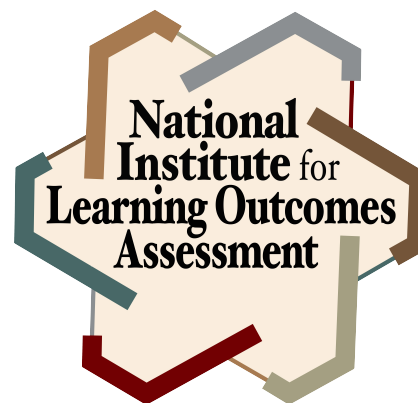


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# **A New Decade for Assessment: Embedding Equity into Assessment Praxis**

Erick Montenegro  
& Natasha A. Jankowski

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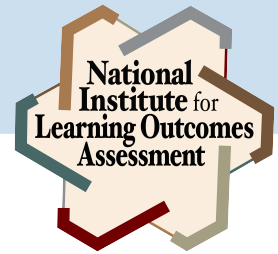
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**NILOA Mission**

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), established in 2008, is a research and resource-development organization dedicated to documenting, advocating, and facilitating the systematic use of learning outcomes assessment to improve student learning.



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## Abstract

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Entering into a new decade with an even more diversified college student population will not only require more assessment models involving students but also deeper professional development of institutional representatives key to student learning. Reflecting upon the conversations over the last three years around culturally responsive assessment and related equity and assessment discussions, this occasional paper highlights questions, insights, and future directions for the decade ahead by exploring what equitable assessment is and is not; the challenges and barriers to equitable assessment work; where the decade ahead may lead; and next steps in the conversation on equity and assessment.

# A New Decade for Assessment: Embedding Equity into Assessment Praxis

Erick Montenegro & Natasha A. Jankowski

In addition to being the dawn of a new decade, January 2020 marks the three-year anniversary of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment's (NILOA) equity conversation. Working to bring the field of assessment in alignment with practices that support the success of diverse learners, NILOA's equity work focuses on being collaborative. The conversation on equity in assessment began with the launch of Occasional Paper 29 titled *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment*. The goal of the paper was to open a dialogue on the relationship between equity and assessment by presenting the concept of culturally responsive assessment. *Equity and Assessment* implored the field of assessment to examine assessment processes in order to be responsive to both issues of equity and the needs of diverse learners, focusing on embedding culturally responsive assessment into processes and practices. Using the paper as a space for dialogue on the assumptions from which assessment operates, Montenegro & Jankowski (2017) sought to encourage assessment work to be reflective of the students served and to ultimately use assessment data to address learning, persistence, and attainment gaps.

Since 2017, the message of *Equity and Assessment* has spread beyond the confines of those initial pages. While our original focus was upon exploring culturally responsive assessment, what we did not expect was the interest in intersections of assessment and equity related work. Through inviting responses to the paper introducing the concept of culturally responsive assessment, practitioner authors brought multiple related elements into the conversation, widening the dialogue space to explore the relationships between equity and assessment. These practice and thought leaders introduced various elements to consider—challenges to overcome, promising practices to move the needle, and supports needed in advancing equity-minded assessment work. As became clear through the conversations, an assessment process that is not mindful of equity can risk becoming a tool that promotes inequities, whether intentional or otherwise, leading to a broadening of the conversation from culturally responsive assessment to how assessment could address equity in education (Zamani-Gallaher, 2017).

In over 15 published *responses to Equity and Assessment* from May 2017 to November 2019, respondents in the field set forth common themes in their exploration of equitable assessment, specifically culturally responsive assessment. For one, respondents noted the need for models or frameworks to inform this work and raise additional awareness (Henning & Lundquist, 2018a; Laird & BrckaLorenz, 2017; Tullier, 2018; McArthur 2017; Rudnick, 2019). Questions regarding where to start, how to scale, and who to involve arose (Fisler, 2017), with people doing the work offering answers to these questions, such as beginning by disaggregating data to identify areas of need (Wright, 2017; Williams, R., 2018), and aligning equitable practices to larger institutional goals to promote sustainability, alongside identifying potential partners (Levy & Heiser, 2018). Additionally, respondents noted considerations for culturally responsive assessment throughout assessment processes including the learning outcomes phase (McArthur, 2017; Henning & Lundquist, 2018a; Levy & Heiser, 2018; Laird & BrckaLorenz, 2017;

An assessment process that is not mindful of equity can risk becoming a tool that promotes inequities, whether intentional or not.

Williams, E., 2018; Tullier, 2018); questions to ask during data collection to choose appropriate sources of evidence and include student voices in the assessment process (Wright, 2017; Williams & Perrone, 2018; Meyerhoff, 2019; Clark & Arimoto, 2018); and data analyses to check biases, dive deeper into the data, and make meaningful comparisons (Levy & Heiser, 2018; Williams & Perrone, 2018; Williams, R., 2018; Roberts, R., 2019). However, NILOA has not been the only vehicle driving the equity conversation forward.

