

Other examples of actions related to project findings include specific types of funding and programming made available to FGS as supports. For instance, upon learning that FGS experience greater financial worry and plan to work more for pay off-campus compared to non-FGS (see appendix), the alumni office developed a request for scholarship funding intended to help mitigate the financial stress FGS experience and to reduce the amount of hours they have to work for pay off-campus. In seeing that fewer FGS plan to live on campus than non-FGS, the housing office established a living and learning community specifically for FGS to create a more focused and open pathway into campus living for these students. These are just a few examples of many actions taken by campus faculty and staff in an effort to provide targeted support to FGS based on evidence in the BCSSE and highlighted by the First-Generation Collective.

Institutional survey work at UNF typically uses an aggregated approach to data analysis and reporting. However, equity-based assessment focuses on the intentional disaggregation of data (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). If the Collective had not been formed, and if UNF had simply reported the BCSSE data in the aggregate, the findings about FGS would not have been unearthed. The strength of conducting this project in an equity-based manner and broadly sharing the findings across campus meant that staff and faculty could find ways to take action to support FGS in their own units and according to their own missions. In short, using an equity-based framework contributed to a groundswell of support for UNF FGS, all based in assessment evidence.

In the following sections, we highlight three strategies that represent lessons we learned and which helped the Collective carry out this project.

**Strategy 1: Gather a Collective**

From the outset, it was clear that this project called for a shared effort among people who are passionate about FGS. Members of the Collective were predisposed to care a great deal about FGS, as several were from units that were already on the front lines of service and programming related to first-year students. The group was also intentionally demographically diverse, including those who had been FGS themselves and those who had not, as well individuals from different gender, racial, and ethnic identities. Importantly, the group was made up of individuals who were distributed both horizontally and vertically across the organization (Bess & Dee, 2008). Members included an assistant vice president, multiple directors, assistant directors, coordinators, and graduate assistants spanning student and academic affairs units. Units represented included office of diversity and inclusion, international center, the graduate school, LGBTQ resource center, provost's office, housing and residence life, academic support services, advising, assessment, and institutional research. The personnel choices were intentional: they offered the necessary breadth to cover various departments but also had the advantage of higher-level staff who could share findings broadly. The cross-unit selection of members brought in unique skill sets and points of view, including people who interacted with students on a daily basis, those who deal primarily with data, and those working in leadership. While assessment and institutional research staff carried out the statistics used to respond to the research questions, all members were responsible for reviewing the iterative findings, coming to the meetings with ideas, questions, and interpretations, and with identifying ways these findings could be used to enhance programming, services, policy, and practice at the university in each of their respective areas. The committee also created a shared site with "parking lot" items, or ideas that were outside the scope of the committee's purpose but that could be shared with university leaders and which could improve the university's overall efforts to serve FGS.

**Strategy 2: Build an Equity-Based Framework**

Much of the foundational literature on FGS leans toward a deficits perspective, which negatively influences how we think and talk about FGS in the campus environment, even for those of us who identify as FGS ourselves. As Hood, Hopson, and Kirkhart (2015) suggest, those who interpret the data give voice to the data. To proceed cautiously through the analyses, the Collective needed an equity-based framework to hold our discussions accountable to who first-gens are, to consider the strengths they bring, and to avoid falling into the trap of focusing only on their weaknesses. To do this, we developed competing sets of hypotheses about FGS from the academic literature highlighting their relative strengths (e.g., Sarcedo et al., 2015; Yosso, 2005) and weaknesses (e.g., Martinez et al., 2009; Miyazaki & Janosik, 2009; Padgett et al., 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Stebleton & Soria, 2012), as they relate to college expectations and readiness.

These competing hypotheses ended up functioning like two sides of the same coin. Where we had a negative, we also had a positive. The deficits-based hypotheses included characteristics that act as potential obstacles to FGS successfully launching into college life. These included things like lower levels of parental education, lower family income, greater uncertainty about affording college, planning to work more and longer hours for pay during the first year of college, lower high school achievement, and plans to devote less time studying in college. The strengths-based hypotheses included characteristics that act as potential advantages to FGS successfully beginning college. These included things like a heightened sense of academic perseverance, high educational aspirations, plans for academic and social engagement, and close proximity of students' homes to campus. Once the framework was set, we held to it. In the end, most of our "deficits" were not confirmed by the data, and many of our "strengths" were confirmed.

For instance, we had competing hypotheses related to students' readiness to learn in college. Our "deficits" hypothesis suggested that FGS would have lower high school grades compared to non-FGS. Our "strengths" hypothesis suggested that that FGS would be as confident about their ability to succeed academically as non-FGS. Through the analyses, we found that FGS and non-FGS had equal high school GPAs (a 3.88 average, see the appendix), which failed to confirm the deficits hypothesis. We also found that FGS and non-FGS had the same levels of confidence in feeling ready and able to learn, which confirmed the strengths hypothesis. Having both sides of the coin available held us accountable to avoiding the trap that many of us fall into: only focusing on the ways in which students lack the things we feel are important. Instead, this framework helped us focus on the negatives and positives in an effort to understand who our FGS students are, what they need, and what they offer.

In the end, we learned that how well the data matched our hypotheses mattered less than the fact that these competing hypotheses enabled an open discovery process. The presence of this framework allowed us to have candid conversations about power, privilege, and inequity without the obligation of proving or disproving any given theory or perspective. It led us to systematically consider the vast amount of strengths FGS bring to the table, when we might not have otherwise been inclined to see them.

**Strategy 3: Embrace Data Storytelling**

The Collective chose a one-sheet visual format to share our findings with the campus community because it allowed viewers to digest a lot of information quickly (see appendix). Covering the numerous facets of the BCSSE survey was less important than telling the data story of the main character: the FGS represented in these data. Thus, our goal was to be clear, concise, and focused on FGS. The first side of the one-sheet explores proportionality and the intersecting demographic backgrounds of FGS at UNF. We used icons depicting groups of individuals to personalize the visualization and proportional shading to put the layered demographic characteristics of FGS in relief against the backdrop of non-FGS students. It was important to us that viewers could, in a glance, get a sense of the representation of FGS in the student body as well as the complexities of FGS with different demographic backgrounds. The second side of the one-sheet allowed us to illuminate the strengths and deficits perspectives of our framework, without labeling it as such. These findings also reflected the Collective's openness to holding multiple, competing interpretations of who FGS students are, what they expect of college, and how prepared they are to make their way through the first year. FGS are not depicted as either totally prepared or totally unprepared for college, but instead land somewhere in between.

The one-sheet was shared broadly throughout the UNF community, from meetings at the executive level, to faculty workshops, to individual unit staff meetings. The one-sheet was also featured as what UNF calls a "data byte", or a brief, campus-wide data analytics tidbit emailed to all employed staff.

