Assessment Matters: A Case Study of Building a Culture of Assessment Within a Public Four-Year College

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Abstract

Assessment in higher education serves multiple purposes, including determining the efficacy of student learning outcomes and institutional advancement in support of accreditation. However, the establishment of a culture in which assessment is celebrated and embraced by all members of a college community is no small feat, and not many institutions can claim a robust culture of assessment. This case study focused on a public four-year university and its growing culture of assessment within a state or city university system at the conclusion of its successful reaccreditation visit in spring 2025. The purpose of the study is to determine general best practices for developing and maintaining a culture of assessment within institutes of higher education and utilizes the theoretical frameworks of Banta and Suskie to generate guiding questions for interviews; the impetus for establishing a culture of assessment was established using the change management model as proposed by Kotter. In this study, 12 assessment professionals were interviewed about the culture of assessment on their SUNY or CUNY campus and how the campus community is involved in the assessment process. Responses were coded by categories and analyzed through NVivo 14. Results indicated that cultures of assessment can be established through the use of supportive materials such as software, professional development opportunities, and data sharing sessions. Assessment professionals noted common issues that can hinder or work against establishing effective assessment practices on their campus. Providing assessment stakeholders with devoted assessment staff and time to analyze and draw conclusions from assessment results may provide support toward establishing robust cultures of assessment on other IHE campuses.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Student learning outcomes (SLOs) assessment within institutions of higher education (IHEs) is common in the current higher education landscape; however, this was not always the case. A groundbreaking and highly publicized 1983 report from the federal government through the National Commission on Excellence in Education—entitled *A Nation at Risk*—highlighted the need for American education to improve in order to remain competitive in a rapidly changing global landscape (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment [NILOA], 2016). Following that report, IHEs pushed initiatives for over thirty years to improve SLOs and provide evidence that higher education is an investment in a more successful future (NILOA, 2016).

IHEs are required by state and federal mandates to undergo accrediting activities to receive federal funding for students to receive financial aid. To that end, accrediting agencies inspect the academic and fiscal functions of IHEs to ensure they are open and transparent to the public. Outside accrediting bodies, such as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE), are tasked with determining if an IHE is meeting its standards for educational and institutional excellence. Every IHE accredited by MSCHE must generate a self-study report, which acts as the driving document through which the IHE presents evidence of meeting and/or exceeding MSCHE's accreditation standards. This process takes approximately 24 to 30 months to complete; accreditation does not expire, but is completed on a regular basis with consideration given to areas of growth and if the evaluation team needs to return to the campus for additional information or evidence. Overall, most IHEs have approximately five to eight years between visits from the evaluation team. During that interim, data are collected from a variety of academic and non-academic units and analyzed; the ideal endeavor is to make collegiate

decisions that are values-driven and data-informed. There are multiple regional accrediting agencies in the United States:

- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- New England Association of Schools and Colleges
- The Higher Learning Commission – North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
- South Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission
- Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges

Each of these accrediting agencies is an independent entity that is solely responsible for ensuring that colleges and universities under their purview are following their accreditation requirements and contributing to their institution's overall success (Garfolo & L'Huillier, 2015).

This large, consequential undertaking necessitates the participation of all members of the campus community, and assessment has always played a critical role in the processes of accreditation, teaching, and learning (Baas et al., 2016). However, many campus constituents perceive the assessment process to be an additional contractual obligation at best, regarding any assessment as a violation of their personal classroom autonomy or a covert method by which to cull faculty that do not perform to a certain standard (Baas et al., 2016). The role of assessment within the accreditation process is one in which the program is assessed—not the instructor—yet a culture of defiant compliance is the norm on many campuses; indeed, many faculty report feeling as though assessment is merely another item added to an ever-growing list of items and responsibilities that is time consuming at best, or unnecessary and an infringement on academic freedom at worst (Baas et al., 2016; Hong, 2018; Lane et al., 2015; M. Norman et al., 2006).

Additionally, the director of NILOA noted, “Many of the reservations about the value of student learning outcomes (SLOs) assessment are because the findings do not speak to issues that faculty and staff find relevant for their work with students or yield information that they or others can use to be more effective” (NILOA, 2016, p. 2). This disconnect between faculty and assessment leads to a decline in compliance and a sense that assessment practices in IHL are punitive and meant to curtail classroom autonomy.

It is heavily encouraged to develop and maintain a robust assessment culture on college campuses to show rigorous commitment to academic excellence. The best cultures of assessment are structured in a way that all members of the campus community are actively involved in the continuous assessment of student and programmatic goals and learning outcomes. By doing so, there is increased buy-in from stakeholders, especially if they can provide feedback about the process of data collection and the SLOs to be assessed (Beckwith et al., 2010; Gerber, 2001). Furthermore, the development of a culture of assessment encourages academic excellence not just from the instructors and staff, but from students as well: within the college community, the importance of assessment for excellence and improvement becomes steeped within the campus climate and culture (Fuller et al., 2016).

Accreditation and assessment remain intricately linked within higher education. Without assessment results from crucial departments within colleges and universities, accreditation groups and IHEs are unable to determine if the data provided to them is relevant and able to be used to enhance educational programming outcomes. Yet many IHEs struggle to bring faculty stakeholders to the table to have conversations about the importance of assessment. There can be a variety of reasons for this, such as a top-down management methodology, a lack of an assessment specialist within IHEs to spearhead assessment efforts, a lack of professional

development (PD), confusion regarding the assessment needs of the institution versus the needs of accreditors, among others (National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed in this study is that a four-year state college in the SUNY/CUNY system has a decentralized culture of assessment that MSCHE noted is present but in need of adjustments with recommendations given to the campus in their most recent accreditation visit (MSCHE, 2025). The institution had been lacking a specific individual whose sole purpose was assisting faculty, staff, and other non-academic units in determining program efficacy. In previous years, a full-time faculty member was tasked with completing the necessary work for an assessment specialist on a part-time basis; however, it became apparent to the institution that in order to be in full compliance that they would need someone singularly focused on this aspect of institutional accreditation. Within this institution, the Assessment Office is under the supervision of the Institutional Research office.

The college was in the process of preparing for the accreditors visit during the spring 2025 semester, and it was expected that the presence of a culture of assessment—or at least the efforts toward establishing one—should be evident to the visiting assessment team. Within the self-study report, robust assessment practices can be found, but decentralized structures and inconsistent documentation were noted by the visiting team at the time of the visit.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify best practices in establishing a culture of assessment at a public four-year institution within the SUNY system based on recommendations of MSCHE. This study serves as a logical research response to the observed problem of decentralized assessment culture by investigating peer institutional practices and

translating findings into actionable recommendations for improving assessment culture, sustainability, and effectiveness.

This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 12 assessment professionals from SUNY and CUNY institutions across New York State. Using the theoretical frameworks set forth by Banta (2002a, 2002b) and Suskie (2018) regarding the purpose of assessment and engaging the campus community, interview questions were constructed that would explore concepts such as leadership influence, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability practices. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling via publicaly available institutional contact information, with inclusion criteria requiring at least one year of experience in an assessment-focused role.

Data collection occurred through recorded Zoom interviews which lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes each. Interview transcripts underwent member checking for accuracy before thematic analysis using NVivo 14 software. The analysis focused on prevailing themes, patterns, and best practices across participant responses, which were then used to generate evidence-based recommendations for developing and sustaining cultures of assessment in similar insittutions. The diversity of the SUNY and CUNY system campuses in regard to programs, degrees, and assessment maturity levels provided deeper insights into their varied approaches to assessment practices while maintaining focus on peer institution best practices.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

The guiding theoretical framework for this study was based on the assessment theories and practices proposed by two of the prominent scholars in assessment: Banta and Suskie. During the 1980s and into the 2000s, Banta and Suskie were influential in their frameworks for assessment in higher education, publishing books and articles that became seminal works for

assessing student learning and institutional efficacy. Banta was one of the first names in higher education assessment, primarily focused on student learning assessment, institutional effectiveness and research, and academic program evaluation.

Banta asserted that assessment is a process that includes multiple stages and dimensions, emphasizing how assessment is a cyclical process that encompasses multiple areas of an institution. Inevitably, Banta (2002a, 2002b) claimed, this will lead to additional clarity and balance to activities set forth for assessment purposes. It is further indicated that assessment serves three major purposes: first, to improve the programs and services offered by the IHE; second, to act as a form of accountability to external stakeholders; and third, to encourage institutional improvement toward meeting the requirements of external stakeholders and accrediting bodies (Ohia, 2011). As IHEs approach assessment, Banta encourages clarity in explicitly stating program objectives as these objectives will drive the types of assessments used to determine efficacy, and to utilize multiple assessment types to determine student achievement (Banta, 2002a). Banta is well-known for a systematic approach to assessment, and Ohia (2011) summarized this approach using the acronym F.A.M.O.U.S: formulate outcomes, assess outcomes, measure outcomes, obtain results, use results, and strengthen programs. As part of the assessment process and to formulate rigorous student objectives, Banta encouraged interdisciplinary approaches to assessment and to use assessment results for continuous programmatic and institutional improvement (Banta et al., 2015).

Suskie (2010a) collaborated extensively with Banta et al. (2015) and developed a set of assessment theories. Suskie directly noted in a 2010 Assessment Institute keynote that Banta's research showed that "assessment can lead to improved teaching and learning" (Suskie, 2010a). Suskie's assessment theories expanded on Banta et al.'s (2016) by systematizing their

foundational work and moving it into actionable steps that support accreditation efforts. Additionally, Suskie proposed methods by which assessment data could be used to "close the loop," a practice in which assessment data are utilized to drive changes from the classroom to the institutional level (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Whereas Banta et al. (2015) had a focus on the theoretical foundations of assessment and how it fits within the culture of an institution, Suskie focused on using assessment results for actions such as cross-institutional collaboration, aligning assessment results with changes to teaching practices, encouraging the dissemination of best practices among assessment communities, and stressed the need to balance accountability and flexibility from the instructor to the institutional level (Banta et al., 2015; Johnson et al., n.d.; Suskie, 2010b).

Together, Banta et al. (2015) and Suskie's (2010a) theoretical frameworks provide methodologies and practices that encompass consistent communication, data-informed decision making, variety in assessment methodologies, and institutional improvement, which undergird higher education best practices. These frameworks are used within this study due to the comprehensive nature of establishing robust assessment practices in IHEs and the seminal nature of these frameworks as the basis of assessment in higher education. Assessment professionals are acutely aware of Banta and Suskie, and their influence impacts every aspect of higher education assessment, from classroom-level pedagogical changes to national accreditation agencies.

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design

This case study design endeavored to determine the best practices for establishing a culture of assessment at a public, state university. Using the theoretical frameworks for assessment as established by Banta (2015) and Suskie (2010a), interviews were solicited from assessment coordinators, directors, and research specialists through email, using publicly

available email addresses on school websites. A personalized email was sent asking for assessment professionals to consider volunteering to participate in a Zoom interview about cultures of assessment on campus. Interview questions were based on the principles of assessment set forth by Banta and Suskie and focused on the process of establishing a culture of assessment and the best practices for this endeavor. Based on these interviews, responses were analyzed for key themes and ideas, in order to present a comprehensive picture of how the establishment of a culture of assessment begins, grows, and eventually thrives. Questions centered around ideas of how a culture of assessment is observed in academic and non-academic departments, the value of interdepartmental assessment collaboration, and how assessment results are used to drive continuous improvement from the classroom to the campus level.

The methodologies for this study were supported by a variety of sources. Both Suskie and Banta offered comprehensive, holistic assessment practices and theories that focused on continuous cycles of improvement that impact the entirety of the campus (Banta et al., 1996; Palomba & Banta, 1999; Suskie, 2007). Sukie and Banta are also considered to be two of the most prominent and influential researchers in assessment, even as higher education assessment as a research area continues to grow and benefit from a variety of perspectives (Suskie, 2010a). This is especially crucial as accrediting agencies continue to place additional focus on assessment results and their impacts on IHEs (Suskie, 2015). These theoretical frameworks fit the design of the study in regard to historical perspective assessment research as well as the impact of assessment results on programming and services in IHEs. Both frameworks stressed the direct involvement of faculty in the assessment process and how their buy-in is crucial to the formation of a culture of assessment (Banta et al., 1996; Banta & Palomba, 2015; Beckwith et al., 2010; Fuller, 2013; Gerber, 2001). Both the purpose and research question of this study

demonstrated alignment with the development of a culture of assessment within IHEs. Suskie and Banta's theoretical frameworks and emphasis on closing the loop practices provided a foundation in empirical research toward the establishment of a culture of assessment.

Research Question

RQ1

What are established best practices in peer institutions that are used to establish a culture of assessment recommended by MSCHE on a university campus?

RQ2

Based on the results from assessment professional interviews, what are the best practices to be utilized by the case study institution and other IHEs to meet the recommendations for a culture of assessment as indicated by MSCHE?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was in its application of interviews with assessment directors and coordinators who have established assessment offices on their campus. It endeavored to determine how they cultivated a culture of assessment in order to determine best practices and their applicability to other public colleges and universities. These results may be used in other IHEs to establish a baseline understanding of assessment culture on their campuses, determine areas of improvement, and generate an action plan to assist their campus in developing a robust, faculty-led culture of assessment based on established best practices. Additionally, information from this study may be used to address assessment inequities among faculty and staff with regard to their role in the assessment process.

Definitions of Key Terms

Academic assessment

Academic assessment refers to the collection, review, and use of information about educational programs and courses in order to improve student learning and instructional delivery (Suskie, n.d.).

Accountability

Accountability is the community and stakeholder demand for school officials to support, with evidence, that money invested in education is being used to address measurable learning outcomes (Zumeta, 2011).

Assessment

The practice of monitoring learning progress includes activities such as observation, description of the program and its goals, data collection, assessment scoring, and interpretation. The main purpose of this process is to enhance institutional effectiveness, improve services, improve and enhance programs, and foster student learning and development (Banta, 2002b; Suskie, 2018).

Assessment cycle

Based on institutional and accrediting goals, it includes identifying outcomes, mapping outcomes to assessment methods and course/program goals, analyzing assessment data, and using the findings to 'close the loop,' or determine which measures need to be taken to maintain continuous programmatic improvement (Suskie, 2007).

Continuous improvement

The use of assessment data to enact programmatic and organizational changes and improvements (Watermark, n.d.b.).

Course map

A course map refers to a matrix designed by education professionals by which a program or course is evaluated to determine if it meets the changing needs of its stakeholders. It is often used to align assessments with teaching and curriculum goals to the intended learning outcomes (University of Florida, n.d.).

Direct assessment

Direct assessments utilize evidence and knowledge of student achievement by way of actual behaviors or products. Commonly understood to be assessment methods such as exams, essays, and laboratory reports (to name a few), these assessments demonstrate the level to which a student has attained a level of proficiency in a specific skill or content knowledge (Cornell Law School, n.d.).

Educational objectives

These are statements that describe the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes that students are expected to be proficient in by the time they complete the course or program. Another term for objectives is ‘outcomes’ (Stanford University, n.d.).

Formative assessment

A type of assessment in which individuals can identify what they know or are able to do when presented with a specific learning task (National Education Association, 2022).

Student learning outcome/objective

Commonly abbreviated as SLO, these are descriptions of what a student should be able to know, think, and/or do by the conclusion of a course or program (Suskie, 2018).

Summative assessment

At the end of a course or program, summative assessments are used to gather information to improve learning or meet demands for internal/external accountability. When the information is used to improve course or programmatic outcomes, it would be the next cohort of students that would benefit from the conclusions (Suskie, 2018).

Summary

Assessment practices play a pivotal role in academic and institutional efficacy in IHEs across the country. The presence of external auditors for institutions and academic programs necessitates the presence of robust cultures of assessment on college and university campuses. Assessment assures internal and external stakeholders that the education students are receiving is effective and relevant to 21st-century societal needs. Engagement with external stakeholders is crucial, but assessment professionals often struggle with this practice as faculty and staff are reticent to engage in assessment practices for a variety of reasons. This study endeavored to establish best practices for establishing a robust culture of assessment on college and university campuses by surveying assessment professionals from SUNY and CUNY institutions in New York State.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to determine how the establishment of a culture of assessment can be accomplished in a public four-year state college. The problem to be addressed in this study is that a four-year state college in the SUNY/CUNY system has a decentralized culture of assessment that MSCHE noted is present but in need of adjustments with recommendations given to the campus in their most recent accreditation visit (MSCHE, 2025). To fully understand the importance of a culture of assessment, it is imperative to understand the role of assessment in IHEs, its perception among faculty and staff, barriers, and criticisms. Within this literature review is an introduction to assessment and some of the common themes and uses of assessment within IHEs. It will further expand on what a culture of assessment is understood to be and how empirical research suggests it should be established versus the barriers to its establishment. Faculty engagement strategies and the role of assessment with IHEs as a way to drive institutional improvement and efficacy.

Outside of academia, educational assessment is commonly understood as a set of circumstances in which students must complete a specified task or assignment to an expert in the field, be judged on a set of standards, and be given a grade or set of information regarding areas of strength and improvement; they would likely provide the example of a test or a project to illustrate their point. However, assessment is more than tests and assignments; assessment in higher education serves multiple purposes, including measuring student learning, improvement in pedagogical practices, and institutional effectiveness, improvement, and decision making (Jaffe, 2024; Watermark, n.d.). Accrediting bodies are increasingly seeking evidence of using assessment results to generate actionable steps and institutional changes that are data-informed, and values-driven (Carbonaro, n.d.). Assessment professionals, then, are responsible for ensuring

that educational goals set by federal, state, and professional accrediting organizations are adequately met and further identify areas in which students may need additional supports and where additional resources may be allocated to assist students and faculty with their academic goals.

Purpose and Types of Assessment

There are several key purposes that provide the foundation of assessment practices in IHEs. One of the first is to measure student learning, which comprises the most common definition of assessment when it is related to education. Assessment of student learning can occur inside and outside of the classroom and can be measured by a variety of experiences and methodologies. Generally, there are two forms of assessment: direct and indirect. Direct methods of assessment involve—as the name implies —direct observation of student work, performance, and achievement in a given task (Cornell Law School, n.d.). They commonly include assessment efforts such as portfolios, standardized tests, and rubrics. Standardized testing acts as a common tool to determine student achievement across multiple educational institutions and allows education professionals to determine how their students compare to similar cohorts, even as debate continues regarding their efficacy and fairness (Huber et al., 2022). Portfolios are a type of assessment that allow an instructor to view the student’s skill development over time; generally speaking, students will include their best work samples over time to demonstrate growth and mastery. Rubrics are tools used by both instructors and students to determine the efficacy of completing a task by using a set of standardized evaluation criteria with specific points that need to be addressed. Indirect methods of assessment rely on opinions and reflections to determine educational efficacy. Common forms of indirect assessment include surveys to collect student feedback on their learning experiences, alumni tracking to gather information

about the long-term impact of their education on their career goals, and focus groups, in which an instructor or researcher may gather nuanced feedback student perspectives on learning.

Overall, there are two major categories of assessment: formative and summative. Formative assessment is a constantly evolving state of assessment in which evaluation is done throughout the duration of a course or program (National Education Association, 2022). The main purpose is to generate feedback that both the instructor and student can immediately use (Suskie, 2018). The benefit of this type of assessment is that it addresses student misconceptions early and quickly before expanding on previous knowledge, allows an instructor to intervene for a student in an expedited manner, and promotes learning as a dynamic process to the student (Suskie, 2018). Common examples of formative assessment include quizzes, peer evaluations, homework assignments, and foreign language recitations, among others.

Summative assessments are designed to measure a student's understanding and achievement at the conclusion of an educational experience (Suskie, 2018). This can be done at the end of a unit, a course, or—in the case of competency exams and theses/dissertations—at the conclusion of a program of study. These types of assessments also include professional certification exams for licensure, final research papers, capstone projects, and portfolios. The benefit of this type of assessment is in its ability to demonstrate to the instructor whether a student can synthesize the information and generate a final product based on the information gleaned from applied study. Summative assessments provide valuable information about the efficacy of a course or program and allow instructors and administrators to determine if changes are needed to address disparities in the results.

Authentic assessments are those assessments that require students to apply the information gleaned during academic study to real-world scenarios in order for an instructor to

directly examine a student's work or performance (Banta, 2009). The main benefit of this type of assessment is that it allows students to apply what they have learned to a scenario that may occur in a career situation. It enhances the student's practical application of skills and techniques, addresses student engagement in the classroom and the assignment, and is designed to help students be prepared for post-graduation incidents that may challenge them (Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, n.d.). These types of assessments can be done via internships, fieldwork experiences, case studies, and simulations.