Indeed, we have seen the field respond to the call for equitable and culturally responsive assessment through various means. For one, we have seen an increased focus on equity at many higher education assessment conferences either through conference themes on equity, diversity, and inclusion such as the 2019 *Association for Assessment of Learning in Higher Education* (AALHE) conference and the 2020 *Higher Education Assessment Conference* sponsored by New England College, and/or specific presentation tracks discussing equity in assessment (e.g., 2019 *Assessment Institute*, 2019 *Assessment in Higher Education Conference*, and the pre-conference track at the 2020 *Association for Institutional Research (AIR) Forum* to name a few). Coupled with increases in publications on the topic, including special issues of academic journals devoted to equity in assessment (e.g., *New Directions for Institutional Research* Spring 2018 issue, AALHE's Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 issues of *Intersection*). Additionally, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and Campus Labs launched their *Socially Just Assessment* podcast, while the Student Affairs Assessment Leaders (SAAL) and CAS launched the *Assessment for Social Justice Project* (ASJP) (Henning, 2018) bringing together multiple organizations across higher education to explore social justice and assessment. We have even been fortunate to learn that various consortia of institutions across the country have used the concepts presented in *Equity and Assessment* to structure their assessment plans, including a group of Tribal Colleges and Universities utilizing elements of culturally responsive assessment to advance work within their unique mission and contexts. Relatedly, our equity work helped launch the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) *Collaboration for Excellence in Educational Quality Assurance* (HBCU-CEEQA). Since the Fall of 2017, HBCU-CEEQA has grown to include over 70 members from over 35 colleges and universities across the United States, focused on assessing student learning and being accountable to stakeholders, while also remaining true to the special mission of HBCUs and the students they serve (Orr, 2018). And in partnership with CAS and Campus Labs, NILOA released a call for equity related case studies to better explore culturally responsive assessment in practice, cases which will be released throughout the year.

Through these important voices in the equity in assessment conversation we have learned much and have heard the need for further direction regarding what exactly equity in assessment is and is not, along with what it looks like for different stakeholders across all levels of higher education. It is for these reasons that as opposed to a paper focused on deepening and developing culturally responsive frameworks in assessment, we instead provide an overview of the various conversations on equity and assessment that emerged over the course of the past three years, with implications for future directions on where the larger conversation on the relationship between equity and assessment might lead in the decade ahead. We present what we gleaned from the insightful questions, comments, and perspectives shared through conference presentations, webinars, authored guest responses, and other literature to address: 1) what equitable assessment is and is not; 2)



the challenges and barriers to equitable assessment work; 3) where the decade ahead may lead; and 4) next steps for NILOA and the field of assessment as it relates to issues of equity.

## What Equity-Minded Assessment Is and Is Not

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What has become evident as more and more assessment practitioners and thought leaders engage with the equity conversation is the desire for a unifying definition of what is meant by equitable assessment. For example, NILOA's conceptualization of equity in assessment, along with others (Singer-Freeman, Hobbs, & Robinson, 2019) revolves around culturally responsive assessment. Furthermore, CAS and Campus Labs approach the discussion from a socially just assessment perspective (Henning, 2018; Henning & Lundquist, 2018b). Thought leaders have also conceptualized equitable assessment through a critical perspective (Heiser, Prince, & Levy, 2017; Hanson 2019). Other efforts include decolonized assessment (Eizadirad, 2019), bias free assessment (Gibbs & Stobart, 2009), assessment of learning outcomes relevant to indigenous peoples and their cultures (Small & Willson, 2018), and assessment that ultimately aims to do no harm. But what exactly does all of this mean? Questions have been posed aiming to uncover differences and similarities among approaches, and practitioners have requested direct translations of what exactly these terms mean for everyday practice. For the sake of cataloging the conversation thus far, brief explorations of culturally responsive, socially just, and critical assessment are presented below.

### *Culturally Responsive Assessment*

NILOA began with cultural responsiveness for various epistemological and practical reasons. First, cultural responsiveness is a concept that has been associated with evaluation and assessment since the 1970's (Stake, 1975) and gaining prominence in the 1990's (Hood & Hopson, 2008). However, the conversation emerging from the evaluation community examined assessment and cultural responsiveness from the perspective of item validity in test development. Nevertheless, it provides a space from which to build upon an existing conversation within assessment on issues of cultural appropriateness. Additionally, the term "culturally responsive" is practical in nature and connected with teaching and learning. Stemming from Ladson-Billings' (1995a; 1995b) seminal conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy, cultural responsiveness calls for practices which respond to the needs of the contexts in which we teach and learn; including the needs of the students we serve. If assessment is an integral and connected part of the teaching and learning process, then conversations on culturally responsive pedagogy are appropriately positioned to help better explore culturally responsive assessment and is also well aligned with NILOA's prior work in transparency of assignments and assignment design (Hutchings, Jankowski, & Baker, 2018).

However, the focus upon culture left readers curious. Whose culture are we being responsive to: the department/institution or the students? How does this translate to the tools used and the policies in place? Both are very important questions, but the answers depend on context. The reality is that *culturally responsive assessment is fully dependent on the context in which you are assessing*. It is a process that requires reflection and planning. What worked at one institution, program, or classroom may not work the same at another. However, as posited by Montenegro and Jankowski (2017), it is impossible to do without direct

Culturally responsive assessment is fully dependent on the context in which you are assessing. It is a process that requires reflection and planning.

involvement of students, noting that in its core, culturally responsive assessment must:

1. Be mindful of the student population(s) being served and involve students in the process of assessing learning;
2. Use appropriate student-focused and cultural language in learning outcomes statements to ensure students understand what is expected of them;
3. Develop and/or use assessment tools and multiple sources of evidence that are culturally responsive to current students; and
4. Intentional improvement of student learning through disaggregated data-driven change that examines structures, demonstrations of learning, and supports which may privilege some students' learning while marginalizing others.

These considerations guide and inform assessment work at each step of the culturally responsive assessment process to ensure responsiveness to the needs of students and implementation of meaningful improvements. Some of the elements of culturally responsive assessment are expanded upon in socially just assessment.