**Next Steps**

While the Collective's assessment of FGS based on the BCSSE data is finished, the dialogue around supporting them is not. The Collective is now considering future studies of FGS, such as looking at the expectations given in their BCSSE responses compared to reality after their first semester, first year, and beyond. The results have helped inform programming in a new living learning community dedicated to FGS, and a community alliance dedicated to the success of minoritized students. The campus is considering applying for federal and other funding opportunities to support FGS. FGS status and BCSSE data are being used in predictive analytics focused on student retention and progression. University leaders have publically shared the findings with various constituencies. The story in these data continues to inform the campus community's collective understanding and work to support FGS students at UNF.

**Conclusion**

While formal training and expertise on culturally responsive assessment is important, assessment professionals who do not have this type of training can still begin to engage in this type of work, especially if they embrace a heightened level of consciousness and intentionality. The case study of the First Generation Collective at UNF is one example of how a group of people came together in an attempt to understand an often-misunderstood group of students, and to work collaboratively to convey those stories to the campus community. These strategies – gathering a collective, grounding analyses in a shared and equity-based framework, and telling a data story through compelling visuals and language – are practical tools that can help assessment professionals who want to design and carry out culturally responsive assessment projects at their own campuses. It is our hope that members of the assessment community might adapt and add to these strategies to engage deeply in culturally responsive assessment at the institutional level. In doing so, we can act on our shared responsibility to use data to help improve the conditions for learning and success for all students.

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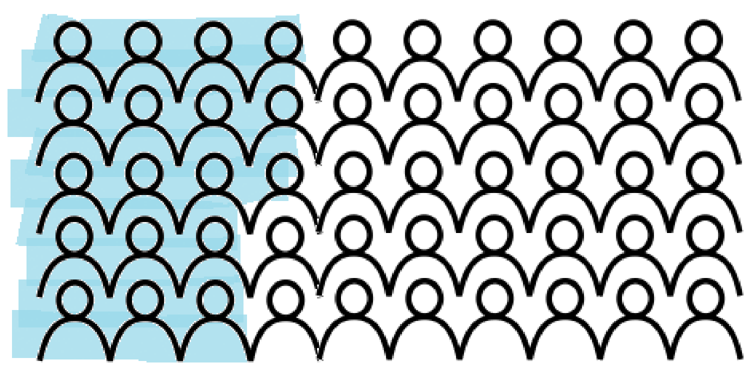
# Osprey Firsts

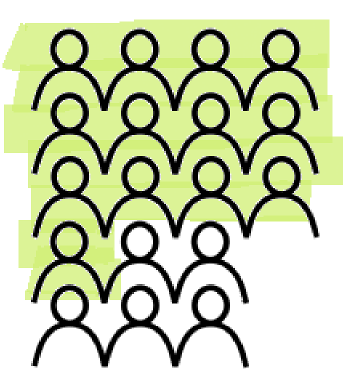
## A Profile of Incoming First-Generation UNF Students

All incoming UNF first-time-in-college students were asked to share their high school experiences and college expectations via the *Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement* (BCSSE or "Bessie"). Between graduating from high school and attending college orientation, 43% of the incoming 2019-20 first-year cohort (n=1,173) completed the BCSSE. First-generation students are defined using the federal definition: **first-generation students** come from families where neither parent/guardian has completed a four-year college degree, and non-first-generation students come from families where at least one parent/guardian has completed a four-year college degree.

36% of incoming Ospreys are first-generation students:

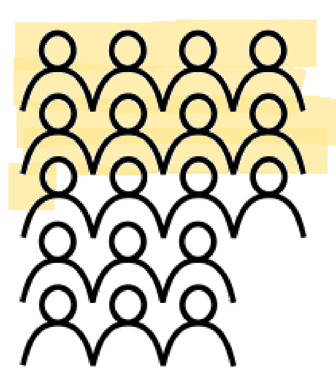


Of those, 72% are women*



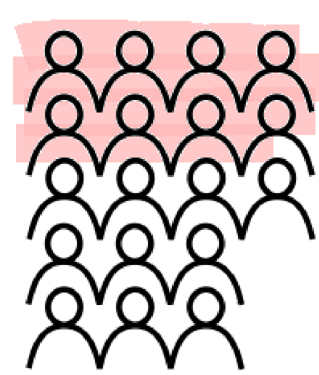
compared to 60% of non-first-gens who are women

46% are eligible for a Pell grant*



compared to 19% of non-first-gens who are eligible for Pell

and 44% are students of color.*



compared to 34% of non-first-gens who are students of color

# How are first-gen Ospreys unique?

| 72%* | 88%* | 11-15 hrs* | 63%* |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| say it will be difficult to pay for college | plan to work during the first year of college | hours they plan to work per week during the first year | plan to live on campus |
| compared to 37% of non-first-gens | compared to 82% of non-first-gens | compared to 6-10 hrs for non-first-gens | compared to 72% of non-first-gens |

First-gens tend to live closer to campus at a median of 32 miles from UNF compared to 96 miles for non-first-gens.*

First-gens are less likely to engage with quantitative analysis and to have taken pre-calculus or calculus in high school.*

First-gens feel it's more important that UNF provides help as they cope with non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc).*

First-gens are more likely to say they'll seek help from their academic advisors and less likely to say they'll seek help from their families.*

First-gens primarily plan to use grants, scholarships, and employment to pay for college, while non-first-gens rely more on support from parents and relatives.*

# First- and non-first-gens have similar:

High school GPAs (3.88 average), college credits earned prior to enrolling (median of 12), and levels of confidence in feeling ready and able to learn at UNF.

Most know what they want to major in (80%), about half are aiming for a STEM major (53%), and they plan to devote similar amounts of time to studying, reading and campus life in college.

They plan to frequently interact with faculty, regularly use learning support services, become involved socially, and attend events on campus.

Prepared by the Office of Assessment, August 2019. Images courtesy of flaticon.com.

* All items marked with an asterisk represent statistically significant differences between first- and non-first-generation Ospreys at the level of $p<.05$ or greater.

# Enhancing Student Outcomes Measures through Culturally Relevant Assessment Practices

***By Audrey S. Rorrer and Bruce Richards***

***Abstract:*** This paper is based upon a conference workshop session designed to a) demonstrate a pilot approach for enhancing assessment efficiency via use of a learning management system and b) to discuss a framework for shifting the culture of assessment away from compliance toward a culturally inclusive model. The theoretical foundations for culturally relevant assessment practice are presented along with institutional contextual factors driving the pilot process. We posit that through the use of our Learning Management System, we are better able to conduct assessment that is culturally inclusive at the program level. Results from the pilot's enhanced data analytics are shared. The three themes that emerged from the workshop discussion include: defining and measuring culture, ethical stewardship of the management and use of student data, and obtaining institutional resource support. These three themes are discussed from perspectives offered in current literature. We conclude by providing an update of the College's assessment practice, and offer terminology to shape institutional structures and capacity for culturally responsive assessment practice.