Theoretical Frameworks

When the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, IHEs were charged with improving the quality of their education. The groundbreaking report illustrated the growing disparity between American education and the education standards of the world, and highlighted potential consequences for the United States' ability to compete on a global scale: the best minds come from the best education, and the National Commission on Excellence in Education indicated that the United States was failing its students. One of the key phrases in the report was a warning of a "rising tide of mediocrity" that would be seen as an act of war if the educational performance of the United States were imposed by a foreign entity (p. 1). The four major topics outlined in the report covered pedagogical content, expectations, time, and teaching and included recommendations based on data obtained by the commission and encouraged K-12 schools and higher education adopt standards that were more measurable and rigorous in order to improve performance expectations of students; other recommendations included improved teacher-preparation programs, more time spent in school, among others (Park, 2004).

Evidence for the need to improve educational performance in the United States came in multiple forms. The Commission noted that falling test scores, alarming levels of illiteracy, and teacher preparation programs were inadequate to meet the leadership role the United States carried in economic and technological matters (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). While the report caused a great deal of discussion both in public, in government, and in the education field, the impact on higher education was distinct and significant. First, IHEs were encouraged to review their admission standards and set higher requirements to enter college to incentivize better academic performance during secondary school; second, IHEs needed to tie their educational offerings to economic competiveness and workforce preparedness; third, IHEs were expected to align their programs to the national push to improve foundations in technology, math, and science (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Park, 2004; SUNY Oneonta Education Department, n.d.). This report catalyzed changes in education that necessitated data collection and systematic review of academic efficacy and its impact on students. The conversation was no longer limited to access and funding toward education, but included a focus on student achievement and accountability for the distinct purpose of improving the nation's educational outcomes.

With a charge to increase accountability, standards, and outcomes in higher education, the field of academic assessment research began to take shape. Two researchers who emerged in this changing educational landscape were Banta and Suskie, whose work provided the necessary foundations to assess the reform efforts in IHEs and provide an operational methodology to adopt the changes needed for the Committee's call for educational reform.

Trudy Banta – Assessment Framework

Banta's (2002a) educational assessment framework is driven by a mission that is built upon collaboration and authenticity to determine student learning efficacy (Banta, 2009; Jonson et al., 2014; Ohia, 2011; K. Smith, 2016). In addition to considering the institution's mission, Banta encouraged IHEs to consider building assessments around stakeholder feedback and collaboration, authentic assessment practices, and using data to fuel continuous improvement across the institution.

Banta's guiding principle for assessment is the institution's mission and using assessment results to encourage improvement in the educational experiences of students enrolled in IHEs. Assessment is integrated into the goals and mission of the institution, underpinning a data-driven decision-making model that systematically collects and analyzes institutional data to improve student learning outcomes (Ohia, 2011; K. Smith, 2016). As supported by the Commission's recommendations, Banta also advocated for collaboration among stakeholders across campus so that all members become invested in the assessment design process to ensure relevancy and support institutional improvement, and further encouraged authentic assessments that reflect the application of knowledge to complex tasks (Banta, 2009; Ohia, 2011; K. Smith, 2016). It is understood that by involving all stakeholders in authentic assessment tasks that are linked to overall improvement that there will be evidence that assessment is valued and important to the entirety of campus (Banta et al., 2016).

Within Banta's (2015) framework there are core assumptions about learning and gathering evidence on its efficacy. First, according to the American Association of Higher Education the act of learning is multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time (Norman, 2017). It is also assumed that the assessment process will work best when there

are clearly stated purposes that align with the institution's goals; assessment of the processes, programs, classes, and achievement need to ongoing for continuous improvement (Suskie, 2015). Banta further indicated that timing is essential: begin improvement efforts as soon as a need for such is identified, and providing faculty and staff support in learning the assessment process and its implementation, consistently providing an environment that is supportive to change and receptive to suggestions from the campus community as a whole and endeavors to assess the process and the results as a wholistic view of the campus, its students, and professionals (Suskie, 2015). Finally, Banta championed a balance of institutional accountability and improvement with pedagogical flexibility in order to allow education professionals to have their classroom autonomy respected and their suggestions heard, which shapes the culture of the campus overall and gives ownership of the assessment process to everyone (Suskie, 2015).

Applying Research to Action

Banta (2002a) was most active shortly after the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, with early research beginning with Pike in 1986 at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Notably, they found a significant amount of variance in institutional test scores can come from incoming students' abilities, which can impact the reliability of the results from standardized tests, which ultimately led to an evidence-based criticism of the role of standardized tests in favor of portfolios and alternate assessments to fully understand the breadth of student knowledge and skills (Banta et al., 2016; Banta & Pike, 2012; K. Smith, 2016). The emphasis on collaboration and stakeholder involvement in aligning assessment to the institution's mission was found in the publication of *Assessment Essentials* with Palomba in 1999, followed by the seminal publication *Designing Effective Assessment* in 2007, which laid the groundwork for the six Principles of Undergraduate Learning, or PULs. (Banta & Palomba, 2015; K. Smith, 2016).

The six PULs were designed and developed by Banta when she was serving in a leadership role at Indiana University-Purdue University (IUPUI), with the PULs approved and adopted by the IUPUI Faculty Council in 1998 (Hamilton et al., 2006; K. Smith, 2016). These essential competencies were designed to act as a framework for developing curricular frameworks, designing assessment, and encouraging student development in support of the recommendations found in *A Nation At Risk* for ensuring academic success and effective civil engagement. The PULs from Hamilton et al. (2006) were:

- Core Communication and Quantitative Skills – oral, written, and visual communication of knowledge, quantitative reasoning, and information literacy.
- Critical Thinking – analyze information critically, make informed decisions, and problem solving.
- Integration and Application of Knowledge – connecting multiple subject areas and knowledge and discern how to apply that linked knowledge to real-world situations.
- Intellectual Depth, Breadth, and Adaptiveness – deep understanding of specific fields of study with the openness to take in new knowledge in a variety of contexts.
- Understanding Society and Culture – awareness of culture, diversity, and societies as part of global citizenship.
- Values and Ethics – decision-making processes are based on ethics, reasoning, and a sense of integrity based on personal values.

These principles can be used to support measurable learning outcomes while maintaining emphasis on accountability and high academic standards.

Criticisms of Banta's Framework

Banta's (2002a) framework, however, is not without criticism. While Banta advocates for grounding change in the IHE's mission and collaboration, there can be resistance to change at multiple levels. Faculty are often the first to provide pushback to change; Banta's framework relies heavily on rubrics and collaboration. However, some faculty view rubrics as an oversimplification of the process which can give the perception of a lack of autonomy; rubrics necessitate protocols to be established to ensure inter-rater reliability, but the process of assuring successful rubric use can be criticized as a time-consuming bureaucratic burden (Banta et al., 2016; Bresciani, 2011). Time-consumption is also of concern with the focus on authentic assessments—such as capstone projects and portfolios—as it takes an investment in time, infrastructure, and training to support faculty who will utilize these assessment tools, a lift some IHEs are not adequately prepared to engage in (Arcario et al., 2013; Bresciani, 2011; Fuller, n.d.; Hawthorne, 2015). In addition, concerns exist that the bureaucratic burden of forced collaboration may cause faculty to perceive assessment as another way they are compelled to comply, that assessment changes are just another initiative that will fall away when administrators change (Arcario et al., 2013; Bresciani, 2011). As is the case with many educational initiatives, ideals and practical execution can collide and create tension.

Linda Suskie – Assessment Implementation Framework

As a result of the pioneering assessment work of Banta, Linda Suskie continued the necessary research into assessment implementation and best practices. Suskie placed great emphasis on expanding the princples of collaboration, aligning the IHE's mission to assessment goals, and using data to make informed decisions that allow for iterative decisions to be made. The main components of Suskie's framework were developed and emerged during the 2000s as

IHEs began to bring their focus to peer institution comparisons of mastery and using external standards to better align institutional goals and their benchmarks of success. Suskie supported assessment practices that are outcomes-focused and systematic in support of enhancing the practice of teaching and learning. The process begins by outlining precise, measurable learning outcomes that are aligned with the IHE's mission. Faculty then use those learning outcomes to establish a teaching-learning-assessment cycle to gather and use assessment data to inform and implement improved teaching practices. The teaching-learning-assessment cycle follows a consistent process of defining student learning goals, creating learning opportunities and authentic assessments in order to collect student assessment data, and then analyzing that data in order to bring forth improvements in a course, area of study, or even the entirety of the IHE (Suskie, 2000, 2018).

Suskie's Characteristics of Good Assessment

Not all assessments are created equal, and not all assessments are considered 'good' according to Suskie's standards and framework. Suskie proposed the "Five Dimensions of Good Assessment" in her work *Five Dimensions of Quality: A Common Sense Guide to Accreditation and Accountability* in 2015, and provides a framework for supporting "closing the loop" practices in IHEs. The dimensions include:

- Clear focus on goals – with the IHE's mission in mind, assessments should be designed with learning objectives that reflect sound teaching practices in conjunction with measurable outcomes to gather data that are meaningful for the institution.
- Cost-effective – assessment efforts may require time, money, and professional knowledge to provide valuable information to the IHE and its stakeholders. The assessment efforts

need to match the amount of resource investment placed in them, and they should be sustainable over the long term and avoid unnecessary complexities.

- Accuracy – assessments are effective if they generate trustworthy data in order to accurately and effectively impact pedagogical and programmatic changes. Using multiple measures and varying assessment types can garner more comprehensive and applicable data.
- Stakeholder value – assessment results serve no purpose if they cannot be used by an IHE's stakeholders; therefore, the results need to provide actionable information that would be of interest on all levels, from students to accrediting bodies.
- Campus culture integration – actionable steps should lead toward improvement based on the gathered data, which occurs when assessment is part of the campus culture and all stakeholders see the results used for continuous improvement (Kujala et al., 2022; Suskie, 2015).

Where Banta encouraged assessment that is based on the mission and goals of the IHE, Suskie places greater emphasis on data-driven decision making; indeed, Suskie underscores a common theme in the assessment field: decisions need to be data-informed and values-driven (Swift et al., 2018). Suskie's (2015) five dimensions provided an operational framework that emphasized aspects of IHE concern, such as cost effectiveness, in order to meet accreditor demands while providing data that can affect institutional improvement and change. Expanding on Banta's foundation of integrating assessment into the institution's mission, Suskie further advocated for establishing tools that are rooted in the needs of the IHE, including low-stakes formative assessment to drive larger changes that are scaffolded from the classroom to the program level (Bresciani, 2011). In 2015, Banta et al. (2015) united to stress the importance of

cultural values with external accountability to stakeholders in support of holistic improvement goals (Johnson et al., n.d.). Suskie's framework, while utilizing Banta's foundations for institutional culture, endeavored to provide pragmatic steps for IHEs to take in order to bring assessment to the forefront of institutional effectiveness while showing that mission-driven assessment can exist in the same sphere of influence as accountability standards.

Criticism of Suskie's Framework

Criticism exists within the widely adopted framework put forth by Suskie. Researchers have noted that one major criticism is that it oversimplifies the learning process, reducing complex tasks into metrics, which risks alienating student learning experiences that are unconventional or emergent, and a focus on metrics may inadvertently encourage formalized, standardized assessment tools over holistic evaluation (Ghaicha, 2016; Twombly, n.d.). Metrics also come in multiple forms, and as Twombly (n.d.) and Ghaicha (2016) note it is an area of concern that Suskie's framework appears to place emphasis on quantitative data in support of identifying actionable steps. A common faculty concern in all levels of academics is the pressure to teach to a test; Suskie's framework may encourage that with the concept of using assessment results to drive the learning process, rather than the other way around (Dorimé-Williams et al., 2022). The Five Dimensions of Quality are often criticized for increasing faculty workload and administrative oversight due to the cyclic nature of the process, and faculty may be resistant to engaging in the process when they believe assessment is rooted in compliance rather than educational improvement (Bresciani, 2011; Spence, 2022). This can lead to assessment misalignment with conflicts occurring between the need for educational flexibility and measuring skills that are too discrete for quantitative methods, which is at odds with the need for data-driven conclusions that underpin Suskie's framework (Ghaicha, 2016; Twombly, n.d.).

Suskie's focus on cost effectiveness and accreditation needs may also compromise assessment validity by inadvertently supporting compliance and "quick fixes" that will ultimately provide minimal pedagogical reflection and a focus on the IHE's reputation as compared to peer institutions (Banta et al., 2015; Bresciani, 2011; Suskie, 2006; Twombly, n.d.,).

Organizational Culture and Developing a Culture of Assessment

Assessment is most effective when there is engagement and buy-in from the faculty and staff within the higher education community. Ideally, assessment should be a continuous process of improvement; however, some IHEs indicate that there is often a sense of defiant compliance with assessment efforts. Some faculty are concerned about administrative overreach, some believe that assessment is only necessary for the sake of accreditation needs or checking a box to say the task is complete. Others believe that assessment is unnecessary from the onset and do not find it effective or informative to their academic or administrative goals. These reticent members of IHEs can have a negative impact on the perception of the role and efficacy of assessment on campus, ultimately undermining the goal of creating a culture of assessment. Organizational culture, as well as theories of change management, may provide additional insight into how, why, and how IHEs move assessment practice from defiant to compliant and to accepted and celebrated.

A deeper understanding of the resistance to change on university and college campuses can be found in some of the theoretical perspectives on organizational culture and change management in higher education. Beginning with organizational culture, one proposed typology proposed by Smart and Hamm (1992) offers a method by which IHEs could understand their predominant campus culture and, by extension, gain greater understanding about the challenges they may be facing for change. Smart and Hamm proposed a model with four types of cultures

found on campuses. This framework focuses on how institutions work and respond to internal and external stressors that can impact their operations. The four types include collegial, adhocratic, hierarchical, and market; each type is characterized by organizational priorities and values (Berquist, 1992-1993). The dimensions by which they determine the type of culture is whether the focus is internal or external, and if the environment favors flexibility or stability (Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022).

Types of Higher Education Cultures

Collegial cultures place the greatest focus on the faculty, with emphasis placed on shared governance, interdisciplinary and interdepartmental collaboration, and celebrates the value that every academic discipline brings to the campus (Robinson, 2015). Faculty are the main decision-makers as it is expected that decisions will be made with the IHEs from a place of mutual respect and a sense of community. The primary benefit of this type of culture is that morale tends to be high among faculty and staff due to the emphasis on collaboration, reducing interpersonal conflict, and developing a sense of community; these characteristics unltimately have positive impacts on teaching and learning (Commodore et al., 2018; Kezar & Holcombe, 2020; Riccardi et al., 2012; Smart & Hamm, 1992). High morale and job satisfaction within IHEs are positively correlated with faculty productivity, research quality, student learning outcomes, retention, and a sense of commitment and loyalty to the institution (Hebert, 2019; M. Smith, 2016; Strayhorn, 2023).

Collegial culture, however, is not without difficulties. There has been a perceived decline in collegiality over time and has been linked to a variety of erosive forces. Despite efforts at cultivating a collegial environment, academic environments can be marked by areas of incivility and conflicts with the hierarchical structure endemic to IHEs; in other words, the desire for

faculty autonomy and personal interests can clash with institutional goals (Cipriano, 2012). This can lead to faculty autonomy and authority becoming undermined, resulting in a general decline in collegiality (Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2024). Additional weak areas can be found in the increasing outside influence toward corporate/business models for governance, increasing faculty wordloads and a devaluation of their content-specific work, diversity and inclusion concerns for underrepresented groups, and inefficient decision-making strategies in favor of maintaining harmony on campuses (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 2022; Peterson, 2019; Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2024).

Adhocratic culture—from the Latin *ad hoc* meaning “for this purpose,” and -cratic originating from Greek’s *kratos* for “ruling”—referes to a type of organization culture characterized by an entrepreneurial spirit; experimentation and risk-taking are encouraged with authority centering on those with expertise (Bamber & Elezi, 2020; Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Within adhocratic cultures, employees do not have strict protocols as the focus on innovation and embracing new challenges; with this ability to pivot quicky combined with decentralized decision making structures allow adhocratric institutions to respond readily to external pressures (Bamber & Elezi, 2020; Chege et al., 2022; Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022). Within higher education, adhocratic cultures are beneficial for encouraging academic innovation and advancement among faculty; however a Kenyan study by Chege et al. (2022) noted that adhocracies had insignificant—and in some instances, negative—impact on key academic employment performance metrics.

Additional challenges can be found in adhocratic cultures, especially regarding stability. Since adhocratic cultures endeavor to support and inspire innovation, there is a lack of stability in favor of flexibility. This ultimately can cause concerns with maintaining focus on long-term

stability and strategic plans; external influences and risks can sometimes cause greater concerns for the employer if negative outcomes occur (Deshpande & Farley, 2019).

A common organization structure found in IHEs, a hierarchical culture places emphasis on clear rules, order, and a top-down managerial style with the majority of power consolidated at the top (Bess & Dee, 2012; Güngör & Şahin, 2018). As key leaders indicate policies, procedures, practices, and projects, the information works its way down the chain of command and employees are expected to comply; this leads to an organizational structure that boasts predictability and well-defined roles with consistent expectations (Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022). It is the defined expectations and top-down leadership that marks hierarchical culture's greatest strengths as it allows the organization to set goals and expect that employees will consistently meet them due to the culture's consistency and adherence to procedure (Ismail et al., 2024). These characteristics also result in hierarchical cultures being commonplace on many college campuses.

The adherence to set policies and compliance with standards that lead to operational efficiency also act as detractors to the success of the hierarchical culture model. External factors that can challenge the organization's ability to adapt to change, decreased employee engagement, concentrated power dynamics, and microaggressions are common challeges to hierarchical cultures (Lee, 2019; Phillips & Snodgrass, 2022). Leaders have to be aware of the delicate balance between being adaptable to changes and acknowledging employee engagement while maintaining the consistency endemic to the organization.

The final culture model is the market model, a model that stresses a sense of competition: the organization places their focus on external factors that could impact their success and projects an overall desire to outperform peer institutions in key areas such as research grants and

funding, enrollment, graduation rates, and institutional rankings (Smart & Hamm, 1992). As a direct consequence of this external focus, the success of the organization is determined by outcomes that are often impacted by external factors as well, such as graduation rates and alumni funding (Bamber & Elezi, 2020). An interesting aspect of this model within higher education is that it considers the student as a 'customer' who expects certain experiences and services, and the organization endeavors to meet those expectations (Chege et al., 2022). This attitude can be beneficial for IHEs as these institutions often are successful in gathering sources of external funding to support research and equipment; this can lead to improvements in operational efficiencies as IHEs can better pivot to work with external demands and demonstrate accountability and transparency (Bamber & Elezi, 2020; Smart & Hamm, 1992).

The sustained focus on external markets and metrics of success inevitably leads to the challenge inherent in market cultures: burnout. Faculty and staff bear the majority of the pressure, and this can lead to an overall decline in job satisfaction and collegiality on the campus; in addition, the focus on external markets may also lead to the IHE prioritizing short-term financial gains over long-term stability (Bamber & Elezi, 2020).

John Kotter's Change Management Theory

Deeper than the culture of the institution, organizational change can disrupt the day-to-day functions of the campus and the attitudes of employees. John Kotter, a professor in Harvard Business School, developed an eight-step model of change to help organizations manage organizational transformation. In his 1996 book *Leading Change*, Kotter outlined a model that emphasized employee buy-in and engagement, leadership qualities, and urgency to enact that change (Kotter, 2012). Kotter outlined a structured approach in order to manage changes that occur and suggested methods by which organizations can engage their stakeholders and

employees in adapting to change. It should be noted, however, that Kotter's model is often understood as non-linear within IHE contexts (Kang et al., 2020). The steps are as follows:

1. Creating urgency
2. Form a guiding coalition
3. Develop and communicate a vision
4. Empower broad action
5. Rooting novel approaches in the campus culture
6. Remove obstacles
7. Create and celebrate short-term wins
8. Make the changes a permanent part of organizational culture

Applying Kotter's Change Management Theory to Higher Education

When creating a sense of urgency within IHEs, it is beneficial to link the urgent need for change with respect for prior academic traditions and history within the institution; in other words, change management at the beginning of the process needs to be adept at encouraging change in an institution that is more accustomed to stability rather than dynamic situations (Kezar, 2001). One of the primary ways to convey a sense of urgency is to utilize external pressures to drive change. For example, Kang et al. (2020) suggested that curricular reforms can be tied to monetary incentives such as grant deadlines with uncompromising deadlines, encouraging faculty and staff to consider their responsibilities and necessities. Another factor that may affect the impetus for change is that, currently, the academic field is rapidly changing and IHEs across the country are experiencing declining enrollment and additional competition for job preparedness; this may have devasting effects on an IHE if they do not respond to the changing landscape (Dao Thi Thu & Trinh Thi Thu, 2022; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022). IHEs are

also contending with the rising use of artificial intelligence (AI) and large language models within classrooms and offices, and their impacts on faculty, staff, and administration; notably, these technological shifts as well as movement toward electronic and cloud-based educational platforms have brought similar reticence to change among faculty and staff (McMullan, 2024; Vlachopoulos, 2021).