### *Socially Just Assessment*

Socially just assessment stems from the work of SAAL, CAS, Campus Labs, and other partners in the Assessment for Social Justice Project. Socially just assessment includes the elements mentioned in the previous section and refocuses them within a framework that analyzes the interplay between culture, bias, power, and oppression in the assessment process. Socially just assessment calls for the acknowledgement that assessment takes place within various departmental and institutional cultures which impact the processes we follow (Heiser, Henning, & Lundquist, 2018; Henning & Lundquist, 2018b). There typically are norms, resource constraints, timelines, procedures in place which influence assessment plans and how those plans are subsequently executed. In addition, personal biases can influence the types of tools used, the sources of evidence to which more weight is assigned, and the interpretations drawn from assessment data along with possible solutions on how to go about improving student learning. Heiser et al. (2018) also note that the paradigms used to approach assessment—whether conscious or subconscious—work to affect decisions made and questions asked (e.g., asset-based versus deficit-based perspectives toward different initiatives, student populations, sources of data).

Socially just assessment uses the concept of deconstructed assessment to not only understand why our students are achieving, persisting, or stopping-out in the ways they are, but to also understand the underpinning structures of why these things are happening in the first place (Henning & Lundquist, 2018b). In order to do this, there must be an understanding that learning and assessment operate under dynamics of power and oppression (Henning & Lundquist, 2018a; Heiser et al., 2018). In other words, assessment is not an apolitical process. We need to first understand how systems of power and oppression influence how students experience college, engage with the learning process, and build knowledge before we can understand how to better assess their learning. This also helps draw appropriate interpretations and conclusions from the data. Power and oppression can play into the assessment process when selecting whose voices to include in assessment and the methods we use or processes we follow. Typically, assessment is



planned and carried out by faculty and administrators, and changes are implemented according to what faculty and administrators assume to be most appropriate. Seldomly are students involved to verify that the assumptions in play are real, appropriate, or meet their needs.

The perspectives we include in assessment and decisions of who has a voice at the table privileges certain ways of knowing while potentially oppressing those who are not represented. For example, culturally responsive assessment stresses that the student voice must be included in assessment because students have been typically treated as the object of the assessment; a mere passive participant in a process that has important ramifications for their success (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). As argued by Zerquera, Reyes, Pender, and Abbady (2018), “Many of the assessment approaches employed today are misaligned with social justice agendas, failing to adequately inform decisions about how best to support marginalized student populations within higher education” (p. 17), reinforcing the need to actively involve students throughout the process of assessment. With this in mind, socially just assessment raises awareness on how assessment can be a process inherent of structures of power and oppression (Henning & Lundquist, 2018b).

Socially just assessment reminds practitioners to be mindful of how the ways in which data are analyzed can also privilege or oppress. Far too often, if a specific student population has a small sample size in assessment data, they are removed from analyses (American Indian College Fund, 2019). This inherently marginalizes specific populations because they are silenced from analyses, even though much can be learned from the experiences of the students behind the small ‘n’ (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; Heiser et al, 2018).

Furthermore, assessment needs to be more aware of the types of comparisons made between learners (Levy & Heiser, 2018). Far too often, we compare the outcomes of students of color to those of white students. White students are then normed as the population to which others should strive. Or we examine theories of white male student persistence, pipeline approaches to education and learning, and assume them to be the theory that should guide our practice to help “the other students” be more like the “successful students.” These comparisons, especially if not worded or contextualized appropriately, can send the message that non-white students should strive to be like their white peers without examining the unique experience of non-white students. The point raised in social justice focused assessment is that “cultural and social differences influence whether and how students perform academically and socially at their institution” (Dorimé-Williams, 2018, p. 42) as well as that “flawed assessment and implementation processes disadvantage students” while “inaccurate interpretation and reporting of results can lead to policies with a discriminatory impact” (Dorimé-Williams, 2018, p. 51).

The end goal of socially just assessment is to advance social justice. In other words, assessment should strive to serve as a mechanism that helps close opportunity, persistence, and attainment gaps between different student populations. Socially just assessment should challenge structures of privilege within institutions and society writ large to better serve and support learners. The goal of assessment is to make data informed decisions on how to improve teaching and learning, so the goals of social justice and assessment are very similar. It takes a conscious, intentional approach to make it happen, alongside potentially hard conversations. Indeed, socially just assessment echoes the same values expressed in culturally responsive assessment but bounds them within an exploration of

Assessment should strive to serve as a mechanism that helps close opportunity, persistence, and attainment gaps between different student populations.



how power and oppression impact assessment.

### *Critical Assessment*

At its most fundamental level, equitable assessment requires approaching assessment through a critical lens. Both culturally responsive assessment and socially just assessment operate from a critical perspective. They strive to challenge the status quo; raise questions of privilege, power, and oppression; and work to remedy injustices whether purposeful or accidental. Heiser et al. (2017), as well as Hanson (2019) brought forth various elements of critical inquiry which can be applied to the assessment process. In short, critical assessment calls for:

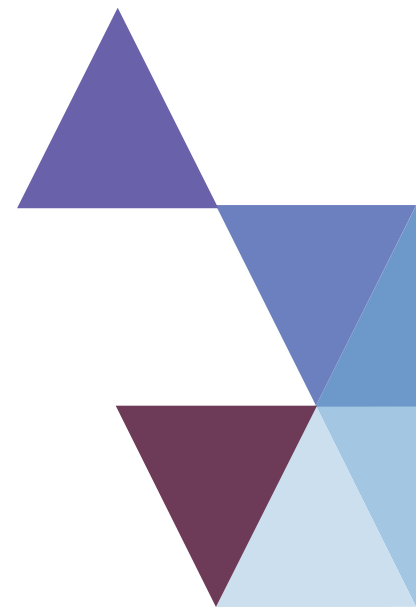
1. Disregarding the objectivity myth and accepting that assessment is inherently subjective and guided by the biases and experiences of those conducting assessment;
2. Varying the types of evidence used to assess learning outcomes to not privilege specific ways of knowing or preferred ways to demonstrate knowledge;
3. Including the voices of students, especially those who belong to minoritized populations or those whose voices can often be left unheard, throughout the assessment process; and
4. Using assessment to advance the pursuit of equity across previously identified institutional parameters that demonstrate disparate outcomes across student populations.