**Enhancing Student Outcomes Measures through Culturally Relevant Assessment Practices**

Assessment theory and practice are difficult to bridge in higher educational settings, especially when applying culturally relevant assessment. The Center for Teaching and Learning and the College of Computing and Informatics at the University of North Carolina Charlotte, are devising an approach to blend assessment for compliance with culturally relevant assessment practices. The project is in its initial phase, which launched use of the campus learning management system (LMS), Canvas, as a means of collecting student learning outcomes data. This university supported LMS addresses key resource and capacity challenges common to assessment practice, that of collection, depth and timeliness of knowledge. Essentially, our efforts are aimed at creating efficiency and opportunity for faculty and administrators to capture meaningful data, in a more immediate time frame, and shift the focus away from compliance toward an exploration of student learning outcomes from a culturally relevant perspective. The expected outcome is an enhanced formative knowledge that is deeper in scope and faster in actionable awareness so that corrective interventions can be identified earlier than is typical from reports of student achievement of learning outcomes.

**Background**

The University of North Carolina Charlotte is a large urban university of over 29,000 students, most of whom are recipients of financial aid, and are first generation college students. Within the College of Computing and Informatics (CCI), there are 2,700 undergraduate and graduate students across three departments and 31 degree programs. Enrollment has increased 77% in the last five years. Computing disciplines lack diversity nationally (Zweben & Bizot, 2017), and our College established the Center for Education Innovation to drive computing education research that identifies best practices for attracting, retaining and graduating a more diverse pool of students who represent the cultural landscape of the country. With a student demographic population of 23% female, and 19% underrepresented minority group students (African American, Hispanic, Native American, Pacific Islander), CCI is one of the more diverse programs in the country. Given our growth, scaling assessment practice that addressed student cultural context is an imperative. In 2017, the CCI College Assessment Director launched a trial use of the LMS to capture student learning outcomes at the undergraduate program level among five courses. Student Learning Outcomes are measured in designated courses via student projects; the mastery of concepts are assessed by rubric scores given by course instructors. The intent of the trial was twofold: to devise a more efficient and automated assessment system and create a comprehensive process for examining learning outcomes across a myriad of student demographic factors, including and not limited to gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, most recent institutions (i.e. high school or community college), and course sequencing. In essence, we expected that the new automated system would enable a scalable process, i.e. a critical first step to enable culturally responsive assessment practice to examine the impact of multiple variables on student success. We describe the context and process, then discuss our interpretation of culturally responsive assessment.

**Center for Teaching and Learning and the LMS**

The Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) serves as an academic support unit with a mission to champion the advancement of scholarly teaching. By identifying, developing, and sustaining enterprise level instructional technology systems, the center advocates for services which provide enterprise level instructional technologies, and supports constructive and active learning environments (CTL Mission, 2018). The center administers and supports the Learning Management System (LMS), Canvas, within the university, for faculty and student access to academic and instructional programs. The LMS application was implemented into the academic system in 2016 to provide increased reliability, greater ease of use, user-friendliness for mobile devices, reduced support problems, plus the flexibility and adaptability in meeting the growing needs of faculty and students (CTL LMS Evaluation, 2018).

The use of an LMS serves as a platform that can electronically deliver learning content (text, audio, video), support assessments, and provide data on student progress and success for all modalities of courses, be it online, hybrid, and face-to-face (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). With the adoption of the LMS, new opportunities through a wider assortment of tools are available to the institution, faculty, and students; one being a tool called 'Outcomes and Rubrics'. Outcomes are a tool within the LMS that allow the administration and faculty to track mastery levels within a course. Rubrics, within the LMS, are a way to establish custom, outcomes-based assessment criteria for scoring, and are a means of conveying expectations of quality. The widespread use and acceptance of the LMS among faculty and students can be increased if the appropriate support and needed resources are provided to faculty, allowing for the design, development, and facilitation of exemplary student-centered learning environments (Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013). Therefore, the senior instructional technologist in the center explores solutions that extend the use of the LMS in ways that support student learning and faculty engagement and assessment practices. Several tools within the LMS are noted in support of assessing student learning outcomes, foremost among them being the ability to measure students' educational progress through mastery of learning outcomes. The senior instructional technologist initiated collaboration with the CCI for the initial pilot launch in 2017, which tested the outcomes and rubrics tool within Canvas. We describe the process in the following section for historical context, to demonstrate how an LMS can be leveraged for making data-driven teaching decisions (Orchard, 2019).

**The Pilot Process**

Based on discussions and exhaustive investigations, the senior instructional technologist started discussions with the CCI to run a pilot test of the outcomes and rubrics tool. This college was chosen based on (1) their dedicated college assessment director (CAD), (2) having detailed assessment outcomes with rubrics, and (3) faculty who were willing to pilot this new assessment process. The initial process called for faculty to be provided Excel spreadsheets from which data from their respective course gradebooks would be compiled showing student performance and mastery of the chosen assessments via rubric. This process was unwieldy, burdensome, and problematic based on the varying levels of understanding of what exactly were the correct data points to be entered. This led to data that was prone to errors, slowly reported, and primarily utilized in support of accountability reporting to Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). By mapping student outcome results in the LMS to SIS, the CAD would be able to report disaggregated analyses of student assessments and competency data in a timely manner for better understanding and quicker awareness of student learning outcomes.

The implementation and pilot testing of the Outcomes and Rubrics tool in Canvas LMS was guided by the organizational framework of the university instructional programs, departments, and college. By having a well-defined nomenclature for each outcome and rubric, assessment directors within colleges would be able to easily identify and collate outcome and rubric data captured within the LMS. Both outcomes and rubric information was created at the college organizational level, providing faculty within that college with easy access to attach the rubric to any assessment element. The faculty benefitted by ease of rubric scoring, directly in the LMS, eliminating their extra reporting duty, and also providing them with a student mastery level view within their courses.

This pilot test provides the college with an assessment process from analyzing student outcomes based on what students actually learn through analytical data captured from the course level. Assessment processes (Singer-Freeman & Bastone, 2016) used in a software application supports the collection of assessment coursed date, connecting or aligning student work with student demographics, organizing the evidence, archiving the data as a repository, analyzing for trends and statistical analysis, communicating the student progress, to supporting decision making and interventions. This assessment process enables the college to more actively use learning evidence to improve student learning (Kuh, Jankowski, Ikenberry, & Kinzie, 2014) in a timely manner. By linking the LMS into CCI undergraduate program assessment in this pilot phase, with information gathered and practices observed, the assessment team is able to address specific assessment challenges: removing faculty reporting burden, capturing greater depth of academic data, leveraging campus tools for more efficient use of data and resources, and increasing the capacity to understand student learning outcome patterns. We believe these steps are essential to making assessment practice culturally responsive because they catalyze ability to interpret more data, more quickly, with less faculty burden, and greater application of findings. This approach, described as an 'all-in-one assessment system' (Matuga & Turos, 2018), can be applied across a variety of Learning Management Systems (Orchard, 2019; Turner, 2015).