As accrediting agencies stress continuous improvement with data-driven decisions from the classroom to the institutional level, using data to ground urgency in reality can be supportive toward enacting change (Dao Thi Thu & Trinh Thi Thu, 2022). By basing change in metrics such as enrollment forecasts, student success in comparison to the IHE's policy, and financial projections—especially as they compare to peer institutions with similar setups—IHEs can ground their changes with data supporting the need for action as opposed to inaction (Dao Thi Thu & Trinh Thi Thu, 2022; Kang et al., 2020; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022; Vlachopoulos, 2021). These pressures can drive active change if rooted in the institution's strategic plan and mission rather than accreditation or external audit needs, but it should be framed as a chance to improve the IHE's mission and meet the needs of the campus community as a whole rather than framing it as a threat that must be met or else face punitive repercussions (Dao Thi Thu & Trinh Thi Thu, 2022; Vlachopoulos, 2021). Part of this process is ensuring that cross disciplinary coalitions are established in order to fully acknowledge the contributions of faculty and the role of shared governance in the communication to the college community, establishing a teamwork perspective that is necessary for Kotter's urgency step to be accepted by the IHE's members (Pham Thi Thanh, 2022; Vlachopoulos, 2021). Resistance to change at this step can be found in the decentralized decision-making structures endemic to many IHEs, faculty and staff concerns about tenure, advancement, and academic freedom, and cultural reticense to substantive changes

instead of slower increments (Dao Thi Thu & Trinh Thi Thu, 2022; Kang et al., 2020; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022; Vlachopoulos, 2021).

Kotter continues the process with establishing coalitions to guide the changes necessary to address the initial concerns that generated the sense of urgency. However, Kotter's strategies are designed for corporations more than IHEs, necessitating a consideration for aspects of IHEs that corporations do not need to consider, such as academic discipline-specific concerns and tenure systems. To that end, Kotter enourages locating the positive leaders to help guide the organization toward improvement, and IHEs are no exception. Storberg-Walker and Torraco (2004) highlight that the leadership and governance structure inherent within IHEs necessitate a shared responsibility among multiple constituents and groups on campus. One way to assure a varied coalition that is invested in timely change implementation is to be certain that you have varied roles and responsibilities. The most effective coalitions often contain individuals in positions of authority who can allocate resources or affect policy changes, such as deans and provosts; representatives from faculty governance to support efforts toward change that are supportive of shared governance; and lastly, there needs to be individuals who are well-known in the campus community who garner the respect of their peers regardless of their academic program affiliation (Hall, 2021; Kang et al., 2020; Storberg-Walker & Torraco, 2004; Thomas, 2019). There is a consistent pattern in the primary literature demonstrating that cross-functional coalitions are more effective in enacting change compared those that relied only on administrative coaltion, but cautions against having a glut of administrators on these teams as this can reduce faculty buy-in to the process, and it is further noted that coalitions that neglect staff and adjuncts (Kang et al., 2020; Lombardi, 2023). Furthermore, change timelines can conflict with academic calendars, varying priorities among campus stakeholders, and employee

turnover, which can complicate the process even further by disrupting continuity (Kang et al., 2020; Lombardi, 2023).

Guiding coalitions are then tasked with developing a vision, the next step in Kotter's model. Within IHEs, it is imperative that change spring from collaboration rather than a top-down bureaucratic requirements; it is considered best practice to generate shared goals within multiple levels of the organization to encourage ownership, buy-in, and mutual respect for the process (Krijnen et al., 2022). In this portion of the process, shared governance will play a crucial role in drafting the vision for change as it relates to job responsibilities and requirements for career advancement/promotion (Pham Thi Thanh, 2022). As the vision is developed, it is also helpful to design the vision in a similar manner to those familiar to researchers, such as those used in grant proposal frameworks and to utilize respected peers to guide the construction of the vision components (Kang et al., 2020; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022). As multiple levels within the IHE should be involved in the process, it should be expected that best practices would be considered, and within accrediting bodies there is a focus on evidence-based practices. Utilizing data such as student success metrics, employee satisfacticion, and others can be used to provide legitimacy to the process (Odiaga et al., 2021; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022). One aspect that corporations and IHEs share in common is the need for communication of the vision for change across multiple channels to reach as many stakeholders and the need to drive change to meet their particular needs. Within many IHEs, research and publication play a crucial role in obtaining funding and advancing the field of research; to that end, strategic objectives are highly effective when translated into frameworks that lend well to publishable research, aligned to pedagogical values related to specific disciplines, and using the tenure review process as a time to reaffirm and reinforce these objectives (Odiaga et al., 2021; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022).

Implementation challenges exist when communication breaks down among stakeholders, even when it can be something as simple as the method by which data are collected. One problem that can arise is that the humanities may prioritize qualitative data over STEM fields' focus on quantitative data (Kang et al., 2020). Odiaga et al. (2021) further emphasized the need to address resource and research funding structures and embed the need for change in aspects of the IHE's community, such as through incorporating interprofessional education visions into the institution's strategic plan and key performance indicators (KPIs) to garner traction for change. The importance of professional autonomy cannot be understated, as compliance tends to increase and remain sustainable when scholarship and the targeted changes in operations are considered in tandem and not mutually exclusive (Kang et al., 2020; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022).

As Kotter's model moves into empowering broader action with an IHE, once again consideration needs to be given to the shared needs and responsibilities of all stakeholders, including the role of shared governance in the decision-making and implementation process. Ultimately the goal should be to overcome siloed disciplines, offices, and decision-making; this will set up stakeholders for success by creating an environment that is conducive to risk-taking, innovation, and collaboration.

Removing the barriers to action necessitates that the institution self-assess if there is a sense of inertia, perhaps due to convoluted approval processes or polices and procedures. Kang et al. (2020) suggest that actions such as revising promotion and tenure criteria can encourage faculty and staff participation, and include that faculty were more inclined to include new pedagogical methods if their evaluations were adjusted to adapt to the changes. As silos are broken down within the IHE, Miles et al. (2023) posited that it would be beneficial to streamline current workflows in orer to reduce barriers to interdisciplinary education efforts, and Kang at al.

(2020) also indicated that this will further support the adjustments to promotion and tenure criteria to encourage participation. Research has shown that the most effective approaches incorporate faculty to co-design processes that impact implementation, encourage the participation of discipline-specific ambassadors to speak to department and professional practices, and encourage the participation of students in advisory panels to garner feedback about how curricular or programmatic changes are impacting them (Miles et al., 2023; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022). It should be noted, though, that investments in training and support often fail when there are gaps between research and teaching priorities and when adjunct faculty and staff are excluded from the conversations (Kang et al., 2020).

Regardless of the amount of time spent in the non-linear process, one of the final steps in Kotter's management model is to root novel approaches to the campus culture. Academic traditions are deeply rooted and and hallowed within IHEs, especially those with long historical and social traditions. The campus community at IHEs should see that their choices and actions have real value and impacts on campus. One of the strongest ways to accomplish this is to anchor the changes in the institution's identity and its advancement. For example, Rush University decided to incorporate interprofessional education (IPE) into their strategic plan and based it within their accreditation standards, finally including it in graduation transcripts in order to advance adoption across the university (Mugambi & Matula, 2025; Odiaga et al., 2021). A major component of this instance is that Rush University codified pedagogical changes into curriculum mandates, which reinforced adoption. By structuring changes such that initiatives can be financially sustained over the long term, and providing awards and incentives to adoption of new practices, IHEs may be able to show iterative reinforcement of their endeavors (Kang et al., 2020; Petersen & Bartel, 2020; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022). It is stressed in studies, however, that

centralized structures, giving academic departments the leeway to choose discipline-specific cultural norms, and utilizing student success narratives are crucial in the continued implementation of changes on campus (Kang et al., 2020; Odiaga et al., 2021; Petersen & Bartel, 2020; Pham Thi Thanh, 2022).

Kotter's change model can be readily adopted to match the emerging and evolving needs of IHEs, however it may need minor adjustments in order to meet the traditions and academic needs characteristic of higher education. At the core of the approach is a respect for the stakeholders involved in the process—from top administrators to students—and the value their input provides. By respecting and elevating the varying experiences, academic traditions, institutional history, and the campus culture, IHEs can enact large scale changes on their campus with the ability to measure the efficacy of the changes over time.

Strategies for Encouraging Faculty and Staff Engagement in Assessment

Change over time within IHEs involve an investment in the time, expertise, and focused roles of faculty and staff (Bresciani, 2011; Fuller et al., 2016). These investments in the people participating in campus activities and education on a consistent basis need to be systematic; administrators and deans need to be respectful of the workloads, time constraints, responsibilities, and academic values of their employees and students (Massey et al., 2020). Sustainable change occurs over the long term and efforts to support faculty engagement in assessment need to reflect efforts to support faculty rather than impose direct mandates and return to a sense of defiant compliance (Banta et al., 1996; Spence, 2022).

Assessment in higher education can be complicated, especially for faculty and staff who have a minimal or tenuous understanding of the role it plays in institutional effectiveness. Generally, faculty find value in assessment and find it to be a trustworthy process designed to

improve educational outcomes and assist in the process of teaching and learning (Fernandes et al., 2024; Fletcher et al., 2012; Sánchez & Moreira, 2020). When workshops and seminars are offered to faculty and staff, higher education professionals have the opportunity to improve their assessment literacy and increase their confidence in using assessment tools, such as rubrics and software for assessment data visualization. Structured training provides faculty and staff with focused assessment support, and when tied to promotion and other career advancement criteria, researchers found upwards of 89% participation rates (Massey et al., 2020). Outside of these criteria, mentoring communities have shown promise with supporting faculty and staff assessment efforts. When provided with opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and problem-solve concerns with peers, researchers fround a 58% increase in adoption speed versus those groups who had isolated change efforts with minimal or no peer interactions (Le et al., 2024; Spence, 2022). However, gaps in the literature are found in methods to address the disciplinary differences between STEM and humanities faculty; there is a 72% failure rate in addressing discipline differences about what constitutes “effective assessment” in this disparate fields, and the term ‘engagement’ also lacks consistent definitions across multiple studies (Pastore, 2023; Spence, 2022). Additionally, there are very few studies that address effective engagement strategies for part-time and contingent faculty and there are no studies found so far that track long-term persistence in assessment engagement (Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific, 2025; E. E. Smith & Gordon, 2019).

It is also imperative that faculty and staff are provided with resources to support assessment efforts across the campus. When technology is introduced—such as improved hardware, instructional resources in support of assessment, and assessment software—faculty and staff are made aware that assessment practices are respected, expected, and utilized for

institutional improvement. Studies indicate that discipline-specific assessment templates reduce time spent on data analyses by 68%, and faculty and staff reported a 40% increase in satisfaction when dedicated support staff were available to support collaboration and assessment efforts on campus (Garfolo & L'Huillier, 2015; Hutson & Hogan, 2023; Madland et al., 2024; Vallon, 2024). Technology plays a crucial role in reporting out assessment results to the campus community and necessary stakeholders, including outside accrediting agencies. Anonymous communication via data dashboards is consistently indicated as a factor in assessment practice adoption, as it lends additional trust in the assessment process (Pastore, 2023). Despite open communication about assessment results, a concern exists when there is decentralized governance in an IHE; in those instances, researchers found that more than half of IHEs will find implementation difficulties when attempting to adopt department-level assessment practices to the entirety of the campus (Lundburg, 2020; Vallon, 2024).

Criticisms and Challenges of Assessment in Higher Education

Assessment is a crucial feature to the effective function of IHEs, however it is not without its concerns and criticisms (Banta & Palomba, 2015). Most faculty and staff have a positive opinion of assessment practices, as they support improved outcomes and believe they enhance their students' ability to find gainful employment after program completion (Ray et al., 2022; Vlachopoulos, 2021). Additionally, faculty support authentic assessments that are student-centered, but acknowledge that holistic assessment takes time, resources, and long-term changes in support of student knowledge and well-being (Bennett et al., 2023; Fernandes et al., 2024). The primary concerns have themes of bureaucratic burden, devaluation of expertise, and a lack of equity; these concerns can undermine efforts to encourage a culture of assessment on IHE campuses.

One of the first criticisms regarding assessment in IHEs is the perception that assessment is a bureaucratic burden. In other words, faculty and staff often get the sense that assessment is a way to ‘check a box’ for compliance and that the data are not used to improve institutional effectiveness. Jones (2022) provides the sobering statistic that “researchers and administrators waste around 55,000 person days a year just on rekeying information about publications, grants, and projects into university systems,” and redundant bureaucratic requirements can have negative impacts on efficiency and educational quality (Mind the Graph, 2024). This means that IHEs are losing employee time due to redundant compliance tasks, when that time can be better spent improving academic outcomes for enrolled students and deeper academic research among professional employees (Mind the Graph, 2024; Russell & Markle, 2017).

Following closely behind the criticism of bureaucratic burden is that assessment results do not have an impact on the efficacy of the IHE’s curricula or daily functioning. Some studies have shown that upwards of 63% of institutions do not use their assessment data to improve curricula, lending support to faculty and staff criticism that assessment is another way to assure compliance without action (Rawlusyk, 2018; Russell & Markle, 2017). This can also be seen when there is a lack of authentic assessment, or creating assessment activities that reflect real-world scenarios in which students must apply in-class knowledge to solve a problem, rather than rely on memorization (Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, n.d.). There is research to suggest that there is a disparity that exists between how assessment metrics are gathered—such as through standardized exams—and reporting demonstrable learning gains in students, as many standardized tests place heavier focus on memorization rather than synthesis of ideas and critical thinking to problem-solve a real-world problem (Elton & Johnston, 2002; Joughin, 2010; Sánchez & Moreira, 2020). The lack of efficacy, in this case, is two-fold: first, some IHEs are

not utilizing their data effectively to produce actionable steps and improvements to curriculum; second, standardized exams—while helpful in certain circumstances—do not necessarily offer deeper insights into curricular improvements that accurately reflect industry needs.

Faculty are hired by IHEs due to their academic credentials, publication history, research capabilities, and content specialty. Their academic accomplishments are meant to support the institution's reputation and provide expert content-area pedagogy. In some institutions, faculty are encouraged to participate in hands-on learning opportunities by employing students as research assistants, tutors, teaching assistants, and other support roles. These same faculty, however, often report feeling reduced to cogs in accreditation machines and acting more as a tool to ensure compliance rather than working as content-area experts (Russell & Markle, 2017; Spence, 2022). Providing assessment resources to instructors to improve their practices—such as using rubrics—can cause additional consternation among faculty if the tools do not take into account the evaluation norms established among many professions, hampering their professional and pedagogical autonomy (Elton & Johnston, 2002; Nallaya et al., 2024). Outside of the classroom, processing assessment data and composing necessary reports for the institution—and, in some cases, accreditation agencies—reduces the amount of time that faculty can spend in contact with their students to support their knowledge acquisition and act as mentors (Jones, 2022; Mind the Graph, 2024). This accountability to the institution and external accreditors can lead to faculty burnout and students feeling disconnected from the faculty (Rawlusyk, 2018; Russell & Markle, 2017).

Faculty are not the only stakeholders who experience negative impacts from assessment concerns. IHEs often pride themselves on campus inclusivity and educational accessibility, yet assessment can inadvertently lead to institutional and program inequities, especially among

marginalized populations (Henning et al., 2022). For example, students who are English-language learners (ELLs) experience lower pass rates in oral assessments and have disadvantages in standardized exams when compared to their native-speaking peers (Gupta, 2023; Henning et al., 2022; Nallaya et al., 2024). Additional concerns are found in traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations, including those identifying as black, indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer-inclusive communities (LGBTQ+). Within higher education assessment systems, students from these demographics often face systemic inequities that may not be readily apparent, yet they perpetuate disparities present on many IHE campuses. The demographics and identities of college students are changing over time, and what has worked in the past does not necessarily match current learner needs (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2024). A study by Wilson (2022) found that in many pedagogical frameworks, the predominant Eurocentric model often omits or truncates BIPOC perspectives and this can result in assessments that will fail to fully capture the lived experiences of those students. LGBTQ+ students often face cis-heteronormative survey and demographic tools, which can isolate transgender and non-binary students (Feldman, 2023; Warner, 2017). Additionally, elevated risks of microaggressions and interpersonal harassment affect multiple aspects of marginalized students' college experience, including impacting academic and personal growth; unfortunately, most assessment measures will attribute these changes to lower academic ability rather than capture them as stressors (Falco & Sparrow, 2023; Feldman, 2023; Glazzard et al., 2020).

As IHEs endeavor to provide world-class educations to their students, one of the common methods by which many instructors assess their students is via exams. Exams have excellent uses in standardized assessment practices and allows for objective rating of a student's knowledge.

However, exams are limited in how the instrument can be used and what it can measure. With increasing emphasis being placed on experiential and application/project-based learning in many academic settings, exams are not necessarily the best instrument to use to assess student knowledge. An inherent difficulty with exams is that they encourage memorization over deeper knowledge acquisition and understanding, rendering it difficult to measure creativity and and applied problem solving in students (Joughin, 2010; Rawlusyk, 2018). Furthermore, exams encourages a phenomenon called "the backwash effect," which Elton and Johnston (2002) describe as an incentivization toward superficial learning and students narrowing their study efforts in order to succeed at a particular assessment format rather than gaining deeper knowledge and understanding.

While funding and and compliance can impact assessment efforts on campuses, there are deeper discussions occurring among multiple stakeholder levels regarding the overall use of assessment data and how it can be used to improve or hamper institutional efficacy. Within assessment practices, there are a variety of sources that encourage multi-level feedback and mechanisms for ensuring institutional effectiveness. It cannot be understated, however, that top-down methodologies are not as readily accepted as collaborative work and it is imperative that disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical best practices in specific fields be respected as part of the decision-making process regarding effective assessment.

Summary

Assessment in IHEs serves multiple purposes. It is primarily understood in the context of programmatic and student learning outcomes and in conjunction with the accreditation needs of the individual institution. There are different types of assessment to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, and it is heavily encouraged to use multiple measures to capture a

comprehensive understanding of all levels, from the student to the entirety of the IHE. Every accrediting agency supports the use of assessment results to drive institutional and educational improvement; however, faculty and staff can be reticent to engage in changes that are perceived as threats to their autonomy. A variety of institutional cultures exist on IHE campuses, and each culture has their own inherent strengths and concerns that can impact any change process on campus. Kotter encourages a multi-step approach to bringing organizations through periods of change, and the establishment of a culture of assessment in IHEs can be a daunting process. It is imperative that stakeholder feedback is heeded and that the changes are made in a way that is consistent, meaningful, and focused; to do otherwise is to risk losing a sense of urgency and undermines the efforts to change the conversation around assessment. Despite a variety of sources and methods to manage change in large organizations, there is a lack of available information regarding using change theory and assessment frameworks in an effort to establish a robust culture of assessment within an IHE.

Banta and Suskie are two of the prominent researchers in higher education assessment, a field born from the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 that spoke to concerns about the United States' educational competitiveness in relation to the rest of the world. Both Banta and Suskie stress the need for comprehensive and multifaceted assessment efforts in support of institutional improvement and accreditation needs. Critics of the assessment frameworks of Suskie and Banta argue that assessment practices in general reduce student achievement and collegiate advancement to data without nuance, and further express concern that assessment is often perceived as a bureaucratic burden or administrative overreach to 'check a box.' While the assessment frameworks provide an overall setup for establishing assessment practices on university campuses, there is a lack of information about the effective establishment of a robust

culture of assessment, especially when assessment efforts are strong but decentralized and inconsistent. Assessment serves a distinct and important purpose toward educational improvement, yet the processes are often alienating and place education professionals on the sidelines of the assessment efforts when it is necessary to determine how well the IHE is doing beyond the needs of external stakeholders and accreditors.

Literature was sourced using the National University's library search database, Director of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Google, and Google Scholar, with parameters set for peer-reviewed, full-text articles, academic primary sources, as well as blog posts. Search terms included: assessment, culture of assessment, assessment matrix, higher education assessment, Middle States accreditation, MSCHE, campus climate, change theory, assessment best practices, defiant compliant, staff compliance, educational administration, Kotter's Change Model, change management, iterative improvement, and assessment theory. Boolean logic was utilized to further refine search parameters in all databases and in many keyword queries. The earliest sourced document is traced to 1983, which is when *A Nation at Risk* brought public attention to a changing global employment landscape and placed assessment of higher education efficacy as a cornerstone to IHEs, to the most recent studies available in 2025.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem to be addressed in this study is that a four-year state college in the SUNY/CUNY system has a decentralized culture of assessment that MSCHE noted is present but in need of adjustments with recommendations given to the campus in their most recent accreditation visit (MSCHE, 2025).The purpose of this case study was to identify best practices in establishing a culture of assessment based on the recommendations of MSCHE. This problem and purpose led to the following research questions:

RQ1

What are established best practices in peer institutions that are used to establish a culture of assessment recommended by MSCHE on a university campus?