What these four tenets outline is the important role that context plays in critical assessment. The context of the institution/program, the person(s) conducting the assessment, and the learners need to be understood and reflected upon in order to properly create and execute an assessment plan that will yield appropriate and equitable results. However, simply being attentive to issues of equity during the assessment process is not enough. Results must then be used to improve equity imperatives for the student populations experiencing inequitable outcomes, in part because the learning outcomes that institutions list are learning outcomes to which all students strive. Thus, assessment efforts must be consequential to issues of equity. Culturally responsive assessment and socially just assessment centralize these tenets of critical assessment. There certainly are nuances between them, but they each strive to meet the same end goal: increase equity in assessment.

### **Bringing it All Together: Equity-minded Assessment**

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Nomenclature aside, each of the above perspectives on equity and assessment are rooted in the same core notion of being mindful of equity and actively working to address inequities. At its core, equitable assessment calls for those who lead and participate in assessment activities to pay attention and be conscious of how assessment can either feed into cycles that perpetuate inequities or can serve to bring more equity into higher education. From this point on, this paper will use the term equity-minded assessment, similar to how Bensimon (2006) speaks of equity-mindedness, as it encompasses a shared perspective on equity across the various conversation spaces unfolding. Here, we draw out principles and elements of culturally responsive assessment, socially just assessment, and



critical assessment that have emerged over the past three years of conversation.

### 1. *Meaningful Student Involvement*

Being mindful of equity brings a necessary and embedded focus to questioning the assessment process to ensure we are not succumbing to biases or established norms while simultaneously excluding important voices and perspectives. One of the easiest means by which to check assumptions is to actively involve students in the process of assessment. In the face of changing enrollments in higher education, continued and widening opportunity, persistence, and attainment gaps for different student populations (Condrón, Tope, Stiedl, & Freeman, 2013), the “typical” or “traditional” way is simply not working for specific groups of students. Equity-minded assessment is about challenging what we think and exploring what others think, need, and are affected by which we may not understand or experience. Just as authentic assessment requires the use of multiple sources of evidence (Kuh et al., 2015), equity-minded assessment invites multiple voices to the table to determine learning outcome statements (Tkatchov, 2019), inform the appropriateness of assessment (Gipps & Stobart, 2009), and make sense of the results.

A good starting place is with statements of learning outcomes—both in ensuring they are measurable and that faculty, staff, and students understand and can make sense of those outcomes. If learning outcome statements serve as the point from which educational experiences are designed, and the learning outcome statements themselves are not inclusive or include biases, then the educational design will as well (Rodrigues & Raby, 2019). Further, students can be involved in determining what could be changed to further their learning. Institutions are positioned to make more impactful changes by engaging with students about what would best support their learning as opposed to trial and error, or implementing “what worked for me when I was a student.” Experiences and perspectives come with biases which can be embedded into the assessment process. If we do not reflect on these biases, and take action to challenge them, then we risk acting upon assumptions which may not be appropriate for students—even with the best intentions.

Listening to the voices of those historically silenced is an essential element of equity-minded assessment. Fully complementing this is ensuring that everything, from learning outcomes to data collected and reports are 1) written in a way that can be understood by students and other stakeholders; and 2) are disseminated and communicated through channels which can be easily found by students and stakeholders. In other words, equitable assessment is transparent.

A forthcoming **equity case study** of Capella University, notes that equity-minded assessment requires transparency in the assessment process as well as in educational design—students should know what is being assessed, how it is being assessed, and how well they achieved the assessment’s expectations. If students are to be active participants in assessment, then we need to ensure students are also informed of assessment results, improvements or changes made due to assessment data, and what this means for students. Capella believes, equitable assessment practice means that all learners have an equal and unbiased opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and achievements through assessment processes that use differentiated methods, transparency, accountability, and fairness from design to measurement to improvements and dissemination of results. (NILOA’s **Transparency Framework** can offer additional insight on how to make

Listening to the voices of those historically silenced is an essential element of equity-minded assessment.

assessment a more transparent process by making information accessible and engaging.)

## 2. Data Disaggregation, Exploration, and Action

A second element of equity-minded assessment involves exploring assessment data to uncover potential learning gaps between student populations to make data informed changes in order to close those gaps. In other words, equity-minded assessment requires *meaningful* data disaggregation and subsequent action. In reviewing data, students can be an active part of the conversation such that their needs and lived realities are present, heard, and acted upon. Consider the noise added to data on a particular learning outcome if collected results are not a demonstration of students' learning on that particular outcome but are instead based on social capital related to navigating assessment tasks? Should curricular changes be made based on data about structural inequities as opposed to learning? Another forthcoming equity case study from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte notes ways to identify false evidence of achievement gaps in data analysis. The exploration revealed that differences in student grades were reflective of students' ability to navigate college instead of demonstration of competence or achievement of an outcome. This led assessment professionals to turn their attention to making assignments more equitable for assessing learning instead of the "hidden curriculum"; a similar sentiment echoed by R. Roberts (2019) who urged assessment practitioners not to make decisions from assessment data which only reflects students' ability to navigate assessments (e.g., ask questions and have good test-taking skills) instead of their actual learning.