**Culturally Responsive Assessment**

The call for culturally responsive assessment has been made by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017), and deemed a critically important responsibility for assessment practice. The NILOA paper states that assessment practice must be "mindful of student differences and employ assessment methods appropriate for different student groups" (p.9), calling upon higher educational assessment practices to be 'responsive' to equity and issues around privilege in higher education.

Nomenclature is important, and because there is a dearth of literature among the assessment community that fully defines culturally responsive assessment practice, we draw from the seminal and widely utilized theoretical frameworks of culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogy. We trace the origin of culturally responsive assessment to what is more broadly identified as culturally relevant education. Culturally relevant pedagogy developed from Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) by Ladson-Billings, who initially called for curriculum to be socially relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) to all students, not just the white majority, and moved toward the broader application of teaching to be culturally sustaining (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In other words, teaching practices should be inclusive of students' individual cultures, and also operate to preserve these cultures. Within assessment we think this translates to the recognition that assessing learning is embedded in students' cultural perspectives, and therefore needs to intentionally account for the variety of cultural vantage points when developing assessment models at the program level. We present the framework we have developed for culturally responsive assessment based upon culturally relevant pedagogy in Figure 1.

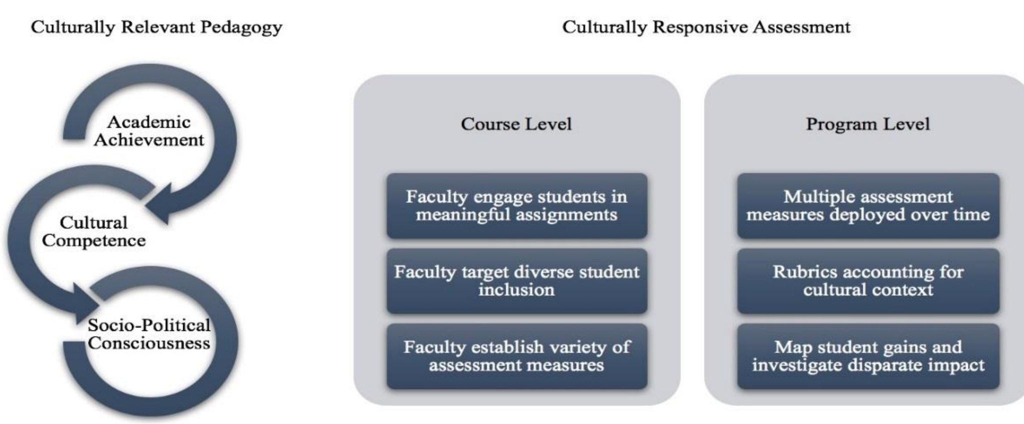



Figure 1. Culturally Responsive Assessment Framework

At the course level, culturally responsive assessment will include the pedagogical approach to teaching. Faculty incorporate meaningful assignments that intentionally address the social and political climate. Achievement is measured by a variety of assessment methods, rather than a single standardized method. At the program level, multiple measures are used to assess student learning, that are based upon rubric evaluation that can be normed, and can account for cultural context. Student cultural groups are examined to determine patterns of achievement.

While culture is admittedly complex, several authors have defined the term in ways that apply to assessment. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) define it as 'explicit' which includes "behaviors, practices, customs, roles, attitudes, appearance, expressions of identity, language, housing region, heritage, race/ethnicity, rituals, religion;" as 'implicit' which includes values, beliefs, and experiences; and as 'cognitive' factors, such as ways of learning (p.8-9). The Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment[1] incorporates power, privilege and intersectionality in its definition of culture. The key, and also daunting, question is how to define culture within specific institutional contexts.

**CCI and CTL Contextual Definition of Culture**

The CCI and the CTL have begun this complex technical process, as described above, which is enabling the investigation and application of culturally responsive assessment practice. We begin by defining culture within our context. For CCI, admit status is a key variable, because half of our students arrive as transfers from other institutions, with varying degrees of computing exposure. Similarly, half of our students arrive as freshmen, many of whom have no exposure to computer at all. These students exemplify a cultural context within our College, and also embody a myriad of other cultural traits that are implicit, explicit and cognitive. We are able to include many variables that can be direct markers of culture (gender, ethnicity), implicit measures (freshmen, transfer) and cognitive (GPA). Indirect variables can also serve as proxy measures of culture, such as financial aid, military status and many other factors. We acknowledge the limitations of the administrative and academic quantitative variables, and add that part of the process of culturally responsive assessment is to discuss all findings in context and in collaboration with faculty, administrators, and students. We expect to refine and modify as our model necessarily shifts to accommodate our constituent perspectives, and toward what is measurable within our population.

**Themes from the Conference Workshop**

Twelve assessment professionals participated in the workshop, and represented a variety of institutional types. Participants were from doctoral, master level, and associate level institutions, ranging in size from small (<5,000), medium (<15,000), large (<29,000), to huge (>30,000). Throughout the session, discussion focused around challenges and opportunities within assessment practice that resonated across the group. The observed themes for challenges of culturally responsive assessment was in defining and measuring culture and in resource allocation. Themes for opportunities also included defining and measuring culture, and in ethical stewardship of data.

A resounding issue for everyone included a need for resources. The support required to capture data on a large scale is not generally viewed as a challenge. However, considerable effort is required to prepare and analyze data for meaningful interpretation. A notable feature related to this theme was recognition that faculty and administrators often lack awareness and understanding of the process of data interpretation. Generally, an impatience with investigative process, and an expectation of fast extrapolation with clear conclusions was noted by everyone. The process of understanding data requires iteration, which is often not fully recognized by high level administration. As noted by (King, Dodd, & Cunliff, 2016), assessment data needs to be understood easily by a variety of 'users' to be effective. The collective wisdom from workshop participants suggest that higher levels of resource commitment are necessary to ensure ease in interpretation.

Amid these noted challenges were opportunities. Assessment professionals believe that culturally responsive assessment practices are important and necessary within higher education. We all strive to be 'improvement

[1] https://crea.education.illinois.edu

catalysts' (Good, Dirlam, Fulcher, Hawthorne, and Russell, 2016). There was considerable discussion about what culturally responsive assessment is, what culture is, and what distinctions exist between culturally relevant versus responsive assessment. As a result, we refined our operational definitions, as noted above.