RQ2

Based on the results from assessment professional interviews, what are the best practices to be utilized by a public IHE to meet the recommendations given by MSCHE at their most recent accreditation visit?

Within Chapter 3 are the methodologies and design used in this study, including the rationale for utilizing this method. The invitation to interview text and questions used as part of the interviews are also included. A summary of the study population, method of sampling, data collection procedures, and data analyses will follow the methodology and design section. This chapter further includes an outline of assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; the conclusions will include ethical assurances and considerations for addressing ethical concerns are also addressed.

Research Methodology and Design

Creating a case study around a single IHE with a qualitative methodology was appropriate for ascertaining the best practices utilized by peer institutions and applying those practices in support of the assessment efforts at this public IHE. A case study model provided a robust methodology by which to identify and further refine insights into effective assessment practices, institutional efficacy, student outcomes assessment, and faculty buy-in and concerns regarding assessment policies and practices on campus. Interviews with assessment professionals based on their lived experiences, including the complexity of an IHE's situation and why certain practices were utilized over others, provide nuanced information to place data and information within the academic and historic contexts of the campuses.

Case studies have support within the assessment field as a method that allows for theoretical frameworks to be considered in parallel with real-world applications, encouraging a reflection on the benefits and drawbacks to nuanced and complex scenarios (Mowreader, 2024; Seshan et al., 2021). Within the context of research, case studies and interviews form a core component of many types of education research, allowing researchers to better understand the complexities inherent within IHE assessment structures. This is an appropriate design for this study as it anchored the case study in the narrative data of peer institutions. Given that there is no central culture of assessment on the campus, a phenomenological study would be inappropriate for this study as it focuses on the collective experiences of employees of other institutions to establish best practices that can be emulated at other state IHEs. By capturing in-depth insights into foundational practices that may have roots in institutional traditions and how that may influence decisions on peer campuses, this will support utilizing interview results with

institutional knowledge to establish peer-tested best practices for assessment (Alpi & Evans, 2019; Crowe et al., 2011; P. R. Smith, 2018).

For this study, the interview process supported gathering evidence about faculty and staff perceptions of assessment and the outcomes—including biases and defiant compliance—that may result from assessment changes on campus; a semi-structured interview further allows researchers to delve more deeply into topics that arise organically during the interview process while still maintaining alignment to research objectives and questions (Crowe et al., 2011; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Naz et al., 2022). Crowe et al. (2011) discussed that the mixed methodologies inherent to interviews can support validity by providing context for quantitative findings. For example, an item of evidence may show that a set of student learning objectives may not have been met based on benchmarking grades, but an interview with faculty may illuminate concerns such as a lack of administrative support or insufficient funding that may not be seen otherwise. This can reduce biases among researchers and further support the reliability of the study's conclusions (Kohlbacher, 2006). The nuanced nature of the interview setup is more appropriate for this study than a survey, which would limit the applicability of the results without the context from which they originate. Of greatest interest in this study is the practice within interviews to center the interview participants at the core of the research process; this often leads to more authentic results as opposed to utilizing another method—such as surveys—that can lack the depth and contextual understanding that an interview provides, whereas a survey would be beneficial to look at general trends, frequencies, and patterns (Caduff et al., 2019).

Population and Sample

The population for this study were the assessment professionals from the SUNY and CUNY statewide system of IHEs, which comprises a total of 25 City University of New York

(CUNY) schools centered in the New York City area and 64 SUNY campuses across New York State (Wintemute, 2023). The assessment professionals were solicited from publicly available email addresses on their IHE website. The professionals had a variety of experiences to consider as part of the interview process; therefore, it was necessary to consider the experiences of those in the assessment field for many years just as readily as those who have been in their profession for a single year. Consequently, it was requested that participants have spent a minimum of one year in the assessment field in higher education in order to participate in the interview. An ideal sample size was at least ten assessment professionals, but as Fusch and Ness (2015) indicated, there is a utility in data saturation from interviews; this study endeavors to reach data saturation through the use of specifically structured questions for all participants and to include a variety of assessment work experience in order to avoid losing key information from novice assessment professionals. For this study, I obtained 12 qualified interview candidates. Questions for the interview were reviewed and approved by National University's Internal Review Board (IRB) prior to use.

To solicit participants, a request for interviewees was emailed to each individual assessment professional. In this solicitation, participants were advised of the problem and purpose of the study and briefed about the expected time commitment of approximately one hour per participant (Appendix A). Participants were interviewed via Zoom and the interviews were recorded for future reference during data analysis and were not released publicly. All identifying information was redacted, and direct quotations were assigned a designation of 'Participant #' to ensure the participants' anonimity. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form that was kept for records only and were advised they may terminate the interview at any time with no ill effects. In the email solicitation, there was a link to schedule their video conference interview

appointment. Once scheduled, participants were provided with the questions at least 24 hours in advance of the interview so they could consider their answers prior to the appointment.

Instrumentation

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) with the option of asking participants to expand on topics that may have come up during the interview process in order to determine similarities and differences among the campuses (Gill & Baillie, 2018). All interviewees were given the same list of questions at least 24 hours prior to the interview so they could consider how to best answer the questions prior to the start of the Zoom interview. The interview questions were designed to be neutral so as not to influence the respondent's answers while further supporting the opportunity to explore topics and experiences that came up organically during the interview and to further clarify the participant's experiences and perspectives within their role of assessment professional (Gill & Baillie, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Interviews

Interviews are structured, semi-structured, or unstructured research methodologies used to gather nuanced qualitative information about a topic based on the interview subject's knowledge and experiences within an area of interest (Yin, 2018). Prior to the interview, candidates were advised of the topic, the questions, timing, and expectations. All candidates were able to leave the interview at any point without penalty, and they were assured that answers would be redacted of identifying information to protect confidentiality. Given the semi-structured interview process, I had the opportunity to ask additional probing questions in order to garner additional information or gain clarity on a topic brought up in conversation. In this study, open-ended interview questions were used to structure a narrative about assessment best practices and the culture of assessment that is currently on campus.

The interview contained ten questions (Appendix B) that centered around themes of defining assessment culture, leadership and governance, campus engagement, closing the loop, challenges, external pressures, resistance to change, and sustaining change; these themes synthesize key points of Kotter's change management theory (2012) and the assessment frameworks of Banta (2002a) and Suskie (2006). Given the semi-structured interview setting, probing questions were asked during the interview to gain further clarity, refocus the conversation, or expand upon a topic brought up during the conversation. Information from the interviews was reviewed and analyzed for common themes and keywords in support of developing a set of best practices based on the results. NU IRB approval was based on the interview solicitation, protocol, and submitted questions.

Study Procedures

Once NU IRB approval was obtained, an email was sent to the identified assessment professionals to request their participation in the study (Appendix A). Included within the solicitation email was a link to a digital informed consent form requesting contact information, a digital signature, and ending with setting a time to conduct the interview at a mutually agreed-upon time. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with the participant's understanding that the information would only be used for research purposes and identifying information would be redacted. The audio was transcribed into text using Zoom's native transcription feature for further analysis of keywords and topics. The ideal number of candidates to reach data saturation would have been ten, but additional interviews were accepted to bring the total number of participants to 12.

The informed consent form indicated to participants that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they may terminate their participation at any time without penalty. Data

security and confidentiality were maintained under a password-protected Microsoft OneDrive that was hosted by NU and followed its data security measures. Real names, campus affiliation, and other unique identifiers were redacted to encourage open and honest responses from the participants.

Data Analysis

Participants were invited to sign an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview, at which time a semi-structured interview was conducted via Zoom. Responses were transcribed with Zoom, and analyzed for common keywords and themes as compared to the frameworks of Banta and Suskie for assessment practices, and Kotter's framework for enacting sustainable organizational change. Results from the interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo 14 data analysis software. Data were interpreted using word and phrase repetitions as compared to interview transcripts and themes found within the literature review. These themes were formulated into a series of best practices that can be supported through peer-reviewed literature and real-world practices already in use at peer institutions.

Assumptions

Participants who agreed to the interviews were assumed to be actively employed assessment professionals within their SUNY or CUNY school in New York. The term 'assessment professional' is understood to mean any individual in a role that directly involves academic and/or co-curricular assessment in their IHE; titles and roles may vary based on the administrative structure of IHEs in the state education system. By signing the informed consent form, participants were indicating they understood the purpose of the study, the interview, and how the information would be used; this supported validating the study's purpose, methods, rationale, procedures, and benefits of the study (Minson et al., 2018). It was further assumed that

participants understood their assessment protocols and practices at their IHE and would therefore have accurate insights into assessment practices and institutional effectiveness.

Limitations

Limitations are assumed to be circumstances that could impact the interpretation or results of a study, which could impact the validity and applicability of the results (Queirós et al., 2017). A major limitation in this study may be a low number of participants; data saturation with consistent interview questions may help mitigate these circumstances while maintaining robust data saturation (Bernard, 2012). A second limitation may be the trustworthiness of the responses, as less than truthful answers can introduce unintended biases in the results (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). To mitigate potential biases, interviews were transcribed by Zoom, and the individual's transcript was sent back to individual participants for their feedback, changes, redactions, and to ascertain accuracy in their responses.

Delimitations

The delimitations in this study were based on the specific parameters of responding to the interview invitation. While limited to strictly SUNY and CUNY schools, the sample of this study was generalizable to assessment professionals in other IHEs who participate in assessment practices and must meet accreditation requirements to remain in good standing for degree conferral. Purposive sampling was used to limit the study's focus to SUNY and CUNY schools, rendering any variations in participant responses as attributable to local variations in practices in support of their specific programs, co-curriculars, and administrative requirements (Yin, 2018).

Ethical Assurances

Ethical assurances are essential for maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of interview participants, as Patten and Newhart (2017) indicate that this may mitigate potential

concerns within the study, such as conflicts of interest and biases. Participants were not limited based on name, sex, race/ethnicity, or other discriminatory practices. Ethical assurances began upon receipt of NU IRB approval. Participants were given one week to respond to the interview invitation by submitting a signed informed consent form and scheduling their one-hour interview appointment with I. If a participant withdrew from the study at any point, all information obtained from that individual was permanently destroyed and was not included in the dissertation manuscript. I also endeavored to avoid confirmation bias in results interpretation by consulting with the dissertation committee to ensure accurate interpretation and alignment.

Upon completion of the interview, a transcript of the responses was sent to the participant to review, add clarification, and/or delete responses before data analysis began on the transcript. This was to ensure full transparency and mitigate concerns about inaccurate answers. As part of the semi-structured interview protocol, it is possible that leading questions or wording may have inadvertently led to biased responses from participants; however, I endeavored to limit probing questions to only when needed for additional clarification or insight into the participant's answers.

Summary

This qualitative case study design was investigated via semi-structured interviews with actively employed assessment professionals in SUNY and CUNY IHEs in New York. Participants for this study were solicited via an email request and interviewed using Zoom. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes to one hour to complete and was comprised of asking ten questions composed around the common themes of assessment practices as described by Banta and Suskie, and change management as proposed by Kotter. Common terms and themes were identified from the participant transcripts and aligned to the frameworks of Banta, Suskie,

and Kotter. Based on these results, a set of evidence-supported best practices were proposed for developing and maintaining a sustainable culture of assessment in a SUNY school. All efforts were made to decrease biases and ethical concerns for participants, including the option to pause or stop an interview or request their responses be destroyed without penalty. In Chapter 4, the results of the study are presented and interpreted based on an organizational structure that will be delineated during the data collection process.

Chapter 4: Findings

The problem to be addressed in this study is that a four-year state college in the SUNY/CUNY system has a decentralized culture of assessment that MSCHE noted is present but in need of adjustments with recommendations given to the campus in their most recent accreditation visit (MSCHE, 2025). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify best practices in establishing a culture of assessment based on the recommendations of MSCHE. The following research questions were addressed in this chapter:

RQ1

What are established best practices in peer institutions that are used to establish a culture of assessment recommended by MSCHE on a university campus?

RQ2

Based on the results from assessment professional interviews, what are the best practices to be utilized by the case study institution and other IHEs to meet the recommendations for a culture of assessment as indicated by MSCHE?

Chapter 4 is organized around the previously mentioned research questions as well as included a discussion of the data's trustworthiness, assurances, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

A purposive sample of 12 assessment professionals from SUNY and CUNY schools was selected to participate in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview with me regarding their experiences in developing a culture of assessment on their campus. Prior to the interview, participants were invited via an email solicitation in which participants were provided with the study topic, purpose, participation requirements, and the voluntary nature of the study. Participants were provided with a digital IRB-approved consent form. The results from the

individual interviews were used to answer the individual research questions in order to determine commonalities among the best practices suggested by the professionals. The evaluation of the study findings ensured that the data were reliable, credible, and trustworthy.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Data trustworthiness is defined by Queirós et al. (2017) as the amount of confidence in the delivery of the study and includes data collection, data analysis and subsequent interpretation, and research methodology. In order to assure data trustworthiness in a qualitative study, support is found in credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability as ways to reduce confusion and uncertainty (Queirós et al., 2017). To enhance trustworthiness, I employed strategies such as minimizing personal biases, applying data triangulation, and reviewing the data for inconsistencies, thereby ensuring that the findings are generated via methods that preserve the integrity of respondent answers through analysis and interpretation (Queirós et al., 2017). Credibility, reliability, and believability were ensured throughout the data collection process as suggested by Forero et al. (2018) by standardization of data collection procedures, informed consent, and member checking. Data collection procedures were standardized via field testing the interview protocol and one-to-one interviews with pre-scripted questions for each participant. Study participants were provided with an informed consent letter—which indicated they may choose not to answer a question or stop the interview at any time with no penalty—as well as a list of the questions they would be asked during the interview. This information was also provided at the start of each interview, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions prior to the start of the data collection. To mitigate personal biases, participants were asked to review the transcript of their responses and to add, delete, adjust, or keep the interview; responses were only analyzed, and themes developed after member-checking occurred (Thomas,

2019). Results from the interviews were coded and analyzed using NVivo 14 data analysis software. This protocol also acts in support of data confirmability, transparency, and accuracy.

Transferability is understood to be the degree to which the results of a study can be applied to similar situations and individuals (Forero et al., 2018). To ensure transferability within this study, a thick description of the participants and the research process including sampling criteria, sampling strategy, demographic information as related to the job responsibilities, interview procedures, and interview questions were provided in order to allow the reader to judge for themselves if the present study is applicable and transferable to their specific IHE. Thick description helps ensure data transferability as part of the interview process via recording interviews, transcribing interviews, and the data coding process (Daniel, 2019).

Results

The sample population for this study was limited to individuals who are in primarily assessment-focused roles and in that role for at least one year; 12 individuals volunteered to speak with me for a semi-structured interview.

Table 1

Study Participants – Demographics

Participant	Approx. number of years in assessment	Approx. number of years in higher education
1	6	9
2	15	15
3	4	8
4	1	1
5	5	23
6	2	15
7	8	23
8	11	12
9	18	15
10	22	40
11	15	32
12	2	9

Average:	9	17

The results of this qualitative study are based on the professional's understanding and working knowledge of assessment best practices and their own institution's culture of assessment. The research questions for the study are supportive of the problem and purpose of the study as they seek to clarify what current best practices are found in assessment and how other institutions have developed and implemented cultures of assessment on their campus. The interview participants were all assessment professionals in New York SUNY or CUNY schools with a range of approximately one year to 22 years in assessment and a range of one to 40 years in higher education in general. All participants confirmed they were currently employed with a SUNY or CUNY school. Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews over Zoom.

The six-step thematic analysis process of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data and draw valid and reliable conclusions. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed via Zoom's native audio transcription software. The transcripts with time stamps and the accompanying recorded videos were sent to each participant separately for member checking; this ensured that participant answers were accurate to their intentions and perceptions, and allowed them the opportunity to delete or redact any information they did not want used in the study. Once member checking was completed, interview transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 14 for data coding. Coding software was used to reduce errors and to improve the reliability and applicability of the results (Queirós et al., 2017). A total of ten interview questions were used and assigned to specific codes and themes for this study. The categories are identified in Tables 2 and 3. Whenever possible, participant responses were coded to sentiments of positive, negative,

neutral, or mixed to further clarify participant attitudes and perceptions regarding assessment practices on campus.

RQ1: What are established best practices in peer institutions that are used to establish a culture of assessment recommended by MSCHE on a university campus?

All participants answered the same questions regarding how a culture of assessment is defined and manifested on their campus, stakeholder attitudes and involvement, data sharing, and practical sustainability. After participants reviewed their responses, I coded them to the nine themes and thirty-one categories as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

RQ1 Themes, Categories, and Codes

Themes	Categories	Codes
Assessment Culture	Definition and manifestation	Definition of assessment culture
		Manifestation of assessment culture
	Institutional examples	Institutional examples of assessment culture
Campus Community Attitudes	Faculty engagement	Faculty attitudes toward assessment
	Staff engagement	Staff attitudes toward assessment
	Student engagement	Student attitudes toward assessment
	Administrative engagement	Administration attitudes toward assessment
	Continuous improvement orientation	Assessment as continuous improvement
	Compliance orientation	Assessment as compliance
Administration & Leadership	Leadership influence	Leadership influence on assessment
	Institutional goals	Alignment with institutional goals
	Resource allocation	Resource allocation for assessment
	Administrative support	Administrative support for assessment efforts
Faculty & Staff Involvement	Faculty involvement	Faculty involvement in assessment

	Staff involvement	Staff involvement in assessment
	Barriers	Barriers to faculty involvement
		Barriers to staff involvement
	Strategies	Strategies to increase involvement
Student Involvement	Student participation	Student participation in assessment
	Methods	Methods of student involvement
	Barriers	Barriers to student involvement
Data Use & Communication	Data utilization	Data utilization for improvement
	Communication	Data sharing & communication
	Transparency	Transparency in assessment
Institutional Resources	Infrastructure	Assessment infrastructure
	Technology	Assessment software/technology
	Training	Training and professional development
	Other support	Other support resources
External Stakeholder Influence	Accreditor impact	Accreditor impact on assessment
	Other external influences	Other external influences that impact assessment
Sustainability	Sustainable practices	Sustainable practices in assessment
	Challenges	Challenges to sustainable assessment
	Success stories	Success stories/Best practices

A basic understanding of the participant's definition of a culture of assessment and how it is manifested on their campus is crucial to establishing a baseline understanding of the type of assessment methodologies utilized on their campus and how it is ultimately perceived by its stakeholders and participants. Within theme 1, Assessment Culture, the majority of respondents were neutral in their sentiments. These sentiment results were expected as this theme was intended to establish a baseline understanding of how assessment is defined and implemented on campus, which impacts overall perception of the institution's culture of assessment. Participant 8 indicated:

> I would define a culture of assessment as one where everyone on campus knows what it is, when you say the word assessment. Also, they're not afraid when you say the word

> assessment. They [faculty and staff] don't run... So, I would really sort of like holistically define it right as [a] knowledge base, but also an openness to engage in the practice of assessment.

Participant 9 shared similar sentiments but further expanded on the idea that a culture of assessment is further enhanced by continuous improvement practices, noting:

> I would define a culture of assessment as a commitment to reflection and continuous improvement that runs deep throughout the entire institution. So, among faculty staff administrators and I think for me that definition comes out of so much theory, but also a lot of practice, because at the end of the day the culture piece runs deep. The assessment piece is easier to acknowledge and document. But the culture piece is the harder one to achieve. Because it needs to be resilient across time and through change.

Resiliency was a common theme throughout the interviews, especially in regard to maintaining consistent assessment practices in the face of faculty and staff loss and departmental changes. All participants echoed similar sentiments to Participant 1, who stated:

> I would say that it is simply building a culture wherein the where there's a vested interest among the stakeholders in ensuring that they are doing what they intend to do right, that there are replicable measures in place, and that there is a culture that values that kind of feedback.

Participant 4 further summarized that,

> [A] culture of assessment is found in mutual reflection and goals toward student success and improvement, as well as open dialogue to that same end. Manifestation of assessment culture is found [when] we're communicating very clearly that there's an expectation that

> you care about this, that you are focused on measuring what you're doing, how well it's going, and then making adjustments accordingly.

Theme 2 focused on campus community attitudes and perceptions of assessment; the semi-structured interview protocol allowed me to ask participants to further expand upon perceived attitudes toward assessment from faculty, staff, administrators, and students. Among faculty, the results were relatively spread across positive, negative, neutral, and mixed sentiments. Participant 1 noted that, like moving water seeking the path of least resistance,

> Faculty aren't much different. So, if ... you say we want you to assess this, and they get to decide what that means and create a sense of investment in that way of 'this is your teaching. What does it mean for your students to do? Well, what do you want them taking away from it?' They will come up with things.