As learned from the [National Association of System Heads \(NASH\) project on taking high-impact practices to scale](#), meaningful data disaggregation is a good first step towards examining equity issues but is not by itself a practice of equity-minded assessment. Simply examining disaggregated data without examining if the assessment process is equitable will lead to continued inequities. Meaningful disaggregation involves deeper analyses by specific student characteristics, alongside the intersection between and among them (Roberts, J., 2019). To enable a place where practitioners can dive deeper into the data, we first need to gather assessment data at a level and in a manner which can be meaningfully disaggregated. It is incredibly difficult to disaggregate data at an institution-level if data do not exist. To address issues of disaggregation, institutions might work in a data sharing consortium in order to explore disaggregation options, or instead undertake focus groups with students by verbally exploring differences in experience.

The first step is evaluating the depth of assessment data on hand and what can realistically be done with it. Before collecting more data, it is always wise to fully explore the data already collected and determine if it should still be collected or if something else is needed. This can be done in partnership with institutional research or institutional effectiveness staff as well as assessment professionals (should you be at an institution with so many positions!). Further, we should consider siloed data which may provide additional insight if connected to data on student learning whether in the Student Information System, Learning Management System, course related systems, or other data sets managed by student affairs and related units. Then, we can begin to determine what analyses to run.

An assessment plan that can yield the data needed would include shared definitions, variables, and student characteristic data, which takes time and conversations to determine. We cannot expect to collect all of the data in one round of assessment, but



over time we can begin to collect data that allows us to explore the intersection of various student characteristics. For example, a deeper dive into our data can show that low-SES male Latinx students are disproportionately less likely to attain a specific learning outcome compared to both their low-SES female Latinx peers and their high-SES Latinx counterparts. Or we might find that low-SES full-time commuter students are lagging behind both their full-time residential peers and their high-SES full-time commuter peers in attainment of a particular learning outcome in certain programs based on curricular paths. Here, both SES and the residential/commuter characteristics are of importance, coupled with student voice as to why this might be the case.

A cautionary note: In equity-minded assessment, data related conversations should be interrogated to ensure that data are not weaponized to facilitate self-fulfilling prophecies where results are used as “proof” that students are unprepared or disinterested; where someone can take assessment data and say “see, I told you they can’t learn!” To support equity-minded assessment discussions informed by data, professional development may be needed prior to data discussions to interrogate biases and assumptions. An important aspect of meaningful disaggregation is thus knowing which questions to ask and what to do with the different findings, as well as who to have participate in the process. This takes practice, patience, and thrives from collaborating with and learning from others who have different experiences, skills, and perspectives than our own. For faculty and assessment practitioners to become comfortable with such conversations, administrators need to provide spaces with facilitated discussions on structural barriers, inequities, and practices which can affect student outcomes. Gansemer-Topf, Wilson, and Kirk (2019) offer various questions assessment practitioners can ask of the data to critically interrogate data collection and analysis processes.

Second cautionary note: While small samples can inform assessment through trend data collected over time, equity-minded assessment is responsive to student needs by examining and helping individual students, when they need it (Maki, 2017a). We cannot disregard data simply because it is from a small sample. Generalizability is important for publications but not as much for equity-minded institutional improvement or decision-making. If the capstone for a major/program has three students in it who will graduate and all three students struggled with attaining the program learning outcomes, should something be done, or is the “sample size” (in this case the population of graduates – not a sample, but an often confused point in these conversations) too small to incite action, when none of the graduating students met the learning of interest? If ten students out of 500 are not meeting an outcome, it may not be statistically significant, but it is significant to those students’ and their families and has implications for retention and persistence. Thus, it is worth exploring. Further, looking at the same student in multiple points through their learning journey in relation to learning outcomes provides information not simply on one data point at the end of a program, but many throughout, in order to examine learning progression over time. Such an approach shifts the unit of analysis from a student to instances of demonstrated learning, thus one ‘n’ may have many associated data points.

### *3. Context-Specific Approaches and Responses*

Third, equity-minded assessment requires that we address issues of equity within our specific context. It is impractical and unlikely that assessment professionals working to

Simply examining disaggregated data without examining if the assessment process is equitable will lead to continued inequities.

advance equity and assessment within their institutions will be able to fix the entirety of the educational system in the United States. In addition, there are many areas and issues to explore within a specific institutional context on equity and assessment, and it is unwise to tackle them all at once. Determining an issue of equitable assessment that can bring faculty, staff, and students together in a space of productive discomfort will lead to more equitable assessment in the future than charging ahead with full disruption of assessment processes in the name of equity. Some possible ways to begin include exploratory analyses—done to see if there are inequities within assessment data and inquire about how they can be fixed—or purposeful analyses to see if a recent change intended to close a learning outcomes gap among specific populations achieved its intended purpose. Starting with changing student demographics as a point of exploration of learning success or of questions that faculty have about students and their learning opens space to examine learning while bringing an intentional equity lens to the discussion. Additionally, equity-minded assessment efforts can align to ongoing department, program, or institutional initiatives to help meet overarching student success and learning goals, thus helping to inform a larger issue that the institution needs to address or is already addressing. Whatever the case, assessment efforts must be mindful of inequities which matter in a specific context and assessment professionals need to sensitively navigate institutional initiative space, working to make the case and connect the dots between equity and assessment for faculty, staff, and administrators (Jankowski & Slotnick, 2015).