**Discussion**

The workshop discussion yielded three critical needs within the assessment community. Operational definitions of culture are complex and, in many cases, not quantifiably measured. The authors suggested that culture is very contextual within each institution, and that definitions must be organically developed. We shared examples from our own endeavor, highlighting that the nature of our definition of socio-economic-status is in fact a proxy measure. While some expressed discomfort in the limitations of proxy measures, many workshop participants recognized our call to action begins with an intentionality to collaborate across institutional constituents in order to frame cultural definitions that are pertinent to the respective institution. Additional terms that warrant clarity are the distinctions between cultural relevance and culturally responsive, as indicated above.

The second key need identified from the group was the need for tools and a clear set of practices that can be applied at the program and institutional level. While there are many resources to support culturally relevant classroom assessment, institutional level assessment practices appear to be in the early development phases. The issue of cultural responsiveness seems to be intimidating and sensitive, as assessment professionals have an earnest desire to make a positive impact, and do not wish to be careless with measurement practices. Assessment that is not done well, can potentially do harm (e.g. misinterpretation, deficit modeling of groups of people, etc.).

The third factor is the need for further testing of our model and approach. We are in the early stages of designing culturally responsive assessment tools at the program level. While it is daunting, we believe that the process has facilitated difficult and yet enriching conversations across our campus. These conversations show signs of a shift toward a culture of assessment that is less concerned about compliance, and more concerned about equitable education access and practices. At our institution, we are witnessing a renewed focus on the scientific inquiry underlying assessment, and systematic assessment, which excites faculty and administrators who wish to discover how best to serve our particular student population within our complex culture. Indeed, we are implementing Kitchener's five principles of ethics in research and assessment: respect autonomy, do no harm, benefit others, justice, and faith towards truth (Kitchener, 1984). These foci support compliance but are fundamentally student centered, and not about a bureaucratic obligation. This is a perspective that resonates with our academic community.

**Status Update**

From the 2017 pilot, we learned that there was a statistical difference between two cultural groups in our major. Students who enter our College as transfers from 2-year community colleges did not perform as well as those who entered as first-year freshmen on one of the degree program's learning outcomes. While the full methodology and findings are beyond the scope of this paper, these findings were reported to College leadership, which contributed to institutionalization of new assessment practice and infrastructure. For example, the College continues to use the LMS to capture learning outcomes data across the undergraduate curriculum. There has been a shift away from assessment as compliance towards understanding the impact of student-teacher oriented practices.

The College created a center in 2018, the Integrated Critical Core, to ensure that the required degree courses maintain consistency across course sections, appropriately scaffold between course levels, and measure learning outcomes. Because the LMS is being leveraged to capture learning outcomes, measurement now goes beyond tracking and reporting learning outcomes, by considering the larger connections between student demographics (cultural variables) and across course and program matriculation (curricular variables). There is a bigger picture view being taken, so that the relationships between culture and curriculum can be understood, and to identify actionable steps to support student-centered learning.

**Conclusion**

We envision an expansion of our approach as we design practical tools that support culturally responsive assessment practices for program levels at our institution. Already in design are web resources that educate faculty and administrators about assessing student learning outcomes and leveraging our LMS to collect and report data on a large scale. We are assisting other colleges and programs within our campus to test alternative approaches to using the LMS, and ways to define cultural terms of meaning to our institution. Our model is demonstrative of an initial phase of developing a culturally responsive assessment practice. Throughout the workshop, discussion of the salient contextual challenges that colleges and universities face in managing large scale data for meaningful and timely assessment practices ensued. Notable themes included a need for institutional resources that provide technical support and also offer recognition to those who engage in assessment practice. Additionally, a need to further define culture and how to ethnically oversee the culturally responsive assessment process is critical to moving forward. We believe that a research and inquiry lens is best when considering culturally responsive assessment that promotes application of data to derive deeper knowledge about student outcomes. Each institution has the responsibility to define metrics appropriate to their contexts. The process will be iterative and collaborative, engaging faculty, administrators and students in the discussions and discovery of operationalizing culturally responsive assessment practices that scale.

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# Examining Conduct Data Using a Culturally Responsive Approach

**By Ciji Ann Heiser and Nichole Millar Allbee**

***Abstract:*** Staff at Western Michigan University examined 19 months' worth of data to determine if the Student Conduct process was living up to its mission to take an equitable approach. Researchers investigated whether race or gender were related to the rates at which students were referred to the process and the rates at which they were found responsible in the process. It was discovered that hearing officers were consistent in their rates of findings across race and gender, but students identifying as black or African American were overrepresented in referrals to the process. The Office of Student Conduct shared the data with their campus partners in order to collaborate on ways to respond to the findings.

A culturally responsive approach to assessment is mindful of the diversity within the student body, treats students as stakeholders, centers concerns of equity and justice, and address issues of power inherent in processes and procedures (Heiser, Prince, & Levy, 2017; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; Zerquera, Reyes, Pender, & Abbady, 2018). In higher education, one area presenting an opportunity to assess effectiveness and student learning is the student conduct process. As universities often serve as microcosms of the larger socio-political context, evaluating student conduct creates a unique opportunity to practice culturally responsive assessment by centering underserved students in order to challenge dominant norms and assumptions, and interrogate processes for inequities and injustices.

Student Conduct practitioners must have a commitment to equity and "treat others with respect and fairness, preserving their dignity, honoring their differences, and promoting their welfare" (Association for Student Conduct Administration, 2017, p. 3). At Western Michigan University (WMU), the Office of Student Conduct's mission was revised by their staff to include their commitment to the use of an equitable approach (WMU Office of Student Conduct, 2020). Given this espoused value, the need to assess the University's conduct process for inequitable outcomes was clear.

Schuh, Upcraft, and Associates (2001) noted the difficulty of engaging in the assessment of a conduct office given the nature of its function. Still, Western Michigan University's Office of Student Conduct (OSC) had endeavored to directly and indirectly measure both learning outcomes and process outcomes for their students, with positive results. Over several years, between 91 and 95% of respondents were able to identify a campus resource they would use in the future, a direct measure of an identified learning outcome for the office. Further, 96% of students reported being treated fairly and 98% reported feeling respected through the process, though the anonymous nature of the office's Exit Survey did not allow for demographic disaggregation of these measures. In order to further assess the office's core function, the team sought to use the existing data from the University's conduct database to examine the process for potential implicit biases in conjunction with the Director of Assessment and Effectiveness for Student Affairs.