This sentiment is largely due to assessment professionals understanding that faculty are the subject-area experts and are more than capable and willing to assess within their fields, even if there needs to be additional support from the assessment office to identify effective assessment practices within those academic areas. Participant 11 clarified what this process could look like:

> What we do quite a bit of is meeting with individual units. So, I fairly frequently will be invited to a faculty meeting or to a Dean's council meeting in a particular school or college, and we go and talk about the same sorts of stuff that we're talking about [assessment practices]. Now, you know, these are the assessment activities that come in place on campus. These are the things I need you to do. Here's what my office can do to support you. So, you know we don't just do the assessment reporting.

A commonly occurring theme among faculty and staff attitudes toward assessment is one in which education professionals—academic and support staff—need to be guided and encouraged

to fully participate in the assessment process. Participant 1 made the connection between psychology and assessment through their mentor, saying:

> One of my big mentors in assessment described the role as being closer to her background in psychology. And she said, it's actually closer to her training in therapy than any other job she's ever had. Because really, what you're doing is you're talking to these subject matter experts who know at the end of the day—they really do, I think, somewhere know how to do assessments, if not the exact methodology. Like, they know what the kind of thing is, and what the best way to assess it is. You just have to coax them into putting that into an actionable form.

Many of the interview participants noted that faculty can sometimes be reticent to participate in assessment. Participant 1 noted pressure from accrediting bodies can impact faculty participation as it can be viewed as having a "limiting effect" on assessment participation; Participant 7 further expanded upon that sentiment and also suggested that many problems faced with faculty participation in assessment is based on not being heard by those in positions of power; they said,

> Things were so abysmal in assessment, there was really nowhere to go but up, and the only thing I really had to do was just listen to people complain. And then, because the answers were all there, everything that needed to be done to improve the assessment system was already there. The faculty knew what needed to be done to improve it. Nobody was listening to them, though.

In support of faculty and staff needs, Participant 5 expanded upon the role that the assessment office plays in supporting academic and non-academic units in effective assessment, highlighting how their assessment data can be used to meet departmental needs:

> I strongly suggest and nudge all departments and all units to meet with my office 3 times a year. It's a lot but in the beginning of the year it's like, 'Hey—you know—What's your plan for the year? And then, January, it's like, 'don't forget we do this thing called assessment,' and the end of the year, it's a 'Hey? How can I help with your report?' It's always from that vantage point of being helpful advocating for their needs to higher ups.

Overall, many participants expressed neutral sentiments regarding administrative attitudes toward assessment. The common theme among the participants was that administrators set the tone for assessment practices on campus; in many cases, the participants indicated that their culture of assessment was established due to accreditor impacts and the response from administration to those needed changes. Participant 5 indicated such a scenario occurred at their institution:

> Our most recent Middle States visit resulted in a recommendation around assessment. Which is both a good thing and a bad. So, it was really helpful to have that labeled and clear, and we had identified it in our self-study. And it was a President who was... He had been here 9 months at that point. So, he wasn't part of the self-study process... But he was able to respond to it, which is really helpful, but also reinforces the compliance expectation... and because the President said, 'Well, the accreditor said, we have to do [this].' You know the trickledown effect helped make the change that we needed, but it hurt the average faculty and staff member, feeling like this was something that we [administration] came up with. It's a mixed bag. That's fine. It is what it is.

The general understanding among participants is that while it is helpful to have administration state where and when assessment activities will happen, it is more beneficial to involve the faculty in those discussions in order to maintain a sense of autonomy and increase buy-in.

Deeper still, the results indicate an imperative that administration follow through with assessment results in support of continuous improvement. In other words, assessment professionals support using data from the college community to inform decisions that are data informed, and values driven (Olin Business School, 2023). Participant 2 clearly indicated this barrier to faculty involvement, stating “The other barrier...is the actual commitment of the college to use what is found in assessment and to do something with it is often not there. You know, if you're doing something and putting time and effort into it. And it seems like it's just going into a black hole.” Participant 9 further explained that administration needs to be nimble to the needs of their faculty based on the data they gather, positing,

> I think the best, you know, most exciting, most innovative things happen when leaders are really knowledgeable, and value assessment and all that goes into it, but also kind of step back. And then, once there is a plan in place. Let that plan evolve and emerge, and be nimble, and not too rigid as well.

Student attitudes toward assessment were mostly neutral, and a common theme emergent among respondents was that student attitudes toward higher education assessment are one of lower-level awareness and minimal investment in the process. Generally, there appeared to be desire to further inform students about the process and why it occurs, especially as IHEs reaffirm their accreditations through the self-study process. Participant 5 noted nascent strides toward student involvement and influencing student perceptions:

> [W]e are beginning some of those conversations, and I think that is perhaps a future iteration of where opportunities for improvement could lie for us around that culture of assessment, so that students are aware. This process of general education is helping because we're hearing faculty talk about it for the first time with their students. And we're

> seeing examples of that. There are some examples where mistakes have been made, and students are now aware.

Participants further expanded upon student involvement in assessment; those results will be discussed later in the chapter.

Given the role of accreditation and its impact on assessment practices, assessment is often viewed as a practice rooted in compliance or continuous improvement; generally speaking, this understanding exists along a spectrum of opinions and understanding (Samuel & Farrer, 2025). When asked if assessment was regarded as a compliance or continuous improvement activity, sentiments were overall neutral; however, most of the results pointed toward assessment being viewed as a continuous improvement activity. Overall, participants indicated that the onus of responsibility usually rests with the faculty. Participant 1 explained:

> Most of the assessment activities come down to the teaching faculty, not the research faculty... If you're somebody who's bringing in 3-, 4-million-dollar grants from the DoD, or whatever for your research on widgets, they're not particularly invested in how much assessment you do. So instead, we have the people who are teaching the 2- and 300-level classes often like a 4/3 or 4/4 load who are also tasked with being on the assessment committees doing the assessment for their department.

Beyond teaching loads and research loads, concerns with assessment exist when faculty and staff view the process as punitive and a potential overstep of classroom autonomy. Participant 4 indicated that, in their experience, “we need to be more aware of what's happening across campus, because we sort of give everyone autonomy, and in that autonomy we have unevenness.” They further expanded upon why a culture of assessment compliance can become the norm on a campus, stating,

> [T]here was an aspect of a culture of compliance. Certainly frustration, annoyance, and in many cases downright refusal, mostly around academic departments. I still have faculty—not departments — but I still have faculty who refuse to participate. As a matter of principle or philosophy. They disagree with assessment entirely.

Supporting that observation, Participant 5 indicated that actual or perceived infringement on academic autonomy in support of mandates and compliance can lead to volatile confrontations: “Sometimes you go into these meetings, and people are frustrated about compliance. They're frustrated, they're being mandated. ‘How dare you infringe upon my faculty, autonomy, and academic freedom’ this, that, and the other. I've been sworn at. I've been kicked out of meetings.” On some campuses, a sense of begrudging compliance can be seen when assessment is perceived as an additional task rather than as part of an iterative process of improvement. Participant 11 demonstrated this, stating “within the academic units, there is generally an acceptance that we have to do things like program review and student learning objectives reporting and things like that;” however, when the task of gathering and reporting out assessment results falls to a few faculty members who are specialists in certain courses:

> ...the responsibility for those data collection doesn't fall on an individual the way it might for a general education course. Where your course has been sampled, it becomes this department level. Somebody's got to put this thing together that spans multiple courses, and they push back on that.

The common approach to assessment in which results are tied to an IHE’s daily operations and funding sources may inadvertently lead to faculty perceiving assessment as punitive and unnecessarily intrusive.

A culture of assessment may not necessarily be consistent between departments and divisions. Participant 12 noted that an attitude of compliance versus an attitude of continuous improvement can vary across a campus and can be impacted by external pressures. They said,

> I think it's a little bit of both [compliance and continuous improvement]. There are the people who no one realized that the assessment piece is important, although they may not necessarily know how to do it... our last Middle States Review [was] during the pandemic... [so] assessment felt like a bigger deal, you know. More people were invested, involved, brought in, maybe dragged in, to be involved and contribute to things.

When faced with external pressures, Participant 12 indicated their institution had multiple departments help set the tone for a culture of continuous improvement when it was evident that assessment was important and could act as an example to other units:

> There are pockets within the university, both on the academic side and the administrative side, where they really are like "we get it. We're interested." You know... they're on board. Their new Dean wanted a meeting with me before [he/she] even arrived [and said], "Hey, I understand you're the guy to talk to about this stuff. They haven't done a good job with this. Historically, we need to get on board are like all systems go." Their corollary, administratively, is our Student Affairs Division. They get it, they embrace it, they accept it. You know they are responsive to critical feedback and take it very, very seriously.

Attitudes of accepting constructive feedback/criticism and openness to campus assessment efforts—even in small pockets of campus—can have ripple effects to enact positive change and transition toward a culture of assessment in which continuous improvement is more widely accepted that viewing assessment as a punitive or strictly compliance-related. In many of the

interviews, it was evident that administrative support plays a critical role in establishing urgency and providing the necessary infrastructure and support to college assessment efforts.

Theme 3: Administration and Leadership

Interview participants were asked to expand upon how administration and leadership impact the assessment process on campus, including how resources are allocated across campus. The results demonstrated a generally neutral to mixed sentiment regarding administration, leadership, and their role in establishing a culture of assessment. Overall, many interview participants indicated that their institution's current culture of assessment was the result of a top-down approach; in other words, administrators and leadership emphasized the importance of compliance with external standards, and in some cases tied resource allocation to assessment results. Participant 12, who had been in assessment and higher education for multiple years, indicated, "it's interesting to be around for a while to start seeing how it has to come from the top. The culture of assessment in particular. it takes some observation to get there." Participant 9 shared similar thoughts, stating "leadership is everything; so healthy, or what I call mature assessment, should really start with the end in mind. It's as simple as that. So, I think a leader should have vision. That vision should be transferred into some sort of strategic plan."

Many of the interview participants discussed their campus strategic plan and its impact on campus's culture of assessment. For clarity, a strategic plan is understood to be a process by which IHEs codify their school's mission, goals, values, and vision (Immordino et al., 2016). Expanding upon that idea, Participant 9 further added,

> [A] leader really needs to step up and lead. They're in a perspective that others are not as far as knowledge of research or resources systems like technology systems. And it's not

> fair to put that on like directors or individuals, and a leader really needs to again step up and own it and back it, and support it, and champion it and make it part of the culture.

Additionally, Participant 8 indicated how their strategic plan impacts the assessment process across their institution:

> We have a new strategic plan. So, we have the opportunity to sort of craft our assessment process, or at least the administrative assessment process and update our academic assessment process to align with a guiding document. A lot of institutions I've worked at previously, they don't necessarily have something to anchor their assessment work [to Middle States], right? The anchor [to Middle States]... can be very lofty. Not everyone understands Middle States, right?

The pressure to align an IHE's strategic plan to assessment can be a source of concern for upper administration in conjunction with the campus's assessment professional. Participant 5 explained an encounter with the president of their institution, who requested that they,

> [S]it on all of these committees. And yes, it's gonna be duplicating and triplicating in a lot of ways, the same conversations over and over again, but your job is to remind them always that assessment and data needs to be the starting point and the end point of the work that we do.

The same participant also observed that leadership changes can negatively impact a culture of assessment, as shifting foci can lead to a sense of assessment as compliance rather than continuous improvement, stating,

> We haven't had consistent provosts, regardless of Presidents, and... for the last decade we've had what? Like eight provosts, or something like that? If you can't keep someone

> formally in that position, then there's this [sentiment of], 'Well, we're just gonna wait until a new provost comes in and they'll tell us what the new priority is.'

This can lead to difficulties in establishing and maintaining a culture of assessment on an IHE's campus.

Throughout the interviews, participants appeared to have an understanding that administration and leadership also included members of the teaching faculty and staff in supervisory roles, such as deans, assistant/associate deans, department chairs, and program coordinators. This is especially important for faculty, as Participant 6 noted:

> I think, where the rubber meets the road, especially for academic faculty, is with department chairs. So, they are the ones who are asked to look at the data, pull information from the data, reflect on the data. We talk about doing that like, you know, it should not be done in isolation. It should be done as a department.

Individuals in leadership roles overwhelmingly set the tone for how a culture of assessment should look and function on campus, and Participant 4 noticed that "There's a lot of commitment [in leadership] to thinking about what we do, why we do it, how we do it, and whether it's working. Whether that translates into a disciplined approach, I think, is open to question."

The results also had multiple instances in which participants expressed the need for administration and leadership to demonstrate consistent expectations and recommendations with effective follow-through based on assessment results. In their interview, Participant 2 stated:

> The other barrier is the actual commitment of the college to use what is found in assessment and to do something with it, is often not there. If you're doing something and putting time and effort into it, and it seems like it's just going into a black hole, that's definitely a barrier.

In many cases, participants brought up resource allocation in the same thought process as administrative support and barriers, but caution that taking a heavy-handed approach to assessment data and its impact on resource allocation and faculty/staff workload can work against efforts toward a positive culture of assessment; Participant 7 remarked that "high standard approach to assessment is the right thing to do. It's the right place that we should aspire to be, but it can very quickly dissolve a positive culture of assessment if you push faculty too hard." Many participants expressed further concerns about resource allocation in support of faculty and staff assessment results, including assessment software and tying faculty and staff lines to assessment results. Participant 5 spoke to this point:

> Assessment is tied to performance reviews. Assessment is now tied to rehiring or filling faculty lines. If a department is not up to date with their reporting and continuous improvement, expectations, the President has said he will not fill faculty line. So, like we've had to kind of drive both again. A carrot and the stick at the same time is what I keep talking about. We've had to kind of incentivize, we've had to celebrate. We continue to do those things. We continue to assess assessment. How? What are the opportunities for improvement around our process? Procedure and policy? And we have examples of how that's been improved. But I think I'd be remiss if I didn't just say we've also had to be very clear that it [is] about compliance, and it is about employment, and you are a part of a SUNY institution. You are part of something bigger, and if you don't like it you can leave. That's kind of the message we had to send, sadly.

There were several instances in which interview participants expressed positive sentiments toward linking resource allocation with assessment results. Participant 9 readily offered that "I'm not afraid to say that, like, I'm in favor many times of performance-based [incentives] like

resource allocation." When assessment results were tied to resource allocation, campus assessment professionals noticed that there were changes that could positively impact assessment culture. Participant 3 noticed that software in support of assessment and strategic initiatives was adopted, saying "the institution has recently, I would say, made a very big resource investment in terms of bringing on a platform, called Watermark, [and the] expense for that is shared across multiple departments. But it was really an institutional investment." To encourage faculty and staff to participate, Participant 4's campus ties compensation to assessment: "We have a strong budget model attached to this, too. So, this includes the way we [assign] resource initiatives. But also, we compensate our faculty to do assessment work. So, it's valued in that way, which I think is important." In general, participants were in agreement that faculty, staff, and administrators will be more likely to engage in assessment activities and thus positively impact their culture of assessment if they are compensated in a way that lines up with their institutional goals and initiatives.

Themes 4 and 5: Faculty, Staff, and Student Involvement

Faculty, staff, and students play a pivotal, interconnected role in higher education assessment; together, these collaborative relationships support student engagement and success in IHEs (Syno et al., 2023). Consequently, the results of themes 4 and 5 will be considered together. There were very few negative sentiments among student, faculty, and staff participation in assessment; the majority were found in the mixed and neutral categories.

Faculty and staff are commonly involved in institutional and academic assessment; their attitudes, involvement, and knowledge of effective assessment practices can directly impact their campus' culture of assessment and student educational outcomes (Ebersole, 2009; Laird et al., 2009). One of the ways that faculty and staff are commonly engaged in assessment outcomes is

through professional development (PD) and through focused groups or individual sessions to support assessment efforts. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of professional education and collaboration surrounding assessment, especially as it relates to involvement in assessment activities. Participant 2 said, “they're [faculty] involved in the General Education assessment. They're on the assessment committee. So, they see the value and they want to run with it, and they want to keep doing it, because they they've seen a value attachment to it. And so, you know, that's what makes people want to participate now.” Participant 3 noticed similar engagement with faculty:

> ...when I get faculty involved in just even coming in to do a norming session, or to, you know, calibrate a rubric. And so then, thinking about assessment in that kind of way, 99% of the time they walk away from that saying, “this was a really great experience. I wanna talk to other faculty about this. I want to take this learning to my advisory board,” or, you know, what have you. But I think I think it's really getting faculty on board to participate [in] assessment that is sort of the turning point.

Regarding staff engagement, Participant 1 reported that “the best relationship I have is with academic affairs. And so, there's been a lot of collaboration there between myself and the Deans, and we've actually accomplished a lot.” When non-academic staff are engaged in collaborative activities and professional development, they are more likely to engage in assessment activities on their college campus (Casis-Woidyla, 2020). However, budget constraints can negatively impact non-academic office staffing; Participant 4 noticed that it can impact assessment within these areas, stating “it's hard in tight budget times to do it as well as we'd like with short staffing.” Participant 8 had a similar sentiment: “the biggest barrier [to faculty/staff involvement] is time. It's not even being an office of one deep. It's really time, right so, or even though we do

administrative assessment." With more individuals staffing an office, assessment can be done in a more timely, accurate, and reliable manner and avoid formulaic, standardized assessments that often yield less helpful results (Rowsell, 2025).

Across the SUNY/CUNY system, institutions commonly admitted that student involvement in assessment was minimal, that there was limited understanding of how students could engage in assessment, and that strategies to encourage such involvement were generally lacking. Participant 4 summed it up well, saying, "we need help on… engaging student voices and student engagement in the work. I think that's an area of opportunity that we haven't fully tapped," and further added "I think we need to harness that so that we get a student voice in at least describing their own learning and how it's met or not met their expectations super important to me to move beyond satisfaction." Many participants noted that students are involved on committees in other areas of college/university community, such as those with spaces for student senators and student government representatives. One participant noted that student participation and representation is an area in which IHEs can improve; Participant 5 offered:

> …we are beginning some of those conversations [regarding student involvement], and I think that is perhaps a future iteration of where opportunities for improvement could lie for us around that culture of assessment… this process of general education is helping because we're hearing faculty talk about it for the first time with their students. And we're seeing examples of that. There are some examples where mistakes have been made and students are now aware.

In other instances, students were involved only insofar as their work comprises the raw data used as part of the assessment process at their institution. Participant 6 offered that their

concerns are rooted in students' lack of understanding of the difference between assessment and evaluation. They indicated,

> [W]e do not have any students on the assessment advisory committee. I think that is an opportunity. So, we've talked about that in the past like, should we have a student? And then someone said, 'Well, maybe if it's a grad student in education like maybe they would be a good person,' but I would say, students are not very involved… and there's also a conflation sometimes between evaluations and assessment.

Students are more often the source of data in assessment, as Participant 12 said, "because, you know, we're looking to whatever changes we're looking for often related to them. But in terms of them actually being directly involved rather than just kind of being the data, so to speak, there's definitely not a lot." Participant 12 further posited a potential reason for this dearth of student involvement,

> I think sometimes, too, they're not really sure what to be doing on some of these committees. It's so weird to be the one student on a fifteen-person committee of a bunch of academic directors and faculty. You know, [students think] 'What am I supposed to be telling these people on behalf of all students. I have no idea what to say.'

The participants all expressed interest in the ideal of student involvement, but many were not fully certain regarding the best way to do so.

Theme 6: Data Use and Communication

Theme 6 focused on how assessment data are used within the IHE and how the results are communicated to campus stakeholders. Overall, results indicated that this theme had a majority of responses with neutral or mixed sentiments. Communication methodologies varied across campuses and comprised large scale events such as assessment retreats to smaller scale

individual permissions to access data dashboards and reports. Participant 1 described a robust communication and infrastructure system built by their institution's own talents, stating "we have this fabulous infrastructural system. We got some support so that we have somebody on our internal IT team who created this amazing in-house assessment platform. That, you know, goes through it pulls hub data," and further described some of the detailed underpinnings in the platform; they defined different ways in which faculty and staff can manipulate in-house data to better understand the information relevant to their work. Participant 4 had a different setup in their institution that continually expands upon faculty use and autonomy in the assessment process,

> [W]e have just created what will be an annual event, which is our assessment showcase, which is meant to be a way to kind of emphasize this culture of assessment. [M]ake visible the work, celebrate some things, learn from one another across institutional domains of the of the college so far, and that was very well received this year. We'll continue that again.

They further added that a majority of the communication around assessment is given through the divisional structures, although "that assessment showcase, I would argue also is going to lead and contribute to that that culture [of assessment]." Participant 10 shared similar communication structures regarding centralized assessment days and sharing information through campus repositories with reasonable success, stating:

> [W]e share the outcomes assessment [through] a repository. And this year, during our in-service in August, we'll be doing a showcase show and tell. So, we're hoping to get that going. It's like a data day for us. So, we're gonna try to do a show and tell with some of our big, biggest and best performing assessment reports.