#### 4. *Embedded in All Things Assessment*

Finally, equity needs to be embedded within and throughout the entirety of any assessment effort. In her Assessment Institute keynote remarks, Tia B. McNair (2019) said that those doing equity work need to *live* equity work. In other words, doing equity work is not something we can step in and out of. It is a mentality and approach that remains central so that we do not lose sight of it, that others are able to follow by example, and we are always being critical, reflective, and questioning processes, biases, assumptions, within ourselves, others, and the processes followed. This equity-mindedness needs to actively permeate the entire assessment process, and the practice of assessment professionals. To do equity-minded assessment we need to:

1. check biases and ask reflective questions throughout the assessment process to address assumptions and positions of privilege;
2. use multiple sources of evidence appropriate for the students being assessed and assessment effort;
3. include student perspectives and take action based on perspectives;
4. increase transparency in assessment results and actions;
5. ensure collected data can be meaningfully disaggregated and interrogated; and
6. make evidence-based changes that address issues of equity that are context-specific.

Equity-minded assessment refers to ways we ensure assessment processes and practices are appropriate for *all* students and that we ultimately do no harm in the process. While it can be challenging to consider the vast differences and needs of our student populations in our practices, our task as educational providers is to strive to help *every* student succeed.



What “ensuring that our assessments are appropriate for *all* students” means is that equitable assessment should work to ensure that learning outcomes, and how we assess those outcomes, are done in ways which do not privilege certain students over others; that data-informed changes are not benefiting one student group over others; and that assessment efforts are not conducted with only one dominant perspective or voice leading the process. Once we are aware of inequity in learning or assessment, we should strive to address it instead of ignoring it; or worse, blaming students. Equitable assessment means that we interrogate changes for possible disparate impacts on different student populations and their learning, that we examine the changes with data collected on various characteristics of interest to examine if learning improved, and provide students with multiple opportunities to advance in their learning before leaving our institutions (Maki, 2017a). This means that the learning gains we desire are not only for future students, but the students who are in the active process of learning (Maki, 2017b).

### The Barriers and Challenges to Equity in Assessment

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Assessment with an embedded focus on equity is attainable, but there are barriers to advancing the work. Some of those barriers deal with discomfort with engaging in conversations about privilege, power, oppression, and marginalization. In her book *White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, DiAngelo (2018) explores the various cognitive barriers some can encounter when equity and related concepts are discussed. With the many lessons of this book in mind, R. Roberts (2019) notes that assessment practitioners who avoid equity simply because it is uncomfortable or an inconvenience makes assessment practitioners accomplices to practices which perpetuate inequities; especially through sustaining “barriers to student success, retention, graduation, and, most of all, learning” (p. 3). In her response to *Equity and Assessment*, R. Roberts (2019) provides a rich personal experience that exemplifies this behavior:

I recently attended a training focused on equity and data-informed improvements to instruction... The group excitedly followed along during the first day of our training when we reviewed information about the efficacy of the proposed improvements that we could all bring to our colleges. However, when the presentation shifted to a review of national data about inequity, the room exploded with anxiety. Suddenly, several white people had seemingly random objections, others had comments they believed were crucial about all the aspects of inequity outside of their control, or comments about how “other faculty” on their campuses would never tolerate reflecting on campus-wide or course-specific data on inequity. The presenter repeatedly had to intervene to redirect the conversation... *She reminded us of the challenging but extremely important truth that there are some things as instructors and even administrators that are absolutely within our control when it comes to improving equity* (emphasis added) (pp. 1-2).

The last sentence is invaluable. Equity work is not someone else’s responsibility. We each play a role in equity-minded assessment. There are elements we control within our spheres of work and influence which can alleviate the mechanisms through which inequities exist and persist. However, responsibility is diverted with comments such as “this is not a problem at my institution” or “I can see why this would matter for Minority-Serving Institutions but not us.” Choosing not to see an issue does not mean it is not still there,

Equitable assessment should work to ensure that learning outcomes, and how we assess those outcomes, are done in ways which do not privilege certain students over others.

nor can only one type of institution approach assessment in an equity-minded perspective.

A very real barrier to this work, which most can relate to, is initiative fatigue (Kuh & Hutchings, 2015). At many institutions, people are wearing multiple hats often being the lifeline of various projects, students, and other stakeholders in addition to their daily job responsibilities. For those who work in assessment offices, most are often understaffed, without much authority to convene faculty or directly impact policy and practices across the institution. Assessment professionals have to contend with accreditation requirements and various external calls for accountability while addressing issues of ongoing need internal to the institution. Being asked to be the “assessment person” supporting one more institutional initiative can be a significant load to bear. Adding further responsibility to be the sole driver of equitable assessment can further stretch thin assessment staff, thus, finding partners in the work before implementation can be key to further success.

Institutional culture plays an important role too; specifically the culture around assessment. For example, if the assessment culture is about compliance/reporting or positivist-based scientific views of measurement, then equity might not be an important part of the conversation aside from item validity or reporting required disaggregated data (Jankowski, 2017). However, if the culture of assessment is focused around improving learning and teaching, then equity can be a fruitful approach. The point being that depending on the culture of assessment, the conversation around equity-minded assessment can be difficult; often requiring someone to lead and facilitate the discussion in language that resonates with the institutional context. An example of such facilitated approaches are Assignment Charrettes—intensive assignment design workshops that are led by faculty—or the [Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education](#) (TILT Higher Ed) project that helps faculty add transparency in their pedagogy to improve student learning (Winkelmes, 2016). This way, our assessments and the use of assessment data can both lead to more equitable learning outcomes.