Centering concerns of equity and justice in the examination of conduct data shaped the assessment questions, analysis, and approach to continuous improvement. Questions posed decentered whiteness to focus on the experiences of underserved students. With an understanding that universities often operate as microcosms within larger socio-political structures, the basic question for this analysis was: is this university replicating systems of bias in the conduct process? Guiding questions for this assessment project focused on the demographic profile of students coming into the conduct process (the "pipeline") and the demographic profile of those found responsible or not. Specifically, the analysis included race, sex, and the intersection of these two variables. An immediate example of how the systems and structures influence data collection and analysis in Conduct, and other areas, is that the analysis was limited to students adhering to the gender binary. For example, data for students who may identify as transgender or gender non-conforming was nonexistent.

To take a culturally responsive approach to quantitative data analysis the investigators looked beyond the averages for the groups analyzed by disaggregating the data, considered multiple identities within groups, examined between and within group differences, and discussed the implications for practical significance compared to statistical significance. Disaggregating the data was critical for understanding student experiences from multiple perspectives as was the inclusion of two variables and their intersection. Within group and across groups differences were important to analyze in taking a culturally responsive approach. Hughes, Seidman, and Williams (1993) explain, "in comparative designs, the group means are compared to each other; the differences are often interpreted within a value-laden framework. In within-group designs, individuals are implicitly compared to each other" (p.698). Although the findings, discussed next, did not show statistically significant results, the findings did warrant consideration of the practical significance of the conduct process for diverse populations on campus. Congruent with a culturally responsive approach, the practitioners in this case acknowledge that demographic variables serve as proxy variables for cultural understanding and could never holistically capture students' lived, and cultural, experiences.

As with most investigations, the findings were mixed. There was much to be celebrated and much work to be done. First, it was found that the conduct process itself was incredibly consistent. Across demographics, there were few differences in rates of findings of responsibility for students in the process. On average, 80% of students who advanced through the conduct process were found responsible and 20% were not. When examining whether there was a relationship between race and findings (whether a student was responsible or not responsible for the violation) no significant relationship was observed. Further, when examining the relationship between sex and findings, the results were also nonsignificant.

However, it was found that Black or African American students, males, and in turn Black or African American males were overrepresented in the process, while women and White students were underrepresented. That is, these demographics were referred into the process by campus partners at rates that did not correspond with their representation on campus. The percentage of Black or African American students attending the university is 10.7%, living in on-campus housing is 16.6%, and engaging in the conduct process was 21.1%. The percentage of White students attending the university is 66.5%, living in on-campus housing is 61.1%, and engaging in the conduct process was 56.6%. The percentage of males attending the university is 51.1%, males living on campus is 49.1%, and males engaging in the conduct process was 57.3%. Given these demographics, one would expect more White students referred to the process and fewer Black or African American students, as well as more women and fewer men.

Examining the percentages of students being routed to the process by race and sex did not yield substantial statistical findings; however, this analysis did provide practically significant information for understanding students coming into the process. In writing about cultural responsiveness and data collection, Hood, Hopson, Kirkhart (2015) argue, "data do not speak for themselves, they are given voice by those who interpret them" (p. 296). As such, the investigation team reviewed the data and considered its implications together. Because the OSC and its process cannot select its students nor do students self-select, the imbalance of demographics represented in the process was dubbed the "pipeline problem." That is, because the process is reactive in nature and is triggered as a response to a documentation or referral from outside departments, the "pipelines" by which students entered the process were not equitable and in need of intervention.

Once the "pipeline problem" was identified as the primary source of concern regarding the imbalanced demographics of those in the conduct process, the OSC understood the need to share the data with campus partners in order to engage in planning for improvement. While allegations of violations are reported from a variety of sources, the primary partners are Residence Life, course instructors, and the campus police. Residence Life was the source of 78% of the referrals to the conduct process during the 19-month period for which case data was reviewed for this investigation. Course instructors accounted for 15% of the referrals in this time, and campus police for 5%. The Director of Student Conduct worked with several key stakeholders in the conduct process and leaders in the respective referral departments in order to share the findings and work together toward achieving a more equitable referral process.

In Residence Life this collaboration included the Director, the Associate Director responsible for staff training, and the Assistant Director responsible for Residence Life Conduct. Upon sharing the data, the Director of Student Conduct thought it important to first recognize the good work that was happening in the process by OSC's partners in Residence Life. The professional and graduate staff in Residence Life who serve as hearings officers were doing an excellent job at being consistent with rates of responsible findings across demographics. Almost 80% of the hearings during the 19 months were conducted by professional and graduate-level Residence Life staff, so they are invaluable in ensuring a fair process for students. The "pipeline problem" was then reviewed. Because Resident Assistants (RAs) document student behavior in the Residence Halls, attention was initially focused on Resident Assistant training. Through this collaboration, implicit bias was a focus of the summer training and the conduct portion of the summer training for RA staff had an additional specific implicit bias element. The team also encouraged further partnership to explore additional avenues for improved equitable documentation.

In order to address the "pipeline problem" with respect to instructors, the Student Conduct staff first relied on their already-existing partnership with the Office of Faculty Development (OFD). The OFD had worked with the OSC over many years to offer classroom management and academic misconduct workshops for course instructors. Elements to aid in the understanding of implicit bias were added to these trainings and similar trainings conducted for individual academic departments and colleges. To further the efforts toward equitable referral rates from instructors, the Director of Student Conduct met with the University's Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion in order to share the findings; she continues to use it as a source of information for the equity work happening across the institution.

The Director of Student Conduct also met with the University's Chief of Police about the "pipeline problem." While police referrals only accounted for 5% of the cases independent of their collaboration with Residence Life, the percentage of cases referred by the police was still significant. As a part of sharing the findings, the Director offered to collaborate on training opportunities for all officers. While OSC will work to train officers on the conduct process and its parallels and differences from the legal process, a new accreditation requiring specific annual implicit bias training was already being pursued by the police.

While training is important, it must be acknowledged that it is only the first step toward improvement as the collaboration efforts between OSC and its partner departments continue. All those involved in the process expressed the desire to do more as these first steps were taken.

Examining conduct work in this way prompted the office to reflect on systemic processes and procedures that impact diverse students and they did so in a way that engaged Student Affairs and other campus partners to improve process and system surrounding student conduct. The value of assessing student conduct data with respect to equity cannot be understated, as demonstrated by this example. Though often units fear engaging in assessment regarding equity out of concern that the data may be weaponized, this example shows the ways it can be used to empower administrators to make informed decisions, to enhance collaboration, and to celebrate effective and equitable process. Existing partnerships were strengthened and new relationships were formed around the data in an effort to ensure equitable approaches to conduct work continue at WMU.

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# What's Beneath the Demographics? Writing Center Usage and Inequality

**By Nicole I. Caswell**

***Abstract:*** Students' demographic markers such as race, gender, and social economic status are often used to indicate which students might need additional learning support and to predict students' likelihood to persist or graduate. Writing Centers serve as one site of additional learning support on college campuses. This article uses the writing center's fall 2013 demographic usage data to complicate the simple question of who does and does not use the writing center. Focusing on students' Social Location (López, Erwin, Binder, & Chavez, 2018) as an intersectional data point, this article demonstrates how writing centers and other learning centers can use demographic data to actively engage in social justice work through assessment.