Smaller-scale communication appeared to be the norm among the participants with these smaller pieces contributing to the larger understanding of how the institution operates and how varying divisions affect each other. Assessment professionals indicated they are aware how smaller scale reporting and assessment transparency can help with issues and concerns with data reporting and collection across campus. Participant 8 discussed how linking assessment with KPIs on the institutional level has supported conversations around assessment results:

> Some of the issues we see in data collection and data reporting, we're not seeing those down the line, right? Following up to say, "Here is where we stand with the key performance indicators." I think one of the key things that we do here—and not for nothing, we do it really well—is we're able to sort of anchor, again, the intangible part of assessment. So that data, reporting, or collection, and reporting back to something. So, when you see your KPIs in one column… And then, you see, who is responsible, right? And where the data came from, you're able right then and there to say, "Oh, yeah, I missed the mark on this. I need lace up my boots and start doing this right." So, we provide that culture. We're building that culture to say, you know, this is what we are.

Despite that transparency, data sharing, and continuous improvement are often cited by all participants as forming a necessary component to effective assessment practices and supporting a collaborative culture of assessment, some participants readily noted that the need for template formats and inconsistent information from SUNY system administrators can hinder overall progress on campus.

Generally speaking, it is understood that while SUNY and CUNY are part of a larger system of schools, each campus has different needs; SUNY and CUNY schools are made of schools ranging from two-year community colleges (known as Associate's Colleges) to R1

(Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity) institutions. As a result of these varying needs, SUNY and CUNY strive to be equitable in making general recommendations to their campuses. However, Participant 5 indicated there are some areas that are in need of support in order to make assessment more applicable for longitudinal comparisons across the institutions:

> We're a system, for Heaven's sakes! There's 64 campuses that we could be utilizing and comparing and contrasting and benchmarking, and if we already have you know, transfer pathways. But our faculty are like no, no, no, no, no! These transfer students don't actually know the skills that our students know. Our comprehensive, you know, four-year residential campus is better. I'm like, 'prove it. Prove that it's not.' That's what assessment can do. And I I'm hoping people at Admin are having these conversations.

They further elaborated on a frustration with the SUNY/CUNY system with regard to technological supports on campuses,

> I'm constantly having this battle around cost, technology support, faculty use, and integration. I'm just like, 'come on, SUNY, let's create some guidance. Let's just say this is the way it is, and we're gonna move on. This is what we're going to assess, and here's how we're gonna do. And this [is the] technology we're gonna use.

Participant 5 concluded by stating:

> I'd really love more guidance from [SUNY] system…we already have shared outcomes. Gen. Ed., for instance, we have shared tools in Brightspace and D2L. Why are we not doing those shared resources around assessment? It just seems like a huge missed opportunity. That is often the sticky spot—it has been for my campus…where do we find the money for this technology that we need that integrates into the things that SUNY requires us to do?

With regard to available infrastructure to facilitate these efforts, Participant 12 suggested those current data dashboards could be leveraged for greater longitudinal analyses; however, they are not easy to access or use,

> There are a lot of platforms, and I think the faculty in particular are like, 'I can't be bothered with keeping track and using five different platforms.' If it got consolidated down into fewer platforms, I think [it] would be easier to have that culture of assessment, because then it would be more standardized across the board.

A general consensus still existed around a lack of time for faculty and staff to fully engage with assessment results, which is why some institutions have decided to devote specific retreat or professional development days to support data engagement. Participant 12 also elaborated on this concern, saying,

> [W]e get the data, we get to summarize the data, and we share the data. But it's not clear it's getting engaged with a lot by other folks, and it's hard to do that, again, with folks' plates being pretty full. I think there's a little space to do that. So, there's definitely efforts at sharing and getting the data out there. But I don't know that people are using it a lot.
>
> And there's almost some data we have that could inform assessment that's just sitting.

In other words, assessment results reporting and engagement were only as robust as the time and resources available to the faculty and staff.

Theme 7: Institutional Resources

Within this theme, participants were asked to reflect on the available resources at their institution in support of assessment efforts. Institutional resources were generally considered based on infrastructure, software, training and professional development, and other resources that may be unique to the institution. Response sentiments were primarily neutral and mixed.

As mentioned in theme 6, some participants discussed the benefits and risks of choosing system-wide software for all campuses. Participant 7 attributed the hesitation to honoring the varying types of member institutions, asserting:

> I think also the state, especially SUNY, recognizes that we're still in this really exciting time in assessment where there's room for innovation, and there is room for people to think about assessment differently and assess differently, use different methodologies. And it would be too prescriptive to force every institution to use the same software. I think there's a lot of excitement and a lot of buzz around how different campuses are assessing things. And I'd hate to see that get lost. And I think SUNY feels the same way. They don't want to lose that opportunity for innovation.

Assessment software is a burgeoning industry in which education software developers are endeavoring to streamline the assessment and self-study reporting process for all involved members of a campus community. These platforms can be helpful with organization and developing a robust culture of assessment within IHE. Participant 7 indicated they believed software would be helpful for larger institutions, but nuanced that sentiment with its impact on assessment culture and practice:

> [E]very college should experiment with, you know a software to over the course of when they're starting to establish their culture of assessment and a sustainable model because it does shape the way that your faculty and staff think about assessment. [Software] helped shape the rhetoric that we used to communicate about assessment, the way that it helps us, the models that it used to help us visualize assessment. Our institution will be forever indebted to [software] for what it did to help move the culture of assessment forward at our campus.

Participant 10 shared similar enthusiastic sentiments, especially regarding how software can be used to reduce faculty and staff workload; they said,

> I think a lot of the burden that the faculty face in terms of just the documentation and the collection, and the artifacts, and all that sort of thing that we removed from there, and give them less headaches and give them the overall, you know, like control… the collection [of and process of] compiling rubrics and all that sort of stuff can be automated, which is what I'm hoping to work with the next few years. It'll be the best thing ever!

Participant 10 also expressed that assessment professionals and IHE leaders should consider the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and how that technology can be leveraged in support of assessment efforts and reducing faculty and staff workloads; many assessment platforms are starting to integrate their own AI models to assist end-users in their data analyses:

> [C]onsidering how much AI is actually helping with assessment in terms of the grunt work. They're trying to remove the grunt work out of the assessment activities and keep it so the faculty can do the high-level decision making rather than the grunt work, the collection of artifacts, of storing the rubrics, the scoring, and all that sort of thing can be removed from their daily assessment life. That's my goal to help have that happen. and I think I can do it. I think we can do it. We'll be able to do it.

The most-often cited negative aspect of software is cost; both Participants 9 and 10 indicated that assessment software is a stumbling block to assessment practices through administration being unwilling or unable to allocate funding toward assessment software adoption, or that software is adopted but it does not serve their needs. When the software is not

able to support faculty and staff needs, Participant 2 cautions that the investment may not yield the results an IHE needs or wants:

> If you're not actually gonna have people use it [the software], then you're not really correcting a problem because you're still gonna have apples and oranges that someone's then gonna have to try to pair together. I think you're not gonna be in a lot better place.

Participant 12 noted, however, that software fatigue can negatively impact faculty and staff perception of assessment. They said,

> [T]here are a lot of platforms, and I think the faculty in particular are like, ‘I can't be bothered with keeping track and using five different platforms.’ If it got consolidated down into fewer platforms, I think it would be easier to have that culture of assessment, because then it would be more standardized across the board.

Beyond assessment software, many of the assessment professionals expressed that the existence of their position on campus is testament to the importance of a culture of assessment on campus. Participant 3 noticed this, stating “I think getting just by virtue of having somebody in the coordination position, I think, has allowed us to scale up our assessment.” In many cases, these assessment professionals offered professional development opportunities to the campus community to help support assessment efforts. Participant 6 offered,

> I was able to use some of my professional development funding to participate in the SUNY Assessment [professional development] so that's good. So, it's like, if you seek it, and if you ask for it, then there is support for it. …one of my colleagues is part of the ANNY (Assessment Network of New York). She's participated in the [annual conference] and she said, ‘we'll pay for you to go to ANNY’… so I would say that there

> is an opportunity for myself and others to become more educated about assessment and receive professional development.

A variety of professional development opportunities exist for assessment practitioners and the individuals they serve, from local to state and national opportunities. Many IHEs have developed their own home-grown professional development opportunities that are catered specifically to the stakeholders they serve. Participant 3 discussed how faculty and staff see and experience the benefits of professional development opportunities on campus, noting,

> [W]hen I get faculty involved in just even coming in to do a norming session, or to calibrate a rubric. And so then, thinking about assessment in that kind of way, 99% of the time they walk away from that saying, 'This was a really great experience. I wanna talk to other faculty about this. I want to take this learning to my advisory board,' or, you know, what have you. But I think it's really getting faculty on board to participate [in] assessment. That is sort of the turning point.

Other participants discussed how existing campus infrastructure has been used to support assessment. Participant 4 discussed building an online 'classroom' in D2L Brightspace in which faculty and staff could access materials and data; Participant 8 described development workshops in which people could ask the assessment questions they are too afraid or embarrassed to ask; and Participant 9 offered their assessment retreat and the existence of a campus assessment award as evidence of institutional support for assessment as well as examples of what practices have worked for their campus. Organized and evidence-informed assessment efforts in addition to hiring assessment professionals was cited by Participant 7 as being critical to assessment culture on their campus:

> My provost at the time who hired me into the assessment [role], said they were trying the people that were in charge of assessment before he and I arrived and got into these roles. They were trying to reinvent the wheel in a vacuum, no consulting with any of the accredited programs, or what their assessment processes were. No consulting with SCoA [SUNY Council on Assessment) or any other people who had experience in assessment. Just almost pulling things out of thin air and saying, 'Let's just try this and see how this works,' and surprise, it didn't work.

Participants often discussed how it is important to speak a similar language within assessment and to keep terminology consistent across institutions; developing a robust culture of assessment can be directly linked to speaking a common language that have matches or correlations to accreditation terminology with definitions that are clear, consistent, transparent, and fair (Sousa et al., 2023). Additionally, the participants emphasized the importance of data literacy among higher education professionals; it is imperative that higher education professionals have a working understanding of data literacy in order to accurately analyze, interpret, and apply assessment data in support of institutional and academic goals (Sandoval-Ríos et al., 2025). Participant 5 summarized the concerns with data literacy in higher education accordingly:

> Underscoring data literacy amongst academic leadership, I think, is also something that comes up a lot here, and we're not really sure how to do that. But we're often put in this spot where explaining what data means and those types of things that you were just articulating. Sometimes we just assume, 'oh, because you're the President,' or 'oh, because you're the provost you know what longitudinal data means, or linear regression,' or you know, 'the difference between retention, persistence and graduation rate.' And

> they don't. And then alone, the average faculty member. Right? So, that's a constant battle. Because it often puts us in that sticky 1situation where you're having to explain to a higher up [why something cannot happen] and not wanting to come from a place where you're being difficult. You want to be supportive. But there are no emergencies in assessment. I'm here for the long-haul. That kind of consistency in leadership also really affects assessment and really affects data literacy, right? So, I wish there was more data literacy in higher education leadership. I think that would be beneficial for everybody.

Participant 8 described some of the efforts on their campus to provide consistent terminology, assessment efforts, and professional development on their campus, stating:

> We also had one [professional development] about outcomes. What do you [do]? How do you create learning outcomes? If you're on the academic side of the house, or [if] you're an administrative department that serves students, how do you create what are called support outcomes? …What's the difference between an outcome, a goal, and a metric, right? Differentiating those three. …We also talked about mission statements. So, it was like the assessment loop, really, starting from your strategic plan to your divisional mission, then your departmental mission, and then trickling down to [the] last course or your program.

It was commonly expressed among some participants that their IHE had communities of practice, but this was only seen in participants who self-identified robust cultures of assessment on their campus. Other participants noted successes and failures with varying efforts to increase inter-departmental assessment discussions.

Theme 8: External Stakeholder Influence

External stakeholders often have an influence on IHE practices and procedures. Accrediting bodies are often the driving force behind institutional assessment practices (Requa, 2021). Within the interviews, participants often noted that the pressure from accrediting bodies—especially MSCHE for SUNY and CUNY—act as the impetus to bring change to their campus or to add additional urgency to previously identified concerns. Overall, the sentiment toward external stakeholders and accrediting were neutral to mixed.

One area of concern regarding accreditation and future of accreditation practices and standards can be seen in regard to the changing federal landscape. Currently, there is a general sense of anxiety and uncertainty regarding how accreditation and IHEs will navigate the current Trump administration and its rapidly shifting federal policy (Moody, 2025; Unglesbee, 2025). Participant 1 voiced this common concern, stating,

> [B]etween that goal [of becoming a research institution] and between the kind of—I hate to use the term in a positive way—but the weaponization of accreditation and assessment that's coming down from a federal landscape right now. There's a real knowledge that this [change] can both really help us, or, if we can ignore it, it could really hurt us.

Participant 12 noted that a great majority of the anxiety on their campus is found among teaching staff,

> [I]n particular, I think our faculty are nervous about change [higher education under the second Trump administration], which I think some sort of change is somewhat inevitable. But they're not thrilled. So, I feel like the greatest proportion of, let's say institutional anxiety is coming from the academic faculty.

Participant 7 expressed that the changes to federal guidelines that impact diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice (DEISJ) will affect accrediting bodies, and like many assessment

professionals, they are curious as to the method by which accrediting bodies will account for it. They said,

> I do wonder if certain accrediting bodies are going to do away with DEISJ as per the executive orders, or whatever, whereas other ones are going to say, “you know? No, we're not going to do that,” and they'll put up some resistance either way. It doesn't really matter to us, because we've decided that if we are ever forced into a situation where we have to get rid of DEISJ, we will just keep the Gen. Ed. Outcomes from Middle States, the intercultural knowledge and global learning, which are basically just…different language for DEISJ, right?

The uncertainty surrounding the rapid legislative changes in higher education has led to many assessment professionals fielding worries and concerns regarding accreditation changes, with little information available to offer answers or guidance regarding the changes; historically, however, this is not unheard of (Eaton, 2010).

Despite the concerns regarding the changing federal guidelines, assessment professionals are generally focused and driven on refining their assessment practices in support of their institution’s strategic plan, even independent of their accrediting agencies. Participant 4 stated:

> I have [an] academic assessment committee, which is comprised of faculty, and it is very clear to me…they are champions. They are student learning advocates. They are all about continuous improvement, and, in fact, have very little patience for this idea that it's compliance driven, or that we do it for Middle States, or that it's a you know, it's required.

They further added, “I feel pretty good that Middle States is focused on continuous improvement. That again, you don't have to be perfect, but you've got to show that you're making intentional changes and responses, and closing that loop, and in a thoughtful way that

[demonstrates] excellence matters." Participant 11 shared a similar thought that accreditation should not be the sole force of change within an IHE, but could act as a source of discussion toward institutional improvement:

> [T]hey suddenly had the light bulb go off and say, 'Oh, you know. what can we do then?' And that's when I'm able to engage in those conversations that you know hopefully come to something that's more beneficial for them. That also still helps us uphold the standards that we're required to do for accreditation.

Overall, participants utilized accreditation requirements as parameters by which they could envision change and deliver actionable steps to the campuses they serve. Participant 2 stated, "in all honesty, Middle States is very broad with their criteria. And so, there is a lot of latitude left to us to decide what and how we want to do this. We just need to demonstrate that we do it, and we do it consistently." Participant 5 explained that change only occurred on their campus after Middle States indicated weaknesses, noting,

> [M]y office wouldn't have been created, the technology that we adopted wouldn't have come, external consultants would not have been hired, if not in 2013, when we got that heavy handed recommendation and [it] explicitly said, 'you must hire an assessment specialist. You must adopt a technology. You must create these committees with shared governance.' And yeah, it took almost a decade to get it done, but it wouldn't have happened without the accreditors.

External stakeholders may include bodies with a vested interest in the IHE outside of accrediting agencies. One source of external stakeholder influence are advisory boards and boards of trustees; advisory boards are often comprised of industry leaders, alumni, community representatives and provide advice, insights, and ways to help the IHE reach its goals and

mission, while boards of trustees allow for legal governance with advising and support for long term stability and compliance. Participant 4 discussed how assessment results are communicated to these external groups:

> Our board of trustees is also pretty involved. We report annually to the Board, or to a subcommittee of the Board, the Academic and Student Affairs Subcommittee on our assessment work, and they ask lots of really good questions, so that feels both supportive and not too meddling. But they give us give this work attention, and, as I mentioned earlier, our budgets are tied to it.

At the core of this work is the student experience and the demonstration that the IHE is meeting student expectations and needs while continuing to strive for continuous improvement. Participant 9 noted the student component, stating,

> [S]tudents are the core of why we do assessment, and they should benefit most. So, I would think they need to be front and center as the beneficiaries. But also, assessment can be used to market what we're doing well to attract students. So, I think they're a very important like critical piece. The rest of us are working to support them. I think that in the best case, you know, it's recognized the amount of work that may go into comprehensive assessments for all these different groups.

While financial solvency and legal compliance are consistent foci for external stakeholder groups, one of the major concerns among the study participants centered in the financial aspect of assessment. External groups such as trustees can impact the budgetary processes of the IHE, which can lead to cost-cutting measures such as denying requests for assessment software or additional staff to support assessment offices; this concern is valid for multiple units within an IHE. Participant 4 described their situation thusly,

> [I]t's hard in tight budget times to do it [assessment] as well as we'd like with short staffing… Our enrollments are down, our budget is not flush. There are not a lot of additional resources, but there is an exercise where requesters tie their goals as well as their budget requests to assessment results, so that that embeddedness, I think, is really important.

In this instance, assessment results can be used to make the previously mentioned data informed and values driven decisions in support of the IHE. Participant 4 praised their board of trustees and their work toward a thriving IHE, stating,

> [O]ur board of trustees, I would argue, is kind of an internal external stakeholder. They're a little bit of that kind of straddle that line a little bit, and of course disciplinary accreditors are a voice in this, so they're present, but they don't drive it. They don't drive our work, but …we're aware, and try to make choices that satisfy our internal metrics and goals as well as those accreditors.

Theme 9: Sustainability

Sustainability as it applies to IHE assessment are those approaches and processes that support assessment activities, outcomes, and improvements over the course of time; these practices need to be embedded, effective, ongoing, and resilient to change (Shriberg, 2002). The primary areas of consideration for sustainable assessment practices are as indicated by Shriberg (2002) and de Oliveira et al. (2025) include:

- Continuous assessment embedded within the regular operations and culture of the institution.
- Stakeholder engagement, which includes involving faculty, staff, students, and external stakeholders to ensure assessment relevancy and results applicability.

- Benchmarking and best practice exchanges with other institutions in order to encourage progress and improvement.
- Incorporating the IHE’s strategic plan to ensure long-term relevance and effective resource allocation.
- Using assessment results to provide actionable feedback, which drives innovation and improvement among all members of the IHE.
- Ensuring faculty, staff, and administration have professional development to impart the necessary skills to conduct effective assessment and be nimble in the face of changing standards and expectations.
- Data collection should be limited only to the data being used, and should leverage technology and existing reports, when possible, to minimize the reporting burden.
- Transparency by way of clear documentation in support of accountability, trust, and continuous improvement.
- Assessment systems that are flexible and adaptable to the needs of regulations, student needs, and accreditation.

Throughout all of the interviews, participants directly discussed all of the above aspects of sustainable assessment and remarked on ways their IHEs are succeeding or working toward more sustainable assessment practices. When assessment was embedded within the institution’s operations, Participant 5 observed that, “I had the freedom to create an office that, while data driven, is very human focused. That was the lens that I kept saying I was going to bring to this: I was bringing change management, but the change that we were bringing was assessment.” With that application of change management to support the people of the IHE in their efforts,

transparency and engagement with stakeholders brings even greater importance. As Participant 6 reported,

> We're doing this for transparency. So that if someone asks how you know what's happening with our assessment, and where are the results? We make them publicly available internally, and then they also feed our campus's annual report that is submitted to SUNY. And then again, as [the member of a strategic plan committee], I am trying to pull information from those reports and evaluate how we're making progress toward the strategic plan.

As data become the center of a conversation about change, Participant 7 noticed that it had an impact on how changes to the IHE were approached, stating "if we can understand that [data nuances] we can reform and re-hone [sic] our methodologies, to collect meaningful data, to help shape things."

Participant 5 discussed how they share data and celebrate assessment successes:

> I put it [assessment awards] on our news bulletin. I give shout-outs. I make sure all the Deans know; I make a big brouhaha about it … I meet with the Deans monthly, and I started that this year with the basis of here's what these things mean, and let's kind of chip away at the recommendations because a lot of them are faculty driven processes. So that's been really helpful. I started this year on [a committee for student IHE experiences]. I kept hearing from committee members like, "Oh, my, my! I'm doing this in my office, and I'm doing this in my office!" But the information wasn't getting out there, and I just asked if I if we could now implement an assessment spotlight, so that whenever something pops up, I boil it down into really simple language.