Another challenge is determining how much to involve students in the assessment process, coupled with the comfort-level of faculty, staff, and administrators regarding student involvement in assessment. Assessment practitioners, in partnership with others within the institution, will need to determine how much and in what ways to involve and recruit students to be part of different stages of the assessment process. While students may initially lack assessment literacy (Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher, & McPhail, 2013), or an understanding of assessment, student involvement in assessment as active participants with agency over their learning has proven beneficial to student learning and the overall student experience (Jankowski, Baker, Brown-Tess, & Montenegro, forthcoming; Singer-Freeman & Bastone, 2019). While recruitment of students may be difficult—because just like faculty and staff students wear multiple hats and are rather busy—students may be more likely to participate if they understand the impact(s) and/or benefits of their involvement. No one wants to waste their time or, worse, share their thoughts and see no action taken in response; thus adding to feelings of being unheard or unseen.

As the roles of students in assessment are explored for a particular institution, measurement related concerns towards active involvement of students in the design, administration, and analysis of assessment related information may arise. Most of these concerns stem from conflicts of interest and issues of objectivity and bias from involving the students who are being assessed in the process of measuring their own learning. However, student



involvement in assessment at an institution-level involves a variety of students in the process (Maki, 2017b; Damiano, 2018), and involving students as part of the assessment process within a course can position assessment as a formative opportunity for learning, not just summative demonstrations (Hattie, 2009). Involving students in the process of measuring learning supports learning outcomes of quantitative reasoning along with written and oral communication as well as involves students in undergraduate research (Truncale et al., 2018; Welsh, 2013). However, equity will not be attained through placement of a token student on institutional assessment committees or connections with student governance without a wider involvement of students from throughout the institution.

### Looking to the Decade Ahead

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We are not tasked with changing the world with one assessment effort or verifying that learning outcome statements are culturally appropriate with every individual student. We are not expected to survey every single student about intended data-informed changes, nor does equity-minded assessment call for every single student to participate in data analysis. Instead, equity-minded assessment is ultimately about being responsive, aware, and intentional in order to not perpetuate inequalities.

We are aware of the various challenges to this work. In part, there are data issues including a lack of common definitions by which institutions gather and report student characteristics, coupled with a lack of data by which to disaggregate—in ways that intersect with multiple student identities— but also intersect with data on learning. In part, there is a design issue for embedding equity in assessment as well as the means by which to be transparent to students about the assessment and learning process. While some faculty and staff actively engage in universal design for learning and structure curricular and co-curricular learning experiences such that access and success are not student characteristic dependent, it is not widespread enough to occur for every student, every time. And finally, in part we are not measuring in ways that provide the data needed to address issues of equity. It is to address these challenges in the coming decade that we turn.

#### *Professional Development: The Key to Unlocking the Potential of Equity-Minded Assessment*

Professional development can break down barriers to equity-minded assessment. It can bridge perceived gaps between assessment and context (Levy & Heiser, 2018), and between knowledge and knower. We cannot assess what students know without also attempting to understand how culture, context, and the influence of both impact learning and how we assess that learning (Fisler, 2017; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Levy and Heiser (2018) suggest that “Institutions may want to create a meta-assessment rubric or checklist to help ensure assessment practice is following proper process as intended by the institution in accordance with institutional goals and values” (p. 3). The goal being that by maintaining a clear vision on good assessment practice, biases may be limited. However, Tharp (2019) argues the need for individual professional development on issues of equity, making the case that for issues of equity to be examined within an institution, individuals must spend time working on understanding their own assumptions and biases first. Thus, we need to both examine processes and practices and ensure there are checkpoints on implementation, as well as provide support for individuals to explore issues of equity in order to meaningfully implement processes and practices in equitable ways.

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The truth is that many of us are not comfortable with or well-versed in conversations about equity. However, the best way to acquire a skill is not by avoiding it, but by immersing ourselves in it. Having conversations about race/racism or power/oppression—even if they are just reflective and introspective—can be uncomfortable. None of us want to find that our practices may be marginalizing students or contributing to inequitable outcomes. But that fear—or worse yet, complacency and comfort in current practices because they work for “most” students—prohibits progress and perpetuates inequities and inequality. Addressing equity is everyone’s job at the institution, and difficult conversations cannot be passed to someone else. Equity work requires assessment professionals to be courageous and continuously seek ways to develop skills in equitable assessment, but everyone in the institution has a role to play.

Professional development is an important partner in equity work because it allows faculty, staff, and administrators the space to improve their own learning and understanding in order to improve the learning of students; all the while helping programs and institutions better meet student success goals. Equity focused professional development should be communicated as important and supported with targeted incentives to engage all stakeholders, not just the willing. As R. Roberts (2019) explains, “To develop this self-awareness...educators should participate in ongoing training in understanding and supporting equity and how it relates to inquiries about culturally-responsive outcomes, classrooms, and professional development” (p. 3). In truth, doing equity work is a continuous process—much like assessment—because our student populations change with enrollment trends, and gaps in learning change continuously. This means that equity work, and especially our own continuous development in this area, is a life-long process that requires “sustained engagement, humility, and education” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 9) regardless of race/ethnicity and background. Equity-minded assessment requires a certain comfort with being uncomfortable; with having tough conversations, engaging in reflective practices, and implementing a critical mindset throughout.