## Introduction

Writing centers serve as para-curricular sites of learning on the majority of college campuses and offer students an opportunity to engage in writing and learning outside of a classroom environment even though the writing itself might be a project for a class. Being connected to – though outside – a classroom, course, or academic program, writing centers are positioned to design assessments that respond to larger diversity and equity concerns on college campuses. Because of the para-curricular nature of writing centers (and other learning centers), direct assessment of services are time-intensive and difficult to design. Design concerns range from quantifying what counts as success to limiting the number of variables that impact learning. When it comes to designing and reporting assessment, writing center professionals (WCPs) are drawn to usage statistics and satisfaction surveys because of the ease of collecting and accessing countable, objective data. Even though analysis of demographic data does not qualify as direct assessment of writing, it offers a way for WCPs to engage and respond to larger institutional concerns such as retention and graduation rates.

As a strategic way to secure funding, WCPs gather data and engage in conversations around retention and graduation to demonstrate their worth on campuses. However, as Gansemer-Topf, Wilson, and Kirk (2019) advocate, without attention to socially just assessment practices quantitative data, such as demographic data, erases bodies and hides possible inequalities. WCPs must engage in what Roberts (2019) calls equity-minded assessments before considering the writing center as a possible intervention for student success. WCPs can use demographic usage data to design socially just assessment practices that allow for equity-minded interventions.

Since 2012, the writing center at East Carolina University (ECU) has collected race and gender demographic usage data. As single demographic categories, the yearly writing center usage (not considering class level) mirrored the racial breakdown of the student population. However, in terms of gender, the writing center saw a higher percentage of females (67% usage) compared to the student population (60% female). At first glance, writing center usage data indicates a need to market toward males, but this flattening of usage data left the complexity of the student body invisible. The writing center treated students' identity markers as fixed, stable entities that functioned independently from other demographic markers rather than understanding how demographic markers might influence the ways students seek out learning support. This article uses the writing centers' fall 2013 demographic usage data to complicate the simple question of who does and does not use the writing center. Focusing on students' Social Location (López, Erwin, Binder & Chavez, 2018) as an intersectional data point, this article demonstrates how writing centers and other learning centers can use demographic data to actively engage in social justice work through assessment.

### Socially-Just Demographic Markers

Students' demographic markers such as race, gender, and social economic status are often used to predict students' likelihood to persist or graduate. Similarly, students' demographic markers are used to indicate which students might need additional learning support compared to their counterparts. However, students might hold multiple identity markers that complicate statistical formulas for persistence, graduation, or learning support. In writing assessment, when researchers attempt to respond to calls for more fluid understandings of identity markers, those projects tend to focus on the relationships across categories *after* running statistical models instead of the interactions of those categories *during* or *before* the statistical models. Single gender and demographic category analysis leave the complexity of student bodies invisible and limits understanding of how demographic markers influence the ways students experience college and learning.

A socially-just approach to writing assessment, such as this study, attends to issues of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) within statistical models (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). One way to engage in intersectionality within statistics is through QuanCrit methodology (Garcia, López, & Vélez, 2018). QuanCrit methodology grounds itself within a critical race theory which privileges the experiences and ways of knowing and being for students of color, and actively challenges white-centric frameworks and ideologies. QuanCrit methodology is enacted through quantitative methods that advocate for statistical models attending to intersectional demographic markers. Demographic assessment data is one place where WCPs can begin to actively resist white centric statistics (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008) and engage in socially-just assessment practices.

**Study Population**

This study is situated within a regional, doctoral granting institution in the southeast with a primarily white (66.7%) student body around 27,000 (includes undergraduates, graduates, and medical students). During an academic year, the writing center conducts 8,000 - 8,500 45-minute long sessions. The writing center advertises its services to all ECU students the same way: classroom visits, emails to faculty, a parent-family newsletter and social media accounts. On their satisfaction survey, 62% of students reported learning about the writing center through their professor.

This study focused on a cohort of 780 first-year students who used the writing center in fall 2013. Usage data was collected by the writing center and shared with the institutional data office who constructed representation within the 4,453 total first-year cohort, configured social economic status, and ran distributions of visits across Social Location (SocLoc) usage to calculate retention and graduation rates. SocLoc refers to the constellation of race, sex, and need-level (López, Erwin, Binder, and Chavez, 2018) and captures the "configurations of inequality" among the student body (McCall, 2001). Race and gender data were easy to access, but given what institutional data was available, financial need level was used as a proxy for family income/class. High-need students applied for financial aid and were awarded a Pell Grant. Mid-need students applied for and were awarded financial aid, but not a Pell Grant. No-need students did not apply for financial aid. This study compares the retention and graduation rates of the first-year students' SocLoc who used the writing center in fall 2013 to those first-year students' SocLoc who did not use the writing center.

The sample initially had Hispanic, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, non-resident aliens (international), people who identify as two or more races, and people with no reported race or ethnicity as individual race or ethnicity data points, but because of small sample cells these groups were combined into "Underrepresented Minorities." While the writing center allows students to identify their gender as female, male, non-binary, trans*, not-listed, or self-described, the university maintains data only on the male/female binary. The analysis followed the university data. This study was approved by the institutional review board.

**Results**

Using SocLoc as the intersectional approach, demographic data revealed possible inequalities between student usage that would have otherwise been erased in aggregated gender and race data. Results indicated that high-need males and females (Table 1) used the writing center more frequently than no-need males and females (Table 2). Focusing on female usage, only 13% of high-need white females used the writing center compared to the 29% of high-need Underrepresented Minority females, 25% of high-need African American females, and 23% of high-need Asian females. The largest percentage gap was between the 23% high-need Asian females who used the writing center at least once in fall 2013 and the 14% of no-need Asian females who used the writing center at least once in fall 2013. No-need white females were more likely to use the writing center (21%) than high-need white females

(13%). By removing race as a variable, the same proportion of high-need females used the writing center as no-need females.