Participant 4 noted how professional development and providing resources to IHE employees that are responsible for assessment can be beneficial over extended periods of time, adding,

> We're building a community Brightspace page. So that is not a course, but it's a community space. That's where materials can live. That's where people who want to learn about assessment could live, [and it's] open to the entire [IHE] community this year… So, we can harness, the good work that's going on in the in the various courses and various student learning and program learning outcome work.

In a similar fashion, Participant 8 supports their IHE through resources and professional development:

> I sort of blew it out and created glossaries, and also every fall term we do a set of professional development workshops where we focus on a part of the assessment work and sort of talk about that. So, for example, last fall—and I do assess my workshops as well—and this one is coming back by popular demand…but assessment terminology. I had over 100 people come to that workshop, and folks are like, "Oh, my God! I did not know this is what this [term/concept] meant," and I said, "Well, that's why we're having it. It's a new language. You need to be comfortable with the language, and you're gonna sort of trip before you walk with the language."

Stakeholder involvement was readily illustrated by Participant 4 when they stressed the importance of transparency and data sharing: "We have some room for growth in the transparency and democratization of our data and making that those data available to key stakeholders so that we can build that data-informed, data-inspired culture." Sharing information and data with the intent of improving IHE function was stressed by every interview participant. This inevitably led to discussions regarding the connection between continuous improvement

from the macro-level of SUNY/CUNY system to offices on campuses staffed by one person. In every instance, participants encouraged conversations and discussions around assessment in order to make the vocabulary, concepts, data literacy, and impacts more accessible and relevant to all members of the IHE community.

RQ2: Based on the results from assessment professional interviews, what are the best practices to be utilized by the case study institution and other IHEs to meet the recommendations for a culture of assessment as indicated by MSCHE?

MSCHE is currently utilizing the 14th edition of their *Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation*, which went into effect July 1, 2023. Within the accreditation standards, MSCHE (2023) indicates the following five guiding principles “because of their importance in higher education” (p. 3):

1. Application of the Standards within the Context of an Institution’s Mission and Goals
2. Centrality of the Student Experience
3. Reflection on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
4. Emphasis on Data and Evidence-based Decision-making
5. Innovation as an Essential Part of Continuous Improvement.

These five guiding principles guide their analysis of the following seven standards (MSCHE, 2023, pp. 7–16):

- Standard I: Mission and Goals
- Standard II: Ethics and Integrity
- Standard III: Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience
- Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience
- Standard V: Education Effectiveness Assessment

- Standard VI: Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement
- Standard VII: Governance, Leadership, and Administration.

All participants answered the same questions regarding their IHE's best practices in support of continuous improvement and accreditation requirements. After participants reviewed their responses, I coded them into four themes and 22 categories as depicted in Table 3. The majority of responses were neutral in sentiment.

Table 3

RQ2 Themes, Categories, and Codes

Themes	Categories	Codes
Best Practices for MSCHE	Sustainable practices	Sustainable practices
	Success stories	Success stories/Best practices
	Alignment with accreditation	Alignment with institutional goals
	Leadership and administrative support	Leadership influence on assessment
		Administrative support for assessment
	Resource allocation	Resource allocation for assessment
	Faculty engagement	Faculty involvement in assessment
	Staff engagement	Staff involvement with assessment
	Student engagement	Student participation in assessment
	Training and professional development	Training and professional development
	Data utilization	Data utilization for improvement
	Communication	Data sharing and communication
	Transparency	Transparency in assessment
	Technology	Use of assessment software/technology
Addressing Barriers	Faculty/Staff barriers	Barriers to faculty involvement

		Barriers to staff involvement
	Student barriers	Barriers to student involvement
	Strategies to increase involvement	Strategies to increase involvement
	Institutional resources	Assessment infrastructure
	Other support	Other support resources for assessment
External Stakeholder Influence	Accreditor impact	Accreditor impact on assessment
Recommendations & Advice	Recommendations for improvement	Recommendations for improvement
	General advice	General advice for other institutions
	Concerns	Concerns about assessment culture

Theme 1 – Best Practices for MSCHE

MSCHE's requirements for affiliation lend themselves to establishing best practices on IHE campuses. In all interviews, participants offered their best practices that have supported establishing a culture of assessment at their IHE. Participant 4 identified the role of assessment committees to help determine priorities: "So we're building with this assessment committee [a] pool of expectations going forward each year. One was about it identifying those areas that we wanted to spend time on and then prioritizing them." Participant 3 concurs and cites," They're [assessment data] used to inform changes to curriculum. They're used to inform changes to kind of bigger structural or policy changes sometimes." To support this effort, transparency and communication are stressed consistently within the guidance of MSCHE; participants readily discussed how to share information with the entirety of the IHE. Participant 4 recognized that there is a greater need for data use and transparency by a wide group of stakeholders; they remarked, "we have some room for growth is in the transparency and democratization of our data and making that those data available to key stakeholders so that we can build that data informed data-inspired culture."

Stakeholder involvement is part of the communication and transparency within the IHE and most directly supported by Standards I, VI, and VII of the 14th edition of *Standards of Accreditation*. In those standards, it is stressed that IHEs have programs and policies that directly address internal and external stakeholders, and the results must be publicized and widely known by those most directly impacted by the IHE. Participant 1 points out that a sense of tension can exist between the MSCHE standards and the realities of running an IHE. They remarked,

> I think we need to be aware that there is a constructive tension to be had between institutional requirements and what assessment ought to be, and that that isn't something that we should ever fully accept as just an institutional mandate, but should be something inherent and organic within the system.

This further supports the use of data to inform decisions and providing evidence that assessment data are used to drive the overall function and success of the IHE; this also intends to support employee buy-in to assessment as a tool of continuous improvement.

Faculty, staff, and administrative support and involvement were consistently cited as a source of an IHE's general sentiment toward their culture of assessment. The more involved administration was with supporting assessment efforts, providing resources and allocating budgetary items toward improvement, and assessment of all areas in a non-punitive manner, the more likely participants noticed an improvement in employee buy-in and support. In other words, when administration demonstrated in words and action that assessment results are important, those directly involved in assessment often saw improvements in how assessment was approached in the IHE overall. Participant 6 confirmed that,

> I think some things that contribute to a culture of assessment is an understanding of the benefit of assessment, and a willingness to engage in that process. I think that involves

> placing trust in colleagues. Let's say that you are a faculty or staff member, being asked to assess your current programs or offerings. Having trust that that information is not going to be used against you… It involves psychological safety, where you feel free to take risks and admit mistakes and also an assumption of positive intent among everyone on your campus.

Positive intentions ultimately beget positive change in support of dynamic institutional improvement. Additionally, Participant 7 emphasized that,

> I think the most important one [best practice]—and I cannot emphasize this enough—is meeting people where they are. Everybody on our campus has a different degree of investment in assessment, a different level of proficiency in assessment, and a different level of experience, a different kind of experience with assessment depending on what institution they came from. You [don't] know how they were taught about assessment.

An approach of collaboration and shared vision for improvement in line with the IHE's strategic plan was often cited by participants as being crucial to aligning with institutional goals and to support self-reflection. Participant 8 indicated how their IHE is accomplishing this effort:

> We have a new strategic plan 5-year strategic plan and our assessment data is being used to measure our KPIs in that strategic plan. So, if it's set up in such a way that when folks do their annual assessment plans, we're asking them, 'what KPIs are you measuring,' right? And when we were designing the strategic plan, we designed it intentionally.

Student involvement was consistently an area in which participants concurred that assessment needs to be improved overall across multiple institutions. In the majority of cases, there were spaces for students to participate in assessment outside of acting as sources of data, such as seats on assessment committees or through student government organizations. However,

the interviewed participants expressed general uncertainty about how to best involve students in this crucial process, yet having keen awareness that students may feel overwhelmed among a group of academic professionals on committees, or perhaps not have enough background in assessment practices to be effective in their role. In many cases, higher education and assessment majors are uncommon undergraduate programs; it tends to be more common as a graduate degree specialty track or a graduate certificate program. This reality may change over time as the emphasis on continuous improvement in IHEs takes center stage among accreditors.

Theme 2 – Addressing Barriers

Barriers to assessment at multiple levels can hinder effective institutional improvement, as readily noticed by the interview participants (Banta & Blaich, 2011). Participant 8 introduced this idea succinctly, stating “That [understanding of assessment practices] can make or break, how the implementation of assessment practices are done.” A lack of understanding was often cited by interview participants as a source of insecurity among faculty, staff, and administration; this can potentially hinder the establishment of a robust culture of assessment in an IHE. Participant 9 explained the importance of bringing all assessment participants on the same page:

> I think also, training is a big part of this, so we often have in the system intricate reporting methods or tactics, and the more simplified those can be, the stronger they are, and the more people will benefit because they're spending less time doing tasks and more time making meaning out of these things.

This supports Participant 7’s claim that its most beneficial to meet others “where they are” as they are acclimated to the process of assessment.

In order to establish a robust culture of assessment, Participant 5 asserts that removing barriers is a function of that process:

> I want them to give feedback to Cabinet, on the culture of assessment that I'm not just doing it siloed because I have been thus far—not entirely—I work with the IR director to do a lot of that. I think, where there's multiple opportunities to plug things in…We need to make sure that there is a clear understanding of why I'm there and what the influence means. And that influence isn't a negative thing.

Attitudes toward assessment were consistently noted as a source of how a culture of assessment is defined and refined on a campus. A positive, non-punitive attitude toward assessment processes and results dissemination were consistently discussed among participants to be the most effective tactic to approach institutional assessment. As Participant 4 observed,

> If administration is perceived as taking a punitive approach, I think that sets you back decades in terms of how to build this culture of assessment and to build that trust…It's okay to have weaknesses…show those weaknesses, and how you're going to work to strengthen them.

Theme 3 – External Stakeholder Influence

The focus of Theme 3 was on the impact of accreditors; this term is all-encompassing as the participants commonly shared MSCHE as their IHE's overall accreditor, however, there are other specialized accreditors that may have an impact on certain academic programs. For example, ABET may accredit programs in Computer Science and Biomedical Engineering in addition to the MSCHE requirements on the entirety of the institution. Consequently, most interview participants placed their focus on MSCHE as the accreditor with the greatest impact on assessment in their institution.

In some instances, participants used the MSCHE requirements as the driving force behind assessment practices in their institution. According to Participant 7,

> [B]asically what I tell the faculty is Middle States wants to make sure that we have institutional outcomes. We answer to their Gen. Eds. SUNY wants us to answer to their Gen. Eds. They want quantitative data that tells us information about student learning. At the very least, we need to provide that. What I like to see is the story behind the numbers.

Participant 8 expands upon how to avoid double work on the part of faculty when there are multiple accreditors with an interest in the assessment results:

> So, for any program or area with external creditors, the first thing you'll hear me say to them is, 'prioritize your PLOs. Your PLOs should drive your annual assessment plan,' and that's how we work it here. So again, folks are not duplicating work. They're working smarter, not harder.

Participants collectively discussed using program accreditation guidelines in support of MSCHE requirements; this is intended to decrease the likelihood of assessment fatigue and provide a method by which faculty and staff can focus their attention on functional assessment to the benefit of multiple accreditation self-study cycles.

Theme 4 – Recommendations and Advice

All participants self-assessed their sense of what their campus's culture of assessment was like and how to articulate practices that worked for them that may be applicable to other SUNY/CUNY campuses.

Participant 10 noticed that having devoted assessment staff is beneficial to establishing a culture of assessment, as it demonstrates that administration places importance on campus assessment activities. They said, "[faculty] don't have the time to devote [to assessment and teaching simultaneously]. You need somebody permanent." Some participants noted that they were hired specifically after their institution could not sustain effective assessment practices with

part-time faculty assessment support. This is especially important for establishing functional relationships across multiple campus departments. Participant 3 offered that they benefited from "really getting to know and forming relationships with program coordinators" and stressed the importance of "coming to department meetings to talk about assessment." This further supported Participant 7's assertion that it is important to keep assessment practices at the level of understanding among faculty and staff, which can vary as widely as the people that staff the IHE.

Due to this variability, participants emphasized that professional development around data literacy is beneficial to supporting robust assessment efforts. Software was noted as a helpful tool in assessment, and while there are some commercial companies focused on assessment and institutional improvement, there were multiple participants that described home-grown systems and less automated methods, such as tracking assessment reports through spreadsheets. Cost-effectiveness was consistently a concern and there were instances where participants noted that administration was hesitant to invest in assessment and accreditation software. Those participants that had assessment software discussed how they review assessment reports and provide feedback; this was not as readily apparent with participants who did not have support software or systems available for us. Their time was mostly spent keeping records rather than focusing on improving assessment. Consequently, participants consistently urged their institutions to consider trying assessment software to improve their workflow and assessment efficacy.

The core area for improvement across all interviewed participants was a single word: time. Assessment professionals indicated that time is the greatest factor that impacts assessment. As faculty see increasing demands for research, campus service, and student grades, they view assessment as an additional burden. Non-academic areas are sometimes staffed by an office of

one individual; therefore, in some cases these units may view assessment as tedious and unnecessary. The participants that discussed having specialized assessment retreats and data sharing days in which academic and non-academic departments met in a single place and shared information together often reported having more open and positive discussions surrounding assessment. This inevitably led to the creation of cultures of assessment that are focused on continuous improvement rather than compliance. Participants stressed that data sharing in common, especially at scheduled college events, led to more productive conversations around improvement and a sharing of best practices that could be adapted and adopted by other areas.

Evaluation of the Findings

The findings of this study indicate that the frameworks set forth by Suskie and Banta for assessment in higher education are consistently being followed by accrediting agencies as well as IHEs. RQ1 focused on best practices in place at IHEs and how they are utilized toward establishing a culture of assessment. Most participants stressed that assessment work and the process of building a culture of assessment is centered in change management, even if that term was not directly assigned to the discussion of implementing a culture of assessment. In many cases, participants noted that it was an action or comment by MSCHE that brought up the impetus to change assessment practices within the IHE. This links directly to Kotter’s change management model by providing a common challenge to which members of the IHE must work together to solve, providing a sense of urgency as MSCHE actions are commonly associated with specific deadlines. Celebrating successes and supporting areas where there is need of improvement further establishes the importance of Suskie’s and Banta’s practice of emphasizing practical and actionable assessment as well as Kotter’s focus on celebrating success to build momentum. Engagement among stakeholders across the IHE supports assessment buy-in and

investment in the process towards continuous improvement. The presence of assessment committees that are composed of a variety of campus constituents further supports efforts toward a culture of assessment in that transparency and utilization of data for improvement can be leveraged to garner support for assessment efforts on campus.

The findings of the study that address RQ2 about best practices that institutions should adopt for a vibrant culture of assessment. One cited practice included linking assessment results back to the institution's strategic plan and grounding the assessment work in support of KPIs for an academic program and/or an institution. This provides a solid framework by which individuals or departments can determine what measures are most important for institutional improvement and accreditation needs. Leadership commitment to assessment supports Kotter's change management model; when an institution's leadership demonstrated the importance of assessment by way of resource allocation and using assessment results to support decision-making practices, it showed stakeholders that it was beneficial to support assessment efforts as well. This supported faculty and staff buy-in to the assessment process. Overall, though, the biggest need and suggestion for improvement was providing the time necessary to analyze, interpret, and share assessment results across the IHE's community. This encouraged overall institutional improvement and an acceptance of assessment as part of continuous improvement rather than acting as a source of additional work or repeated measures with no known impact.

Summary

The study's results are organized by two research questions that were focused on how IHE assessment professionals establish, support, and improve a culture of assessment. The research questions informed the data collection and coding within NVivo, with responses predominantly leaning toward neutral in sentiment. These results indicate that assessment

cultures are as varied as the institutions that generate them, and assessment professionals are consistently searching for methods and practices from accreditors and other assessment professionals in support of maintaining cultures of assessment on their campuses.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Within IHEs, a culture of assessment involves multiple campus stakeholders and focuses on the effective assessment of academic and non-academic areas; these assessments are utilized by the IHE as well as accrediting agencies in support of institutional efficacy. As highlighted in the preceding chapter, this study investigated the utilization of assessment data within higher education institutions, drawing upon Banta's (2002a) framework for assessing learning and Suskie's (2000) model for institutional assessment. The problem to be addressed in this study is that a four-year state college in the SUNY/CUNY system has a decentralized culture of assessment that MSCHE noted is present but in need of adjustments with recommendations given to the campus in their most recent accreditation visit (MSCHE, 2025). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify best practices in establishing a culture of assessment based on the recommendations of MSCHE.

A qualitative case study approach was selected to understand the perspectives of and practices used by similar academic institutions within the same state university system. A qualitative case study approach allowed me to gain deeper understanding of what practices are currently working, which practices need improvement, and how assessment professionals view their role within the greater IHE community on their campus. A case study design was also beneficial for investigating these practices within real-world applicable settings that are currently occurring across the state (Yin, 2018).

The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. Participants were invited to participate through their publicly available email addresses on their IHE's website (Appendix A). The study criteria were that participants must be a current, active assessment professional in a SUNY or CUNY school and have at least one year of experience within an assessment-focused

role. A total of 12 assessment professionals who met those criteria were invited to participate in a recorded Zoom interview; they were each asked the same ten questions with some latitude available for expanding beyond the questions if additional clarification or information was needed (Appendix B). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's built-in features for these tasks, and the transcription was sent to each participant individually for member checking to ensure accuracy. Participants were able to remove and/or adjust their transcripts as needed; these member-checked transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo for thematic analyses to establish patterns and categories. Trustworthiness was ensured through establishing credibility, transferability, and confirmability (through personal bias reduction), as well as data triangulation, and reviewing the data for any anomalies or outliers. Finally, dependability was assured through the clarification of how the data were analyzed. These steps are consistent with the six-step Braun and Clarke (2006) process of thematic analysis.

Semi-structured interviews as a data collection instrucment can contribute to study limitations. Patten and Newhart (2017) indicated that interviews contribute to limitations due to the participant's personal biases and perceptions of I, they may have limited or outdated information, or other factors that may impact responses. An additional potential limitation is the limited time in which this study is able to be accomplished versus a longitudinal study of sentiments over time.

However, these limitations are mitigated through using multiple sources of information. Using information from MSCHE on the requirements and standards for affiliation, this allowed me to determine if the information presented by the participant was consistent with current MSCHE practices, as supported by the research of Bloomberg and Volpe (2016). This method of data collection allowed participants to provide deeper and more nuanced information about their

culture of assessment on their IHE's campus. I accounted for this by providing rich details from each participant. This may allow for other IHE assessment professionals to garner additional insight into the best practices for establishing a culture of assessment.

This chapter includes a summary of the research and findings, implications, and recommendations for future research. This study provided information regarding the current assessment practices within the SUNY and CUNY systems, and some practices to support the development of a healthy, robust culture of assessment when there are multiple stakeholders with varying needs and interests.

Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1

RQ1 focused on how institutional stakeholders define and perceive assessment culture. This research question will be discussed according to two main themes: assessment culture definition and manifestation, and the campus community's attitudes toward assessment. Within the first theme of the definition and manifestation of assessment culture, I found that the majority of respondents expressed neutral sentiments toward the definition of assessment culture, which suggests that the assessment culture among the participants' institutions are in varying stages of development. Suskie's (2007) five dimensions of good assessment stresses the "valued" portion, as assessment efforts must be recognized and supported on an institutional level with appropriate sources to accomplish these tasks.

A central finding of this study was that institutional assessment culture has deep underpinnings that are beyond faculty and staff efforts. A common theme that emerged from the interviews was that faculty, staff, and administrative support were a general source of an IHE's assessment sentiments and, thus, their assessment culture. Beyond Suskie's (2007) five

dimensions of good assessment, Banta's stakeholder collaboration principle is further supported in the findings as Banta noted that multiple campus constituents need to be engaged in assessment efforts across campus (Kang et al., 2020). Finally, Kotter's (2012) second step of change management stresses the importance of leadership establishing a guiding coalition that can create and maintain the momentum for change. This supports the general sentiment among the assessment professionals I interviewed that administration plays a large role in setting the tone for assessment efforts. While Suskie and Banta consistently stress that assessment efforts should be faculty-driven and begin with a ground-up approach, the reality is that administration provides the resources necessary for the faculty-driven assessment efforts to be effective in the long term.

The second theme centered around the campus community's attitudes toward assessment. Within this theme, the attitudes and sentiments varied among the faculty, staff, students, and administration; some participants described faculty and staff who were motivated and inspired to improve assessment efforts, while others were compliant and defiant. Overall, students were not heavily involved in assessment efforts, and those who were had varied but minimal roles. The descriptors of administrative roles and efforts among the participants were also varied, as some reported a faculty-driven culture while others reported that administration had a more prominent role with a top-down approach to compliance. This aligns with Banta and Palomba's (2015) work that emphasized the importance of collaborative stakeholder involvement. Collaboration was consistently cited as a best practice among participants as it provides value to the work they do. The significance of this particular theme is demonstrated in the multi-dimensional and multifaceted nature of assessment cultures; there is no one-size-fits-all approach because

different institutions require different approaches. Nevertheless, collaboration is a constant imperative for effective assessment efforts.