Relatedly, we could all benefit from professional development on how to involve student voice to ensure biases are in check and equity is embedded throughout assessment practice. Biased assessments fail students. They can be unfair to learners who are not fluent in specific cultural norms and exclude the experiences of linguistically, culturally, and socioeconomically diverse learners (Williams & Perrone, 2018). Professional development helps practitioners engage in practices that maintain a conscious understanding of how practices and decisions are influenced and, in turn, influence the assessment effort.

In the coming decade, research is needed on effective equity focused professional development supports for various levels within an institution. What might be the role of centers for teaching and learning in working with faculty in partnership with assessment professionals on issues of equity and assessment in the classroom? Note: see Levesque-Bristol et al., 2019 and Kinzie, Landy, Sorcinelli, & Hutchings, 2019 for some ideas on how centers for teaching and learning could be involved. Where will assessment professionals find support on issues of equity-minded measurement and data collection? What is the role of institutional researchers in equitable assessment and what professional development supports will they need? What professional development might accreditation related positions need to address issues of equity? And where will administrators find models for supporting equitable assessment through professional development? It is our hope that the decade ahead provides answers and resources to the



wide-scale professional development needs to fully support equity-minded assessment across an entire institution's assessment process.

### *Focusing on Equity and Assessment*

Since the launch of the equity and assessment conversation, many threads of related discussion have emerged. In the coming decade, assessment professionals will continue to unpack issues of equity and measurement; data definition, collection, and disaggregation; decolonizing assessment and learning outcomes; and indigenous approaches to assessment. Student affairs will lead in socially just assessment, and groups such as HBCU-CEEQA will provide insight into the equity-minded practices that have been unfolding for years within the confines of their member institutions but have not been acknowledged or implemented more broadly at predominantly white institutions. And while the use of multiple sources of evidence can be helpful to culturally responsive assessment, it should not be taken as a simple solution, and instead an opportunity to explore equity in design and measurement and how to offset different sources of bias, if possible. It is our intention that over the course of this decade, we will work to elevate the institutions who have been doing equitable assessment and have models and answers to scholarly questions, but whom have been silenced or not asked to join the assessment conversation thus far.

We expect a challenging of measures of institution-level assessment around areas such as climate, which have been historically presented in ways that ensure “white” students are comfortable and experiencing “enough” diversity, as opposed to understanding diverse student experiences or what an equitable climate entails (Phillips & Jones, 2019). And if our practice is guided by theory and our theories are inequitable, we have a responsibility in the coming decade to develop theories that address as well as interrogate the norms around student behavior, engagement, and what a “good” student does to demonstrate their learning in ways that address diverse student populations and their experiences. Discussions on how to embark on equitable comparison groups along with related supports and possible changes to see success are all rife for unpacking in the decade ahead—if as a discipline of assessment we focus on equity and assessment, at all levels of assessment from classroom to program to college to general education and institution. We will continue to see examples of ways in which students can be involved in assessment, ranging from curating their own collections of evidence related to learning outcomes, participating in transparent assessment design, or simply helping to rewrite learning outcome statements in student-focused language. It is not enough to tell our students about the intentional design through transparency approaches if the design itself remains flawed and inequitable. Assessment is an ongoing process of improvement helping to continuously refine teaching and learning, as well as assessment processes and practices, and a focus on equity can help us attain this goal.

### **Final Thoughts**

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The equity in assessment conversation is far from over and it will become an increasingly important practice for higher education as our student populations continue to diversify. NILOA will continue to embed equity-minded assessment as a central thread in our efforts. This is especially true as we continue our partnerships with others working in the equity space. We pledge to continue the dialogue on equity-minded assessment and

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to continue supporting and learning from the field so that we may advance this work together. We must all reflect on how our privilege(s) and positionality within society, the institution, and the classroom intersect with that of students and assessment processes and practices. We look forward to continued reflection by assessment professionals on the ways that current assessment efforts either centralize issues of equity or serve to perpetuate them (Felder, 2017), showcasing examples of implementation, and pushing the scholarly conversation forward towards wider understanding and action.



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**Dr. Natasha Jankowski** is NILOA's Executive Director and a Research Associate Professor with the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. She is co-author, along with her NILOA colleagues, of the books *Using Evidence of Student Learning to Improve Higher Education*, and, *Degrees That Matter: Moving Higher Education to a Learning Systems Paradigm*. Her main research interests include all things assessment, organizational evidence use, and evidence-based storytelling. She holds a PhD in higher education from the University of Illinois, an MA in higher education administration from Kent State University, and a BA in philosophy.

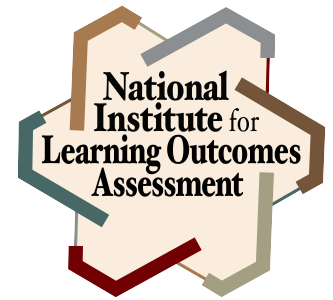


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## About NILOA

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- The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) was established in December 2008.
- NILOA is co-located at the University of Illinois and Indiana University.
- The NILOA website contains free assessment resources and can be found at <http://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org>.
- The NILOA research team has scanned institutional websites, surveyed chief academic officers, and commissioned a series of occasional papers.
- NILOA's Founding Director, George Kuh, founded the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE).
- The other co-principal investigator for NILOA, Stanley Ikenberry, was president of the University of Illinois from 1979 to 1995 and of the American Council of Education from 1996 to 2001.



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