One-year retention rates were higher for high-need (92%) and no-need females (90%) who used the writing centers compared with those who did not (79% high-need females and 85% no-need females). High-need females with no writing center visits in fall 2013 had a 47% 4-year graduation rate compared to high-need females (63%) who used the writing center in fall 2013. No-need females who used the writing center had a slightly higher 4-year graduation rate (66%) compared with no-need females who did not use the writing center (64%).

| Table 1: High-need Student Populations | | Writing Center Visits | | | All |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | None | Single | Two or more | |
| | | % | % | % | & |
| SEX | RACE GROUP | | | | |
| F | Asian | 76.6% | 12.8% | 10.6% | 100.0% |
| | Black or African American | 74.4% | 13.5% | 12.1% | 100.0% |
| | Underrepresented Minority | 70.7% | 14.3% | 15.0% | 100.0% |
| | White | 86.1% | 7.6% | 6.3% | 100.0% |
| | All | 79.9% | 10.6% | 9.5% | 100.0% |
| M | RACE GROUP | | | | |
| | Asian | 95.8% | 0.0% | 4.2% | 100.0% |
| | Black or African American | 87.2% | 4.1% | 8.7% | 100.0% |
| | Underrepresented Minority | 86.1% | 8.7% | 5.2% | 100.0% |
| | White | 86.5% | 10.2% | 3.4% | 100.0% |
| | All | 87.0% | 7.6% | 5.4% | 100.0% |
| All | RACE GROUP | | | | |
| | Asian | 83.1% | 8.5% | 8.5% | 100.0% |
| | Black or African American | 79.2% | 10.0% | 10.8% | 100.0% |
| | Underrepresented Minority | 77.8% | 11.7% | 10.5% | 100.0% |
| | White | 86.3% | 8.5% | 5.3% | 100.0% |
| | All | 82.6% | 9.5% | 8.0% | 100.0% |

| Table 2: No-need Student Populations | | Writing Center | | | All |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | None | Single | Two or more | |
| | | N | N | N | N |
| SEX | RACE GROUP | | | | |
| F | Asian | 85.7% | 14.3% | 0.0% | 100.0% |
| | Black or African American | 76.9% | 15.4% | 7.7% | 100.0% |
| | Underrepresented Minority | 74.2% | 16.1% | 9.7% | 100.0% |
| | White | 79.4% | 10.6% | 10.0% | 100.0% |
| | All | 79.0% | 11.3% | 9.7% | 100.0% |
| M | RACE GROUP | | | | |
| | Asian | 90.9% | 0.0% | 9.1% | 100.0% |
| | Black or African American | 60.0% | 20.0% | 20.0% | 100.0% |
| | Underrepresented Minority | 82.6% | 4.3% | 13.0% | 100.0% |
| | White | 87.1% | 8.0% | 4.9% | 100.0% |
| | All | 86.1% | 7.9% | 6.1% | 100.0% |
| All | RACE GROUP | | | | |
| | Asian | 88.9% | 5.6% | 5.6% | 100.0% |
| | Black or African American | 69.6% | 17.4% | 13.0% | 100.0% |
| | Underrepresented Minority | 77.8% | 11.1% | 11.1% | 100.0% |
| | White | 83.0% | 9.4% | 7.6% | 100.0% |
| | All | 82.3% | 9.7% | 8.0% | 100.0% |

The intersectional approach holds true for males even though there is a small usage difference between high-need males (13%) and no-need males (18%). The writing center had already identified males (in general) as an outreach demographic, but this analysis narrowed the outreach demographic to no-need Asian, African American, and Underrepresented Minority males. High-need (4.2%) and no-need (9%) Asian males are the least likely to use the writing center compared to other groups. No-need African American males (40%) are more likely to use the writing center than high-need African American males (13%).

One-year retention rates were also higher for high-need (86%) and no-need (98%) males who used the writing center compared with those who did not (73% high-need males and 77% no-need males). The 4-year graduation rate for high-need males who did not use the writing center was 33% whereas the 4-year graduation for high-need males who did use the writing center was 44%. The 4-year graduation rate for no-need males who did not use the writing center was 44% whereas the 4-year graduate ration for no-need males who did use the writing center was 63%.

These results do not reflect a causal relationship between writing center usage and graduation/retention rates. While an intersectional approach provides a different look at the demographics of who is using the writing center, it does not account for other student characteristics (such as motivation) that might make it more likely for them to graduate sooner.

**Next Steps**

Because writing centers function within institutions, writing centers are just as guilty of perpetuating the structural and systemic racial disparities affecting students and privileging heteronormative views of learning and language (Greenfield, 2011, 2019; Grimm, 1999). Writing centers assume they are open, welcoming safe spaces that all students can access, but writing centers must reckon with the fact they are welcoming for *some*, not all students (Fasion, 2018; Lockett, 2019). As Greenfield (2019) notes, for many Black students:

> "the act of being seen entering and working within the [writing center] space (defined by a highly visible entrance and wall of windows) carried with it a poignant meaning that it did not for white students, whose challenges with writing were by and large viewed by the institution and society as individual and educable, not pathological or symptomatic of a biological or cultural deficiency" (p. 112).

An intersectional approach to demographic data allows WCPs to understand the impact of Greenfield's story within their own centers. For ECU, by simply considering class level, writing center usage went from mirroring the racial breakdown of campus to 69% of first-year white students using the writing center compared with only 16% of first-year African American students. By looking deeper and intersecting race with gender and financial need, larger usage disparities emerge. 13% of high-need Black males used the writing center compared to the 40% of no-need Black males who used the writing center. While financial need as a single demographic marker does not appear to be a defining feature of students using the writing center, it does appear to illuminate differences when layered with race and gender. As a regional institution with a large first-generation population, the writing center should pay attention to financial need as part of a students' SocLoc to help identify writing center outreach.

Although study is not without limitations, it represents a first step in understanding how learning inequality occurs within a writing center site. The results point to different populations of students that could benefit from direct outreach to pull them into the writing center. What this study does not answer is why certain demographic groups of students elect to use the writing center versus other students. Next steps would include focus groups or surveys with the different student populations to better understand how students navigate support units on campuses. As mentioned earlier, multiple variables impact usage that are not addressed within this study but should be accounted for in future analyses, such as if students were required to use the writing center as part of a course.

While there appears to be a relationship between writing center usage and higher retention and 4-year graduation rates, the small sample sizes make racial comparisons difficult. Similarly, because of small cell sizes, some racial categories were invisible altogether in the study. Next steps would include comparing and combining Fall 2013 data with Fall 2014 and Fall 2015 data (for 4-year graduation rates) for larger sample sizes. Such comparison across time will also help account for the ever-diversifying student body. Additionally, multinomial regression could be used to indicate significance across time or within a specific time frame. Other identity markers are also hidden in this study because of what data the university collects. Next steps should also incorporate expanding notions of gender and sexuality as demographic markers. Most likely, this requires advocating for institutions to collect gender and sexuality data, but in the meantime assessment professionals can advise programs how to collect and analyze this data for their own programs.

Even with these named limitations, this study on who uses the writing center is a first step in disrupting racial disparities that prevent students from seeking writing support. Results from this study allow the ECU Writing Center to begin to better construct a learning environment that's actually inclusive to all students on campus. More than that, this study demonstrates how writing centers can commit to inclusive, socially just assessment practices without inventing new data collection strategies.

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