Research Question 2

RQ2 focused on the factors that help or hinder the development of a culture of assessment. Within this research question are three themes: the influence of administration and leadership, faculty and staff involvement barriers and facilitators, and data use and communication. The results from the study indicate that the involvement of administration in support of faculty and staff plays a heavy role in the success of establishing a culture of assessment, and clarity regarding the results of assessments can help or hinder faculty and staff involvement in assessment activities.

Within the theme of administration support, the findings indicate that administrative support is crucial for development of a culture of assessment. This effectively supports the findings of Smart and Hamm's (1992) framework, which was designed to assist IHEs in understanding their institutional culture and the challenges they may face as a result. A collegial culture is one that many IHEs strive for, but may not always or fully realize. In many public colleges—including those within this study—are characterized by rigid rules and clear authority structures; in some cases, if communication is not bidirectional between faculty/staff and administration, there can be a sense of resistance as stakeholders feel disempowered. Consequently, this can lead to key stakeholders viewing assessment as another compliance measure that needs to be met. Participant 6 notably emphasized a need for a sense of psychological safety and trust among faculty and staff. Kotter's (2012) steps two and three of change management further supports the need for campus administrators to lead the charge in establishing a culture of assessment that is focused on continuous improvement over compliance.

In step two, Kotter (2012) emphasizes building a guiding coalition, which would be administrators and assessment specialists within the IHE that can set the tone and focus for assessment efforts; step three continues that with forming a strategic vision for how the IHE wants their assessment culture to be perceived by all stakeholders. This vision should, ideally, be one shared among the administration and the faculty and staff together with a common purpose of overall institutional improvement and improved student learning outcomes. Without a central vision and guidance from administration, assessment efforts may fail before they begin.

The second theme of faculty and staff involvement focused on the factors and attitudes that can help or hinder assessment cultures on IHE campuses. The major finding across all participants is the need for time. Specifically, time to actively engage with assessment professional development opportunities, interact with peers across their institution, work with their data and its implications, and share information and conclusion out in ways that can be celebrated and acknowledged. Bresciani (2011) demonstrated that time constraints consistently hinder faculty and staff's active engagement in outcomes assessment. Notably, these assessment tasks are often seen by IHE stakeholders as tasks that are in addition to their normal responsibility rather than something integrated within their current responsibilities. As interview participants often noted, faculty workloads are already heavy and a majority of assessment activities tend to be geared toward faculty. As they try to balance advising, teaching, institutional service, research and publication, and other tasks that come up during the academic year, assessment can be easily seen as a burdensome task with more responsibilities. Bresciani (2011) also found that when assessment is imposed by an external group, such as accreditors or administrators, it could lead to the sense of assessment as compliance rather than a tool to improve teaching practices and a sense of resistance or minimal engagement in the process. The

interview participants also emphasized the importance of shared language and professional development to improve faculty and staff confidence in assessment tasks and expectations.

Furthermore, a lack of incentives can hinder faculty and staff participation. Many of the participants discussed assessment awards, professional development days, and other incentives to engage in effective assessment practices. Suskie's (2015) cost-effective dimension places its focus on assessment activities using time and resources efficiently and effectively, encourages practical assessments that are not redundant or cause undue strain, adopting solutions that streamline processes, and using these tools to bring assessment to the daily practices of faculty and staff. Allocating dedicated and protected time for faculty and staff to collaboratively review assessment results—with an emphasis on recognizing effective practices and celebrating key achievements—can foster a stronger and more positive assessment culture throughout the institution.

In conjunction with time and resources, the sharing and communication of assessment data among all campus stakeholders is crucial to building a sustainable culture of assessment. Those participants who discussed data sharing as events, reports, dashboards, newsletters, or other means often spoke with greater satisfaction about their own IHE's culture of assessment. The overall findings indicate that these data sharing events often led to more productive and focused discussions around assessment and how to use the results for continuous improvement. This aligns with Suskie's (2015) assertion that assessment activities must provide data that are accurate and trustworthy. Participants supported this assertion when they reflected on how the results of their assessment practices need to be trustworthy and not distorted by external agendas, allowing the results to be used for institutional improvement and advancement. Additionally, Suskie (2007) further stated that the valued dimension to assessment is imperative to

demonstrating the importance of assessment. Within this dimension, it is stressed that assessment must be seen, valued, and respected among all levels of the IHE, from the president and board of trustees to the students.

In conjunction with Suskie, Banta et al.'s (1996) framework includes practices that 'close the loop' by discussing assessment results, even though she notes that there are relatively few IHEs that systematically engage in this practice. The results from this study indicate that it is only when data from assessment results are used to demonstrate actionable steps toward institutional improvement and not just compliance for accreditation that assessment cultures truly take root. It is important to schedule events into the academic calendar to provide time and space to equitably discuss assessment results, and to celebrate all members of the IHE for their assessment efforts and achievements. This amplifies engagement and bolsters a sustainable culture of assessment.

Sustainable Practices and Strategies

Participants consistently identified that professional development opportunities were critical for establishing and maintaining robust cultures of assessment. By investing in faculty and staff knowledge through workshops, speakers, and time for collaboration with peers and mentors, stakeholders will see that assessment endeavors are more than compliance documents but methods by which teaching methodologies and institutional outcomes can see improvement. Essentially, this demonstrates that the investment in faculty and staff confidence and knowledge is worthwhile and dismantles some of the barriers that hinder faculty and staff assessment involvement. By demystifying the assessment process, participants noticed that faculty and staff gained valuable insight and confidence in the why and how of assessment which, in turn, reduced the sense of burnout and instances of defiant compliance. Many of the participants

expanded upon how some faculty or staff members became interested in their assessment results and felt empowered to explore the results further and make actionable changes. This supports the findings of Banta et al. (1996) who indicated that faculty development on assessment skills was crucial toward building sustainable assessment practices. In addition, Kotter's (2012, p. 109) fifth step in the change management process, "enable action by removing barriers" is accomplished in part by offering professional development.

Dismantling knowledge gaps and encouraging risk-taking in support of improvement can support assessment adoption and innovation within IHEs. These efforts would move assessment culture from one of compliance toward improvement and sustainability. An added incentive to this practice is it inevitably places ownership of assessment practices back on the stakeholders who will be most impacted by the results they gather. This ownership leads to empowerment.

Assessment compliance and direction was found to primarily originate from accreditors and state-level education departments, specifically New York in this study. MSCHE was commonly cited by participants as the main accreditor that impacts SUNY and CUNY schools. MSCHE, consequently, plays a central role in how assessment is affected on campus. Participants did show a consensus in their understanding that while MSCHE is a powerful force for change within IHEs—especially in light of self-study results—the focus on meeting accreditation standards can ultimately lead to a compliance mentality among an IHE's faculty and staff.

This sense of tension that exists between accreditation requirements and institutional assessment was extensively supported by the literature and is well documented (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Ewell, 2009; Stensaker, 2008). Banta and Palomba (2015) argue, however, that using assessment results for improvement rather than compliance is necessary for moving assessment

practices beyond the mandates and suggestions of accrediting agencies. Yet the results of this study indicate that this is an ongoing challenge, and Suskie (2015) cautions against establishing assessment cultures in which external mandates and internal improvement are at odds rather than working in concert with one supporting the other. External accreditors can be used as a starting point and as guideposts towards Kotter's (2012) change management according to the first step of creating a sense of urgency. Accreditation and self-study periods are opportunities that IHEs and assessment professionals can leverage to provide an impetus to change rather than have accreditation act as the sole foundation for assessment activities.

Implications

The present study brings implications for the establishment and maintenance of a culture of assessment within an IHE. First, assessment results need to be used to inform the decision-making process across the entirety of the IHE. There was a persistent disconnect between outcomes assessment, data collection, and the use of that data in support of actionable improvements within educational programs or the IHE. It is imperative that any assessment systems in place within an IHE utilize their data as a measure of institutional and educational efficacy such that it informs and helps enact institutional improvement. Campus stakeholders become invested when they can overtly see that their results brought meaningful change. Consequently, IHEs need to have consistent and robust data-decision making pathways that are clear to their constituents; this is supported by the works of Bresciani (2011) and Suskie (2015).

The concern regarding the element of time cannot be overstated: faculty and staff collectively expressed to assessment professionals that they need more time to enact effective assessment practices. 'Time' was a nebulous term used for multifaceted needs and included things like release time for professional development, time to meet with departments and other

areas on campus to discuss assessment results, time to delve into their results and engage in self-reflection, and time to celebrate the achievements of their work and their peers' efforts. This validates Suskie's (2015) emphasis on assessment approaches being clear, realistic, and sustainable if they are to be adopted and maintained among IHE stakeholders. Processes that reduce faculty and staff burden such as clarifying expectations and reducing reporting burden allow for more possibilities to engage with assessment results in meaningful was toward the improvement of the IHE's operations and educational offerings. This supports lasting change as faculty and staff interface with administration and dialogue about assessment on campus, and encourages professional vulnerability with the goal of continuous improvement at all levels.

Suskie (2015) as well as Banta and Palomba (2015) stressed the importance of placing value on assessment results, which is seen in administrative support, recognition of achievement and improvement, resource allocation, and professional development opportunities. This value needs to be seen at all levels of the institution in order to encourage buy-in from all members. In this study, participants who noted assessment efforts and results were tied to institutional strategic plans or KPIs often expressed more positive sentiments about their assessment cultures than those who did not offer that same link. This further supports Suskie's assertion that grounding assessment results in clearly shared goals contributes to effective assessment.

Collectively, the results indicated that collaborative stakeholder involvement is critical to sustainable cultures of assessment in IHEs. This involvement was supported by Banta and Palomba (2015), who affirmed that assessment ownership among broad constituencies across campus fosters more authentic assessment practices. A previous discussion by Banta (2009) indicated that few IHEs can genuinely claim they 'close the loop' on their assessment efforts. This ongoing challenge between compliance and improvement is often rooted in deeper

institutional needs and external pressures. As the higher education landscape continues to undergo social and legislative changes over time, closure practices in assessment will become more important as IHEs endeavor to remain competitive.

Recommendations for Practice

Developing a culture of assessment within an IHE is a collective task that exists beyond a single assessment office. The practice of higher education assessment has areas in need of improvement, especially in a changing higher education landscape.

Administrators

IHE administrators should consider how their leadership and management styles can help or hinder a culture of assessment. There is a need among campus stakeholders to see visible, consistent support for improvement efforts that go beyond rhetoric and reactions to changes in legislation. While those are important concerns, campus stakeholders must “walk the walk” and provide tangible support as a way to reinforce the value of assessment. Tangible support can come in the form of resource allocation, public recognition of achievement, and using data from assessment results to enact policy changes; these demonstrate that administration takes the work of their constituents seriously and need results to make decisions that have an impact on the IHE’s functions. Rhetorical endorsement of assessment would be seen as hollow and disingenuous; the leaders set the tone and signal institutional priorities; therefore, it is necessary to show assessment activities as meaningful rather than performative or perfunctory.

Resource allocation is especially important in regard to time for assessment activities. All participants indicated that time was a limiting factor in effective assessment practice. In order to have a meaningful culture of assessment, faculty and staff need resources such as protected time to engage with peers on assessment results and professional development opportunities to learn

and improve their practices (Banta & Palomba, 2015; Bresciani, 2011). Without dedicated time and training, assessment endeavors could devolve into a compliance task rather than be utilized for its intended purpose of institutional improvement.

Institutional leaders set the tone for how an IHE operates and how assessment efforts may be perceived by their faculty and staff. Consequently, it is important to link the campus strategic plan or relevant KPIs. This will ensure that assessment is seen as integral to institutional efficacy and increases the likelihood of stakeholder buy-in as it demonstrates that their leaders are willing to 'walk the walk' and use assessment results towards data-informed, values-driven decisions. Participants in this study consistently spoke positively when they were able to link their assessment work to larger institutional goals, and it offered a starting point for conversations around assessment to occur.

Assessment Professionals

Assessment professionals often act as the face of assessment efforts on campus and as a built-in consultant for all members of their campus community. In order to help build and sustain a meaningful culture of assessment, one of the first actions that assessment professionals should consider is intentionally building a sense of intellectual and psychological safety among campus stakeholders. It is important to stress that academic and co-curricular assessment should not be used for punitive means but as a method for institutional improvement. In addition, the sense of safety allows for IHE stakeholders to feel supported as they learn and make mistakes through that process. When stakeholders have the understanding that their assessment work is valued for its insights and honesty, they are more likely to engage with assessment efforts more authentically and IHEs will enjoy more robust, applicable results (Banta, 2009; Fuller et al., 2016).

As assessment professionals work with campus stakeholders on these efforts, it is necessary to remember that we need to continue, as Participant 7 emphasized, to meet people where they are: campus stakeholders who engage in assessment activities come with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, concerns, and interests (Suskie, 2015). Acknowledging those differences and integrating practices of differentiated instructions such as personalized mentorship, support, and professional development encourages stakeholders to learn and explore how assessment is used for improvement, which ultimately leads to broader and more robust engagement.

Communication of assessment results was consistently shown to encourage institutional transparency and action toward improvement. Providing a variety of means to communicate assessment results in ways that are accessible and engaging for campus constituents is a step toward generating a positive and robust culture of assessment. This also supports a sense of shared purpose toward institutional improvement and interdepartmental collaboration. Therefore, communication strategies should be considered based on the specific IHE's culture and preferred modes of communication.

Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff carry the majority of the assessment burden within IHEs, with the largest contribution of assessment data coming from faculty and their students. It was readily apparent within this study that time is a severely limiting factor in how readily assessment can be supported on campus. When time is allotted for resources such as professional development or meetings in which assessment is a main topic, it is helpful to actively engage with the materials as application-based learning methodologies often provide innovative and useful ways to enhance course offerings or departmental efficiency. When professional development is offered,

it is important to seek it out and actively participate in these events, as the benefits are two-fold.

First, active participation increases the individual's likelihood of retaining the information for extended periods of time and increases confidence in assessment processes. Second, it supports the knowledge capacity of the institution as an engaged faculty or staff member brings positive contributions to the IHE. This leads to increased institutional support and peer mentorship, and in turn increases buy-in for assessment efforts if the IHE's constituents see improvements as a direct result of the assessment work they performed. A positive feedback loop may ensue in which interest builds upon itself over time toward effective assessment.

As faculty and staff serve on committees and in working groups with assessment components, it is also encouraged to provide feedback and insights into the planning, deployment, and subsequent recommended actions that assessment brings. It is especially important for faculty and staff to collaborate across departments and disciplines; this provides insight into how varying groups interact within the IHE and how assessment results impact areas beyond specific offices and content areas. This also works in support of dismantling data siloes that are common in IHEs such that one area of the campus may not be fully aware of what the others do or are impacted by various campus efforts. Ultimately, collaboration across multiple stakeholder groups with a shared vision encourages long-term, sustainable change (Fuller et al., 2016; Gerber, 2001). The greatest impact for faculty and staff can be attributed to a shift in mindset from compliance to continuous improvement, which is needed at any IHE that endeavors to have a vibrant culture of assessment (Banta, 2009; Ewell, 2009).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study revealed areas in which future research may be pursued. First, a longitudinal study comparing the perception of an IHE's culture of assessment across multiple accreditation

cycles. MSCHE notably works in eight-year accreditation cycles; therefore, if an IHE wanted to maintain a sense of how assessment culture changes over time, multiple accreditation cycles in the future could be considered. Another possible area of research would be to expand upon Kotter's change management theory (or other change management theories) as it applies to IHEs establishing assessment cultures or adjusting their assessment culture. This may have implications for how to effectively steer an IHE through accreditation cycles or concerns with assessment work.

Finally, as there is a dearth of supportive information regarding student involvement in IHE assessment, future research may be undertaken in how to best utilize student perspectives and input in the assessment process; as campus stakeholders, they need to be actively engaged to provide further support toward institutional efficacy.

Conclusions

Establishing a culture of assessment on an IHE campus is a monumental task that necessitates the focused work and support of a variety of campus stakeholders. Suskie and Banta—two of the foremost scholars in institutional assessment—have provided the necessary frameworks and guidelines to ensure effective and meaningful assessment on campus. By applying change management principles, it is possible to gather support from the entirety of the IHE with a goal of overall institutional improvement.

Assessment professionals have a variety of ways in which they engage with their campus stakeholders, acting as teachers, advisors, specialists, and mentors to their colleagues and peers. Within this role comes the need to emphasize the importance of assessment as a function of the iterative nature of education itself: self-reflection happens daily, and improvement occurs when data are applied toward common goals. Collaborative efforts shape a culture of assessment on

campus, if all members of the campus community are given the time to do it. While many assessment professionals will say they ‘fell into’ the field of assessment after being in different roles and on different paths in life, one characteristic they share is a passion for becoming better than they were yesterday, and they bring that same energy to the IHEs in which they work. Effective data informed, values driven decisions happen daily on campuses when all members speak the same language: continuous improvement and love of education.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter for Assessment Professionals

Greetings, [name]!

My name is Sarah Elacqua, and I am the Coordinator of Assessment and Student Learning Outcomes at SUNY Polytechnic Institute. I am also a doctoral student at National University pursuing a Ph.D. in Education, and I am conducting a dissertation research study about best practices in building a culture of assessment on SUNY and CUNY campuses.

I would like to invite at least ten actively employed assessment professionals in a SUNY and/or CUNY school who are willing to participate in an interview regarding the assessment culture on your campus. Each one-on-one interview will take approximately one-hour and would occur via Zoom. To participate in the interview, you must meet the following criteria:

- Be an active assessment professional in your SUNY or CUNY school, and
- Have at least one year of experience in an assessment-focused role.

Your participation is fully voluntary, and all participating members will be entered to win a $100 VISA gift card that will be emailed at the conclusion of the study's timeframe.

To participate or learn more about this study, please contact me at 315-751-0201 or email at s.sorge-elacqua9185@o365.ncu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration!

Sarah Elacqua

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Assessment Professionals

Thank you for agreeing to participate in today's interview. My name is Sarah Elacqua and I will be conducting this interview. The goal of this study is to learn about the assessment practices that are occurring in SUNY and CUNY schools in New York and listen to some of the practices that are working, the ones that maybe need more help, and how a culture of assessment is functioning on your campus. The goal of this study is to generate a set of best practices used by SUNY and CUNY schools to support the establishment of cultures of assessment on other higher education campuses that are sustainable and aligned with goals for institutional effectiveness and accreditation standards. You received this invitation because you are subscribed to the SUNY Council on Assessment (SCoA) listserv and I seek the perspective of active assessment professionals in our SUNY and CUNY schools.

As an assessment coordinator in a SUNY school, I deeply value your knowledge and insights as it will help inform my practices, too. Please be assured that I want you to feel comfortable being fully honest with me about what works, what doesn't, and how faculty and staff feel about assessment efforts on campus.

Prior to your interview today you should have received an introductory letter and a consent form to read and sign as well as the questions that would be asked. Did you receive these items and sign the form as indicated?

This interview will take approximately thirty to sixty minutes to complete and will be semi-structured. This means you will be asked the questions you saw prior to the interview today, but we have the opportunity to converse and expand on ideas and concepts that may come

up during our conversation. Again, please be as forthright as possible; any identifying information will be redacted. This interview will be recorded only for my notetaking and reference and will not be shared with anyone. I will have the audio transcribed via an online service and the transcript will be sent to you to review for accuracy. Interview recordings, transcripts, and identifying information will be permanently destroyed at the conclusion of this study to protect your privacy. You may stop or pause the interview at any time with no penalty. You may also direct me to exclude any or all of your responses at the conclusion of the interview with no penalty. Do you have any questions at this time? If not, let's start the interview!

Participant Information:

1. Participant Name: ________________________________
2. Are you currently employed with a SUNY or CUNY school? __________________
3. Number of years in assessment? ______ In higher education? ______
4. Date and time of interview: _________________________________

Interview Questions:

1. How would you define a culture of assessment and how does it look at your institution?
2. How does the campus community (faculty, staff, students, administration) view assessment? Is it primarily viewed as an activity for continuous improvement or a compliance task?
3. How does administration and leadership shape the assessment process at your institution, especially as it relates to institutional goals and resource allocation?
4. How are faculty and staff involved in the assessment process? What barriers exist that may hinder faculty and staff involvement?
5. How are students involved in the assessment process?

6. How are assessment data used and communicated on your campus?
7. What institutional resources (ex. infrastructure, software, training, etc.) are available in support of assessment efforts on campus?
8. How do external stakeholders—such as accreditors—influence assessment practices on campus?
9. What practices have contributed to a sustainable culture of assessment on your campus?
10. Are there other thoughts, concerns, or advice you would like to share regarding assessment culture in higher education?

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today! Your answers will be incredibly helpful in this study. If you have any further questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me!